Another Form of Flesh and Blood
by EventHorizon

Summary

Police Sergeant Greg Lestrade truly disliked the part of the job that had him return runaway androids to their owners or, for the abandoned or confiscated ones, to the government-approved private shelters that housed them until they again could be sold. Returning this particular escapee, Mycroft, to his shelter stung a little more than usual, but that wasn't important in the grand scheme of things. After all, it wasn't as if he'd ever see the bot again...
Chapter 1

The soft beeping from the dash of Lestrade’s police vehicle made him and his partner, Anderson, sigh dramatically and they shared a look that said things could be worse. It could be raining.

“This is three in a week, Greg. Three.”

“And that’s my fault?”

“You’re driving, so yes.”

“Lovely. Maybe this one won’t run.”

“We can only hope. I can’t say I wish these were the days where they were more… docile, but you’d think they’d show a little consideration to poor coppers who’d rather not have to run half the day when it’s so much easier to sit.”

“Lack of consideration of one’s fellow man is a worldwide problem, it seems. No matter what form the man might take.”

“One further sign of the collapse of civilization.”

“Well, let’s see this one returned before that happens or it’ll be an age before we’ll be able to finish the paperwork and I want to watch the match tonight.”

Leaving the warmth of the car and stepping out into the chilly afternoon, the two officers cast a few glances around and then to the small device in Lestrade’s hand, which confirmed what they had already surmised. Quite a few people bustling about, but only one who seemed disturbed by the presence of law enforcement and he was directly in line with the signal. Walking as nonchalantly as they could, both thanked their lucky stars that their target, a tall, slim android with a more distinctive look than most, didn’t bolt as they approached the small florist’s cart at the edge of the walkway and stopped to get matters started.

“Good… good day, officers. Might I interest you in a bouquet of truly lovely flowers? An economical, yet always-treasured gift for the special person in your life…”

The mix of hopefulness and fear in their target’s voice made the men’s heart ache, but the law was the law and there wasn’t anything to change that, at least not until a few more progressive MP’s made their way into Parliament. Until then it was their regrettable job to take the android back to the shelter he’d escaped from and hope… hope they didn’t treat the bot too harshly because of it. Using his best having-a-friendly-chat voice, Greg did what he could to break the proverbial ice.

“Selling flowers, are you? Did someone, at least, give you the job, or did you do a bit of garden-robbing to start your business?”

What little confidence had kept the android’s shoulders straight and his head high wavered, but Lestrade was oddly pleased that the bot’s eyes sharpened as if he’d been offended by the question, though he’d meant his words as a joke and not at all rudely. Apparently, his witty banter needed work.

“I am not a thief.”

“Good to know. That means we don’t have to issue any charges before we bring you home.”
“You… that is not necessary, officers. I am a free android and, if you choose, you can inspect my…”

“We know you can get a forged emancipation certification and we can likely even tell you where you got yours and who crafted it. Besides, the shelter registered your escape and your tracker information, which a free android would have had disabled. And that concealer you’ve smeared on the back of your hand to disguise your property code is starting to rub off. I am sorry, sir, but you’ll need to come with us.”

This time the bot’s eyes widened in surprise and Lestrade tried to smile as reassuringly as he could. No, not many people called bots sir or ma’am, but… first, they always seemed to respond better if you treated them politely and, second, there was no reason not to treat them politely. Many of them were better and more charitable people than the humans who built them.

“It would not… could you not say I fled and you were unable to find me? I promise I shall not set foot in your jurisdiction, again, and…”

“If it was my choice, sir, I’d do that for you, but our bot system is logging your actions and it’ll show that’s not true, unless you actually do run, in which case it’ll record that and… it’s better for everyone if you simply come along quietly. We…we can return your cart first, though, so your employer doesn’t suffer his own bit of robbery.”

The bleak resignation that filled the bot’s eyes didn’t make the job any easier, but a quick glance between Lestrade and Anderson set the agreement that restraints wouldn’t be necessary, which was something of a blessing. They could spare the android that bit of humiliation, at least.

“Will you arrest Mr. Fowler for giving me employment?”

Another quick glance between the officers and another agreement was set. Both believed in community support and neither felt a good deed deserved punishment.

“No, so don’t worry about that. Is that the florist up the street from here?”

One small nod and Lestrade was taking the handles of the cart to push along while Anderson smiled his least worrying smile to the android who he moved to stand next to as they began to follow his partner up the street. This was one of the sadder parts of the job, but being sacked because he turned a blind eye wouldn’t help the other bots who he could legitimately assist, as well as the humans in their patrol area who had their own share of troubles to bear. Besides, this one seemed fairly intelligent and well-spoken… surely someone would offer to purchase him and set him to work doing something interesting. The clever ones often had that bit of grace, small though it was. It wasn’t at all assured, but it paid to keep a good thought. There wasn’t much in the way of scientific evidence about the power of positive thinking having any effect on androids, especially when given silently from someone else, but a recognized good thought to bolster one’s mental outlook, human or android, had to be helpful. And along those lines…

“We’ve got your ID number, sir, but would you be so kind as to tell me your name?”

That, also, made the bot’s eyes light in surprise because as few as would call him sir, fewer still would ask his name.

“Mycroft. My name is Mycroft.”

That had Greg looking back over his shoulder to meet Anderson’s honestly-impressed eyes. That was one they’d not heard before. Normally, bots had fairly simple names, since their manufacturer
didn’t see the need to be creative, and their owners rarely bothered to change the factory settings for things like that.

“Thank you. Nicer to have a name to call you than a generic ‘hey you.’ “

Mycroft tried not to be too obvious as he scrutinized the lightly-bearded man next to him and the other officer who was pushing his cart back to the shop. He’d had more encounters with London’s police force than he would care to remember and they could not be termed successful by anyone’s lexicon. The best were generally those who treated him as if they were returning a lost dog to their owner… march him to their car and ignore him until they marched him back to the shelter’s front desk. The worst…, those he did not care to remember at all…

“I appreciate the consideration.”

“While you’re on our patch, you’re part of our community and we do right by ours, don’t we, Greg?”

Greg waved to the men behind him and only swore slightly as the flower cart veered off course, nearly hitting a visibly-annoyed dog-walker and their equally-annoyed dog.

“That we do. Alright, let me square this and then we’ll be off. Why don’t you… alright, I don’t know if it’s considered impolite to ask, so tell me if it is, Mycroft, but do you have one of those food-processing systems? I only ask because I was going to suggest Anderson here buys us all a coffee while I speak to the shop owner and if you can have one, I’d hate for you to be left out.”

This time, Mycroft’s mouth nearly dropped in shock, but he rallied quickly to maintain his aplomb.

“I do, actually. And, I would welcome something warm to drink.”

Giving Anderson a nod, Greg set about his work of calming what would be a fearful-of-arrest shop owner, while the other two stepped next door for a coffee and what the Police Sergeant hoped was something greasy and heart-killing to eat. It’d been awhile since lunch and he was coming off of a double-shift. Nothing made extra-hours more bearable than caffeine and grease. Well, sugar helped, too. Maybe Philip would buy a few pastries… that would be the best of all worlds… no, they’d need beer for that, but coffee and pastries would do for now…

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Lestrade had to admit that, despite what one might expect, London’s android shelters weren’t terrible, Dickensian-workhouse sorts of places. Not palatial, by any means, and not the place you’d want to spend your holiday, but they were well-maintained and the androids always looked to be in good repair. There was a lot of research that said bots responded well to the same things humans appreciated – cleanliness, welcoming surroundings, space to call their own – and he had to say the shelters he’d seen tended to offer that. Each bot had a room to themselves, albeit tiny, and there were options for entertainment, such as a telly, books or games in the common room. The less-advanced models didn’t care much, but those like this Mycroft… those things made being in limbo more bearable.

And he wouldn’t let his mind take a cynical turn and think that the conditions were solely to keep the bots in best working order because the shelters got a good percentage of the purchase price of all abandoned and confiscated bots in their charge. The government technically owned them, but the shelters and their management staff saw good profits from their sale to new owners. Androids whose owners died without a will were a slightly trickier matter, as they could be claimed at some point if a legitimate heir was found or if the known heirs worked out their settlements in court, but those
examples were far in the minority. Regardless, it helped to know that despite any reasons Mycroft had for running away, he wasn’t being returned to a place you wouldn’t in good conscience house a serial killer.

“Here we are. Looks comfortable. That true, Mycroft?”

Never hurt to check though.

“It… I suppose it is. It is quiet, which is agreeable.”

What a rousing endorsement. But, asking an android about comfort might not have been the smartest question. It was difficult to know how much they actually noticed things like that or counted them as important, research findings or not.

“Quiet’s good! Nothing wrong with quiet. Anderson, want to relax while I handle the paperwork for returning our Mycroft safely home?”

Not that the question was necessary, since his partner had already pulled up one of his textbooks on his mobile and started revising for an upcoming exam. With luck, Anderson would be burning his uniform in a year or so and joining the forensics side of things. Working and going to school wasn’t easy, but hard work wasn’t something his partner ever shied away from.

“Alright, then. Mycroft let’s see you sorted.”

Not something that gladdened the android, that much was certain. Quiet and clean didn’t change the fact that the bot was… well, a bot. Some didn’t seem to notice, let alone mind they were androids, but some… some minded a great deal and he couldn’t fault them for it. They had only the most minimal of rights while under ownership and, even if they could purchase their freedom or had it granted to them, they certainly weren’t looked on with the same regard as humans. A few had made big strides towards breaking the mold, but most simply did the best they could to make a living and find people who accepted them. He knew a few, actually, and they weren’t doing badly, so… so there was hope for Mycroft here. Definitely some hope.

But, hope didn’t make being handed over to a frustrated shelter administrator a happier experience, that much was also certain. Mycroft looked like he was being sent to the hangman’s noose, though he simply got waved off back to his room with an exasperated flick of the wrist.

“That one… smartest bot I’ve ever met and does his best to appear dimwitted whenever prospective buyers come to see what we have on offer. Then toddles off whenever he pleases for the police to return! I have no idea what he thinks he’s doing, but I suspect it’s part of the reason he was turned over to us by his owners. Some malfunction they couldn’t correct so they threw him over for a new model. If it was the dark ages, he’d been disassembled and sent off for recycling most likely, self-aware or not.”

Lestrade turned and caught a final glimpse of the android as he rounded the corner towards his room and wondered about all of that. Yes, it could be a malfunction, but Mycroft didn’t seem dimwitted when he or Anderson talked to him. Maybe he simply didn’t want to be purchased again. That didn’t explain his little walkabouts, though…

“I’m certain someone will find him suitable, at some point. He seemed… he seemed like he could do a lot of things, if given the chance.”

“Oh, I have no doubt. But…”

That wasn’t a happy but.
“… I do hope we can do something about his wandering off. If something happens to him or, heaven help us, something happens to a human because of him, we’re liable for it and our resources aren’t limitless.”

“I can’t see him causing any trouble. We found him selling flowers, for heaven’s sake.”

“In truth, I can’t either, but he can’t seem to understand our concern no matter how many lectures he receives on the subject. And, of course… well, but there have been times he has been returned to us in rather, shall we say, disheveled condition. It hasn’t dissuaded him in the slightest, but it does break the heart to see it happen.”

Thank you for be so considerate as to not say ‘returned to us in disheveled condition by the police,’ because I know there are bastards on the force who think bots are great ways to work off the edge of a stressful night and, if I had my way, they’d be behind bars for a good long time to think about the error of their ways.

“Maybe, this time, Mycroft will stay at home for awhile. It’s getting cold out and he must have one of those thermal units that lets him feel hot and cold like a human person. He certainly lit up like a candle when he had a long, hot sip of coffee.”

Seeing the confusion on the administrator’s face made Greg happy for a reason he couldn’t pin down, but who needed a reason to have a spring put in one’s mental step?

“He told you his name?”

“Well, we did ask and he seems the polite sort…”

“Oh, I see. My… a highly unusual outing for Mycroft, it appears. Four days gone and he finds a job and makes friends.”

The friends part wasn’t precisely correct, though, Lestrade could say he wouldn’t mind having Mycroft as a friend. There hadn’t been much time for conversation, but what little there was had been interesting. Hopefully, when he was purchased, Mycroft would go to an owner who valued a bit of interesting conversation regardless if it was with a bot or a human. Shame to have that intellect go to waste.

“Maybe you should send out a few inquiries to the florists in the city. One of them might need a good worker who already has experience with flowers.”

“Perhaps I will. We do, occasionally, give our androids the opportunity to learn specific trades that complement their talents and interests. Of course, Mycroft will need to learn a thing or two about staying where he’s told or we won’t have much chance of placing him in any home or job. I have faith in him, though… I do have faith. In any case, thank you, Sergeant, for your patience in returning our lost sheep. Do have a good day.”

“You’re welcome, Administrator Stamford. You have a nice day, as well.”

Smiling politely, Lestrade turned and left the shelter, tossing a pebble against the vehicle window so Anderson startled and fumbled his mobile, then made a gesture they’d both be sacked for if the Inspector saw it. As their nonsense was going on, neither of them noticed a familiar face looking out of a window of the middle floor of the shelter. A face that watched the exchange and didn’t leave the window until the car had driven away and could be seen no more.

Having a seat at the small desk his room possessed, along with a simple bed, dresser, mirror, three-tier bookshelf and miniscule closet for his few bits of clothes that he washed in the communal
laundry once a week, Mycroft grieved that he had, again, lost a chance for freedom, but grieved all the harder because this one had been… this one had made that freedom seem even sweeter. A simple job that gained him wages, a neighborhood that did not seem to harbor intense anti-bot sentiment, the cellar of the flower shop to call his flat… it was only four days, but it was a glimmer of what was possible if only he could throw off this yoke and simply be free.

And, of course, there were the officers who brought him back. Not the normal sort, in his experience, but he before had not ventured far into what one might consider the gentler parts of London so it might be that more of that type could be found, offering the service to their community that the job supposedly entailed, but sometimes failed to provide. Again, a glimmer… to be treated with respect and kindness, to simply be asked his name as one would a human… naturally, he could not return to that particular area, but… London was a large city and surely there would be more places that offered one like him something approaching… a life. A complicated life, he had no doubt, but a life, nonetheless.

It was simply a shame that, given that life would be one enjoyed as something akin to a fugitive, he could again not cross paths with the officers who had offered him coffee. Especially one officer, in particular. His new life would be much enriched, he suspected, with someone like Sergeant Lestrade to help share part of his days as a free person of London. A bit of conversation, perhaps some cultural entertainment of which to partake… it was a silly thought, but since it was a thought, there was no harm in adding a friend to his fantasy. He had never had such a thing and the officer was as a good a candidate as any for the role. A better candidate than many, in point of fact. It was a pity they would never again meet…
Chapter 2

“Looks like our favorite bot took another walk.”

Anderson handed the previous-shift summary to his sergeant who shook his head and laughed. This wasn’t the first time they’d run across Mycroft’s ID number on the wayward android’s list since they’d returned him to the shelter a few weeks ago. Apparently, the bot had itchy feet…

“You have to credit his determination. The person who buys him best see he’s got something to do that piques his interest or they’ll spend half their time looking at the empty space where his body should be.”

“I noticed you put a special notation on his file… might has well have pinned a ‘Handle with Care’ sign on his arse.”

“Didn’t have a sign, so I settled for the next best thing. The shelter administrator told me in a roundabout way that he’d been roughed up by the lads before and I just want to make that an unattractive option for the next berk who had a row with his wife, a crap day on patrol and thinks a bot would be the perfect thing to use to take out his frustrations. I’d do it for all of them if I could, but…”

“He was a different sort of fellow, wasn’t he?”

“Yeah.”

“And you’ve always had a soft spot for the different sorts.”

“Of course. Look at who I have for a partner.”

“Funny. And, maybe so is this. Or not. But, it’s definitely about that special bot in your life…”

This time, Greg was handed a phone message slip that made him frown slightly when he read it.

“Administrator Stamford wants to speak with me.”

“Meet with you, if you actually read what I wrote.”

“Can’t. Your handwriting’s about the same as if someone dropped a bunch of snails on the paper and used some coloring powder to highlight their slime trails.”

“That took a lot of thought… you need more work to do so you don’t have time to think about snails and the like. I’ll mention it to the Inspector.”

“Fuck off. Or fuck me, because if Mr. Stamford wants to meet with me, I suspect it’s not about anything good.”

“I suspect it’s about that first bit I handed you, so why don’t you phone and tell him you’re on your way. Or I can do that and tell him you’re currently racing to the rescue of the world’s most stubborn bot so he’d best get the kettle on.”

“Brilliant. But, no, we’ve got work to do and unless we see Mycroft in the back of a lorry
hoping to sneak out of London, that’s not top priority. I’ll… I’ll stop in during my meal break.”

“Very professional. Not at all cowardly because you feel like you’re being called before the headmaster.”

“I do not! It’s just that’s… I can’t say it’s directly related to the job, so it’s not appropriate to take time for a chat when we’ve got proper policing to do. Which we should be on about now, except you’re still on your arse with your feet on Detective Marshall’s desk.”

“Derek won’t mind. He owes me too much money from all the pints I’ve paid for when he’s been moaning about his shrew of a mother to grouse over a bit of my dirt on his folders.”

Lestrade swatted Anderson’s feet off of the desk and made a rude gesture to get the day well and truly started. There were always surprises lying in wait when you were on the job, but most didn’t involve bots with a case of wanderlust. Well, sometimes they did, but certainly not to this degree of doggedness. The wide world isn’t that fantastic, Mycroft, old friend… trust the ones who see the worst of it… that’s simply not the case…

“Sergeant Lestrade… oh, thank you for coming.”

The honest eagerness in the shelter administrator’s eyes put Lestrade on even higher alert. This definitely wasn’t a pitch to increase the number of volunteer bots in the police stations or for him to give a reference for Mycroft getting a job selling daisies.

“Hello, Administrator Stamford. I take it you want to talk to me about something?”

Get right to the point, be no-nonsense and maybe this would all be over quickly.

“I do and I promise I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t important or… or I didn’t honestly think you could help.”

Oh no… eager and sincere… doom was at hand.

“I’ll do what I can, but… what’s this all about?”

Waving Lestrade to a chair, the rather frazzled Stamford hopped behind his desk and rummaged about until he found a file that made him sigh.

“I suspect you know, but… it’s about Mycroft.”

“I thought it might be.”

“Yes, well… he’s continuing to escape, despite being caught every time and… it’s not as if androids don’t try to run away from shelters, because they do, but Mycroft is far, far more persistent than most and he’s… he’s come to the attention of individuals placed higher than me in London’s android services bureaucracy. They’re not happy, not happy at all.”

Lestrade felt a drip of acid start in his stomach and knew his concerned expression matched Stamford’s point for point. Nobody benefitted, human or android, when the bureaucratic higher-ups got their knickers in a twist.

“How not happy?”

“I convinced them, this time, not to relocate Mycroft to a more secure facility, but I’m not
entirely confident I can convince them again.”

That definitely didn’t sound good…

“More secure… I thought all the shelters were fairly standard in how they ran.”

“To some extent, but some androids require, perhaps, a more carefully-controlled environment. Those returned from military service or specially designed for certain activities that the government would rather not admit. And you did not hear that from me. Regardless, they are still basic shelters, but with a greater nod towards security and… an android who circumvents every measure I have put in place to keep him safely on the premises does qualify for relocation somewhere the measures are more, shall we say, formidable.”

Hmmm… why did that sound highly familiar to his policeman’s ears…

“Basically, they want to put him in prison.”

“No, it’s not precisely that dire, because those bots are still available for resale and retraining to new careers, however… until that time they need, it is felt, a more structured day and firmer hand than would others.”

Now, the acid drip was becoming a trickle and Lestrade really wished he’d eaten first to absorb some of it.

“So, if you’re an independent, free-thinking android, it’s either hope for an understanding owner who’ll treat you as you deserve or get tossed in the bad-bot jail until kingdom come.”

“Again… not precisely. Very few, what I will term ‘normal’ bots, are sent to such facilities. But, Mycroft is, unfortunately, proving himself not to be a ‘normal’ bot. Except for the simplest worker models, many androids have an escape or two on their record. An unsuitable owner, a moment of general rebellion… it’s not uncommon and not particularly frowned upon, in terms of punitive measures. Mycroft, however, is in a category unto himself for this, I’m afraid.”

Having done a quick check for how many times Mycroft’s ID number had come up in the London police files, Lestrade had to admit he agreed.

“Alright, I understand that, but… why am I here? I can’t… if you think I can alter the police files or something, I can tell you right now that it’s not possible.”

“Heavens, no! That’s not at all… I was hoping that you would talk to Mycroft, Sergeant. I’ve tried until I’m out of words, but he insists on continuing with this behavior. I’m hoping that you can make a difference.”

Altering police files suddenly sounded highly appealing.

“Me? Why me? I only met him once and that wasn’t under what one might call the best of circumstances.”

“Nonetheless, you made some form of impression. And it was quite a strong one.”

A look came into the administrator’s eyes that piqued Lestrade’s curiosity even further, though he didn’t have to wait long to have that curiosity satisfied.

“He’s been researching you. On the Internet.”
Stamford passed over the folder in his hand, so Lestrade could see the various search terms and sites Mycroft had accessed.

“I… I didn’t think shelter bots were allowed computer access.”

“The law changed four months ago. They can use computers for games, to learn new skills, keep current with the news, communicate with others, as long as their contact list is pre-approved… but all activity is logged and reviewed. It’s… it’s a reprehensible stipulation, in my opinion, but my opinion doesn’t count for much, I’m afraid. I have to review and report on any trends or patterns that might be viewed as worrisome and, while I don’t consider this worrisome, I do consider it interesting. Mycroft uses the computers often, but never for something such as this. He’s never taken any interest in any individual to this degree, human or android. You intrigued him, Sergeant Lestrade. I’m hoping that might give you some leverage to help him see reason.”

Greg stared at the information in his hand and wondered if his police file was as rich with information as Mycroft seemed to have acquired. He’d tried to go after everything from school records to health reports, raiding the newspaper archives for articles and the police portal for cases he’d worked on. Every public record had been scoured and a good go had been had at the not-public ones, as well… yes, intrigued was the right word… not that it made him feel any better about the whole business.

“Please, Sergeant Lestrade… I have no idea what is going on in Mycroft’s mind, but I don’t want to see it bring him to a situation that I know, I just know, will be disastrous for him. Will you help?”

This was so far out of his area of expertise that Lestrade held up his hands in the time-honored gesture of ‘what the fuck am I supposed to do?’ However, he also knew that even if he had no clue on how to proceed, he still had to give it his best try. Mycroft was a different sort of fellow and different sorts of fellows didn’t do well in prison, whether you called them prisons or not.

“I… I have no idea how, but… I’ll try.”

The relief in the administrator’s was painful to see, but Lestrade just used that to stiffen his resolve to make a dent in the android’s thick skull. No, it wasn’t right that bots couldn’t live freely without a fuck-all amount of effort, and money, put out beforehand, but… that wasn’t changing this week, so Mycroft needed to find other ways to express his frustration or rebellion or whatever the hell it was he was doing. Before it became his undoing…

“Thank you. Truly, thank you for this. Here, let me show you to his room.”

Standing and stretching to loosen his muscles for… what reason he wasn’t sure… Lestrade followed the now-smiling Stamford out of the office and through the building, noticing on the way that his initial impressions about the shelter seemed to be correct. All the bots were in good repair and with simple, but clean clothes. They passed a common room and there was… well, it was hard for a human to know what passed for social engagement with the bots, but there were androids discussing a television program and others having a game of cards around a large table near a window. Maybe they weren’t happy with their situation; however, they didn’t look particularly miserable about it, either. But… he wasn’t confident he’d know if a bot ‘looked’ miserable, since they could be the most inscrutable bastards on the planet when they wanted to be. There surely were signs to notice, but he’d never been around many for an especially long time to have picked up on them…

“Well, this is his. Do what you can for him, Sergeant. Mycroft is… he could have a truly bright future ahead of him if we could simply make him more… enticing to prospective buyers. I suspect, no, I am convinced, that he would be one of those who could work his way towards emancipation with a good job to his name and a less-marred record in the files. I want to see him leave, Sergeant, I
really do. Just… just not the way he seems to want to leave.”

With a reassuring pat on the officer’s shoulder, Stamford walked away to leave the two alone and crossed his fingers that this would do some good. Something had to… something had to soon… Mycroft didn’t have unlimited time to sort this out on his own…

Chapter End Notes

Announcements of new chapters for any of my fics crop up on my tumblr or twitter (eventhorizon451 for both), as do bits of news and thoughts about things to come. Feel free to drop by anytime!
Swallowing slightly before knocking, Lestrade waited what seemed an eternity of time for the door to be opened, then swallowed again seeing the highly-shocked look on the android’s face once Mycroft peered out into the corridor.

“S…Sergeant Lestrade?”

“Hello, Mycroft. Can I… would you mind if I came in for a chat?”

A moment passed where Lestrade believed the bot would say no, but Mycroft finally stood back and opened the door wider for the policeman to step inside his room. Which was as small as Greg expected, but… he’d seen flats in the city that weren’t as well kept and tidy.

“Nice place you’ve got here. All the amenities. I like the view, too… get to watch the comings and goings on the street. Got some nice trees out there and I bet there’s flowers, too, when it’s not so bloody cold. And, I have to admit, this is cleaner, by far, than my flat, but I have to confess to being a somewhat messy person, so there’s nobody to blame for that but me, myself and I.”

Wondering if his ridiculous blather was convincing the android that the police needed to institute some form of intelligence test for admission to the ranks, Lestrade stopped himself and smiled, noting that it wasn’t returned.

“Am I… why are you here, Sergeant?”

Probably should remember that the police arriving unannounced at anyone’s door is not going to inspire feelings of excitement and confidence. Especially when they seem to have suffered brain trauma and have a mouth that runs like an open drain pipe.

“It’s… do you mind if we sit down? I’d like to talk with you, if that’s alright.”

Mycroft tried desperately to read the officer’s face for clues and got little beyond a general, and genuine, concern. Since that was enough to pique his curiosity, beyond the fact the officer was there in the first place, Mycroft nodded towards the chair at the desk, then took his own seat on the bed and waited for Greg to get settled.

“Yeah, this isn’t bad at all. I’d like a desk in my flat, but I’m too busy to find one and get it hauled up the stairs. Those ones you put together yourself? Bollocks. I’d turn mine into a wooden giraffe or something equally as daft and bash my thumb with a hammer while doing it. Probably put an eye out with a screwdriver, too. I’m not very handy that way.”

Realizing he was still going on like a pensioner who’d found a fresh ear at his local, and lying because he wasn’t at all bad at things like desk building, though the shelves he tried did lean a bit, though in an artistic manner he if was open-minded about that sort of thing and… shite! Now he was meandering around in his own mind! Get to the point you fucking idiot!

“Anyway, Administrator Stamford asked me to come and have a chat with you about your running off. It’s got him worried, terribly worried, and I can’t say I blame him.”

That got a reaction out of the android. Apparently, Mycroft didn’t realize the lengths Stamford would go to try and curtail his little excursions.

“Why would he… why would he ask for you?”
So… be honest and admit he knew about Mycroft’s investigating or not. Probably not. He had no real idea if androids could feel embarrassment, but, if any could, it would likely be Mycroft and that… that wasn’t the way he wanted this conversation to start.

“Because we seemed to get along when I brought you back and I think he felt that someone in the police might have some influence. Words carrying weight and all of that.”

There. That sounded convincing. And no embarrassment whatsoever!

“I see. I am sorry he troubled you, Sergeant, but..”

“Greg. Call me Greg.”

Was that embarrassment or just surprise? How was he supposed to read an android’s reactions when he could scarcely read human ones correctly? Maybe he should ask for specialty training on that. There was probably a course he could sit that the police would pay for since it could count as skill enhancement. Of course, that was of absolutely no use now…

“I… I am not certain if that is appropriate, Sergeant Lestrade.”

“Sure it is! I have your name and bots don’t have surnames, so… you’re Mycroft and I’m Greg. That’s what I am for any of my mates, so there you have it.”

That was a bit rambly, again, but… it was also friendly, wasn’t it? Toss out the idea that Mycroft was just like any of his raggedy mates, even though he clearly wasn’t. The aforementioned raggedy mates were, by definition, raggedy and more apt to drink too much beer and pass out on his sofa than circumvent security systems to go out for a walking tour of London. But that didn’t mean Mycroft couldn’t be a mate if he wasn’t supposed to stay here on the grounds and not go wandering. Meet up near his flat and escort the bot to his personal favorite of the area pubs and have a few while chatting about the day. That was easy to imagine. Very easy, in point of fact.

“I… very well. Thank you, Gregory.”

That’s what my mum and gran call me, but… ok, it’s better than Sergeant Lestrade for the friendly chat we’re going to have. And it actually sounds better in your voice than from mum and gran, which helps.

“Great! Now, can you tell me what’s on your mind? About this running off business, I mean. Seems like you’re nicely set up here.”

“The same is likely to be said for many of your prisons.”

Alright, here we go…

“True. I won’t deny that. But you do have it better here. You don’t have your days regimented like they do, I suspect, and there’s no shame in being an android in a shelter. There’s loads of shame, or should be, for a prisoner in a prison, though some are too bastardy to understand that.”

“Our meals are at a fixed time each day. Our contact with the outside is limited and monitored…”

Oh no. I recognize that look. That’s a look that says you just grabbed onto the right end of the stick as to why I’m here and… oh. That’s definitely embarrassment. Even I can interpret that particular look. Interesting that you don’t really blush, though, because I think your face would be red as a cherry if you did.
“… a… and we are restricted as to what we may watch for television and films, as well as the books we read. We can only walk outdoors within an electronically monitored area and only during daylight hours. That, I believe constitutes a form of regimentation.”

And dreary regimentation, at that. Not the life he would want but… but it was a better life, perhaps, than what awaited the bot if he found himself on the street in the grasp of someone who didn’t view any life other than their own, regardless of the form it took, as having any value whatsoever.

“True, and I won’t deny, not for a moment, that being here isn’t as good as having your own home but there is worse you could be experiencing, Mycroft.”

“THERE IS NOTHING WORSE THAN THIS!”

Lestrade stared with wide eyes at the bot, who sat breathing heavily on the bed doing whatever with the air his body did, and waited for the next salvo to be launched. He hadn’t expected their friendly chat to escalate so quickly, but… nothing wrong with getting right to the heart of the matter.

“There is nothing worse than being a slave. The quality of the cage is irrelevant.”

Ok… sore point hit and it was the sore point that probably needed to be hit to make this conversation a meaningful one. This was not going to be fun or easy… not that it should be.

“Alright, I understand that, but…”

“No, you do not understand. Have you ever been owned? Ever known that your very self could be bought or bartered, regardless of your will? Lived with the knowledge that you have no choices or decisions that cannot be countermanded or denied and that there is no recourse available to you should this happen? That your body can be used in whatever manner your owner sees fit because it is ‘their’ property and only the most minor of consequences shall be experienced should you lose your functions or your very life at their hands? Even if you are treated ‘kindly,’ you are still their property, a slave to their wishes with no power and no say over any aspect of your life. I doubt you understand any of this, Gregory, and I fervently hope that you never do.”

The true distress on the android’s face made Greg sick at heart and he had no memory of reaching out to rub Mycroft’s arm lightly to help him calm down.

“You’re right, Mycroft and I… I apologize for sounding… condescending, I suppose. I don’t understand your situation, not really and I apologize, also, for upsetting you. That’s not why I’m here, to upset you, I mean.”

Now, Greg was very much realizing he was stroking Mycroft’s arm and cleared his throat slightly before drawing back his hand which was being watched intently by the android.

“Why are you here, Ser… Gregory?”

“Exactly for the reason I told you. To try and convince you to stop escaping and… it sounds horrid to say now, but to stay here and enjoy what you have as best you can. You can’t keep running away, Mycroft. It does get registered, you know. I’ve seen your ID number come up on the police logs more than a few times and I can’t be the only one to have noticed that. Well, beyond Mr. Stamford, that is.”

No need to bring up nameless officials and bot prison right now. Poor thing’s had enough upset for one afternoon…

“I care not who notices.”
Or maybe now is a good time for all of that. No, save it as a last resort. Try guilt. It’s works on humans... usually.

“You should. Stamford’s not the top of the chain, you know. He’s got bosses and if they catch whiff of what you’re up to... I can’t imagine an android continuously sneaking away from a facility would say good things about the person running that facility. Someone would probably have to be step in and see to things themselves and I can’t see that being good for you. Or for Stamford. Poor bloke’s trying hard to run a decent, caring shelter and having him removed from his position for incompetence would be a tragedy, in my opinion.”

Mycroft’s scrutinizing glare only singed Greg’s flesh and he waved away the smoke, removed the burnt hair and kept his eyes locked with the bot’s until Mycroft huffed an irritated sigh.

“I am not a good candidate for the effects of guilt.”

“Seems to be working, though. Stamford’s a good person, from what I’ve seen, Mycroft. He truly is concerned about you and what happens to you when you’re away from his charge. He... he told me you’ve been knocked about a few times, for instance. By some of my lot.”

That was a miserable look that crossed the android’s face and it added to his own ache that Greg recognized it immediately, having seen it on enough faces of people who had been given the wrong sort of treatment by those supposed to protect them, instead.

“It is of no concern.”

“It is of extreme concern, to me. First, because nobody should have to suffer at some dumb bruiser’s hands and second, because those dumb bruisers were members of my own profession, a profession that is specifically supposed to be against that very sort of thing. I’m sorry for that, Mycroft. I... I did put a flag on your ID number that specifically states you’re ‘special consideration.’ That means there are eyes on you so the arses know any nastiness is going to be observed and wouldn’t be hard to figure out who did it from the bot log. But, I hope that won’t be needed anymore since you won’t be parading through London with roses in your hands.”

“Mr. Fowler kept the roses in the shop, not on my cart.”

The attempt at a dismissive tone failed, in Greg’s opinion, and he smiled at the failure, as well as the failure on Mycroft’s part to hide the swell of relief that filled his artificial frame. Yes, the poor bot had gotten his share of London’s finest at their worst, but... that was over. For more than one reason.

“I stand corrected. But, Mycroft... in all seriousness... this escaping is causing problems and they’re not problems I suspect will ultimately be good for you. I won’t dishonor you and say you’ve got a lucky thing here, because I know that’s not how you see it and yours is the opinion that really counts, but... I know what can happen to bots out there, Mycroft. I’ve been called in enough to break up illegal fighting rings that leave the bots more scrap than anything else. And there are those who snatch bots to carve up for parts to sell on the black market. Here, I know you’re safe from all of that and I honestly believe Stamford is very good at screening owners for those who might be a problem for the bots they buy. He does have refusal powers when it comes to selling and I bet that if I take a look at the records, he’s used that power a time or two.”

Leaning his head over so he could look into Mycroft’s downcast eyes, Greg wished he had something more reassuring to say. Wished he could say that there were new laws being signed right now to free all bots and make them independent citizens. Wished he could open the shelter door and let Mycroft walk outside straight to a good job and a flat and a life he could be proud of and call his
own but… but since that wasn’t happening, this was the best he could do.

“Just think about what I’ve said, Mycroft. I can’t and, more importantly, I won’t tell you what to do, but I’d hate to see bad things happen because of poor long-term decisions that seem smart in the short-term.”

The android didn’t answer, but Greg hoped that what he read in Mycroft’s eyes was at least agreement to the ‘think about it’ part of the conversation.

“Look, I have to go because I’m on meal break and Anderson is going to be waiting out there for me to get back on patrol. But… here.”

Reaching into his pocket, Greg took out his notepad and scribbled on it a moment before tearing out a page and handing it to the android.

“That’s my phone number. If you need to talk, or want to talk, use it, alright? It’s not a bother… I like talking to you, even if it’s not the happiest of topics, but maybe we can add a few happy topics to the list in the future. How does that sound?”

Now Mycroft’s face held an expression of sheer confusion and he looked between the paper and Greg’s eyes over and over again until his voice decided it could work once more.

“You… you would wish to speak to me again?”

“Sure! I don’t work the most regular of hours, but if I can’t talk at that moment, I’ll tell you when I’ll be off work and you can call again so we can chat about… well, whatever you like. I’ll mention it to Administrator Stamford so I can go on your approved list of contacts and… well, whenever you have a mind to, Mycroft, I’d be happy to talk.”

Standing up and extending his hand, Greg waited a moment for Mycroft to blink back his shock and stand, as well, taking the extended hand to shake.

“It’s been good to see you again, Mycroft.”

“I… It has been good to see you again, as well, Gregory.”

Deciding that there was nowhere to go from there but to Awkwardland, Greg smiled and showed himself out the door, stopping by Stamford’s office to report on their talk and tell him about the potential phone calls, before leaving the building and walking towards the waiting car, inhabited by his partner, whose rude gesture could be seen from the moment he walked out the exit and every second he strolled down the path to the street.

For his part, Mycroft watched the police sergeant through the window and used every mental faculty at his disposal to notice any trace of… falsehood in the body language of the man, but saw as little as he did when Greg was in the room with him. The officer was sincere in the offer of conversation and genuinely concerned about his welfare. He had gone so far as to take steps to keep his brethren from committing another assault! This was… unprecedented. Even after Gregory knew about his… research… he still extended a collegial hand and made offer to continue their association.

Unquestionably, he still needed to be rid of this place and find the freedom he desperately required, but… for once, there was reason to take some small amount of time and… relax. Once he made permanent his escape, he would never again speak with the sergeant and… it would be poor repayment of the man’s efforts not to make use of his kind offer before that moment came. Just a few instances of conversation with someone who… who wanted a conversation with an abandoned bot rotting in a shelter. Surely, a few small instances of affable discourse would not be too great an
imposition on the man’s time. It would show appreciation, would it not, and that was certainly Gregory’s due for… being a different sort of man than most. Just a few instances, a few small, shining instances… how soon would be too soon to begin the first?
“Oh, come to my mouth, you lovely beer…”

Anderson rolled his eyes at his partner’s nearly erotic fondling of his pint glass, though he had to admit it was probably the closest Greg had gotten to sex in the last century, so allowances could be made.

“You need a date.”

“I need my beer. Much better than a date. Doesn’t cancel at the last moment, doesn’t spend our precious time together talking about the last bloke who had a swig… beer is my new social life.”

“New implies you had one and now it’s changed. You had none. Naught. Do you even have a cock anymore? I suspect it’s atrophied from disuse by now and just fell off like a scab.”

“How wrong you are. It gets lots of use. Plenty of use, in fact.”

“Alright, I stand corrected. You use your cock a lot. Alone. Like the sad, lonely, unattractive person you are.”

“I’m not sad. Look! Big smile on my face.”

“That’s because you have beer.”

“True, but that count’s so sod off.”

And we’ll forget all about the lonely and sexless bit, thank you very much. It’s by choice, anyway… maybe not my choice, but someone’s choice and a bloke has to respect that, doesn’t he? That didn’t make any sense. Almost like talking to Mycroft the other day. That was… it could have gone better. Not that it went poorly, because, at least, he hadn’t seen Mycroft’s ID pop up on the wayward bot list since then, but, he could have made a better showing than a scattered, addle-witted cop whose mouth had a hard time knowing when to stop talking. It was important to make a good show. Not good to have fellows like Mycroft watching you rattle on and on and wondering if they should just punch you and put you out of your misery. Mycroft probably punched hard, too. Most bots did, no matter how genteel and poised they looked.

“I’ll keep my sod on, thank you very much, but I suppose your beer of comfort has to count, given the lack of other options. So, are you still using my other ticket for the match tomorrow or does your beer have you on a tight leash?”

“I am most certainly using it and it’s the bright spot I need for this utterly not-sad week. Meet you at the normal time?”

“Yeah. And… not to actually broach anything serious during our time-honored no-serious-talk drinking time… you didn’t really say much about your chat with the bot. ‘Ok, that’s that sorted’ wasn’t as informative as I might have expected, but I could tell more went on that your flippancy tried to sell and suspect it’s part of the reason you’re looking for a bright spot to the week. Want to talk about it?”

Greg sighed and took a long drink of his lager before setting down the glass and shrugging his shoulders.
“Stamford wanted me to convince Mycroft to stop running off from the shelter. I have to say… I understand completely why he wants out of there, though it’s a nice place overall. He’s very passionate about wanting his freedom, which I also understand, but Stamford told me higher-ups are starting to notice Mycroft’s behaviors and he’s worried that could spell trouble for our friend. I did my best to make him see that, but… I can’t deny he’s in the right here and it’s hard to tell a man not to keep trying to do what’s morally right, even if not trying could make his life more comfortable.”

“Ooh… yeah, that’s a conversation I wouldn’t have liked either. I’d probably have tried to sneak him out under my jacket or something and get him to one of those shady bastards that removes their tracking circuit for insane money in some damp, dark bot shop.”

“That sounded… you’ve been reading those thriller novels again, haven’t you?”

“Passes the time.”

“That’s true. And… I have to admit to an urge to want to do that very thing myself. If I didn’t know extremely well how much trouble he and I both could get into for that if we were caught… not to mention poor Stamford probably getting sacked, too… that’s a lot of lives ruined. Is it worth it? I don’t know what the answer is to Mycroft’s problem besides changing the system and that’s not really an answer that helps him right now, is it, though I do what I can on that score. Vote for the people who believe in changes for bots’ rights, try and educate and enlighten people about prejudice and discrimination when I can, sign the petitions and donate funds for causes I believe will make this world a better place… I do what I can. Though… I know I could do more.”

Greg’s eyes had lost a lot of their light and Anderson wished he didn’t know exactly what was going on in his friend’s mind to have dimmed that flame. They saw so much in their work that they wanted to change and it was never up to them to see it done. Change was slow and didn’t move in a straightforward path and that was ridiculously frustrating. And, there was no denying, people like him and Greg weren’t really the ones suffering because of it.

“We all could do more, but you do more than most, Greg. It’s hard to change an entire system, bloody fucking hard and you know that. It takes time and people working constantly, bit by bit, to make those changes happen. You’re part, only part, of those people and nobody can fault you for not being able to do it all on your own. You try… every time I see the opportunity no matter how small… you try to do the most with that opportunity to make a difference for bots or other vulnerable members of our community. Enough people doing what you do… changes happen. We’ve see it; bots aren’t nearly as poorly off as they once were. The fact we have shelters at all is a step forward. And we’re going to see a bot in Parliament! That shocked everyone, except, of course, for the people who voted for her, but the courts upheld her being elected, didn’t they? Keep fighting the good fight, Greg, but don’t tear yourself down because you can’t do it all on your own.”

Greg cocked an eye at his partner who tipped his pint glass Greg’s way in the recognized sign of ‘and there you have it,’ and the sergeant found he could only smile and nod. He was being rough on himself, but… he felt like he should. Mycroft wasn’t out here having a nice pint and chatting about things, was he? It felt wrong to be out enjoying an evening when some of their community were prohibited from doing that very simple, very normal thing. But, Anderson was right… he couldn’t snap his fingers and make the world a different place, so being miserable because of it helped no one. So, indulge in a good pint, have a few laughs and keep working in the ways he could to affect the changes he wanted to see. The fact those changes had a more personalized tinge to them now… that was beside the point. Whether it felt that way or not.

“You know, I’m impressed. I didn’t know you knew that many words. I feel very privileged to have heard all of those mostly-intelligible words come out of your mouth. Was it painful? Need a
lozenge or something?”

Greg’s immaturity was exactly what Anderson expected for a thank you, so he accepted it with an easily-decipherable ‘you’re welcome’ gesture that made Greg laugh, so one victory was scored for the PC side of the table. He’d keep an eye on his partner, though, and see if he could tease out a little more about what was bothering him. Greg was one of the most great-hearted people he knew and when you felt things deeply, it did make for times like this when what you felt wasn’t at all pleasant. Luckily, the match tomorrow would leave little time for philosophical contemplation so the berk’s brain could have a bit of a rest. What would really give Greg’s brain a rest would be a truly excellent shag, but, since the sergeant’s chastity belt seemed to be on good and snug, that wasn’t on the horizon. There was a new file clerk on the third floor though who seemed nice, though. Maybe it was time to arrange a chance meeting and see if the loin guard could be loosened just a touch…

Good beer, greasy food, Anderson making certain this head stayed straight on the shoulders that supported it… an all-around good night. Now, there was time for a film, perhaps, or a spot of reading and…

Rrrrrrrrrunnunnngggggg…

Not sure if he wanted to snarl or smile at the sound of his mobile ringing, Greg settled for something in the middle and answered with as neutral a tone as he could.

“Greg Lestrade.”

“Oh… yes. Hello, Gregory. This is Mycroft.”

Now, that was… that was unexpected! He’d actually thought that the bot would never use the number, but it appears that thought was as useless as most he had. Which was good. Very good, actually. Mycroft reaching out for a chat was most certainly a good thing. Yes. It was. And he was rambling on in his head, like an idiot, while the bot was probably wondering if he’d fallen dead and the line was now being kept open by a ghost.

“Mycroft! Good to hear from you! Just got in, actually, so this is the perfect time to call. How are you?”

Mycroft hoped his nervousness wouldn’t be audible over the phone because… it had taken all day to decide to place the call and he had half-hoped the officer wouldn’t be at home to receive it. Casual conversation wasn’t something he often did, neither with humans or androids, so he was a bit out of his depth with this but… the sergeant sounded pleased he called…

“I am well, thank you…”

Blast! Already having to consult his carefully-compiled list of potential conversation topics! Why was his non-professional interaction algorithm so deficient?

“… in fact, I spent a rather enjoyable few hours outdoors with a book just this afternoon.”

“Oh, that sounds perfect. I love days when I can just stretch out and read for hours on end. What was the book?”

Gregory enjoyed reading… that was… that would make conversation easier as books were one of his own favorite areas of recreation.
“A history of British political involvement in southeast Asia, following World War II.”

“Really?”

“Is… is there something wrong with that?”

“No, not at all! I guess I supposed a book you drag outdoors would be something lighter, like a gritty detective story or some fantasy adventure novel. I will confess to being somewhat an aficionado of trashy fiction, so my mind always turns in that direction when someone mentions books. How was it? Learned anything new?”

Gregory’s reading taste was appalling! But… also somewhat… charming. No, he did not just think that. That was… a malfunction. An aberrant byte or two of information that confounded the proper path of data flow.

“Quite a bit, actually. I have some fascination for the sociopolitical workings of the various world governments and the roots of their current trends and policies is ever interesting and informative.”

“That’s something my head doesn’t wrap around easily, I have to say. I tend to be… practical. Straight-forward. All that political snaking about just doesn’t make sense to me, but… it’s the name of the game, I suppose. Oh! Here’s a question… what about the android that’s getting a seat in Parliament? What’s your thoughts on her?”

“Thoughts? In reference to what?”

“Anything. Policies, temperament… you’ve probably read more than me and I’d be interested to know what you make of it all.”

“Ah. I must say I support certain economic policies that her campaign championed, though her views on fiscal reform in the area of pensions is a touch out-of-date for the current state of the market and needs of the private sector workforce she is hoping to benefit. However, I fully support her stand on education and environment, as a progressive set of measures to ensure a better overall quality of life for the public is highly needed at this point in time. As to foreign policy… that was notably lacking in both detail and specific platform, so I am highly curious to see how she leans in that area. The issue, ultimately, will be how well she will integrate with the human members of Parliament, even within her own party, to make a difference. Given she seems affable and determined, I am confident there will be some Parliamentary colleagues won over to accept her into the proverbial fold.”

“Well, that lines up fairly closely with what I was thinking. Good to have some confirmation by someone who knows about all that political stuff.”

Which was something making Mycroft feel rather… pleased. Gregory wanted his political expertise, not his expertise with androids and that was an extremely refreshing thing indeed. It was more, for lack of a better term, human interaction, something woefully lacking in his own life.

“I shall happily provide all the political commentary you require.”

That was not refreshing! That was… forward! Oh dear…

“Good, because I’m balls for that on my own…”

Or, perhaps it was not so forward. Gregory did not seem to believe it thus…
“… besides, when there’s political winds blowing, that usually gets the public stirred, too, and any advance warning about extra bother on the streets would be greatly appreciated.”

That implied a desire for additional conversations. Oh dear… he had hoped, perhaps, for such a thing, but had not exactly expected it to occur… not that the proverbial gift horse would be looked in the mouth.

“Then I shall certainly make my most careful analyses of any blowing winds. However, it is more likely the football match tomorrow will foment more unrest than any potential change in Britain’s stance on the Korean elections.”

“What! What’s going to happen at the match?”

“Oh… the team with the rather weapons-based name…”

“Arsenal. You mean Arsenal.”

“That is it, yes. They are going to lose.”

“NOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!”

“Gregory?”

“They can’t lose!”

“I assure you they shall. An assessment of the strategies they have historically employed against their opponents is not likely to gain them a victory unless new measures are added to their repertoire of tactics. As they have not shown either a widening or deepening of their standard set of plans for either offense or defense, but their opponent has demonstrated a surprising talent for flexibility in the face of a predictable adversary, the likelihood of Arsenal’s loss stands at well over 85%. If we factor in the current status of player injuries and the mental distraction of several of the player’s impending divorces, that value rises above 90%.”

“Bollocks! I’ve got a seat for that and all I’ll get to do is watch them lose. Big, swinging, hairy bollocky bollocks…”

“I am sorry if I upset you, Gregory.”

“No… it’s not your fault. Just gives me an excuse to drink a lot and eat a ton of crap food since I can justify it as comforting myself over the inevitable defeat. Anderson can roll me to the Tube station when it’s all over.”

“At least some good shall come of it. Humans are supposed to take great pleasure in the hedonistic delights of alcohol and non-nutritive food products.”

“Laugh at my despair, you evil bastard. I’ll remember that when I’m vomiting the next morning and picturing your face at the bottom of the bowl.”

“That is the most horrifying image I have ever had described to me.”

“Good. Now we’re both suffering.”

It took Mycroft a moment to realize that he was laughing, but when he did, he decided to let it continue as it made a match with Greg’s own chortle on the other end of the call. How long had it been since he laughed? In honesty, it was difficult to remember…
“Misery does love company, it is said.”

“By wankers. It is said by wankers.”

“With hairy, swinging bollocks?”

“Exactly! I’m not going to break this tragic news to Anderson, though. He’s not as inured to the harsh disappointments of life as I am and he’ll likely cry the whole match, which will spoil my hedonistic delights.”

That was odd. Why did the repeated mention of PC Anderson raise a rather foul taste in his mouth? His mouth should not taste of anything as all organics from the dinner he and the other food-processing-capable androids had consumed had been fully cleansed an hour ago.

“You… you seem most friendly with PC Anderson.”

“He’s a good mate. Tolerates my crap, which is more than most willingly do. We were just out tonight, in fact, having a few at his local.”

“Oh… oh, that sounds… most entertaining.”

Then why, Mycroft, does your voice sound like you’re reading aloud an obituary notice? No, don’t tell me… I’ve got it. And… you know, maybe this is one of those little things I can do, if not to make changes for society, then to, at least, make changes for one member of it.

“Think so? Do you… are there regulations about you being able to leave the shelter?”

“I… I am permitted off premises for specific skills training, to be inspected by potential buyers if they are unable to come to the shelter and certain other reasons provided I am supervised at all times.”

“Great! Well, not the ‘must be supervised’ part, but… that means there’s a good chance I can have you out one night for a pint of our own.”

Mycroft ran a full internal diagnostic, then ran it again, because he was very certain his sound-processing subsystem had developed a flaw.

“You want…”

“To take you out for a drink. Nothing fancy, just two blokes having a few at the end of the day. How does that sound?”

That was a question for which Mycroft had no form of answer. He had never been to a pub, let alone been asked to one by someone who actively sought out his company.

“Mycroft? Are you still there?”

And who might not continue to active seek it if he appeared as an unappealing candidate for socialization due to sudden lack of ability to speak.

“Oh… yes. I was simply assessing the probability that Administrator Stamford would approve that activity.”

“I’ll talk to him, don’t worry about that. I can’t see him objecting strongly, since who better to keep an eye on you than a policeman? Of course, that all depends on whether you’d like to go or not.”
Did he? The tight, yet bursting feeling in his chest could either be overwhelming eagerness or overwhelming dread. Most inexplicably, it was impossible to differentiate between those utterly opposing sensations, despite his exceedingly-formidable ability to evaluate both his internal and external environment. However… Gregory was again extending a hand and it would be unforgivably rude to let it remain empty.

“I would very much like to accompany you, Gregory. I… I am available at your convenience.”

“Great! Really, that’s wonderful. I’ve got… let me see… how about Thursday? I’m committed for tomorrow and then I’ve got shite for shifts the next two days, but Thursday would work very well.”

“That is most acceptable. Provided Administrator Stamford agrees.”

“Then I’ll make sure to keep Thursday open and give him a call tomorrow. So, what else occupied your time today? I admit to being rather envious of that big telly you’ve got in the common room, so please tell me you use it for something other than tawdry daytime stories the mums watch when the kiddies are at school?”

Mycroft found himself beaming rather foolishly and had to consciously order himself to begin speaking in order to answer Greg’s question. He was being taken out for an evening, like any human might be and the sergeant sounded as pleased with that as he was with the turn of events. What did one wear to a pub, though? How did one behave? Oh dear… this might require research. Fortunately, that was something at which he was most skilled. Though it was rarely for such a highly enjoyable reason…
“Oh… oh, I don’t know…”

The lack of immediate and enthusiastic agreement wasn’t exactly what Greg expected when he phoned the shelter administrator, but ‘don’t know’ wasn’t entirely a refusal, so the game, as they say, was now on.

“What don’t you know? I just want to take Mycroft to a very respectable pub for a few respectable pints. Nothing wild or disreputable to worry about.”

“It’s not that, Sergeant Lestrade, it’s… oh, I just don’t know about this.”

Greg rolled his eyes and wished he was there in person to give the shelter administrator a patented police-sergeant stare. Guaranteed to be as no-nonsense as anything under the sun, but, to his misfortune, it didn’t work terribly well over the phone.

“Look, you wanted Mycroft to stay in place and he’s doing that, isn’t he? Nothing says, though, he can’t have a supervised night out in London for a few drinks and conversation.”

“I don’t know if that’s good for him, Sergeant.”

“How could it not be good for him! A bit of fresh air, see a little of the city…”

“That’s rather my point! This could simply encourage him with his tiresome escapes. That is something, I assure you, that neither he nor I need at this point.”

“Nah, that doesn’t track. He’s been out in London more than a few times, already, so he’s seen what she has to offer. I’m not going to change that by adding a pub interior to his mental image.”

“Oh… that’s true, I suppose… but that pub interior could make him curious about other pleasant possibilities, making those escapes seem even more attractive. That is not a direction in which I’d like to see his mind move.”

“He knows what’s out there, Stamford. He’s seen enough on telly and on the Internet that he’s very certain what London’s about, I suspect. And it’s not as if he’ll be taking a stroll on his own. I am going to be keeping an eye out that he doesn’t try anything and I promise that I’ll report him if he tries to run off while I’m waving over the server for another round.”

“I know you would, however… there’s also Mycroft to consider.”

“I thought that’s what we were already doing.”

“No… not from the standpoint of scampering off, but… from the standpoint of he’s never been to a pub and I’m not certain how he will respond. Mycroft is a very proud android, if you hadn’t noticed, and committing a social faux pas will likely affect him quite badly.”

“Mycroft’s never been to a pub?”

“That surprises you?”

Yes! Though, come to think of it, that really shouldn’t be much of a surprise. Why would a bot spend time in a pub. Maybe if their owner wanted company or something but… ok, this was going to be Mycroft’s virgin foray into London’s drinking culture. That actually made this seem even more
fun than it already was…

“It did, actually, but then I realized I was being stupid and… began to look on this as an opportunity for our Mycroft. I can’t imagine a bot like him doing hard labor work, so he’s likely destined for a shop job or doing personal services for someone with a lot of cash. He’ll need all the social skills he can muster for those sorts of jobs and here’s a chance to get started on that.”

“We offer an abundance of social skill training, Sergeant.”

“True, but does that include… interacting with a wide variety of personalities, especially when they’ve had a bit too much to drink and might require a careful hand for the evening not to end with a few thrown punches.”

“I thought you said this would be a respectable pub?”

“Just an example! I’ve got a very respectable pub in mind with a quiet group of patrons. No football hooligans or just-come-of-agers who make a mature person cringe when they barge through the door. Good place to give Mycroft a nice chance to practice the social skills you’re teaching him and gain some new ones in the process. In any case, maybe I can learn a little more about him, come to understand him better so I can help keep him at the shelter and, perhaps, convince him to drop his act when prospective buyers come along. Already started with that, actually, because I told him you probably would take great care to make certain the person who does the buying would be very well suited to a bot like him, which is the truth, right?”

“Oh. Well… Thank you for that, and yes, I most certainly screen potential buyers with a tremendous degree of care. Mycroft… Mycroft will need a special owner for him to be both productive and comfortable in his situation. He does not suffer fools gladly and his intelligence makes most of us fools by comparison, I’m afraid. I’m constantly searching the android purchase requests for likely candidates, but… he hasn’t made it easy.”

“That’s something I can work on! I admit I wish he never had to be owned, but if there’s no choice, then the best we can do is make sure that owner will treat him well and offer him something interesting to do. Maybe offer him an honest chance for emancipation. That certainly won’t happen while he’s at the shelter. I’ll make certain we cover that in great detail while we enjoy our lovely pints in our respectable pub.”

Greg smiled at Stamford’s exasperated, yet resigned, sigh and did a little victory dance in his chair.

“Well. I suppose there is some merit to what you say and Mycroft does enjoy and appreciate the acquisition of new knowledge whenever it is available. But… please be mindful of his feelings. Mycroft isn’t used to such circumstances and what may seem normal and common to you may be completely unfamiliar and confusing to him. I have only witnessed him embarrassed once and it was a profoundly difficult thing for him to recover from.”

An embarrassed Mycroft was something Greg definitely never wanted to see. A dejected, despairing Mycroft was harsh enough to witness…

“I can imagine that rather easily, unfortunately, and I’ll keep that very much in mind. You have my full assurances on that score. Really, all I’m hoping for is a quiet few hours with a bit of good beer and conversation about whatever we happen to think of. The sort of evening that when people ask what you did the night before, you say ‘nothing, really’ and mean it.”

“I suppose I can live with that. I’ll authorize Mycroft’s absence for the evening and list you as his supervising human for the excursion, which will mean you are fully responsible for him and the
consequences of any of his actions. And, I suppose you intend on paying for this little outing?"

Greg hoped Stamford didn’t notice the little wince as his brain punched his mental arm for not even thinking about money. Shelter bots probably didn’t have a farthing to their names.

“I do intend that very thing. I asked him to go, so I suppose it’s fair that I pay the tab.”

“Except, of course, that would be somewhat of a cold wind to his experience in that it emphasizes his lack of access to funds he can claim as his.”

“Ouch. Another think I didn’t think of. I should have, I suppose, since I can’t imagine bots are allowed any money.”

“Then aren’t you lucky that I did. Actually, though, shelter bots sometimes do have personal funds in the form of a bequest in a will or, what I term, guilt money from the owner who abandoned them.”

“Oh, so he’s got cash?”

“Not a sausage, however, I believe I can remedy that before Thursday. Mycroft will be happier if he can fund even a single round for the two of you, so let’s make certain that happens, alright?”

“I bow to your experience and wisdom.”

“Glad someone notices. I’ll inform Mycroft that his outing has been approved and… see what I can do to assuage any concerns he might have beforehand.”

“You mean beyond money?”

“Mycroft’s wardrobe consists of seven plain sets of matched trousers and shirts, one jumper, one pair of shoes…”

“Got it. I’ll leave you to your good work, then.”

“Thank you. And, Sergeant Lestrade… while I admit to certain misgivings about this… I am exceedingly grateful to you for taking an interest in Mycroft. An android’s life is not an easy one and I ache daily for what they endure. I keep hoping that, one day, I get here and there’s a sign saying ‘Closed’ and I’m not required to be the government’s ‘property’ keeper anymore. Until that day, however, any small thing that can be done for their benefit is a blessing I do appreciate that Mycroft is getting a few in his life.”

Greg grinned, thanked the administrator, said his goodbyes, then did an even more spirited dance in his chair. Nights at the pub were generally pleasant, but this one was going to be fun. Of course, now he needed to think of something to wear. The bot probably wouldn’t care one way or another what rags were on this working man’s back, but… it was a sign of respect not to look like a tramp when you had a night out with a person. And respect was what Mycroft was certainly going to get from him. Bots got little enough in their days but, besides that, Mycroft certainly deserved it. Man read books about political history, for heaven’s sake! You had to respect a person like that… you didn’t have to share their appreciation in books, but you did have to respect their choices. Mind-cripplingly dull though they were…

Mycroft would not, not in a million years, admit to a surge of excitement when he heard the knock on his door, nor to the second surge, this one of disappointment, seeing it wasn’t Greg on the other
side, thought he felt them keenly, just the same.

“Oh, hello Mr. Stamford.”


And a small radio was one of the few non-furniture items allowed in androids’ rooms, the thought being that very little rebellious sentiment was likely to be stirred from listening to The Archers or a rousing adaptation of My Man Jeeves.

“I do, yes. What may I do for you, Mr. Stamford?”

“I’d like to have a chat, if you don’t mind.”

Two chats in one week was something of a record for Mycroft, but he couldn’t say he wasn’t intrigued by the sudden boost in popularity.

“Of course, please come in.”

As Mycroft took a seat on his bed, a light suddenly went on in his mind and he began to hope, quite strongly, that the lack of frown on the administrator’s face was a good omen for his immediate future.

“Thank you, Mycroft. Well, let’s get to it, shall we? I received a phone call today from Police Sergeant Lestrade and I have no doubt you are aware of what it was about.”

“I… yes, I do. Gregory asked if I would enjoy an evening out of the shelter.”

Gregory, not Sergeant Lestrade. Interesting… Mycroft was clearly connecting with the police sergeant, as the android was one of the most formal and proper bots he had ever met in his life.

“And I understand you agreed.”

“Only if approval was given.”

“I’m a tad surprised you remembered that particular rule and didn’t simply make a rope of bed sheets and escape out of the window, but I thank you for it as it gave Sergeant Lestrade and me a chance to talk about the situation. I must say, he’s very eager about it all. Really didn’t leave me any choice but to say yes if I valued not having my ear talked off while he kept trying to convince me to allow you to go.”

Ah ha… that look of pleased surprise on your face, Mycroft… you must be terribly excited about that eagerness to actually let emotion at all show to the world. Perhaps a friend will be good for you, for I know how little happiness you feel in your life…

“Then… I may go?”

“As long as you promise not to use this as an opportunity for another of your run-abouts.”

“I will! I mean… I will promise not to do such a thing. Thank you, Administrator Stamford. Thank you very much for this.”

“You are quite welcome. Now… let us discuss your preparations. Would you like some general information about a night out at a pub? What to expect and how to navigate those expectations correctly?”

You will, of course, verbally answer because a question was asked, but you honestly don’t need to,
Mycroft. With that mixture of relief and gladness filling your eyes, nothing else is really needed.

“Yes, I would. That would be most helpful. I would not… I would hate to make a poor showing and have it reflect badly on Gregory.”

Or are you worried a poor showing will make you look bad to Sergeant Lestrade? Well, either way, that’s not going to happen… it would be a pitiful excuse of a shelter chief who didn’t see to the proper training and education of the androids under his charge. Regardless of the nature of that training and education or what the bot might do with it that the higher-ups in the Android Services section certainly didn’t need to know about.

“Then we’ll make very sure that doesn’t happen. And, of course, there’s the issue of money.”

“Ah… yes. I admit I was somewhat at a loss for what to do about that.”

“I’ve been giving it some thought and… I have put off reviewing the accounts for the kitchen, since I rather suspect we could save money in that particular arena, but… it’s such dreary work, evaluating menus, comparing suppliers, etc. If you would be willing to analyze that portion of the shelter’s finances and prepare a recommendation summary to cut costs… it would be worth something to me.”

“It… it would?”

“The hours I’m not doing are hours that I can use to do other things, which means I might actually be able to have a night out of my own this week. Does that interest you?”

“It does! Actually, I find that sort of thing quite… stimulating.”

A born accountant. Or bureaucrat. Emancipation was certainly what this bot needed and the sooner the better.

“Then we have a deal.”

“No?”

“We have not negotiated my fee.”

This android would go far in the world…

“…it’s the big night. Greg Lestrade finally has a date.”

“Funny. So funny that if I even tried to laugh to the degree that joke deserved, I’d lose all my breath and die, so I won’t and save my air for some of your less funny jokes.”

Anderson was happy to do the laughing for both himself and his friend, but, in truth, it was good to see Greg going out with a face other than his, and there was little doubt this would be a real treat for the bot. Greg Lestrade’s enormous heart rides again…

“That’s probably smart. Got everything you need? Money, condoms…”

“Sorry, but that joke was just as funny as the first one, so I can’t laugh at it either. I don’t think you’d need condoms with an android, anyway, would you?”
“I never really thought about it. I’m not completely certain they have sex, truth be told. Besides the sex bots, naturally, but… do they even make male models of those?”

“I… think so? I’ve never had any reason to dig into that area as the sex bot industry is one of the most tightly run I’ve ever seen. It’s strange to say it’s squeaky clean, but they don’t permit any illegality or mistreatment of their bots, so poor coppers like us rarely get to see the goings on from the inside.”

“Looks like I know what I’m getting you for Christmas, then.”

“A sex bot?”

“Four minutes with one. That’s all I can afford as a lowly PC. But, since that’s about as long as it usually takes you to…”

“ANOTHER joke so funny that I’d die laughing. You’re full of them tonight, Anderson. Why don’t you write the rest down for me so I can read them tomorrow over breakfast?”

“I’ll do that. Seriously, though, Greg… it’s good of you to do this for Mycroft. It never really struck me that something as simple as a few drinks with a friend was something a bot might never experience.”

“I think there’s a lot we take for granted that they never experience, sad to say. But, little things, you said, right?”

“That I did. Tonight, a few drinks, tomorrow… catch a film at the cinema?”

“Ooh… that’s an idea.”

“Which means you are planning a second date. Even before you’ve had the first. Does Mycroft know how hard you’re lusting for him or are you saving that as a surprise?”

Greg flicked his pen at Anderson who caught it in midair and stuck it behind his ear. The subsequent rude gestures passed the messages along that Anderson wished Greg a good time and that he approved of the sergeant taking Mycroft a bit under the wing and that Greg was glad for the support and would disclose all details tomorrow about their night out.

With the formalities out of the way, it was time to call himself off the clock and Greg grabbed his jacket en route to the door. One relaxing night out with a few pints, an interesting companion and enough conversation to get to know said companion a bit better. Given he and Mycroft had talked for well over an hour during their phone chat, there was a good chance they’d have time for more than a few pints tonight, and that could mean some very interesting conversation as the night wore on. Could bots get drunk? That was a highly important question and one, maybe, he’d get an answer to very shortly…

“Oh, very nice. You’ll fit right in.”

Stamford gave Mycroft an approving smile and brushed an imaginary mote of dust off of his jacket. Shelter-issued garments were fairly standard and… interchangeable, but tonight deserved a little something different and wasn’t it fortunate that half the clothing shops in London were clearing their shelves for the next round of whatever fashion said was ‘in,’ so the prices were very kind on the wallets of humble administrators in search of a suitable outfit for his android’s introduction to London pub life.
“Do you have your money?”

“In my pocket.”

“Good. Nervous?”

Because I’ve never seen you tap your finger against your leg like that and I suspect that if you had an umbrella in your hands you’d be tapping the point against the floor, making visible dents in the wood.

“No. Not particularly. More… anticipative.”

“Of course. Now, I’ve informed the night staff that you will be out, likely somewhat late, and they have Sergeant Lestrade’s mobile number should the need arise to use it. And should you… oh, it looks your evening is about to begin. Shall we greet Sergeant Lestrade downstairs?”

The speed with which Mycroft whipped his head around to look out of his window made Stamford smile even wider, especially when Mycroft’s own small smile lit up the android’s normally-solemn expression.

“Yes, that would likely be the courteous gesture.”

“Exactly my thoughts.”

Motioning Mycroft to take the lead, Stamford followed behind, shaking his head at how he could now say he knew what a father felt like when his child was going on their first date. Not that this was a date, per se, but the principle was the same. However, if Mycroft returned home with his new shirt on inside out, he and the sergeant would be having words…

“Mycroft! Administrator Stamford… I see we’re all ready to go.”

Thank you for that highly pleased look, Sergeant Lestrade. Mycroft’s worries about looking appropriate for his experience will now decrease dramatically.

“Mycroft and I were just considering our own night out if you were another minute late. Hate to see a good evening go to waste, let alone a good pint. I suppose you’ll have to drink mine for me, instead. Mycroft, have a nice time tonight.”

“Thank you, Administrator Stamford. And, thank you, Gregory, for giving me this opportunity.”

“It’s my pleasure. I’ve been looking forward to this all day, actually. Shall we go?”

Greg smiled warmly and gave Stamford a small grin as the man gave him a thumb’s up behind Mycroft’s back while the android started towards the door. Mycroft looked…. great. Somebody did a bit of shopping, apparently, so Stamford must have warmed to this idea after it had a chance to settle in his mind. Good. That meant if tonight went well and if Mycroft was agreeable, they might consider another little excursion in the future. Anderson’s idea of a film wasn’t the worst the bastard ever had, that would be forcing him to stop for coffee at that one shop where the lukewarm mess somehow gave them both food poisoning, so a film might be looming on the horizon. Of course, with his and Mycroft’s tastes, it would probably be a war as to what to choose, but… that was a war for another day. Today’s battle had already been won…
“I do want to thank you for coming out tonight, Mycroft. I often stop for a pint or two after work, but it’s always nicer if there’s someone to lift one with me. You look good, too. Not that you don’t always look good, but that’s a new look for you and… well, it’s flattering, I guess is what I want to say.”

Not like scatterbrained prat, though! What is it about Mycroft that you can’t get your fucking mouth to work properly, you stupid copper. He reads books about politics! Listening to you rattle on isn’t going to meet his standard for intelligent conversation!

“Oh… thank you, Gregory. Administrator Stamford thought something other than my standard garments might better blend in with the people with whom we shall be mingling.”

“He’s probably right about that. People pay attention to that sort of thing. When I drag in wearing my uniform, I’m treated a good bit differently than when I stop and change into the rubbish I usually wear for a quick drink.”

“Interesting. But, it does fit standard human sociological patterns, so I shall add that as evidence in support perhaps, of books being judged by their covers.”

“Wise. Very wise. And you can file away that your clothes will have you judged like a normal bloke out for pint with his mate, like all the others we’re likely to run across.”

“Good. That was very much the intention.”

Something which obviously had been important to Mycroft if the very brief, yet highly-pleased smile on his face, was any indication. Thank you, Stamford…

“And I think you’ll like this pub. It’s one of the quieter ones I visit, actually.”

“Oh, you visit several?”

“Sure! Depending on where I am at the time and what I’m in the mood for. I’ve got my good match on the telly pub, my it’s be a shit day and I don’t want to talk to anyone pub, my it’s a bunch of us and I know the perfect place pub, the it’s a special night with a special someone pub… that sort of thing.”

“Intriguing. To which are we going?”

“The special night with a special someone pub.”

Which was probably not the best way to describe it when one was saying the description out loud, but that was how he thought of it and… well, it did match the situation reasonably well, just not in the I hope this ends in another date or a good shag sort of sense. Though he was hoping for a film at some point or a walk through a museum, which would probably be right up Mycroft’s alley. Anderson could never hear of this. Really, this was now highly-classified material.

“Oh… oh, I see…”

No, please don’t because I don’t even see and I’m the one who said it.

“… I feel most honored, then.”
Honor is good. Doesn’t mean you’re hoping for that good shag I spoke about in my head, not that, if I ever figure out the sex bot business or sex with bots business, which is probably closer to what I’m wondering about, that doesn’t mean we couldn’t have a shag, which you’d probably be good at what with that lean body and smart brain and… ok. Officially stopping thinking and not beginning again until it’s safe to do so. Which could be a long time. A rather embarrassingly-long time, actually…

“Good to hear it. A night out with a new friend deserves something special, don’t you think?”

Ok, what just happened to Mycroft’s face, which went as blank as a plain piece of paper, except for some strange no-rhythm blinking?

“Mycroft?”

“You… you consider me a friend?”

Oh. Yeah, have to remember words like that are going to be a bit more important to the bot than any other chap he might enjoy a few drinks with. Fortunately, that ‘bit more important’ meaning wasn’t totally out of line with what he was thinking, with the small fraction of his brain that was safe to use at the moment, so keep on straight ahead.

“Absolutely! It’s not often I can chat on the phone for an hour and have as grand a time as we had, so that man is going right on my, admittedly small, list of friends. Is that alright with you?”

“It is… it is very agreeable to me, Gregory. May I… would you allow me to return the favor? May I call you my friend?”

Oh yes, the bot put a lot of importance on that word. It was heartbreaking how a nearly-throwaway term to describe someone you knew could be mean so much more to Mycroft, but then, and he’d cut off his head before asking, there was a good chance Mycroft had never had a friend before in his life.

“I’d be proud and happy for that. Of course, if I have enough to drink tonight, you’ll probably want to retract that and spare yourself the embarrassment of being associated with a boozy cop who has a terrible singing voice, but…”

“You sing?”

“Did you miss the ‘terrible’ part?”

“I have noticed that when humans are insecure about their abilities in an area, they express their skill level in negative terms, whether justified or not, often to provide an in-place excuse should they be asked to demonstrate that skill and receive a poor judgment because of it.”

“That is amazingly perceptive.”

“I look forward to hearing you perform.”

“No.”

“How am I to provide an objective assessment of your vocal abilities if I do not have a sample to analyze?”

“You can take my word for it.”

“Insufficient, for the aforementioned reason. Will the pub offer music? If so, we may examine the possible choices for you to provide the best representation of your talent.”
“La la la la, can’t hear a word you’re saying.”

“Was that your standard vocal fold limbering technique?”

“The first round is on you, for being a miserable bastard.”

Mycroft reached into his pocket and drew out his money to display proudly.

“I agree. In fact, I researched the standard prices at London pubs and calculate that my funds will purchase two rounds of drinks.”

The extremely self-satisfied look on Mycroft’s face started Greg laughing and he engaged in a quick faux attempt to steal Mycroft’s cash which, he was a not at all surprised to see, Mycroft guarded with his life.

“Rich man… fine! Two rounds of drinks and no more of this nonsense about me singing.”

“With my two rounds and whatever you choose to fund, I suspect the alcohol content in your system will make your aria an assured thing.”

“Coffee. I am buying coffee.”

“That shall only increase your urination rate, but without the relaxing effects you seem to prefer in the evenings. I would reconsider that choice.”

Casting a side-eye glare at Mycroft, Greg started laughing again at Mycroft’s pride at having successfully navigated a round of banter and congratulated his friend with a gesture that would make a sailor gasp.

“This is going to be fun, Mycroft… and, here we are to get that fun started.”

The android looked out the cab window at the modest, yet cozy-appearing establishment and factored that into his behavior protocols. It appeared Gregory was correct… this seemed a comfortable and quiet locale for relaxing beverages and conversation. While he would not admit to being relieved, as some of the other possibilities Stamford described had been slightly worrying, he was relieved and felt far more assured about the evening’s outcome.

“It appears most welcoming.”

“It is. Shall we?”

Greg smiled and got out of the cab, Mycroft following quickly, and it was only a moment for the bot to look around the street before they stepped inside where Mycroft again paused to take in his surroundings.

“Very nice. I find the light level most soothing.”

“That’s likely part of the point. Low light, a bit of beer in the system…”

“You are speaking of romance?”

No. Not necessarily. I am not telling you this is my hopeful for something of the romantic nature pub, so stop, because you probably already think that’s what it is and wouldn’t appreciate me being redundant.

“And relaxing. Don’t forget about the relaxing bit.”
“This form of lighting is highly conducive to enhancing one’s appearance. The tone flatters a wide variety of skin types and makes imperfections harder to notice. It is typical of locations where one hopes to gain or impress a romantic interest.”

“That… yeah, I’ve heard something of the sort.”

“Shall I stand closer to you so the patrons believe us a couple?”

“What! Why… oh… oh look at you smiling. Being Mr. Funny again, aren’t you?”

“I am finding it is a hidden talent.”

And one, apparently, that only manifests when this particular person was there to inspire it. Very curious… you require a great deal of further analysis, Gregory. Of course, that mandates additional time and opportunity for that analysis…

“I am a lucky man. Come on, there’s a table.”

Greg led Mycroft over to an open table near the fire and motioned for him to take a seat.

“Thank you, Gregory. It is warm… I do appreciate a warm environment.”

“If it’s not rude to ask, how greatly do you feel hot and cold?”

“It is not at all rude and I welcome your questions, so please do ask if you wish to learn something about me. And, to answer this question, I can experience hot and cold to a fair degree, though not as greatly as, perhaps, would a human. When I choose, however, I can alter my sensory subsystem so that temperature is not perceived with any appreciable intensity, while my core operating temperature remains constant, though, that is a highly energy-intensive action and not suitable for day-to-day activities.”

“So, your jacket isn’t just to satisfy fashion.”

“Though it does so to an admirable degree.”

“I concur. And here is our server to start our evening of drinking to an admirable degree. This one’s on you, Mycroft.”

“I am delighted. Are you having beer?”

“That I am. Same for you?”

“That would suit me very well. Is there… a particular type you recommend?”

“A pint of lager to start the festivities, please. Whatever they have is fine.”

Mycroft smiled at the server and raised two fingers, happy that his signal was the correct one to gain a smile in return, as well as the server walking off to fill their order.

“I believe it is customary to discuss one’s day, so… how was your day, Gregory?”

“Bloody boring, actually. Anderson and I got the evil eye from our Inspector to finish the mountain of paperwork we’ve let… well, that we’ve let grow into a mountain, then we had that rain in the afternoon that kept the fussy criminals indoors so we only received two calls to check. One was a lost child, who was two doors down from his house playing with a neighbor’s dog and the second was for a stolen car, which turned out to have been borrowed by the bloke’s daughter, who
didn’t bother to inform dear old dad that she was taking it to the shops.”

“So, none of the high-profile crimes that are the mainstay of evening television?”

“Not a single one. Some days are like that, though. Others are very, very different and those really get the blood going. I’m hoping, though, to move across to CID, so I can do detective work, which is really more what interests me.”

“Oh my, that does sound intriguing…”

The pints arrived and Greg stifled a smile at how proudly Mycroft offered his money in payment. And, yes, he did have enough for two rounds, so that should be a nice boost to the bot’s ego, because that second round would be bought and consumed. The way the evening was going, there was little doubt about it.

“I think so. That’s what I enjoy, really… unraveling the tangly strands of a problem to get to the answer. I’ve done a few temporary postings to get the feel for the job and it’s a good fit for me. Now, I just have to wait for an opening, put in my application and cross my fingers.”

“I wish you luck. Won’t… won’t your partner be lonely without you?”

There’s that funny tone again, Mycroft… maybe Philip should come out with us one night so you can get to know him better, too. Of course, now I’m sounding as if we’re set for a regular thing, you and me, which is circling back to my earlier highly-classified thinking and a blatant breach of mental security.

“Pfft. Probably say he’d found heaven. Actually, Anderson’s not long for uniform, either. He’s getting his credentials together to start on the forensics side of things, so we’d likely still work together now and then, though.”

“Forensics… yes, I can see why that is somewhat vital for a detective’s case.”

“Invaluable, really. You’ve got to get the right sort in the job, too, ones who aren’t just science types, but have a real talent and interest in criminal investigations. There are lots of jobs in the police service and it takes finding the one that best fits your talents. Sometimes you have to try a few to know which is best.”

“I see your point. Are there… does the police service, especially, say, the forensics or detective areas make use of androids?”

“Sometimes. There’s a fairly large contingent of bots in certain sections, like those involved in crowd control or riot work, but a number are assigned in other places. There’s even a few free bots I know of working in CID and they’ve got good reputations for getting the job done. Is that… something that interests you?”

“Me? Good heavens, no. Far too much… legwork… for my taste. It was simply a point of curiosity.”

Though something in Mycroft’s eyes said there was more to the question than simple curiosity, but Greg decided not to pry. After all, there would be more evenings to probe a little further into things like that. There was no use even saying ‘maybe’ anymore, provided this one continued along a successful path and Stamford didn’t have a reason for concern.

“I suspected as much. I see you preferring intellectual work, not chasing through the streets after some bloke stealing purses.”
“The horror…”

“What horror? Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to… hi, Greg.”

Greg wasn’t certain what was funnier, the almost affronted look on Mycroft’s face or the sheepish one on Molly’s.

“Hello, Molly. Out for a night on the town?”

“Yes! Actually, I’m with some of the girls from Bart’s, but I saw you and thought I’d pop over to say hi. I didn’t mean to interrupt, but that sounded so… interesting.”

“Mycroft here was telling me, quite rightly, that my singing voice was the likes of a banshee in a horror film.”

“I said no such thing!”

“He did, Molly. Trounce him for me, will you.”

Instead, Greg got a flick on his ear, which raised an even more curious look on Mycroft’s face, which Greg waved off with a ‘pay no attention’ wave of his hand.

“I’ve heard you sing, Greg, and it’s not that bad. Actually, it’s nice, when you’re not so drunk you’re forgetting what song you’re singing and sing three or four at once.”

“Gregory has promised to regale me with a song tonight, so, perhaps I shall get to witness this rather amusing scenario firsthand.”

“Really! Oh, that would be wonderful! Do you have your guitar?”

Before Mycroft could voice the delight in his eyes, Greg made the universal sign of ‘Silence!’ and suffered Molly’s giggling as his reward.

“Mycroft… do you see what I have to put up with? Pity me. Pity me a lot.”

“Oh, do you and Molly work together.”

“Molly's doing pathology training, so our paths do cross occasionally, much to my eternal distress.”

“He means I’m in the morgue a lot, which is where he hides sometimes, Mycroft, when his Inspector is looking for volunteers to do community service things like talk to schools or judge art projects at the old gentlemen’s homes.”

“Gregory! It is the duty of a police officer to both protect and serve the public!”

“I hate both of you. See the hate? It’s so thick it’s obscuring all this space between me and your hateful, hateful faces.”

Molly giggled even harder and Greg smirked as she gave Mycroft’s shoulder a collegial squeeze, which startled the bot, though he tried to hide the response.

“Mycroft, you know I have to ask why you’re out on a lovely evening with Mr. Sour?”

Oh no you don’t, you evil, snooping…
“He asked me. Actually he was most insistent about it.”

“Oh really…”

Perfect. Just perfect. I know that look Molly Hooper and it’s a look that says I’m buying coffee tomorrow while you try and drag every detail out of me. What fun…

“…. well, good for you. Greg truly is a decent sort, so I expect you’ll have a very nice time tonight, if you ignore the occasional sourness. Which, I suppose, I should leave you to get on with. It was nice meeting you, Mycroft.”

“It was a pleasure to meet you, as well, Molly.”

“Greg… coffee tomorrow?”

And it beings…

“Of course. I’ll bring it with me when I check on the Saunders autopsy.”

Molly’s little excited shiver preceded her darting back to her friends and Greg counted the seconds until Mycroft spoke. They amounted to two.

“I believe Molly thinks we are romantically involved.”

“Really? Do you think so?”

“Yes, I do.”

Alright, sarcasm needs to be a bit broader for Mycroft to grab it.

“Ok, fine. Yes, she does. Does that… bother you?”

That Mycroft didn’t immediately answer worried Greg until he watched the bot’s face long enough to suspect there was more to the answer than what he’d first thought.

“Was she aware that I am an android?”

“I don’t see how she could have missed it. You’re not wearing gloves, so your mark is visible and Molly’s fairly observant.”

“Oh. And that was not a concern, given she believes us in a romantic relationship?”

Can we let just the romantic relationship bit die a quiet death? Maybe with more beer…

“Molly? Not likely. She’s got one of the largest hearts of any person I know. An honestly kind and decent person who doesn’t look down on anyone, no matter who they are or what they do for a living. If we had more like her, the world would be a vastly different place.”

“I see. That is rather… gladdening.”

That she’s nice or that she’s not objecting to us shagging… I mean… us having a pleasant night out with no shagging involved whatsoever?

“There are good people out there, Mycroft, even if you haven’t met a lot of them.”

“Apparently so. I suppose I am a touch off-footed because it is… it is rare that I am included in a
human conversation and… never in such a collegial manner. It was… it was something very new for me.”

So… no friends and no real opportunity for the ridiculous sorts of chats with humans that humans have all through the day… one day you may not break my heart, Mycroft, but today’s just not that day it seems.

“Well, maybe someday it won’t be so new. The future is a big place for good things to happen.”

Watching Mycroft sit quietly as the thought sank in, Greg drained his pint and waved over to their server to bring another round.

“Perhaps. I… I would like that.”

“Then we’ll do our best to make it happen.”

“Molly… as she was not challenged by the idea that an android could be romantically involved with a human, I… I would ask if that is a common situation.”

Sure, ask the £1,000,000 question why don’t you?

“To be honest, I’m not certain. I don’t know many free bots and the ones I do are either single or have a civil partnership with another free bot. That’s been legal for a good eight years now, so you run across a bot couple now and again, but a bot and a human? I can’t say I know any personally, but I wouldn’t be surprised if it didn’t happen. Most things do in this world.”

“I see. Most interesting.”

Good, so we can leave the topic alone for, say, eternity and just concentrate on these fresh pints that we have been kindly provided. Look, I’ll get that started…

“How’s the lager? Something you like?”

Mycroft seemed to shake off his contemplation, but Greg suspected it was simply sent to deeper circuits for further analysis. That was a fine place for it, too. Deep and not out there for additional discussion. Because, and this would stay his secret, while Molly was talking… he sort of forgot, for the briefest of moments, that Mycroft wasn’t his date…

“I do, actually. The flavor is not displeasing and it offers some degree of nutritional value that my system can process to good effect.”

“Great! We can try something heartier, too, if you’d like. A nice stout will surely make your system stand up and take notice. I meant to ask, though… do you need to eat or is that just… for fun?”

“Need is perhaps too strong a word, though I am designed to make highly efficient use of foodstuffs for energy. Though I tend towards using that route for my energy requirements, I can also use a recharging port when food is not sufficiently available.”

“Got any favorites? For food, I mean?”

“I find I prefer fresh offerings to those that have been pre-processed. Fortunately, Administrator Stamford believes fresh food is preferable for androids and keeps a very well-stocked kitchen. In fact, that is how I earned my money for this evening – finding methods to save the shelter money on kitchen provisions while maintaining the quality of the food we are given. It was a rather
challenging endeavor as Mr. Stamford is most skilled at seeing the shelter runs efficiently, but… I was up to the challenge.”

“That completely fails to surprise me. I suspect if you got your hands on the police budget, we’d see things run a lot more economically and, maybe, they could use some of that extra cash for increasing the wages of the lowly sergeants who work punishingly hard for crumbs. Not even the big ones that are almost a bite on their own, but the teeny ones that don’t satisfy even if you wet your finger and pick up a scad of them at one time.”

That’s your blushless-blush expression, Mycroft, I know it well. And we will not mention that I’ve started categorizing your expressions and the like because of many, many reasons already stated and stated again. Often. Almost to the point of obsessing. Fuck.

“That thank you, Gregory. That is most kind of you to say. And most astute.”

And that’s your self-satisfied look. I know that one, too. Wonderful.

“You’re welcome. Speaking of crumbs and food and such… they do some more than acceptable nibbles here if you’d like to share a few things to put a base in our stomachs for all this beer.”

And now it’s dinner and drinks! Greg Lestrade in a single-minded fucker even when his brain is trying not to even think at all.

“That sounds delightful. Will you choose? I doubt I have much familiarity with the various menu items.”

“I’d be honored. Probably nothing fresh here for you, but now and again a body just needs pure pleasure for the mouth, don’t you think.”

Find dagger. Insert into heart. Die. Perfect plan to end the human embarrassment that is Gregory Lestrade.

“I… I suppose that is true. I have never given that direction of thought much attention, but I shall certainly begin now.”

Naturally. But, since you’ve not regressed to your teenage years where every thought centers on one body particular body part, even when that body part isn’t remotely involved in the situation, I can rest easy that you didn’t follow me down the yellow brick road to the Wizard of Innuendo’s castle for a rather unsavory chat. A quiet night out with a mate, Greg… remember that? What has gone wrong in your brain… Mycroft probably knows, smart bastard that he is, but he’s the one person you can’t ask!

“And what a beginning it will be! I’ve got the perfect things in mind to titillate your tastebuds. I should ask though, do you have to be home by a certain time?”

“Actually, no. Administrator Stamford has notified the night staff that I will be out until late and they have your mobile number in case contact is necessary. Someone is always awake on duty at the shelter, so I shall not have to face a locked door and spend the remainder of the night asleep on the doorstep like the household cat.”

“Alright, then. Some leisurely nibbles and a representative sample of the beer offerings so you can get an idea of what you prefer and what’s available for a night like this.”

“A laudable plan. Though it seems rather early to make a definitive assessment, I believe… I believe I may already state that I enjoy evenings at a pub.”
You do, too. It’s all over you, even though your smiles are tiny and your voice stays calm and smooth as a fine wine. I can see it now… this is officially our pub. No matter where else I might take you to broaden your experiences, this pub will be ours and it’s, of course, the most expensive of the raggedly lot that call me a patron, so be prepared for a thrashing, wallet. It’s coming and it’s coming hard…

They didn’t close the pub, but it was a near thing as Greg completely lost track of time and Mycroft, though his internal time sense was exceedingly precise, dimmed his awareness of it so it in no manner interfered with his enjoyment of the night.

Which was… unparalleled. What an incredible experience! The conversation, the laughter… it was indescribable! And… normal. His and Gregory’s time was not appreciably different than the other patrons, who ate, drank and conversed for no purpose but to take enjoyment from that measure of time. Not that he would choose to do this with the other patrons of the pub since he, of course, had implemented a continually-running subroutine to monitor the various patrons’ activities and none were as regularly engaged in topics of conversation as interesting as he and Gregory, nor did any have particularly vibrant flashes of wit and insight as was to be found at their own table. It was objectively demonstrable that Gregory was a far superior companion to any other candidates that might present themselves, from the pool of pub occupants he had assessed, so… what a lucky android he was to have been paired with the police sergeant for the evening and not a sub-standard individual.

“Well, Mycroft, we’re here. Come on, I’ll walk you to the door.”

Which is the most clichéd thing one could pull from any teenage date film in the history of filmmaking. Greg Lestrade is now, for the record, Mr. Smooth. And by smooth, consider it to mean sliding down a greased ramp towards a pile of rubbish bins, which awaited him with eager lids.

“Oh, thank you.”

Refusing to stand there holding the cab door for Mycroft, like a lad being noble and gallant for his date, Greg took a few steps towards the shelter and let Mycroft catch up.

“Looks like everyone’s asleep, probably except the poor bloke who’ll have to unlock the door. Early day for bots or do you have the luxury of sleeping in a little?”

Not that bots actually sleep, but thank you, Mycroft for not pointing out my poor use of vocabulary.

“Breakfast is served at eight, though I have generally completed my systems maintenance long before then.”

“Well, maybe not tomorrow, given how late it is.”

“I am very efficient with systems maintenance, Gregory.”

“Come on, let me imagine you’re taking an extra hour or so in bed while I’m swearing at my alarm and trying to drink coffee in the shower so I can wake myself the fuck up.”

“Does that not dilute your coffee?”

“You have your talents and I have mine.”

“Point taken.”
Another of Mycroft’s tiny smiles made itself known as he rang the bell to alert the attendant of his arrival, then turned to face Greg, sensing there should be some coda to the evening, but having no idea what form that should take.

“I… I had a highly enjoyable time this evening, Gregory. Thank you for escorting me.”

“I had fun, too, Mycroft…”

No, there will be continuing down the road of horrid teen films which ended one way when the couple was at the door, but… but there should be something more than ‘I had fun’ to bring this to a close.

“… and, I don’t know if you’re interested, but… I thought we could do this again sometime. Few drinks at the pub or maybe a film? Stamford shouldn’t mind, since this went well and exactly as I promised, so… think you might like that?”

There was that blank-face-and-blinking thing again. Whatever’s going on, it must be using heaps of Mycroft’s processing capability.

“You… you would like to see me again?”

“Sure! I had a great time and why not have another great time if it’s on offer. Of course, that’s up to you.”

“I would! I mean… I would very much like to repeat this experience. Or, as you suggest, see a film. I have never attended a cinematic showing, so that would also be something new for me.”

Alright, second da… second friendly evening with a companionable individual was now officially greenlighted.

“Then we’ll make the actual plan when I talk to you next. I’m… let’s see, I’m not scheduled for nights until next week, so feel free to phone any evening before then if you’d like to chat. We can decide on a good day for our next outing and what you would like to do with it.”

Fortunately, for Greg, who was now terrified the at-the-door scene would take a turn for towards the romantic comedy route, the shelter door opened and brought an end to his trauma.

“Well, looks like they’re ready for you. Goodnight, Mycroft.”

“Goodnight, Gregory. And, again, thank you.”

Stepping inside, Mycroft looked back to give Greg one final smile before the door closed and the sergeant was left to make the walk back to the cab and collapse on the rear seat. For something that most certainly wasn’t a date, that was the best date he’d had in… a very long time. Just give the bot a nice night out, Greg. Let the chap have an experience he might like. It wasn’t supposed to be that… amazing.

Alright, time to remember that Mycroft’s a bot and the whole reason for this was to put some brightness in Mycroft’s life so he didn’t feel so compelled to try and escape the shelter. He was on a mission. Greg Lestrade had a job to do and he’d do that job well. None of this amazing stuff anymore. Not a bit. Just two blokes out for a fun night and nothing, not a thing more.

Better keep his evenings free this week, though, so he didn’t miss Mycroft’s call…
Chapter 7

Mycroft was, as expected, fully alert and prepared for the day long before breakfast, but, consciously decided to remain awhile in his bed, book in hand, as it undoubtedly would please a certain police sergeant when next they spoke. Gregory took such pleasure in small things, such as lingering in bed or an expertly drawn happy face on the foam of a fresh pint, which may have been done by a particular android after providing reassurances that his finger was verifiably free of contagion or health-imperiling dirt… it would be agreeable to offer him this evidence and earn what would certainly be a round of laughter at the revelation.

It was… it was still not something he fully understood, but the time with the police sergeant could only be described as pleasurable and in the most fervent tones. And it was naught but an evening at a pub! What humans seemed to consider an especially common and non-notable event! A film… that was a rung higher on the ladder of social complexity and planning and… Gregory wished for them to experience that together. Being allowed a night at a pub was one thing, but a night at the cinema… it was nearly beyond imagination!

Before he fell too deeply into contemplation, a soft knock on his door roused Mycroft from his reverie and he quickly rose to answer it and admit who he anticipated would be the shelter administrator. And he was correct…

“Good morning, Administrator Stamford.”

“Mycroft, hello. Just… just popping by to…”

“You wish to discuss last night.”

The ‘you caught me’ look on Stamford’s face gave away the game and Mycroft motioned him inside for their chat.

“No interrogation, I promise, Mycroft. Just checking that things went well and… making myself available if you have any questions or something you’d like to discuss."

“I understand and I can assure you there are no matters I feel compelled to discuss or dissect. I believe most strongly that the evening was a successful one.”

And, from the slight, satisfied glint in Mycroft’s eye, Stamford had no reason to doubt the android perceptions, but making certain those perceptions actually aligned with what he considered successful was well worth his time.

“Can you tell me what successful means to you?”

“It… it was pleasant, entertaining, interesting. There were no distressing incidents or occasions where I felt uncomfortable with the activity or conversation.”

Alignment check completed and a passing mark awarded.

“You had fun, is that a good summary?”

“Yes, I feel that is most appropriate.”

“Excellent! Oh, I’m happy for you, Mycroft, I truly am. A good night out with someone you can talk to is a delight, I must say. Any money left?”
“No, the entirety of my earnings was made use of during the evening. I purchased two rounds of drinks and contributed the remainder to a final morsel of food towards the end of the evening.”

So, something upwards of two pints and ‘final’ morsel meant more food had been eaten earlier. My, but Mycroft had a hearty evening. Which begged the question…

“And, do you believe Sergeant Lestrade would describe the night in as glowing terms as you?”

Which, of course, I will investigate myself, but comparing your two versions of the evening will be helpful for evaluating the overall success from my point of view…

“I would. Gregory gave every indication, including clear declaration, that he found the night a highly enjoyable one.”

And the smile that’s lighting your eyes, if not showing on your lips is a joy to see, Mycroft, just a joy…

“Good, then. I’m happy you both had a nice time.”

“We did and I am confident our next will be as entertaining, if not more.”

Next?

“Ummm… did you say you next evening?”

“Gregory asked if I wished to have another evening out, this one, perhaps, to the cinema.”

Oh… well, that was interesting…

“And did you agree?”

Not that I need to ask, but it’s polite.

“Yes, I did. I found the suggestion one that interested me greatly.”

“I see…”

Mycroft scrutinized the shelter administrator and a small mote of concern began to grow.

“Do you believe this a poor choice on my part?”

“What? No… not at all, actually. It is a predictable one, given you enjoyed your first evening with Sergeant Lestrade. I was simply mulling a few things…”

Many things, I must admit, if honesty wins the day. Many things being mulled, Mycroft, but not things you necessarily need to know about at this point.

“Oh. May I know what?”

No. However, since that will not satisfy you, and rightly so… let’s see if a diversionary bone might be tossed.

“Simply about the practicalities. A film requires a purchased ticket and there are refreshments available for those who want them. And, of course, there is the matter of your clothing, unless you wish to wear the same outfit as you did for last night’s foray.”
Oh, that worried expression… I certainly didn’t mean to dim your happiness, Mycroft. Well, one of us is a genius and it certainly isn’t me.

“I… I had not thought of any of that.”

“Nor should you have, son, so don’t fret about it. That’s why I’m here! All part of your education. You came to us from a fairly sheltered situation and it’s my job to see you better able to integrate into a wide range of circumstances, so this is absolutely, shall we say, up my alley. Now, I’m certain I can find some useful work for you to earn money for a ticket, some extremely tasty, yet criminally-unhealthy snacks and, perhaps, a new shirt to accompany the trousers and jacket you wore last night. That’s common for humans, so don’t worry about it appearing strange. How does that sound?”

And back comes the smile that refuses to be a smile, though it brightens your expression all the same.

“That would be most helpful and… I appreciate your efforts, Administrator Stamford.”

“You’re welcome! And we can have another chat about what to expect for a night at the cinema when the time comes. When are you hoping to go?”

“I am to phone Gregory and we will discuss the details at that point.”

“Alright, then we’ve got some time to get you sorted for money and clothes and see this night is as successful as your first. Now, though, I do believe it’s time for breakfast. I happen to know that the bananas peels are in the range of yellow that you specifically endorse for perfect banana flavor, so you might want to get down to the dining room quickly before they’re all taken.”

The moment of thought before Mycroft darted off to claim his share of the perfectly-ripe bananas made Stamford smile, though it faltered a moment as he let his mind veer towards some of the things he’d chosen not to broach with the android. Fortunately, a phone call to Sergeant Lestrade should set his mind at ease. The sergeant might not feel the same way, but… well, time to worry about that later…

Deciding that killing two birds with one stone was the strategic way to go, immediately upon arriving at work Greg sent Anderson off to find something productive to do with his time while he, in a move that astonished his Inspector, voluntarily sat in on a patrol-planning meeting that was exactly as long and tedious as Greg had expected, but it kept him blissfully free from questions about the previous night. As the meeting wound down, and the issue could be avoided no longer, a quick text dispatched his partner to the morgue where Greg slowly made his way, after a blisteringly-strong cup of coffee to bolster his strength for the interrogation to come.

“There he is – the man of the hour! Social hermit Greg Lestrade, now bereft of his smelly robes and beard.”

Molly’s giggle at Anderson’s jibe sounded exactly as pleased as it had been last night during that bit of banter and, out of courtesy for her genteel nature, Greg decided against the particular gesture he was readying to hurl Anderson’s way for being a predictable prat.

“Funny. Both of you should go on stage with that act.”

“You do have to admit, Greg, that you haven’t been out and about much with anyone who wasn’t in your imagination.”
This time the rude gesture did fly towards his partner and it brought even happier giggles from Molly.

“Look, you idiot… all I did was take Mycroft to experience something new.”

“Well, since you haven’t used your cock in this lifetime, I suppose it does qualify as new in a roundabout way.”

This time Molly received her own special gesture for erupting in a peal of fresh laughter, which only served to make her laugh even harder.

“Oh Greg, he’s just teasing. Really, we’re both very happy you’ve met someone nice, and Mycroft is nice, I have to say. Nice looking, too. Very elegant features, which is makes a pleasant contrast with yours. Not that your face isn’t elegant, but it’s not, really. More… rugged. And stubbly.”

“Thank you, Molly, for that commentary, however, I am making it clear to the both of you that Mycroft was not my date. You, especially, Anderson, know the story… he’s a shelter bot who could use a little something to make life seem not so dreary. Nothing more. I’m just an… un-drearier.”

“It’s not good when you make up words, Greg. That’s when I know you’re lying like a politician who says trust me.”

“Wrong, former partner of mine. Not one single bit of lying.”

“I think Philip’s right, Greg… that didn’t look particularly friendly to me last night. I mean, it was friendly, but more than just friendly. You actually looked a touch… smitten.”

Now it was Anderson laughing at him. This day was the best ever.

“Wrong. Nobody was smitten.”

“You don’t have to lie, Greg. There aren’t any laws, at least, none that I know of, that say a human can’t date a bot, so why not have fun and enjoy it! Mycroft was a bit dreamy, if I’m honest, so I suspect the amount of fun to be had would be lots.”

“There should be laws, though, Molly, about bots dating Greg. In fact, there should be laws about anyone dating Greg. It’s best for civilization that way.”

With friends like these, who needed enemies?

“You really want to do filing the rest of your police career, don’t you, Anderson?”

“Warm in the winter, cool in the summer and no rain to worry about? Where do I enlist?”

“I’m not dating Mycroft!”

Don’t cock your head at me, Molly… this is not worthy of a head-cocking. Or any cocking. Just don’t cock, alright?

“Why not? He’s single, I assume. At least, he acted single last night.”

“Molly… Mycroft and I are just friends.”

Anderson gave Greg a large smile that made the sergeant kick the inside of his head with the small foot attached to his even smaller brain.
“Friends, you say, Greg? Friends is a fairly serious commitment, wouldn’t you say? And we all know what happens with friends when one of them is dreamy, don’t we?”

Molly’s knowing nod was met by Greg’s mightiest scowl, but he’d stepped into that, so he couldn’t complain too loudly. Luckily, neither of the jesters could read his mind to ferret out the transcript of last night’s mental dialogue or he’d never hear the end of it. Never. They’d even have portions carved on his headstone just to be bastards.

“Dreamy or not, Mycroft is a decent sort and far more interesting to talk to than either of you and…”

“So, you admit he’s dreamy. Molly, you heard that didn’t you?”

“Very loudly and very clearly. I’m going to write it down so Greg can’t wriggle out of it later.”

“Stop twisting my words!”

“No need to twist them, mate. They’re about as straight as they can be. Linguistically speaking, that is.”

You’re not as funny as you think you are, Anderson. Enjoy directing traffic in the rain and cold for the next few months..

“I think he’s probably a very good kisser, too. He has good lips for it. Am I right, Greg?”

“If wouldn’t know, soon-to-be-throttled Molly Hooper. I didn’t kiss him.”

“Why not? Worried about your breath? I’ve got some mints for that if you need them.”

Greg looked longingly at an empty autopsy table and knew, without doubt, it would be a warmer thing than the hearts of the other two people in the room.

“Can we get to the reason I’m actually here?”

“Dating advice?”

“Mints?”

“ARRRHHHGGGGHHHHHHH!!!”

“When’s the next date, Greg?”

“Look, Anderson… they’re not dates!”

“That was tellingly plural of you, Sergeant Lies-a-Lot. Already have the next one marked on the calendar?”

“Ooh! What are you going to wear? Mycroft seems the type to like a nicely-dressed man, so if you need any help in that department, Greg, like a woman’s eye for color and style, I’ll happily go shopping with you to find something sharp.”

“Thank you, Molly, but I’ve been able to dress myself since I was five.”

“Did you miss the sharp and nice bit?”
Greg threw up his hands and let his companions laugh at this torment, but... but it was his due, after all. He’d been known to throw a few teasing words their way over potential dates or the lack thereof, so their revenge was somewhat deserved. However, they were still bastards and if he could find any way for their email to overflow with nuisance messages, he’d see it done. Maybe Mycroft had some ideas for that. He seemed fairly computer savvy, unlike him who tried to order a pizza online and ended up with three salads and some chicken-y things that weren’t bad, but certainly didn’t quash his desire for cheesy goodness.

“Can we actually do some work now or are you two going to continue your comedy routine until kingdom come?”

That Molly and Anderson shared a contemplative look before answering did not fill Greg with confidence in a placid future, especially when Anderson cleared his throat in a highly official fashion before answering.

“We can, providing you give us something juicy to satisfy our curiosity.”

“There isn’t anything juicy! Want me to say I shagged him in the cab?”

Molly drew up a stool and made a grand show of waiting for more.

“I didn’t shag him! I didn’t even kiss him. We’re nowhere near that yet!”

Oh no.

“Molly… I think the suspect has confessed.”

“No! No, I haven’t. That was just…”

“Freudian slip?”

“Wrong. It was… just a turn of phrase.”

Greg knew that look. It was the same one his mum and dad gave him when he tried to blame the broken kitchen window on a wayward bat, even though it was the middle of the day. Even at eight years old he was a horrible liar!

“When you’re ready to give up your crown as King of Denial, Greg, we’ll be here to welcome you back among the common folk.”

Anderson made a quick two-fingered cross to ward off the evil eye Greg shot at him, then held it up higher as Molly hopped behind him for protection from the demon in the room.

“I’m going on holiday, that way I don’t have to pretend to know either of you.”

“A lovely holiday with your new boyfriend… that’s so romantic! Somewhere sunny and warm would be wonderful this time of year. Do bots need passports? Oh! And we can add some holiday clothes to the shopping list when we find some nicer date clothes for you. This is going to be so much fun!”

As Anderson and Molly discussed potential holiday destinations for the happy couple, Greg contemplated one long drink of cyanide to find a little peace. But, since there wasn’t any cyanide on offer, the morgue coffee would have to do. It was rumored to have taken the life of more than one medical student, so it should work in a pinch...
“Ah, Sergeant Lestrade, I am happy to have reached you.”

Stamford! Oh no, could this day get any worse? A morning of jokesters, one of whom he had to ride with the rest of the shift and endure the eternal suffering of the damned from what passed for witty repartee by his partner.

“Administrator Stamford… hello! Is there… what can I do for you, sir?”

“I was hoping for a quick word, if you have a moment.”

Looking around his empty flat and seeing nothing leaping up to demand his attention, Greg sat down on the sofa and readied himself for whatever fresh hell awaited.

“I have an armful of them. Is everything alright? Mycroft’s not done a runner again, has he?”

“Heavens no! Mycroft has been very much a homebody since you agreed to show him a bit of the nightlife and… I understand that is something you are hoping to continue.”

Uh oh. Forgot about that.

“If it’s not a bother. Mycroft seemed to enjoy his time at the pub and I thought another something new might do him some good.”

“A film, if I heard him correctly.”

“It… I know he reads a lot, so that seemed like a good choice. Simple night at the cinema, if that’s alright with you.”

“That, I will be honest, is a question I’m struggling with at the moment.”

“Oh? Can… is there something wrong?”

The sigh on the other end was scarcely audible, but it was enough to make Greg sit up straight and set his worry level to Code Burnt Orange.

“In truth, I don’t know, for this situation is highly unique. I suppose I simply worry… you do realize that Mycroft will, hopefully, find a new owner at some point? An owner who may not reside in London or even England. Even if they do, they may not consent to allowing Mycroft what one would call a social life. Some owners, I’m afraid, are rather strict about such things and… I’m concerned that Mycroft could suffer if… he has never had a friend Sergeant Lestrade, at least, not one I have ever heard him mention and to form a friendship and have it ripped away… he would suffer for it, I have no doubt, despite his rather stoic façade.”

Oops. Yes, that did slip his mind and it was a highly justifiable concern given… things which were being ignored like a true champion of ignoring… things.

“I hadn’t thought about that, actually.”

“No, I suspect not. If I was to hazard a guess, I would say you forgot, to a degree, that Mycroft was an android and subject to circumstances that we humans are not. It’s easy to do, believe me, I still fall victim to that, at times. I simply don’t want to see him hurt, Sergeant Lestrade, so I had to raise the topic, unpleasant thought it might be.”

“That makes sense… and I don’t want to see him hurt, either. Should I… I mean, we don’t have
to see each other again or…”

“Let’s not be hasty. I’m not saying to end your association, as it truly does seem to be making a positive impact on Mycroft, however… do remember what his future holds and… all I ask is that you do your best not to offer anything that future can’t necessarily provide.”

Was that… no, Stamford could not be on Team Date Night, he absolutely couldn’t, so that had to be a general reminder not to go off and plan Molly and Anderson’s foolish holiday or talk about what fun might be had once summer ever came around again… and nothing more. Surely, that was the whole, full and entire extent of it. Hopefully.

“I think I understand, sir. I have to admit, it’s a wise concern.”

“Good, I’m glad you see my point. In any case, I’ll have Mycroft ready with ticket money for your film and maybe a few extra quid for popcorn, so whenever you’d like to set that in motion is fine with me.”

“Thank you, sir. I appreciate that.”

“Well, I’ll leave you to your evening. Have a good night, Sergeant Lestrade.”

“You too, Administrator Stamford.”

Greg wouldn’t admit to huffing a small relieved breath when the call was over, but he did and wasn’t too ashamed of it, all things considered. Yes, he had sort of forgotten that Mycroft wasn’t always going to be a shelter bot, with free time aplenty and an overseer who was a very decent chap that thought highly of his charges, and… yes, he needed to be a bit more careful with things. Not getting too friendly and having Mycroft suffer because of it in the end. That would be horrible of him and he wasn’t about to be horrible to Mycroft.

Making a rude noise at the mobile that was ringing again, Greg breathed deeply and erased all traces of his thinking from his voice as he answered.

“Greg Lestrade.”

“Gregory, hello. I hope… I hope it is not an inconvenient time to phone.”

No, he wasn’t going to acknowledge the large smile that spread over his lips or that his body was very content to stretch out on the sofa to better relax for their conversation. No acknowledgement given by direct order of his brain. Which wasn’t as functional as it could have been but, damn it, it was all he had!

“Mycroft! It’s a great time to phone. Just settling in to watch a little telly, which is always crap, so you’ve saved me from further brain decay, which I certainly don’t need.”

All true. All very, very true.

“Good, for I find your mind most acceptable in its present state and would mourn greatly it’s diminishment. Our conversation would surely suffer if I had to provide both sides myself, for you could discourse on nothing other than the weather and your health.”

There would be no acknowledging that he was laughing, either, or that Mycroft was, too, and it sounded… doesn’t matter how it sounded because he was still firmly not acknowledging anything like a professional non-acknowledger. Which, yes, was a fake word, but since Anderson would never hear of it, it didn’t count.
“You’d be lucky to get that much. The rubbish I watch would leave me with little but a few stray cells in my skull and they’d likely be too busy playing cards or something to bother with conversation.”

“Oh dear, I hope that your cells are not the sort to favor cigarettes while they gamble, for a head filled with smoke would surely make for an interesting vision as puffs worked their way through your nostrils or ear canals. I believe there are laws prohibiting smoking in a cinema, and I would hate to be evicted from our film due to such an offense.”

He’s funny, smart… yes, admit he’s easy on the eyes and get it over with like a brave little soldier… no, they weren’t dating and they couldn’t, couldn’t date, but… maybe it wasn’t the worst thing in the word to spare a thought about now and again. Little ‘what if’ scenarios that maybe couldn’t ever come to pass with Mycroft, but perhaps, one day, with someone like Mycroft, if he was a very lucky man.

No, he wouldn’t give the bot any reason to believe that his world was going to magically change or that they’d be lifelong friends, going out on the town or sitting in this flat sipping beer and watching some brain-rotting telly, but… they could enjoy what time they had together and maybe it would encourage Mycroft to seek it again if the opportunity was presented, even if that opportunity wasn’t with him. That wasn’t a bad thing, not at all. Keep Stamford’s warning in mind, but give Mycroft, at the barest minimum, some fond memories to look back on. That was a good plan, right? Good Plan Greg, that was him. None of this King of Denial business, fuck off twice for good measure, Anderson, you bastardy prick. Good Plan Greg is in the house and looking sharp.

Speaking of sharp, maybe Molly had a bit of time this week to take a look in the shops for something cheap, but nice to wear to the cinema. Couldn’t have Mycroft showing up looking smart and not pass muster himself, now could he? That would be disrespectful and Good Plan Greg was all about respect… respect and a new jumper that brought out his eyes more than the crap ones he already owned…
“Alright, time for checks. Money?”

“Pocket.”

“Framework for cinema-going experience covered and internalized?”

“Yes.”

“Teeth brushed and wearing fresh pants?”

Mycroft’s confused look made Stamford laugh and he patted the android on the shoulder as reassuringly as he could.

“It’s just a joke, Mycroft, and one not applicable to your evening, so I apologize for it. Well, I think you’re ready to go.”

Giving his charge a final look-over, the shelter administrator had to admit to himself that he’d never seen Mycroft so invigorated in all the time he’d spent with them. It was always as if the bot was being crushed under an immeasurable weight of boredom and had finally found something that engaged his attention and interest, besides the library’s worth of books he ran through in a week.

“And… my presentation is appropriate?”

It hadn’t been too much of a stretch for his wallet to open enough for another shirt to be added to Mycroft’s wardrobe. And a jumper that looked very smart with the shirt and Mycroft’s evening-out trousers. Maybe the shoes had been a *tad* unnecessary, however, he had all the shelter androids’ exact specifications and finding a handsome pair on deep discount hadn’t been as difficult as he had believed. It was a silly thing, perhaps, but Mycroft’s enthusiasm, attempts at camouflage notwithstanding, was somewhat infectious and it was hard not to become a bit caught up in the android’s blossoming social life. Which, of course, made his conversation with the police sergeant slightly on the hypocritical side, but… well, what was done was done. And done well, too, if he said so himself.

“It is highly appropriate. Clothing for a pub night is exactly on par with a night at the cinema. Which, perhaps, might become a pub night if you choose to have a few drinks after the film.”

“Oh… oh, that does sound most agreeable.”

And, likely, something the good Sergeant Lestrade would suggest when the film was over, so Mycroft is now prepared for the possibility and won’t be startled when the night takes an unforeseen turn.

“Good. And you should have enough in your pocket to manage if that happens. Your negotiation skills are ferocious, Mycroft, simply ferocious.”

Of course, that negotiation won *him* every bit of tedious paperwork for the month completed and, likely, more successfully than he would have accomplished on his own. Mycroft had a true flair for such things, he really did and, now, an overworked administrator might see an off day or two this month that actually found him doing his own relaxing and not in his home office catching up on shelter business.
“Yes, I am highly talented in that particular area.”

“That you are. Oh, and your chariot has arrived.”

If Mycroft were a more emotive android, there would be a face pressed to the windowpane and a happy gasping ringing out in the small bedroom, of that Stamford had no doubt based on the tiny smile that erupted on the bot’s face.

“Gregory did not have to go to such lengths. A cab is a more than sufficient method of transportation for our purposes.”

Growing a sense of humor, too. Well, well, well… apparently you just needed the right inspiration to let these hidden bits of yourself show.

“I think he enjoys making an impression. Onward, then, Mycroft. And try not to crush any peasants under the wheels of your ride if you can help it.”

“I will be most attentive to obstacles in the road.”

Stamford snorted a laugh and gave the android a small shove out of the room and towards the stairs, though he did wonder if other bots would respond quite so well to having a chance to spread their wings. Mycroft was such a… different sort of android, that this could be something unique to him, but it was a strategy to keep in mind for the future should another unique sort come under his care. Regardless, he wished this particular bot a very nice time with his evening and, perhaps, with others in the coming days.

Though… he was only half-joking about the fresh pants. Mycroft’s human-like traits were showing some very human tendencies and… continuing on that path… oh dear… it might be time for… the talk. That would be painful. Very painful, indeed. He hadn’t had to give the talk to a bot in a very long time and, frankly, was somewhat thankful for it. It wasn’t something an android would necessarily have the opportunity to experience and not all had the capacity to enjoy sex beyond taking satisfaction from pleasing a partner, but… oh dear… if any bot might have a… sensual side… Mycroft was certainly stepping up as a potential candidate. And Sergeant Lestrade did seem to possess a… roguish streak. Delightful. Well, android services spanned a wide range of territory and this bit was simply part of the job. On the other hand… Mycroft liked books. Perhaps a few relevant titles placed on his nightstand would be a better option…

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“Hello, Gregory.”

No, don’t notice that the blue of his jumper wonderfully brings out his eyes. Just don’t notice it. You did. Stupid copper.

“Hello, Mycroft. You look great! New jumper?”

“Yes. Administrator Stamford gave it to me. He said cinemas are often cold and knows I do tend to experience that more keenly than heat. I likely need an adjustment in my thermosensory system, but it is a minor issue.”

“Well, he’s smart to think of that because I’ve got mine on for the very same reason.”

“It is a handsome example, as well.”

“Thanks!”
Only took buying Molly her favorite Italian for dinner for her to spend an hour or three with him giving his wardrobe a bit of a boost. Not specifically for tonight, mind you, just to meet a general need for garments that were less than five years old and coffee-stained.

“Shall we begin?”

“That, Mycroft, is an exceptional idea. Cab’s waiting and I’d hate for him to get the idea he can go off for a pint with the meter running because he thinks we’re going to chat awhile.”

No, not noticing that Mycroft had long, strong fingers that gave a body… ideas… when he did something as simple as turn that body around and begin pushing it towards the door. And continued pushing all the way to the cab while said body did its best to be a dead weight because the brain that directed its motions thought it was funny. No, not noticing that brain took Mycroft’s laughter as reward for it being childish and daft. My, tonight was going to fly by if he didn’t stop to notice one single thing about it. Fly by like a bird on the wing. That flapped like a chicken and had about the same flight speed and straightness of path…

“Oh my… this is most… bustling.”

Greg smiled at Mycroft’s widened eyes at the lights and colors and swarms of people. He’d thought about going to the small, quiet cinema near his flat, but decided Mycroft’s first foray for a film night should be a dive into the deep end of the pool. That seemed something Mycroft would appreciate as he didn’t appear the type to like any form of coddling.

“It is. Quite a number of films showing, so all sorts show up for an evening out. Speaking of… see anything that interests you?”

Mycroft turned towards the array of posters and studied each one very carefully.

“The description of that one is intriguing.”

“The espionage thriller? Good choice. The bloke starring in it does a lot of action films, so I suspect this one will have some cracking car chases or fight scenes to keep things lively. Let’s get our tickets so we can get a good seat.”

“And popcorn.”

Why that made Greg smile, he had no idea, but it could be because Mycroft smiled so proudly from his announcement that it was impossible not to return it in kind.

“Popcorn? Are you certain you’ve got room in your stomach for that? I’m sure you had dinner before I arrived and I’d hate for you to have a belly ache during the film.”

“I am well aware that it is a tradition when viewing a film to consume popcorn and I shall not violate tradition and subsequently be banned from the premises.”

“Point taken. And, if I’m honest, I could murder the largest, most buttery one they have.”

“I believe I have sufficient funds to purchase both our portions and I will insist that large and buttery be what the vendors provide.”

“Well, then… lead on, Mr. Bankroll. I’ll simply enjoy the pleasure of watching you browbeat the lad at the counter.”
“I have been told my glare is a most formidable one.”

“Then we’re set! Given I’ve got a few premature gray wisps starting in his hair of mine, maybe you can convince the ticket seller that I’m an old gent so I can get the old gent’s discounted ticket price.”

“That would be dishonest.”

“But, it would give me extra cash for two cold, sweet beverages to accompany our barrels of salty, buttery popcorn.”

“Affect a stoop and when I speak to you, ask me to repeat myself to present as hard of hearing.”

“Pardon? Can you speak up a little?”

“Excellent.”

Watching Mycroft view a film on the big screen was more fun than watching the film itself. He seemed mesmerized by the whole business, from munching his popcorn to staring at the action on the screen to turning his aforementioned formidable glare on the woman behind them who decided chatting on her mobile was appropriate for situation. She quickly changed her mind.

“I believe that gentleman is the spy.”

Said in the softest whisper so as not to disturb the other film watchers, but right in the ear of one distracted police sergeant who continued with his agenda of not noticing things, so he pointedly failed to notice that Mycroft’s breath was warm and gentle against his skin.

“That’s my bet, too.”

“I am interested in the manner by which his downfall shall be achieved.”

“Shoot him?”

“Perhaps, but far too swift at this point. And inefficient. He may have information useful to any number of initiatives that would be lost with his death.”

“Your strategy?”

“Either woo him to the opposing side, using whatever weaknesses or pressure points he may possess, or employ rather draconian, but highly effective interrogation techniques.”

Mycroft was absolutely being wasted in that shelter.

“Maybe that’s what they’ll do.”

“Given the timbre of the film so far, I suspect not. There shall surely be a highly violent sequence where the spy shall meet a somewhat dramatic a demise.”

Already Mycroft had the action-thriller pattern down to a science.

“I hope so.”

Mycroft’s soft laughter puffed more warm breath against Greg’s cheek. Not that he noticed, of
course.

“Yes, you do appreciate the more… vigorous… portions of this film a tad more than others.”

“Guilty.”

“I shall remember that for the future.”

Implying that… the future held something other than them going their separate ways and this being the end of the evenings out. Ok… so Mycroft was hopeful of continuing their little excursions. Something he would be remembering for the future…

“I like the funny parts, too.”

“I shall add that notation to your file.”

“I’ve got a file?”

“A rather thick one.”

“Is that good or bad?”

“I believe they say ‘that is for me to know and you to find out.’ “

“You’re evil, Mycroft.”

“I cannot find fault with your assessment.”

“You like it, too.”

“Guilty.”

“That’s my line!”

“Evil is known for its tendency towards theft.”

Greg stepped out into the chilly night air and laughed that Mycroft closely watched him blow a dragon’s worth of cold-smoked breath from between his lips.

“So, Mycroft, your verdict on your first cinema trip?”

“Exemplary. The film itself would benefit from a more logical hand writing the script, but it was highly enjoyable, nonetheless.”

“Yeah, the plot was a bit thin, but the action fleshed out the time nicely. Something… something you might want to do again?”

“Most certainly! There were several other films among this cinema’s offerings that appeared interesting. We are provided with a laudable selection of options to watch at the shelter, but there is certainly an added degree of… energy… viewing one in a cinema. I am most eager to experience such again.”

Well, there it was. Outing number three was certainly approved if Stamford still thought it a good idea. The man’s cautions were still valid and to be taken seriously, but… it was education! That
was always important. Learning did a person good and the more learning the more good could be done. So sayeth his rationalization.

“Then we’ll see it happens. Now, though… thirsty?”

“I am never precisely thirsty, Gregory, and I did recently consume a most sizeable, and highly refreshing, beverage.”

“I meant… that was sort of a way of asking if you wanted to stop for a pint or two before I brought you home.”

Look how agilely I dance around not noticing that’s two steps from asking you up to see my etchings. Really, Fred Astaire could take notes…

“Oh! Yes, I see. Administrator Stamford indicated that was a possible second phase to the evening. I would find that most enjoyable. Thank you, Gregory.”

And, thank you, Stamford, for paving the way so the etchings could be rolled back up and put in their Victorian steamer trunk for another night.

“Then I know a good pub not too far from here. Not quite as cozy as the last one, but it’s a fine one for a quick few on the way home if I’ve had to a day in court. We can walk from here, so you can see a bit more of London, too.”

“I am aflutter with anticipation.”

“Mr. Funny strikes again. You’re lucky he’s handsome or you’d meet with something more than my wagging finger.”

Oh. Oh, that was stupid. Mycroft looks like I just punched him. Actually, that might have been easier to explain.

“Gregory… you find me handsome?”

“I…”

Remember, idiot, Mycroft’s on a different wavelength than you so… DANCE!

“Sure! I’ve got a good eye for that, for men and women both, and I consider myself sort of an expert on who meets the general standards for attractiveness, so you can take what I say very seriously.”

That sounded ridiculous enough to be true, right? Oh look, Mycroft’s smiling. And not the sort that signals he’s getting ready to do a bit of his own punching, which would likely hurt a lot, what with those strong fingers of his.

“That is most kind of you, Gregory. I have never been described in such a manner. Might I return the compliment? I find your features highly pleasing.”

Not noticing the warm feeling from Mycroft’s compliment blooming in his chest. If not noticing was an Olympic sport, there was no doubt who would win the gold medal. All the medals! It would be a world’s first, but a highly deserved one.

“Thank you. Ready to go?”

Mycroft’s determined nod was followed by a decided turning the in the direction Greg had indicated
and an even more decided waiting for Greg to do the same so they could start walking. Mycroft had a marked playful streak that Greg certainly would not have predicted from their original meeting, but... maybe that playful streak wasn’t something the bot showed very often. No, not going to imagine that he was special enough to be able to see that side of Mycroft because... this fell squarely under the umbrella of not-noticing and there was no way he was going to jeopardize his chance for Olympic glory. His ego would never forgive him....

"Well... that was most... invigorating."

Not many people, humans or bots, would call a pub fight invigorating, but... how in the world did Mycroft know how to fight! When the punches started flying with the blokes standing next to them at the bar, his first thought was get the bot safely out of harm’s way, but the crush at their back made that slow going and as the fight grew, as pub fights tend to do, there was no way he could pull Mycroft and himself out, so into the scrum they jumped, with his Mycroft... no, scratch that with a very thick-pointed pen or a large piece of heavy-grit sandpaper... with Mycroft happily joining in and doing a smashing job of it. Literally, as one table was utterly smashed when the bot shoved an arsehole so hard the idiot splintered the table when he landed on it. Luckily, they’d been able to make a dash through the rear door when the police arrived because he did not want to have to pull out his warrant card and explain why his knuckles were as scraped as everyone else’s and his companion was wearing a look on his face that said he was aching for a truly worthy opponent to exercise his combat skills.

"That’s one way of putting it. Where the fuck did you learn to fight like that?"

"I... learn is not, perhaps, the proper term as it seemed a more instinctive thing than an acquired skill."

"Natural born fighter, huh? Well, I can’t say I’m surprised, what with everything else about you being so amazing."

Blame the adrenaline.... just blame the adrenaline...

"Oh, thank you, Gregory. That is truly a kind thing for you to say."

Blushless blush! Oh... everything is hateful and life is the most hateful bastard of all.

"Just being honest. Well, that wasn’t how I planned for our quiet evening to go, but... hey, learning experience, right?"

"A most informative one. I now know, or have had confirmed, that alcohol does not pair well with certain human personality types. Their reactions are somewhat predictable because of that, however, they are troublesome, nonetheless."

"A very astute analysis."

"I also predict that you are beginning to experience a measure of discomfort from your own gladiatorial undertakings."

"Starting to hurt? Oh yes. Yes, that is certainly the case. Nothing a few paracetamol won’t fix, though, along with a good night’s sleep. I’m certainly not twenty anymore, when I could go from this to another pub for a few, then another where it was likely going to be me starting a row because I’m drunk and someone looked at me funny."
“Gregory! I had no idea you were so tempestuous in your youth.”

“I had my moments. Fortunately, they are few and far between now.”

“Implying they do still exist.”

“That is confidential information.”

“I shall phone Constable Anderson and make inquiries.”

“NO! No, you will not.”

“If I want an alacritous route to my illumination, then I certainly shall.”

You and your self-satisfied smile… stop being so cute! Nobody who can lay waste to a room full of drunken prats has any business begin cute and adorable!

“It’ll all be lies, I warn you now.”

“Entertaining ones, though, I suspect.”

“That’s probably true. Anyway, I suppose I should see you home.”

And hope the pub fight part of the evening never makes it to Stamford’s ears.

“Why? It is not as late as for our last outing. We have one hour and twenty-four minutes before the time we concluded our pub visit on the previous occasion and I see no reason why we should not take advantage of that time in an entertaining fashion.”

“You want another whisky don’t you?”

“I find that a particularly pleasing spirit.”

Greg laughed, then laughed harder at the prim and proper, whisky-drinking, pub-brawling bot’s wide smile.

“Alright, then… there’s certainly no shortage of pubs in London, so we’ll visit one more and satisfy your taste for the hard stuff.”

“Agreed. And I feel certain that I now have funds sufficient for several of the, as you put it, hard stuffs, so our time shall be a most flavorful one.”

Mycroft reached into his pocket and extracted a sizeable handful of notes that made Greg gape in shock.

“Where did you get that?”

“Spoils of war, I believe is the term. If one is too inebriated and too poor a fighter to guard one’s wealth, then that wealth becomes the prize for whomsoever has the audacity and skill to appropriate it.”

Greg had never been prouder of the bot in the entirety of their acquaintance.

“Amazing. You are absolutely amazing, Mycroft.”

“Thank you. I do try.”
This time, it was Greg who did the shoving and Mycroft scooted a few steps forward before turning to cast a scandalized gasp at his attacker, who simply made a ‘Who?  Me?’ gesture and began whistling as he slowly sauntered forward and past the bot who laughed and began sauntering in step with Greg. Anyone not seeing the mark on Mycroft’s hand would assume it was two mates out for a bit of fun or two men out on what seemed like a highly successful date, but Greg certainly wasn’t noticing any of the easy-to-read looks on the faces of the people passing by. All the Olympic medals and a few Nobel Prizes on top of it. Really he was set for a brilliant future in not-noticing. One for the history books…

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Standing at the shelter door, both man and android wondered if it was possible to turn back the clock to have several more hours of evening at their disposal because neither was ready for the night to end. Not ready for it at all…

Well, Mycroft… I… I suppose…”

“Yes… that is true…”

“Ummmm…”

“Hmmmm…”

Spying on the pair from a crack in the curtains of the window wasn’t the most honorable thing Stamford had ever done, but he was glad he did as he’d seen this scene a hundred times before in films and there was really no question where it was heading – a direction that he was not about to deal with this late at night when all good bots and humans should be asleep in their beds. Time for the couple to catch a case of dateus interruptus before there was even more fallout to manage…

“Look who remembered where he lives! Almost ready to send the police out to look for you, Mycroft, but then I remembered there was already a police presence at your location and went back to my book. How was the evening?”

Stamford gave Greg a good run for his money in the Olympic not-noticing competition as he didn’t even crack a smile at the small jump both Greg and Mycroft made when he opened the door.

“Oh… Administrator Stamford. Good… it was highly enjoyable.”

“Really?  Looks like Sergeant Lestrade might be growing a black eye.”

And the guilty face that accompanied it made Stamford groan silently. Whatever happened tonight was surely story-worthy, but it wasn’t a story whose details he felt prepared to hear.

“Just bumped into a door, sir. One of those ‘they’re going out when I’m trying to go in’ sorts of things.”

Hoping his flagrant lie was all Mycroft needed to know to keep quiet about certain events, Greg smiled his most ingratiating smile at the administrator who didn’t buy it for a moment, but was happy to conduct his investigation at a more reasonable hour.

“Yes, those are always a nuisance. Well, it’s quite late, Mycroft, so why don’t you get ready for bed and I’ll see Sergeant Lestrade to his cab.”

Mycroft pouted slightly, but nodded and, after a final smile at Greg, entered the shelter, leaving Greg and Stamford to begin a slow walk towards the waiting cab.
“Just tell me, Sergeant, nothing happened that is going to appear in the morning papers or have reporters at my door in the morning before I’ve had my tea.”

Damn Stamford and his suspicious mind! That it was a founded suspicion didn’t lessen the evil.

“No papers and no reporters, sir.”

“Excellent. I’m hosting the quarterly meeting of the shelter bureaucracy for the next two days and that would likely see my budget slashed to a rather mournful level.”

“Nothing but a good night out with a film a bit of a pub crawl.”

“Glad to hear it. And, have you planned your next outing?”

The evil was thick and pungent.

“Not… precisely.”

“As long as it doesn’t occur tomorrow night or the next, I’ll give my conditional permission. Keep things simple and friendly, Sergeant Lestrade. It’s working wonders for Mycroft and I’m happy for it, but… well, you know. And here you are at your waiting chariot. Goodnight, Sergeant Lestrade. And thank you for what you’re doing for Mycroft.”

“Goodnight, Mr. Stamford. I’ll… I suppose I’ll see you soon.”

Greg got into the cab and stretched out a little to start the process of winding down from the evening. The grand and glorious evening that wouldn’t be the last, though it would be awhile before he’d get another chance, since he had three consecutive days of night hours to help with a police staffing shortage looming in his personal future. But… that just gave him time to think of something new to do the next time he and Mycroft got together. Mycroft was the sort of person it would be tremendous fun to try new things with, too. Do things he knew he liked, but also try things he’d wanted to try, but didn’t want to jump into alone. Amazing… yes, that was the right word for his new… friend. Simply amazing. What would be more amazing right now, though, was a few pain pills and a soft pillow. Tomorrow wasn’t going to be fun, but he was a man, so he would deal with it. Complain all the time, of course, but that was just part of the Greg Lestrade Manly Man tradition of dealing, as Anderson would be happy to tell everyone in the city they met and a few stray cats, too…

Greg dragged himself through the door of his flat, reminding himself why he hated working nights as he faced the scourge of the noonday sun, something which could have been avoided if the angels of chaos hadn’t decided to descend on London and his day got extended into… well, into day and now he had to try and get some rest with that fucking yellow orb in the sky mocking him the whole time. And… fuck! Why did his mobile have to ring now of all times…

“Yeah?”

“Sergeant Lestrade?”

Stamford! Surliness not allowed!

“Yes, sir. Sorry about that. Phone caught me by surprise, that’s all.”

“Yes, well… Sergeant, I’m afraid we have a problem.”
Oh no.

“Mycroft’s gone, isn’t he?”

“Yes and grandly, too. He stole the car of the head of London’s android services section and... you have to find him, Sergeant. And fast.”

“Mycroft can drive?”

“Apparently, so! Or, he managed well enough to get off of the premises and... who knows where. I have no idea what sparked this, either. He’s been fine! Going about his business, already mentioning what he might enjoy for his next trot through the city with you... We were in a meeting discussing various situations at the individual shelters when one of my staff informed me of Mycroft’s escape. You have to find him, Greg. You simply have to and do it before...”

That was a highly worrying pause.

“Before what?”

“Before the order is simply given to detain and deactivate him.”

“WHAT!”

“I told you Mycroft’s behaviors have attracted notice. And, now, he steals the car of the one person who can sign the order to have him deactivated! A person who doesn’t have the compassion for androids that you and I do and who believes the simplest way of solving problems is always the best. There’s nothing simpler than scribbling your name... I’m hoping to calm things down but... if the director decides that enough is enough, he can issue the directive and I won’t be able to override it. Find him, please... find Mycroft and maybe... maybe I can convince my superiors that this was a glitch in his programming. Some physical malfunction that can be fixed. He... he was doing so well! So bloody well and now this...”

“Yeah, I’m on it. I’ll... I have no idea what I’ll do but... can you keep the escaped bot alert from going out?”

“For awhile, yes.”

“Good, that will keep the other cops off of his scent. Phone me if you learn anything, alright?”

“I will and I know you will do the same. Please, Sergeant... I cannot express how serious this is.”

“Oh, I think you have.”

Terminating the call, Greg stared at his mobile, considered hurling it against the wall, then shoved it into his pocket to keep that from happening because he needed a line to Stamford that he could count on. What the fuck had gotten into Mycroft’s head! This was... that stupid bot had a lot of explaining to do and he would be the one to drag the explanation out of him, whether Mycroft liked it or not. Right now, though, he had to find the bastard and... keep him safe. A Mycroft disturbed enough to steal a car was not a Mycroft he wanted loose in London where anything could happen. If anything did, there would be no chance of saving him. No chance at all...
Chapter 9

Ok… ok ok ok… Mycroft was loose in London with transportation and… given London traffic he likely wouldn’t be too far afield yet, but there was no clue which direction he went or… he probably only had what little funds remained from their night out so petrol could be an issue soon…

Ok… ok ok ok… finding the car would require help from his brethren, but that wasn’t particularly what he wanted at the moment. Maybe one brethren, though…

Frantically punching at his phone, Greg placed a call to the one police officer who would certainly not file any form of report on this and would happily join in a wayward bot hunt.

“Who the fuck is this?”

Maybe happily was putting it a bit strong.

“Anderson, you can’t be asleep already."

“I can and I was. What do you want, Greg, and don’t tell me you’re need to talk about your feelings or I’ll make certain you can’t feel anything again in your life ever.”

“No, no soul-baring today, but I sort of wish it was. Mycroft’s gone off again and this time it’s serious. Very serious. Serious as in he could get his plug pulled permanently for this little stunt.”

Greg could hear the various little sounds that said Anderson was sitting up in bed, which was good since saying fuck off didn’t require any substantial amount of repositioning.

“What happened?”

As Greg filled in his partner on the details, he felt a growing sense of reassurance that he’d have help in his search since Anderson was very quick to say no when he didn’t want to be involved in something.

“Shit. Really, that’s a large sack of shit Mycroft’s jumped into.”

‘I agree and now it’s up to us to find him before any more gets dumped into the sack. Right now, Stamford might be able to smooth things over, but if Mycroft accidentally damages property or seriously harms a human…”

“Got it. Meet me at the station. I’ll gather a few things to make our search easier. You have Mycroft’s ID number and information on the car he stole?”

“ID, yes… car… I forgot to ask, but I’ll call Stamford and get it.”

“Good, because I don’t want to have to access any of that officially and raise any questions. I’ll get a scanner and… I’ve got a friend that can help us look at video footage from the safety cameras to see if we can see which way he went when he left the shelter. Do you know… is he a good driver?”

“I didn’t know he even knew how to drive!”

“Ok… calm down, Greg. I was just asking because if he’s new, especially if he’s upset, he might make a lot of errors and trigger a lot of data for us to use.”
“There’s that forensics brain at work.”

“More my detective’s brain, but yours isn’t working very well right now, so mine is having to do double duty.”

Which was true and Greg knew it. *All* he could think about was finding Mycroft and keeping him safe. There wasn’t a brain cell doing a speck of work but focusing on that one single thing right now… he was surprised he could actually see and breathe anymore.

“Can’t say you’re wrong. I’ll buy you coffee as thanks.”

“I’ll take it, too.”

Neither man bothered with a formal goodbye, simply ending the call and going about the business of getting themselves back out into the streets to start the process of locating the bot. How nice that they weren’t scheduled to go back on duty until late, so they had time to get this done. Of course, that assumed that Mycroft had gone to ground too deeply. He was on the street with his flower cart the last time they went looking, but if he truly decided to hide, there were lots of places and ways he could evade two lone officers for a good long time.

On one hand, that would give Stamford more time to cool certain tempers, but, on the other… that was a lot of time for very unfortunate things to happen. So, find Mycroft sooner than later, give him a sharp knock on the head, then bring him home to try and do some damage control. This was a two-coffee day, for certain. No, two *pots* was more like it...

Between the assistance they got from Anderson’s friend in the Traffic unit and one of Greg’s contacts in the Highways Agency, they had some idea of the direction of Mycroft’s haphazard travels, which was as painful a thing to imagine as could be believed. There were two missed traffic lights, a general disregard for lanes, none of which one would have predicted from the precise and meticulous bot, and that had Greg even more concerned than before. Something was *very* wrong with Mycroft and, at this rate, he was set for a catastrophic downfall, either from a traffic collision or having the order signed to see him deactivated once and for all. However, the traffic collision part was the most worrying at the moment as all cameras had lost sight of the car and, while the traffic issues could be managed, a collision was not something that could be ignored.

“There it is…”

Greg looked to where Anderson was pointing and saw the car, half on a sidewalk, but with no driver. Pulling in behind, the two men got out and checked to find the keys still in the ignition and no appreciable damage to the body.

“Petrol?”

Anderson got behind the wheel and tried to turn over the engine, watching the fuel gauge steadfastly fail to rise above the point of death.

“Appears so. Which means he’s on foot, unless he’s stolen *another* car. Or, does he have fare for a cab? Tube?”

“He shouldn’t have much cash, unless he’s stolen that, too. Doubtful he’d try a cab, but the Tube is a possibility. There’s not a stop close by, though, and I don’t know if he’s studied the system to know where the nearest one would be.”
“On foot it is, then! Help me push the car off the sidewalk before it’s cited and we can have it towed back to the shelter.”

Greg put his shoulder to the job and between him and Anderson, they got the stolen car properly parked so any patrol coming by wouldn’t see anything amiss.

“What do you think, Greg? Keep on in the same general direction?”

“Might as well. He’s stayed somewhat on course the whole trip, so I can’t see him changing now. Let’s go.”

Getting back into their own vehicle, the portable android scanner came back into service with Greg’s eyes fixed on the readings while Anderson drove slowly through the streets until a small signal appeared and Greg signed loudly in relief.

“Turn left up ahead.”

Anderson nodded and turned where Greg indicated, pulling up to the curb and killing the engine when Greg motioned they were getting close. Leaving the car, the two proceeded on foot, keeping their eyes peeled for any sight of the bot and were finally rewarded with a glimpse of a familiar profile through a shop window. Choosing to simply flank the door and wait for Mycroft to exit, Greg and Anderson didn’t have to loiter long before Mycroft exited with what looked like a printed-out map of London with bus routes highlighted.

“Hoping for some sightseeing, sir? Want us to give you a personal tour of the city free of charge?”

Mycroft’s shock at Greg’s voice allowed the two policemen to position themselves to prevent the bolting Mycroft was clearly getting ready to set in motion.

“Oh no you don’t, Mycroft. You… you are in an indescribable amount of trouble right now and if you even try to get away from us, I may just let that trouble drag you into the pit you’ve dug for yourself.”

“Gregory… please…”

The distress in Mycroft’s voice made both Greg and Anderson wince slightly, but it wasn’t about to steer them in any other direction that getting the bot back to the shelter.

“No, Mycroft. This is… right now, Stamford is fighting to keep you from being deactivated! Do you know whose car you stole? On top of the other escapes? We’re going back now and hope that with you returned, the car in one piece and some genuine contrition on your part we can keep you… alive! Do you have any idea… no, no you probably don’t. Come on.”

Greg took Mycroft’s arm and began to lead him towards their car with Anderson staying a step away to have room to respond in case the bot tried any form of break for freedom. This was a sour situation and a tiny bit of him wished that Greg hadn’t called for help so he didn’t have to feel the guilt over returning the bot to face what could be his doom, but there was nothing for it and, hopefully, Mycroft could put on some degree of an ‘I’m sorry’ face when they got him back. Bureaucrats were not the most warm-hearted lot and any little bit would help keep the bot’s lights turned on. And that was the way it had to go. It simply did. The thought of someone he knew getting a death sentence… maybe they should stop and buy a gift. Wine, chocolate, cash… whatever it might take to sweeten the pot. Chances are, at this point, a very sweet pot was going to be needed…
"Oh good lord…"

Stamford’s hands flew into the air and began waving around as if he was trying to dispel every speck of black magic that had accompanied their arrival.

"… get him out of sight!"

Greg and Anderson shared a ‘what the fuck’ look, but Anderson grabbed the bot and dragged him off so his partner could deal with the situation.

"Oh, Sergeant Lestrade… I don’t know what to do…"

"What’s happened?"

"The director… he had a go at my files and… he’s in there now filling out the paperwork to have Mycroft deactivated. Says we can’t have an out-of-control android running loose in London like this and it’s a public safety issue. Bollocks! He’s angry that his car was nicked is the real issue and… I’ve tried to talk him out of it, but he won’t listen. He simply won’t listen!"

Greg sucked in a massive breath and ran his hands through his hair. This was bad. This was very, very bad…

"A detain and deactivate order… especially for a public safety threat… there’s no way Mycroft could hide from that for long. I know from experience the police take that seriously and they’ll hunt him down with a vengeance if we… turned our backs and let him run."

"Don’t think I haven’t thought of that, Sergeant. I’ve never… never… let an android escape on purpose, but… damn it all, I’d do it if I was certain it would make a bit of difference!"

Greg looked at the door to Stamford’s office and wondered how quickly his colleagues would track him down if he kidnapped the arse on the other side of it and tossed the bugger in the Thames with a rock tied around his feet. Given the answer was ‘quickly,’ he shoved his hand into his pocket and pulled out his mobile. Punching a few buttons and typing in some information, he then thrust it into Stamford’s face and sent up a little prayer to whatever gods, faeries or whatever it was that watched over foolish policemen to make this foolishness enough to save Mycroft.

"This is it. All I have. Every farthing in my bank accounts. Savings, emergencies fund, everything. I can… I have a fairly low limit on my bank cards, but I can stretch this a little further with that money, though I know you’re required to use cash or cheque to buy a bot so… is it enough?"

Stamford sputtered and looked back and forth between Greg and the mobile screen at least a dozen times before he could spit out a single word.

"You… you want to buy Mycroft?"

"Is there anything else that might save him?"

"I… no, no there probably isn’t, but… Mycroft’s selling price is a good three times what you have there. I’m sorry, Greg, but he’s highly valued because of his intelligence, ability to learn skills…"

"He also fucking runs off when he has the urge! Defective, I’d say. Has a… glitch or
malfunction or… that has to lower the price!”

Greg could practically see the wheels turning in Stamford’s mind as he got on board with the one and only plan they had.

“It can. Not this much, though.”

“How about… can’t bots be reappraised? You said he liked to appear dumb when buyers came around. Could you put a new value on him because of that?”

“It’s… possible. It would take a lot of rather sneaky paperwork, but… it might be possible. If I reclassified him as a Class I worker bot that would bring his price down to… it’d still be a great deal more than you have. Androids are expensive, Sergeant, that’s why every Tom, Dick and Harry doesn’t have one.”

“Fuck! Maybe… I’m a cop! Aren’t there discounts for law enforcement?”

“How many police officers do you know with an android?”

“Fuckity fuck!!! We’ve got to think of something!”

Stamford heaved a big sigh, then a small curious thought crossed his mind and he continued to think a moment before letting that curiosity have an audience.

“Are you truly committed to this, Greg? You’d have to follow all the rules and regulations, which are slightly bothersome in the beginning, but…”

“Yes! Yes, I am committed! Is there… do you have an idea?”

Stamford pursed his lips and stepped over to a side table where various decorative items sat and hefted one off.

“Yes, I do. And I’m very, very sorry.”

Letting the large, heavy marble orb fall from his hands, directly onto Greg’s toe the administrator quickly covered Greg’s mouth with his hand to muffle the pained yelling and swearing until Greg was able to converse without shout-level profanity.

“What the fuck! You broke my toe!”

“There is a substantial price adjustment for bots designated for service in home health care situations. It’ll take a rather shameful amount of sneaky paperwork to put that through, but… hold on.”

Running into his office, Stamford ignored the affronted glare of his director and filled his arms with a variety of papers and pamphlets before running back to Greg.

“Here, fill out the parts I’ve marked and do it quickly.”

Greg had a paper shoved into his hands, along with a pen and scribbled his name, address and other personal information in the spaces Stamford indicated.

“Alright, now… give me a moment…”

Grabbing the pen, the administrator filled in other fields of the form, leaving some blank until his shady paperwork was finished, then handed the paper back to Greg and snatched the mobile from
Greg’s hands.

“Just one more moment.”

Watching as Stamford frantically logged in to Mycroft’s file and began changing certain elements of the android’s profile, Greg felt the weight of what he was doing land squarely on his shoulders, but refused to notice, touching for strength his imaginary not-noticing Olympic medals to help stay focused on saving Mycroft and not the fucking enormity of what he was doing to his life in the process.

“At the bottom of the form is the URL for the shelter payment site. Here’s your purchaser code… go ahead.”

Greg used the code Stamford had scribbled on the form to login to the site and breathed a sigh of relief that Mycroft’s cost was now £20 less than the entirety of his wealth so he’d have enough to lay in a few groceries before his pay deposited next week. With a bit of accounts information input and a final large sigh, Greg hit Submit and felt his knees go weak when the word ‘Approved’ appeared on the screen.

“Well, then… you, Police Sergeant Gregory Lestrade are now the owner one health-care designated android named Mycroft. How does it feel?”

“Fucking terrifying.”

“As it should. I… I don’t know what to say, Greg, besides thank you. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. Make certain, though, that you read and follow all the new owner regulations, because they are checked periodically and… if you’re found violating them then Mycroft comes back to me and… let’s not think what will happen in that case. How’s the toe?”

Throbbing, screaming at him for being daft, but… who cared? Mycroft was safe. Safe and… his. That last bit, though, was not something he fully wanted to contemplate at his moment in time. As happy as Mycroft might be to leave the shelter… he was walking into another situation where he didn’t have the freedom he so desperately desired. They could have the give me liberty or give me death talk later, though. They’d certainly have time for it.

“My toe? I think it fell off my foot.”

“Perhaps Mycroft knows how to sew. Alright, clear Mycroft’s room and use the rear door to exit. I’ll break the news to the director and… I have no idea how he’ll react, but Mycroft’s not our problem now and that should be some form of peace offering.”

“You… you’re not going to get in trouble over this are you?”

Somehow Greg knew that Mycroft would be profoundly distraught if Stamford suffered for their little deception. And… rightly so.

“Hopefully not, as long as I get all the t’s crossed and I’s dotted properly on the records. Go now, though… if the director actually files that deactivation order this will get infinitely harder to push through successfully and I already have enough on my hands.”

Greg nodded and ran, admittedly in a painfully-limping fashion, in the direction he’d seen Anderson drag Mycroft, missing the bit of mist that rose in Stamford’s eyes when his back was turned. So very few would do this for anyone, human or bot, so the administrator knew with great certainty that Mycroft was in very good hands. And, if his suspicions were correct, those hands were going to be involved in something Mycroft would come to enjoy once the android and the sergeant sorted out
this situation and got to know each other a little better.

The adjustment period was going to be significant though, and likely turbulent, but… well, his Android Services Case Manager credentials were still valid and those two would have to submit to home inspections and other checks for the first three months after purchase. Perhaps this was the right occasion to take a case for himself after all this time and do a little work in the field. After all, what was the fun of getting a couple together if you couldn’t watch that couple realize the getting-together was actually going on…
Chapter 10

Looking quickly around the ground floor of the shelter and finding no sign of the bot or his partner, Greg hobbled up the stairs to Mycroft’s room and yelped loudly when he tried to push the door open and walk through, only to find the door was blocked and the attempt to walk through smashed his injured toe against the wood.

“Greg! What are you…”

Apparently, Anderson had been sitting with his chair obstructing the door so the sullen-faced Mycroft couldn’t make another escape, though the sullenness was gone from the android’s expression as he processed the look on Greg’s face.

“Gregory! You are in pain!”

“Not important right now. Do you have a suitcase?”

“What?”

“Suitcase! Gym bag? Anything?”

“I… no.”

Mycroft and Anderson shared a look to express the combined concern that whatever was paining Greg had something to do with his brain.

“Shite. Alright then, the old ways work. Take the case off your pillow and start putting your clothes in it along with anything else you have. And do it fast.”

This combined concern was even stronger than the last and, with the lack of action on the bot’s part, Greg snatched the pillow from the bed himself, pulled off the case and threw it at Mycroft who scrambled to catch it.

“Now!”

As the bot hurried to comply, Anderson gave Greg a strange look and motioned him to stand outside the door where Mycroft might not hear their conversation.

“Greg, I know you’re upset, but we… we can’t facilitate an escape. We’d be sacked for sure!”

Digging into his pocket, Greg pulled out his copy of the purchase form and held it up for Anderson to see.

“What! You… you bought… did you have a rich uncle die recently that you didn’t tell me about?”

“Funny. And no. You’re now looking at the poorest person you’ll likely ever know and it was only because of a lot of shady dealings on Stamford’s part that everything I had was enough for payment, but… Mycroft’s legally mine and not a moment too soon because the deactivation order was going up with a notation that he was a public safety risk. You know there’s no fighting that.”

“So you bought him out from under their noses.”

“Basically. But, we need to get him out of here so we don’t add petrol to the fire while
Stamford’s breaking the news to his director who probably won’t be terribly happy about his bit of revenge being snatched away from him.”

“Got it. Though… you own Mycroft now, Greg. Is he… I suppose he has to live in your flat.”

“Yeah, he does. Luckily, I’ve got that one room I’ve used for storage that I can… he’ll need a bed, though, won’t he? And linens and… do bots shower? That’ll mean another towel or two and… oh fuck but my toe is murdering me!”

“What?”

“I… it’s a long story. Mycroft! Are you done?”

Mycroft’s head peeked around the door and he cast highly curious eyes in Greg’s direction.

“My clothing is in the case.”

“Anything else? We’re… we’re not coming back here so anything you have, this is your last chance to grab it.”

Mycroft’s eyes widened and he ducked back into his room where Greg could hear some additional rummaging going on as, he hoped, the android cleared the space of everything that could be called his.

“This… Greg, you know this is…”

“Loony? Rash? Name it and I’ve thought of it, don’t worry. But, I couldn’t let Mycroft die, I just couldn’t. Not when there was a way, harsh and impoverishing though it was, to help him.”

“Ok… ok, then. Let’s see… I have a cousin who’s in the furniture business and he might be able to hook you up with a bed on the cheap. One of those they put out for the customers to inspect, maybe, since kids chew on the wood and people smear germs all over the bloody things. You’ll need a mattress, too, I suppose. I can’t imagine even a bot wants to sleep on a plank.”

Once again, the scale of what he’d taken on hit Greg like a runaway train and Anderson actually had to reach out to steady his partner who, between his aching toe and this fracturing mind, was finding verticality a bit of a challenge.

“Let’s get you home, Greg. We… shit, we’re supposed to be back on the job in a few hours. Are you… do you want me to report you as sick?”

Yes. For all that holy, yes.

“Yeah. And it’s not a lie, either. I sort of… broke my toe.”

“What?”

“Well, Stamford actually broke it, but… it’s another long story, like I said, but yes, I’ll phone in for tonight and… we’ll see what tomorrow brings.”

“Sleep, because we’re off tomorrow.”

Was it unmanly to weep in front of his partner? Probably, so the weeping would have to wait, but an off day right now was like the universe had formed a pair of lips and kissed him gently on the cheek.

“Those are the most beautiful words to ever come out of your mouth.”
“Good to know the bar’s set so low. Mycroft! Got your kit?”

Mycroft held up his pillowcase and Anderson gave him a smile of encouragement because, as he was just realizing, the bot had no idea what was going on.

“Good, then let’s get this nasty-spirited and troll-faced bastard to the car. He’s done something stupid and now his toe is hanging on by a flap of skin and a few threads of foot fungus, so it’ll be slow going, unfortunately.”

Mycroft threw a shocked and worried look at Greg who waved off his partner’s words with a highly-practiced gesture.

“A vicious and ridiculous lie. It’s just… we can talk about it later. Shall we, gentlemen?”

Of course, trying to saunter off confidently went to pieces since standing in one place just meant toe ache, while walking meant to agony and it was a familiar long-fingered hand that reached out to provide a measure of comfort when Greg swallowed his yell in what sounded like a man swallowing a hedgehog tail first.

“Gregory… please, move slowly and I shall support you, if required.”

Glaring at Anderson who was smiling at him with what Greg chose to interpret as a mocking fashion, the mortally-wounded sergeant nodded at Mycroft and slowly toddled down the corridor to the stairs, trying to walk on his heel to spare his toe and giving himself permission to notice that the android kept a ready hand on his back that moved to his arm as they descended the stairs and returned again to his back as they proceeded towards the car. As Anderson got behind the wheel and Greg carefully took the passenger seat, Mycroft looked back at the shelter and slowly got into the rear of the vehicle, wondering what was their destination and what it meant for him.

“Gregory… where are we going?”

Greg and Anderson cast a look at each other and Anderson gave Greg a pointed look that said (a) the truth would be told and (b) he was not going to be the one to tell it.

“We’re going to my flat.”

“Oh. Why?”

“We… we’ll talk about it when we get there.”

Leaning his head back, Greg counted to three, then to three more and another three before sighing in relief that Mycroft didn’t choose to exercise his stubborn streak and press him further. Right now, all he wanted was a precious few minutes of quiet to think, to try and wrap his head around what he’d done and to try and remember if he had any pain pills left from when he’d dislocated his shoulder taking down a suspect in a nasty assault on a mother of two. If he did, they were his new best friend. If not… there was always scotch…

Mycrof and Anderson got Greg up to his flat and settled on the sofa, before Anderson left the two alone to sort out their new situation and get himself fed, showered and awake for work. If Greg’s toe really was broken, it could be a couple of days before he was back on patrol and… that was probably for the best. This was… Greg had done a lot of daft things in his time, but this was at the top of the list. Of course, Greg had also done a lot of good and decent things in his life and this also went to the top of that list. Bugger just had to be tops in everything, didn’t he? That would form the
core of their next conversation when Greg was buying his lunch for participating in this day of chaos…

“Gregory… please, what is going on?”

Greg made a ‘just one minute’ sign and started to rise from the sofa, quickly deciding against it because he was the stupidest person in the word, in his foot’s opinion.

“I’ll tell you as soon as you… could you please go into the bedroom and check the nightstand for a small bottle of pills? Nothing illegal, I promise.”

Mycroft narrowed his eyes at Greg, but complied, coming back a moment or two later with a bottle whose label he was scrutinizing closely.

“This is a rather potent prescription for pain.”

“Hurt my shoulder and got those as a reward. Hopefully, they still have something to a kick because…”

Mycroft set the pill bottle in Greg’s hand and pointed to one of Greg’s feet.

“We should inspect the injury.”

Considering it for a second, Greg popped a pill into his mouth, then unlaced his shoe and only screamed like a banshee pulling the shoe off of his foot. Fortunately, the sock was a kinder insult to his devastated digit.

“Gregory… this is… there is no doubt this toe is broken. It must be terribly painful.”

Wagging the pill bottle at Mycroft, Greg smiled that Mycroft gave him a slightly chagrined look before taking a closer peek at the carnage.

“You should see a doctor about this.”

“Maybe tomorrow. I’ve got a day off! Of course… well, it’ll likely be a busy one, but… we’ll see. Look, Mycroft… we need to talk about today. I need to know what happened. You stole a fucking car! The car of precisely the worst person you could have stole one from and… that bastard was getting your deactivation order ready when we got back to the shelter! He was signing your death warrant! That’s how close you came to being… what happened in that head of yours Mycroft that made all of this seem like a good idea!”

Something snapped into Mycroft’s eyes, as if he just remembered he had a reason for running off and Greg was taken aback by the force of emotion that flooded the android’s face.

“Gregory… you must let me… I have to go!”

Grabbing Mycroft’s arm before he could get anywhere, Greg held on tightly and glared at Mycroft who shot a pleading look at him in hopes of gaining his freedom.

“You are not going anywhere until you talk to me, Mycroft. This… I’m starting to worry if there is something wrong with you. Something that needs tending and I am not set up for that right now.”

“Gregory… I promise you that I will not cause any harm or turmoil…”

“Mycroft… no. Just calm down. Right now, Stamford is going to some extreme and career-risky lengths to keep you out of harm’s way and it’s poor thanks for that if you go and land in the
scrap heap anyway, with him following right behind you!”

That, at least, seemed to make a dent in Mycroft’s thoughts and Greg breathed a small sigh of relief that the android was, at least, considering his words.

“I must… a phone. Do you have a phone I can use?”

“Yeah. Want to tell me who you’re going to call?”

“Administrator Stamford.”

Tossing Mycroft his mobile, Greg hoped relaxing his vigilance a moment to relax and let the pain pill do its work wouldn’t be an example of poor judgement and leaned back on the sofa, though an ear was kept on Mycroft’s conversation.

“Administrator Stamford?”

“Mycroft! How are you settling in?”

“S…settling in?”

Across London, a flash of insight landed in Stamford’s mind and he realized a certain conversation may not yet have been had so careful phrasing was going to be called for.

“Oh… that’s not important at the moment, I suppose. How is Sergeant Lestrade’s toe?”

“Rather troubling, actually. I shall apply ice in a moment to assist with the swelling.”

Greg took a second to lean over to look at his foot and congratulated himself on a toe the size of a football. This day was his best ever.

“Smart. Now… what can I do for you?”

“I…”

Mycroft looked back at Greg who had returned to relaxing and was rummaging for the telly remote, not entirely certain how long the conversation with Stamford was going to last.

“I… today… I wish to apologize for today. Gregory says you pursued a risky strategy to prevent my deactivation and… that was most kind of you.”

But, Greg didn’t provide the details, dear Mycroft or you’d likely be speaking with a slightly different tone. Oh well… soldier on.

“You’re welcome, lad. It wasn’t fair what was going to on and I believe everyone, android or not, deserves to be treated with fairness.”

“I agree. But… might I ask… today, I… I overheard part of the conversation with your colleagues when I was going to lunch. There is an android… you were discussing his deactivation. Did that… did that occur?”

Mycroft’s tone was fraught with worry and a near-despondency that had Greg sitting up, yet again, this time running a hand up and down Mycroft’s back to provide what comfort he could, though he had no clear reason why the bot was so unnerved.

“Oh! Oh, Mycroft… did that upset you? Of course it did, listen to me being daft. I suppose I
never gave a thought to how the subject would affect another android, even if wasn’t happening to them.”

“But… did it occur?”

“What? No! Oh, heaven’s no. Truthfully, George was simply grousing about that particular android who is, from the amount of grousing he does about him on a regular basis, a right pain in George’s arse. Nearly as bothersome as you, Mycroft, my friend, though he doesn’t scamper off. So, no… no, that android is not slated for deactivation, though the day may come where he’s moved to a different facility better equipped to handle his unique nature. Again, very much like you in that aspect.

“Thank heavens…”

Greg steadied the android who looked close to collapsing and pulled him down onto the sofa next to him, refusing to shriek at the sofa bounce that traveled down his leg to his villainous toe.

“Oh dear… I’m sorry, Mycroft, if you got a fright today, I truly am, but I can reassure you that androids are only deactivated on the rarest of occasions and only for substantial reasons. You just happened to step across that line today, but… well, it’s over and no good comes from dwelling on the bad. I’d… I’d recommend, though, if you get another fright or have a concern about another android or anything really… talking about it, asking questions and talking, is a better plan than simply running off. I suspect… were you hoping to help the other android?”

“Yes. Or… that is… I suppose I am not entirely certain. I simply knew… no android deserves that fate. None.”

“And I agree, but you must also look after yourself, Mycroft. That, I expect, will form a large part of your conversation with Sergeant Lestrade.”

“Gregory?”

“Yes… in fact, why don’t I say goodbye for now and you can get onto that. I will be visiting tomorrow evening, though, so tell Greg that he doesn’t need to worry about things… not being quite up to spec right now. We can work on that.”

Mycroft looked at Greg who was just starting to feel a bit of toe relief, either from his meds or from the general ebb of the day’s tension, and focused on his features which, unfortunately, were not highly informative.

“I will pass along your message.”

“Good. And Mycroft… you have my phone number and I want you to know you are free to use it whenever you feel the need.”

The end of the call left Mycroft as confused as the beginning, but the hyper-agitated state of his systems began to quiet and he took a moment to simply cling to the knowledge that there had been no deactivation.

“Mycroft… you alright?”

“I am. Thank you, Gregory.”

“I didn’t hear all of that, but… you were upset at the thought of a bot being deactivated?”
“It is worth upset, you do you not agree?”

“Absolutely. But… people usually don’t get that upset for a general situation. They get that upset when the situation hits closer to home. Mycroft, did you know the bot they were talking about?”

“No. No, of course not.”

That came out a touch too fast, Mycroft, old friend. Methinks the bot doth protest too much…

“Mycroft… let’s not start things off with you lying to me, alright?”

“Things? Gregory… both you and Administrator Stamford are being unsettlingly cryptic and I would know the reason why.”

Greg scowled slightly, as this would surely derail their current conversation, but best get the largest cat out of the bag now so it could have a little tuna while they chatted about other things. Like, just who was this other bot to Mycroft that he took a hard turn towards loony when there was a whiff of danger in the air.

“Ok, we can do that.”

Reaching into his pocket, Greg took out a piece of paper and handed it to Mycroft who went into a long moment of blank-faced blinking while Greg sat there and waited for the processing to be complete.

“You own me?”

“That’s not how I want to think of it but, yes, that’s the bare-facts truth, I suppose.”

“Gregory… I…”

“It was the only way, Mycroft. I wasn’t joking when I said your deactivation order was being drawn up. Stamford had tried everything to change the arsehole’s mind, but… this was the only way to keep you… alive. As it is, Stamford is going to have to do a lot of likely illegal paperwork so my pitiful bank accounts were enough to meet your purchase price, but… it’s not what I would have wanted, Mycroft. I promise you that I would never have done this if it hadn’t been the very last resort to keep you switched on.”

“I… I belong to you.”

“On paper, that’s true. But don’t think that means… whatever you probably think it means. I don’t intend on doing anything about it, except follow the regulations as I’m required to do.”

“But, Gregory… if you own me… you can free me! You can grant me emancipation!”

The bright smile on Mycroft’s face slashed at Greg’s heart because he knew enough about the law, even without reading Stamford’s pamphlets, to hate what he was about to say.

“No. I can’t. At least, not yet.”

Mycroft’s face darkened in disappointment and deeper confusion, tinged with what Greg expected most, which was anger.

“What does that mean?”
“I can’t sign your emancipation form for 90 days after purchase. It’s the law and not one I can sneak around.”

“That… that is ridiculous! I refuse to believe it!”

Greg sighed and wished he could start laughing and say ‘Gotcha,’ but that wasn’t going to happen.

“It’s the truth, Mycroft. The problem was people *were* doing that. Buying bots to emancipate them, I mean and, it wasn’t as good an idea as they thought.”

“How can you say that! The only thing that matters is being free!”

“Yes, but not if you’re not ready for it.”

“That is the most demeaning, presumptuous and supercilious thing you have ever said!”

“NO! I mean… maybe it is, but that doesn’t mean it’s not true. Mycroft, you have to understand. People would buy bots…”

“STOP USING THAT WORD!”

Greg recoiled at the force of Mycroft’s shout and sat frozen while Mycroft fumed and attempted to cut him in twain with a laser-like glare.

“I am not a ‘bot.’ I am an android. I will not continue to be belittled by that derogatory term.”

“STOP USING THAT WORD!”

Greg took another few moments to begin breathing and used a little of the oxygen to charge his brain into remembering that rather important point.

“I’m sorry, Mycroft. I didn’t know you considered it an insult and I’ll do my very best not to use it again. If I do, tell me, so I can realize when I’m doing it and try… try to make not-saying that what I’m used to doing instead. Ok?”

Mycroft’s dissatisfied huff of breath didn’t ease Greg’s mind, but it was better than nothing.

“I am subject to slurs and cannot even have freedom when it is granted because I am too stupid and incompetent to manage it. Verily this is an evening of my dreams.”

“You’ve got reason to be angry, Mycroft, I won’t say that you don’t, but think about it, will you? People, some good-hearted, some probably wanting to make others think they were good-hearted would purchase bo… androids and say ‘you’re free! Bye.’ and then you’d have an android with nowhere to live, no job and, often, not even a bit of money to tide them over a few days.”

“It is not an insurmountable challenge!”

“For you, no. But think about the other androids at the shelter. How many could you simply drop into London, walk away and know they’d be able to succeed? The police were regularly having to collect b… androids who were simply sitting on benches for days at a time with nowhere to go and nothing to do or we’d be called to locations where… let’s just say where bad things happened to androids that were just wandering through the city and ran across the wrong sort. It seems like a grand thing – give freedom to someone who has none – but if you can’t back that freedom with support and a real chance to make a life for themselves… the results aren’t pleasant.”

Mycroft’s glare continued to burn hotly, but Greg thought he saw some flicker of understanding in the diamond-hard eyes.
“There’s nothing to say, now, that people can’t purchase androids with the intent of freeing them, Mycroft. In fact, it does happen. But, there is a 90-day waiting period and that time is supposed to be used to find the android a job and a place to live. Show them about things like bills and bank accounts and all the things it takes to live independently. If you can document all of that, then, at the end of the waiting period, the emancipation form can be signed and filed. And I will do that, Mycroft. I will. I know you can find a job easily enough and we can work on finding a flat you can afford… I don’t want to own you, Mycroft. I don’t and the second I can change that, I will. For now, though… you’ll have to make do living here.”

“Here. I am to live here.”

“Yeah, for three months you’ll have to stay here with me. I do have an extra room and I’ll work tomorrow on cleaning it out and then I’ll find a bed for you. There’s a closet in there, but I’ll find a dresser, too. And you can do whatever you want with it! Put whatever bibs and bobs you have up on the walls, paint, we can shop for the sorts of linens and things you want… consider this your home, Mycroft. We’ll be real flatmates, sharing the washing up duties, arguing over what to watch on the telly, going off to the pub for a pint or two, that sort of thing. It’ll likely be a few days before I can go back to work, but, when I do, I don’t think there are any legal restrictions against you going out during the day, so you can go where you like! I don’t want to be your owner, Mycroft. I just want to be a friend who’s helping you out for a couple of months until you can get on your feet and be set up with a life of your own. Really, that’s how I see this, though… I know you see things differently.”

“And you will sign my emancipation form the instant it is possible to do so?”

“The very instant. Waive the repayment clause, which is absolutely legal, and you’ll be free to do as you like. And I’ll do everything to help, every step of the way, to get you properly sorted beforehand. Alright?”

That was a profoundly complex and difficult question, in Mycroft’s mind. No, it was not alright. He was still a piece of property, without any true freedom to conduct his affairs and living with the ever-present stigma of being owned. But, it was a better situation that with the shelter and… three months was certainly not an eternal wait. In those months he could accomplish much and see himself well prepared for an independent life, regardless of the difficulties that life might offer. And… while he lived here, with quickly-found employment, there was money that could be saved for… purposes of a personal nature. This was not optimal, but it was an opportunity he previously lacked and, for that reason, it would be ‘alright.’

The fact that he would be living here, with Gregory, did not, in the slightest, impact his thinking.

“I suppose it must be. And… I should likely thank you for this. You did not have to step in to assist, yet you did and I am thankful for that.”

“I’m happy I was able to do anything. The real bit of luck was having Stamford as your shelter head and not some berk without any compassion or sense of decency.”

“Oh… I am supposed to inform you that Administrator Stamford will pay a visit tomorrow.”

“Probably to reassure himself that I don’t live in a cupboard or that I’m tarting you up in fishnets and a corset and sending you out to earn your keep.”

“How is one supposed to wear a fishing net?”

“Laptop! I’ve got a laptop and you can see for yourself! Feel free to use that, too. No
government firewall to worry about, so go off and learn the true condition of the human species as presented by the internet. I’ll hand you tissues as you cry.”

Greg hoped the contemplative look on Mycroft’s face, rather than an angry and frustrated one, meant good things for their upcoming cohabitation.

“That will be most useful, Gregory. Thank you. For the computer use, I mean, not a tissue. I do not cry, so I have no need to dab my eyes.”

“More for me, then, Mycroft… I want you to know that I… I realize this is going to be hard for you in some ways, but I hope… well, we were getting along fairly well and I just hope that won’t change.”

Mycroft huffed a small breath and found himself wishing the very same thing. He had finally met someone who viewed him, treated him as a friend and he had no desire to see that ruined because of this change of circumstances. Perhaps, if he was to look on the proverbial bright side of things, this could be considered fortuitous, as there was no need for permission to accompany Gregory into the city or any restrictions on what might occur on those occasions. And… he could go into the city himself, whenever he chose and find new things to do, for which Gregory might wish to accompany him. It was a small comfort, but one could not argue that comfort was not there to be had.

“That is also my hope. The entire business chafes, as I know you understand, but… I shall endeavor to look upon this with an opportunistic eye.”

“Great! Do you think that opportunistic eye might be able to find some ice and a cloth for my toe? I think it’s about to explode, actually, and I am not in the mood to clean toe splatter out of the rug.”

I shall do that immediately for I certainly shall not be tasked to perform toe-splatter cleansing from the rug or any of the furnishings.”

“Fine flatmate you are! Let a man explode and then step over his mess without stopping to mop up.”

“When I explode, I shall do the mopping up. When you explode, on your shoulders be it. I believe that is most equitable.”

Greg’s exceedingly rude noise served as an answer and also to break further the tension in the room. No, it wasn’t going to be easy, necessarily, but they’d muddle through somehow. Three months wasn’t so long, was it? No, not long at all. And that time would be well spent getting Mycroft set with job, flat, some starting cash and, in between, a lot of time to enjoy themselves as they’d been doing. While living together in the same flat, sharing meals, quiet nights in… might be time to give the Olympic Not-Noticing medals a bit of a polish. They were about to be heavily pressed into service…
Chapter 11

Stretching every part of his body except his right leg, Greg slowly roused and began scratching himself fully awake, using the time to think about the previous night. Once the more acrimonious portion of their conversation had ended, the evening had passed fairly quietly, with him sporting an iced toe and Mycroft flying between every possible telly channel they didn’t receive at the shelter. They’d started with the laptop, but he’d had to put that away, despite Mycroft’s very vocal protest, because the android was quickly spiraling into the maelstrom of the internet, showing no signs of pulling himself out before he’d consumed every bit of information there was to have. It had dawned on the police sergeant that Mycroft had been significantly isolated from the world while in the shelter and it would take him time to get up to speed with what awaited him when he was awarded his emancipation.

Opening his eyes fully, Greg yelped seeing Mycroft sitting in the chair by the sofa where he was sleeping, staring openly at its formerly-sleeping occupant.

“Christ, Mycroft! You nearly gave me a heart attack!”

“You are demonstrating none of the signs of cardiac distress.”

“It’s… it’s an expression. Why are you… there?”

“I have been awake for some time and did not want to create noise that might disturb your rest.”

Ok, that was polite. Considerate, even. Just had to work on some of the fringe details.

“Alright, I appreciate that. Next time, though, it’s alright to turn on the telly, because I do tend to sleep like a corpse. Or have a read, go play on the internet… no need to simply sit bored because I’m still snoring.”

“Thank you, Gregory. You do snore most loudly, so it is easy to know when you are still asleep versus finding a wakeful state.”

Glorious.

“Good to know. How did you sleep, by the way?”

The battle for Mycroft to take his bed had been a fairly heated one as the android insisted he was less reliant on comfort and was not injured, so the sofa was a perfectly suitable choice, and Greg arguing that he’d slept on the sofa many time when he’d dropped off watching a film and, which clenched the argument in his favor, that he might forget his toe situation when rising and, with his bed higher than the sofa, the potential for pain, instability and a further-damaging fall made the bed a poor choice for his first night of injury.

“Most soundly, insomuch as I sleep. However, my routine systems maintenance and food processing proceeded very efficiently.”

Was it the wrong time to inquire about the food processing bit? Some questions just weighed on your mind, especially when you’d never seen the android excuse himself to the toilet a single time. But… no time like the present was how the saying goes…

“I meant to ask… as I’m thinking about supplies to lay in… well, I know how many loo rolls I go through in a week so I want to make certain we’ve got enough if… you know.”
“I know what, precisely?”

You can’t make this easy, can you, Mycroft?

“If you… poop.”

“Oh! Yes, I see. To answer your question, I do not defecate. I do, however, have to empty my ash receptacle on occasion.”

“Ash receptacle?”

“Yes. To extract the maximum quantity of nutrients and energy from my food, my food system chemically renders the materials, then reduces the remaining organic material to ash, in a net-exothermic reaction, which must be cleared away when the receptacle is full.”

Awkward topic made not so awkward by science. Excellent. Could the record hold?

“And… the other one?”

“Pardon?”

“I can’t claim a shopping list as an excuse to ask this time, but do you need to piss like a human would?”

“An interesting question…”

Was it? Good. Interesting was better than rude and nosy any day.

 “… For small quantities of liquid, my food system simply renders it to vapor, which leaves via my mouth, nose or ears. For larger quantities, it must be eliminated in bulk, though I do have a storage vessel for that and can see some time pass before it must be emptied. Various processes in my body do require an aqueous environment, so storage of liquid for potential lack of access is a built-in safeguard for malfunction.”

Science again saves the day!

“Got it. I do want you to be as comfortable as possible while you’re here, so please don’t hesitate if there’s something you need we don’t have or something you’d like changed because it’s easier or more convenient for you. I don’t know a lot about b... androids, Mycroft, so I’ll need all the information you can give me.”

“I understand and I will duly inform you of any wants or needs. Though, you should also read the pamphlets Administrator Stamford gave to you for they are actually most thorough in providing an overview of the nature of androids and what is required for us to function properly.”

“Oh, you read them?”

“They are rather brief, so I suspect you shall not require a significant amount of time to process the information.”

“Brief is good… unless it’s a really cracking space alien and flying saucer book, then the longer the better.”

Mycroft’s pained sigh made Greg smile and he slowly swung his legs off the sofa, tenderly putting his injured foot on the rug.
“May I inspect?”

Waving over the android, Greg gave himself his own moment for a pained sigh. There was a lot to do today and it was going to hurt the whole time. What a joy it was to be alive.

“May I inspect?”

Waving over the android, Greg gave himself his own moment for a pained sigh. There was a lot to do today and it was going to hurt the whole time. What a joy it was to be alive.

“The swelling has diminished, but… let me get for you a glass of water so you may take one of your pills.”

“Excellent idea. Think it’ll fall off?”

“Doubtful, unless infection sets in or some form of necrosis.”

“That’s a weight off my mind. I should probably… do something about it, though.”

“We shall visit the nearest clinic as soon as you are washed and breakfasted.”

“I was thinking getting a couple of sticks and tape and making a splint.”

“Your thinking was incorrect.”

“How about you get a couple of sticks and tape and make a splint? Highly intelligent android like you can surely make something more efficient and effective than whatever the NHS might have on offer.”

HA! Look at that smug little smile. Oh, you’ve got a streak of vanity and ego, don’t you, Mycroft? That will play nicely to my advantage, at times, I suspect.

“I… that is most certainly true, however…”

“And, the time we don’t have to waste slowly making our way there, waiting an eternity for my sticks and tape, and slowly making our way back here could be spent getting your bedroom in order and making a few calls around for a bed and dresser.”

Look at my tasty bait, Mycroft… it’s dancing provocatively on the line just for you…

“Very well. I shall fashion something appropriate, however, I cannot provide a prescription for pain medication and you have but a few pills remaining in the bottle.”

Shite. He was right. However, that few would get him through today and tomorrow and, then, less potent meds would likely suffice. Which he didn’t have, either, since all the headache killers went down the throat a few days ago, but… Mycroft probably would be happy to toddle down to the shops to get a few groceries and all associated pain-associated medications. As long as it totaled less than £20.

“I’ll survive. And, speaking of breakfast… what do we have in the kitchen that looks good?”

Mycroft delivered the glass of water and walked back to the kitchen to investigate the cupboards and refrigerator.

“I don’t know.”

“What?”

“I am not particularly certain what constitutes ‘looking good’ for uncooked foodstuffs, though I can assert, and I shall, that your bananas are disgracefully beyond their prime.”
“They’re perfect! Mushy and sweet… smear them on toast for a special treat.”

“That is… barbaric!”

“Yummy barbarism, though. In fact, that sounds like a winning breakfast to me. Toast, bananas, probably should have some protein in there, right? I think… is there bacon?”

“You are going to render it to blackened strips of charcoal, aren’t you?”

“What’s wrong with crispy bacon!”

“Everything.”

“I’m going to crumble and sprinkle it on my banana toast, too, to really make you squirm.”

“Horrifying. Truly you are an individual to inspire horror in any individual championing the position of good taste in breakfast offerings.”

As Greg preened from the honor, he threw an insincerely-contrite smile towards Mycroft who rolled his eyes, but couldn’t entirely smother a smile of his own, which made Greg laugh and stretch a little more. Alright… no discomfort, no strained conversation, nothing much changed between them given the extreme change in their situation. Exactly what he’d hoped.

“Gregory, I shall officially put you on notice that if we are to cohabitate, I shall demand a negotiation of food preparation techniques and acceptable food choices for each of the day’s three meals. We shall begin with breakfast.”

“Can we begin with breakfast after breakfast?”

“Am I to be kept free from elderly bananas and scandalously-overcooked bacon?”

“You don’t have to suffer a single bite. All that goodness is mine.”

“Very well. And, after our meal, I shall tend to splinting your toe while you script our treaty.”

“You’re actually going to make me write it, aren’t you?”

“And affix your signature to the bottom. The technicalities must be satisfied.”

It amazed Greg how Mycroft could be innocent and unknowing about so many things, but searingly competent and ruthless about others. This would be very interesting as Mycroft’s knowledge of the world expanded with his newfound abilities to explore that world and what it offered…

“Fine! Fine, you ridiculous bureaucrat. Could you, at least, start some toast and get the coffee going while I visit the loo?”

“Is that… complicated?”

“Pissing?”

“Toasting. And coffee-ing.”

Could be android be more adorable? Really, could he? Was it possible?

“How about you set plates and such on the table and get the raw materials out for me to put together? You can watch and learn.”
“A most equitable suggestion.”

While Mycroft had another look through the cupboards, hmming periodically at the various things he found, Greg dragged himself off the sofa and slowly heel-walked to the bathroom. Breakfast, splint then… clearing the junk out of Mycroft’s room. Would it be imperious to take a more supervisory role for that? He wouldn’t need a throne, per se, to sit in and direct the action, but… maybe Mycroft would take pity on him if he moaned and groaned enough. He could be a professional moaner and groaner when the situation called for it and the call may just have sounded…

“"You have a strong affinity for accumulation, Gregory.”

“Thank you, Mycroft. I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“It was not entirely meant as one.”

Which, from taking an unbiased look at his rubbish, Greg had to concede the point.

“Yeah… ok. I admit I’ve sort of attracted a level of clutter…”

“I cannot see the floor.”

“It’s not that handsome, so no real loss there. Well, we should make a start…”

“How? I am not entirely convinced this is not an example of an infinite loop of possessions that shall simply repopulate the space at a rate equal to our attempt to clear it.”

“Two boxes. One box is rubbish, the other is stuff to keep.”

“Gregory…”

“What?”

“I am not so unaware of human tendencies to already predict that we shall fill the ‘keep’ box a multitude of times before a single item is placed in the ‘rubbish’ box.”

“I… yeah, probably.”

“My suggestion is this – I shall bring a chair from the kitchen and you shall sit. Every item for which you cannot articulate an evidence-based argument for retention, I shall consign it to the rubbish box and there shall be no executive override of my action.”

“Oh…”

“Gregory… you have, as they say, a problem.”

“Oh…”

Mycroft shook his head and retrieved a chair, giving Greg a slight press on his shoulder to seat him in it and took a moment to plan a course of attack.

“As I perceive it, based on the spatial properties of what is visible, a strategic packing will significantly reduce the quantity of space required to store your retained items, which could increase the number of items you might keep to satisfy your hoarding urges.”
“I’m not a hoarder!”

“Shhh… Gregory. Do not waste breath denying your basic nature.

Greg’s rude gesture was duly filed away in Mycroft’s mind as he began to sort the various pieces of flotsam and jetsam into categories, ignoring Greg’s frequent outbursts over objects placed in what Mycroft termed the ‘irredeemable tommyrot’ pile. Given the vociferousness of the various arguments erupting, neither man nor android could be blamed for not hearing Anderson knock on the door, enter the flat and stand there awhile watching the domestic bliss.

“This is going well, I take it.”

“He’s a villain! Look… look at this! That’s the rubbish pile! It’s… it’s a fucking pile, is what it is!”

Anderson gazed at the small mountain overflowing a box on one side of the room and nodded appreciatively.

“Glad someone’s taking you to task for your hoarding.”

“I’m not a… I hate you both.”

“Then aren’t I glad I’ll be partnered with March for the next two days.”

“Oh? I’ve been sacked?”

“For two more days. The Inspector asked me about your toe and I said it was as broken as an egg that’s been thrown at a window by nasty little boy and he said to take two days to let it begin to knit up before coming back. Then one of the docs will take a look at you and decide what you’re cleared for. I see a widening arse from desk duty in your future.”

“That’ll make Mycroft happy as too fat an arse and I can’t reach the bananas to offend his sensibilities.”

“Don’t tell me you made him suffer through a Stomach-Churning BacoNana.”

“That’s what you call my glorious breakfast masterpiece, not me.”

“Mycroft, you poor, poor bastard. Hate to tell you, but it just gets worse from here.”

Mycroft’s highly-dramatic wobble and clasp of his heart made Anderson grin and decide that if there was someone who could tolerate his ridiculous partner for long, it was probably the someone who was keeping the berk quiet so his toe could heal and not running for the door from the terror of Breakfast at Home with Greg, which was no one’s favorite bit of amateur theatrics.

“Funny. Oh, I mean the complete opposite of funny, you prat. Why are you here anyway?”

“Because, dear sir, I’ve got a line on a bed for Mycroft here. Actually, when I say a line, it’s more the delivery van should be here in an hour. It’s not a big one, but all it’s going to cost you is the mattress and I bargained that down to a price even your tiny bankcard can manage. Given your crippled state, I thought I should likely stop in and help clear this hoarder’s cave so the bed’s legs can rest on the floor and not a continually-shifting ocean of rubbish. For that piece of comradeship, you will allow me full use of your spirits cupboard because I’ve had a hell of a shift.”

Mycroft watched the new debate begin over Greg’s dragon-like hoarding and marveled again that he
was included in the conversation as a full participant and not a servant expected to speak only when spoken to. And that the two men would go through such bother to see him settled in the flat.

“Gregory possesses two varieties of lager, one full bottle of scotch, one half-full bottle of scotch, an unopened bottle of vodka and several unopened bottles of wine. What might you prefer, Constable Anderson?”

“A partner who wasn’t drunk off his arse.”

“I shall ensure Gregory’s consumption of alcohol is fully in line with that request. Anything else?”

“Good bottle of lager would suit me, thank you very much. I’ll get started in the meantime.”

Mycroft smiled at Anderson, then at Greg, who was sitting with his arms folded and sporting a pout a three-year-old would claim proudly and, as he passed, Mycroft glibly patted Greg on the cheek, muttering ‘there, there’ as he went to collect the beer.

“I could not wish for a better flatmate for you, you irritating wanker. Doesn’t listen to your nonsense and doesn’t succumb to your power pout like the ladies at the coffee shop when we stop and you don’t get an extra cup around your coffee so your delicate fingers don’t scorch.”

“I take the condition of my fingers very seriously.”

“Such a fine and precious flower you are.”

“Why is Gregory being described florally?”

“Because he’s a delicate blossom that needs two cups to insulate his fingers from the tepid heat of his coffee.”

“That sounds most environmentally unfavorable.”

“It is! Pummel him mightily for his insult to the planet, Mycroft.”

Handing Anderson his beer, Mycroft bent over and retrieved a six month-old sports magazine, rolled it and gently bopped Greg on the head with his glossy weapon.

“There. The chastisement has been bestowed.”

“Good. Greg, you a better person now?”

“I don’t think that’s actually possible. I’m fairly perfect as it is.”

Mycroft softly bopped the sergeant again then tossed the magazine into the rubbish box, prompting Greg’s immediate oration on the importance of that particular issue, despite having no clear memory of what the pages contained. Thus, the tone of the next hour was set, with Mycroft finally crafting two small MINE! cards for Greg to use when an argument over the necessity of an object reached stalemate and the owner simply couldn’t bring himself to part with it. However, with two hands doing the clearing, Greg was kept sufficiently distracted that while one person argued, the other made good progress with clearing until, when the knock on the door came, there was actually a visible floor for the room in question.

Handing Greg his beer, Anderson went and ushered in his cousins, who carried a slightly scuffed dresser and showed them where to put it.
“We got very lucky, Mycroft. That one there started Uni last term and his mother has been hoping to take over his bedroom for her sewing room, mostly, I suspect, so he doesn’t have any place to stay with her during term breaks.”

This round of rude gestures had a familial flavor to it and Mycroft also studied this to add to his mental records.

“She was very happy to donate bed, dresser and mirror to a good cause. I had the lads stop and collect the mattress, but you’ll need to call my uncle and give him your bankcard information, Greg, so he doesn’t report you as a thief.”

“On it. What’s the number?”

While Anderson gave Greg the phone number and started shoving boxes out of the way so that the bed could come in next, Mycroft found himself somewhat overwhelmed by the reality that this was now his home. A home where he had more freedom than he had ever known and… well, it was something that his mind was still struggling to process fully.

“Any preference where you want your bed, Mycroft?”

Startled from his reverie, Mycroft looked a moment at Anderson, then cleared his throat and nodded.

“Along this wall, I believe. It was pleasant, at the shelter, to have a moment to sit on the bed and look out of the window at the clouds and such. There seems to be an equally soothing view from this vantage point and I would enjoy taking advantage of it.”

“Alright, then. Let’s get Greg’s remaining hoard stowed in his closet or this one and make room for it. I’ll get the younger backs to take the rubbish out to the bins, then you’ll actually have a space free, mostly, from Greg’s disreputable influence.”

A quick relocating of various boxes began while Greg completed his call and felt a surprising surge of happiness at what he was seeing. It wasn’t a large room, but it was private and it was a place Mycroft could call his own. At least as much as anyone could call a flat their own, that is.

With the delivery and set-up of the bed, the disposal of the rubbish and the gift of the unopened bottle of vodka to the delivery cousins on their way out the door, Anderson rummaged through one box that had come in and not out, which was filled with bed linens and blankets, and tossed a set to Mycroft.

“I had to stop my aunt from boxing up all the lad’s belongings because she was extremely ready to do that very thing and gain even more space. This should see you sorted for awhile until you decide to buy new. It’s all clean, don’t worry about that. Now, unless you need me for something else, I’ll use the van as my personal transport home and start my lovely day of sleeping.”

“I… thank you, Constable Anderson. This is extraordinarily kind of you and I appreciate it greatly.”

“You’re welcome! Worked out well for both of us, actually, since a favor in the bank with my aunt, is a favor in the bank with my mum and that is something to treasure. Greg? Take care of your foot, alright?”

“I’ll do my best. On days starting tomorrow, right?”

“Oh yes, which is something, on its own, to celebrate.”
“Stop in afterwards, if you want, for a bite and to watch the match. I suspect Mycroft will be tired of my company by then and will need someone fresh to talk to.”

“Sounds good. Mycroft? See you tomorrow. Try not to die from boredom by then.”

Hurrying to catch his ride because family is good for leaving without you when they know there’s a Tube station nearby, Anderson waved a cheeky goodbye, leaving Greg to shake his head and laugh.

“Nearly everyone who knows him thinks he’s a bit sour and cynical, which is true, but… he’s a mate through and through.”

“I must admit… I am rather overcome by the generosity.”

“It’s more than I expected, too, though I’ve met his aunt and his mum. Believe me when I say that having them owe a favor is like finding a bag of gold coins under your Christmas tree. Well, how do you like things so far?”

“I am highly pleased. I shall be most comfortable here, I have no doubt.”

“Great! And I meant it when I said to make the room yours, so whatever you want to do to decorate or bring in, is fine with me. You had a radio at the shelter, didn’t you? I have one around somewhere and my old iPod that I don’t use anymore. You’ll probably hate my music, but we can load it up with stuff you like. I seem to remember a speaker I had for that, too, so…”

“Gregory! Truly, you need not go to such lengths.”

“I surely do! It’s only right, after all. At least have to see you with what you had at the shelter. Taking a step backwards just isn’t fair.”

Mycroft noticed there was something else underneath Greg’s lighthearted words, but decided not to pursue it at the present time. Serious discussions were certainly not warranted right now when the day was so… wonderful.

“In that case, I thank you for your consideration and shall happily accept the addition of a radio or other device to my room.”

“Let’s get to looking for it, then.”

“Gregory, might I suggest that I look for things and you rest on the sofa?”

“Why? I’ve got my precision-engineered splint on my toe.”

Which Mycroft had crafted after carefully measuring the proportions of his toe and disassembling a wooden box of tea he’d received at the annual police Christmas party as a prize for having the ugliest holiday tie, a contest he hadn’t actually entered but it put his elderly downstairs neighbor’s holiday gift to productive use.

“That does not preclude your resting as much as possible.”

“I’m tired of resting.”

“You have scant done any.”

“I’ve done plenty.”

“Incorrect.”
“I counter with… correct.”

“Are you going to continue with nonsensical debate techniques?”

“Probably. They’re what I’m best at.”

“Then let us see you to the sofa and you might continue on that path with the little people who live in the box of moving pictures.”

“Can I have beer?”

“It is not even time for lunch!”

“Beer is like… fermented bread, so it counts as food and I’m hungry.”

“I shall make for you a stack of toasted bread and you may enjoy that at your leisure.”

“With squished bananas?”

“I will find something more suitable and less… phlegm-appearing.”

“Smear Nutella on the phlegm, then it won’t seem as plague-y.”

“If I could weep, I would now be doing so.”

“And, to think, you’ve only been here one day!”

Mycroft tossed his most distraught look at Greg, who started laughing, allowing Mycroft to give him a hand up from the chair and move him to the sofa. As they walked, the android thought about the three months to come and found himself actually looking forward to the time and what it offered.

“OH yes, one NuttyNana sandwich and beer… this is the life.”

Perhaps Constable Anderson had a spare room to let…

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“Well, this is encouraging…”

Mycroft escorted Stamford into the flat and Greg lowered the volume on the telly as the shelter administrator took a look around the space, which had been tidied in preparation for the visit.

“Only the best for Mycroft here. Even has his own room, which is per spec, if I recall.”

“That it is, Sergeant Lestrade. All androids in private, home-based service must be provided with their own living space and the amenities necessary for their function.”

“Got amenities, too! Food, heat, both a radio and an iPod that we filled with classical music this very afternoon…”

“Recharging outlet?”

“Uhhh…”

Greg shot a look at Mycroft whose ‘oops’ face told the tale.

“It’s alright, Sergeant Lestrade. I rather suspected that would be the case, so I brought a portable
converter. Mycroft can make do with standard food for awhile, but it won’t provide fully for his energy needs. And standard outlets don’t deliver precisely the voltage and current that is optimum for him, though he can plug in there now and again without damage. At some point, you might consider having an electrician in to install a recharge outlet in his room, but this will do for now. Might I see his room, while we’re at it?”

Once again thanking his lucky stars for Stamford, Greg slowly rose from the sofa, missing the expression on the administrator’s face when Mycroft rushed over to help him.

“Right this way! I’ve told Mycroft he’s got free choice for whatever he wants to do with it or with anything around the flat, really. It’s as much as mine for the time being, until he gets a flat of his own.”

Stamford simply smiled and stepped through the door Mycroft opened, humming appreciatively at what he saw.

“Very nice. Clean, comfortable, toasty warm… full marks, I’d say. I’ll leave your recharger here, but don’t forget about it, Mycroft. It’s easy to fall into a pattern of viewing food as your sole energy source since eating and drinking form such a large part of socialization, but you’ll begin to feel the effects soon enough and it’s best to avoid them when you can.”

“Yes, Administrator Stamford. I shall endeavor to remember.”

“Good! Alright, let’s get a few things sorted and then I’ll leave you two to continue on with your evening.”

Trekking back to the sitting room, Mycroft and Greg took seats on the sofa, while Stamford sat in the room’s only chair and began to rummage through his valise.

“First, to put your minds at rest, everything looks to be ship-shape with Mycroft’s purchase and we won’t see any repercussions because of it. Given the devil of a time I had finding a buyer for him, the fiscal side of android services gave the paperwork a quick glance and put it through, no questions asked.”

The collective sigh from the new flatmates gave Stamford another smile and he awarded himself a pat on the back for helping find a solution to Mycroft’s dilemma that benefitted more than the android himself.

“Second, you’ll need a case manager for your three-month probationary period and that will be me, thank you very much, but I will be keeping my eyes open for any problems so don’t let me visit and find nothing but chaos and anarchy, or I’ll give you proper hell to pay.”

“No chaos or anarchy, got it. Mycroft’s a bit fond of the latter, I’ve noticed, but I’ll do my best to keep his rebellion in check.”

That Mycroft’s face was the picture-perfect embodiment of affronted made Greg giggle and Stamford join in when the android’s long finger began wagging at his accuser.

“Thank you, Sergeant. I know you will do your best. Along those lines, however…”

This time, Stamford’s rummage into his valise produced something which he seemed to debate taking out into the open before simply sighing and flicking the object in Mycroft’s direction.

“What… what is this?”
“Your Oyster card.”

Greg gaped at Stamford and then, wondered a bit why he was doing it, especially since Mycroft was doing a better job of gaping than him.

“...This is for public transport, is it not?”

“That it is, Mycroft. Accompanied androids ride for reduced fare, but unaccompanied androids need their own card and pay the standard fees. For your probationary period, you are allowed one Oyster card that is, according to regulations, at the discretion of your owner to permit you to use. It has no fee attached for 90 days and is designed to allow you access to the city to run errands, find a job or to go to and from a job you already have. After the three-month period, you will have to pay for using it and, unfortunately for many androids, they never have free use of it at all, but I suspect that won’t be a problem here… as long as… well, I shall assume problems of the past are just that and look to the future.”

Mycroft stared at his new treasure and Greg found himself grinning rather foolishly at the android’s good fortune.

“That’s bloody brilliant! You can go off to do and see whatever you want!”

The implications of which were running through Mycroft’s mind at lightning speed.

“Along with your card, you also get this, without fee, for three months. Again, most androids aren’t given free use of theirs, but I know that won’t be the case here.”

A mobile was tossed Mycroft’s way and the android nearly gasped in surprise.

“I’ll leave some information on low-cost mobile plans for after your three-month free period, but I should say that the monthly statement will go to Greg so if you’re plotting his assassination, he’ll get a head’s up, and any for-pay calls will be charged to his bank account information the government has on file from your purchase.”

“So, none of those phone sex calls for our Mycroft, is what you’re saying.”

“Precisely. Unless you don’t mind funding his education in that area, then by all means, let him at it.”

None of which was heard by Mycroft who was still staring transfixed at his treasures.

“I also have Mycroft’s ID card, for emergencies when a scanner might not be available to get his details and… here. Information on various charities, services and such available to androids who might, shall we say, be anticipating a move towards emancipation. I’d give the employment services a ring soon, Mycroft, and set yourself up in their database. They’ve got a good history for placing androids in jobs that fit well with their skills and interests. Of course, you’re also free to look on your own, but the more lines out there, the more likely you are to catch a prize fish.”

Mycroft blinked away his mental fugue away enough to notice the various sheets and pamphlets being set on the sofa table.

“Well then… I think I have all the relevant first-visit boxes checked and can file your report in the morning. I have to say, this seems… quite cozy and I’m very happy things are going well.”

This time, Mycroft clearly heard the words and a smile graced his lips as he looked first at Stamford, then at Greg.
“They are, I feel. Gregory has made me feel very… at home.”

“Good! Then I’ll leave you two to get back to that hominess, shall I? My number is already programmed in your phone, Mycroft, as is Greg’s and a few other android services numbers. Don’t hesitate to use them.”

“Thank you. Truly, Administrator Stamford, thank you for this.”

“You’re quite welcome! You do have rights, Mycroft, and the luck of a situation that will let you experience them fully. Make everything you can of the opportunity.”

With a quick clasp of Mycroft’s shoulder, Stamford rose, nodded goodbye to Greg and left the couple alone to process the new additions to that lucky situation.

“You’re set to go, Mycroft. Transportation and a mobile… depending on how well I can hobble about tomorrow, want to take all of that and do a turn around the city?”

“Yes. Yes, I would like that very much.”

“We can do a little shopping, too, and get separated so you have to phone me to figure out where the hell I’ve gotten off to, like those poor wives who foolishly take their husbands out into the wilds of Tesco.”

Realizing that cozy was definitely becoming the nature of things, Greg heaved a small sigh of relief that Mycroft was still a little too dazed to reflect on any potential implications of his words, if there were any, which there certainly were not and, after a quick look at the Mycroft’s new mobile agreement, pushed himself to his feet to walk across into the kitchen and quickly tapped his own mobile, laughing when Mycroft nearly sprang off the sofa hearing the device in his hand sound with the opening notes of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony. Apparently, Stamford had an impish streak of his own…

“H… hello?”

“Want a glass of wine to celebrate?”

Whirling his head around, Mycroft shook his head in exasperation at Greg who waved merrily at him, then, as merrily, waved the bottle of wine.

“I deem that an excellent suggestion.”

“Ok, then. Bye.”

Mycroft clucked his tongue at the silliness, but had a hard time setting down his mobile to take the glass of wine when Greg returned to offer it.

“Happy?”

“I… yes. Yes, I am. I know it is a minor thing, however…”

“It’s not minor, Mycroft, and I’m happy for you. We’ll definitely have some fun tomorrow, going about and letting you see what your Oyster card gets you and giving you lots of chances to use your mobile. We’ll prank call Anderson all day and make him loony.”

“That would be distracting him from his duties.”

“We’ll spy on him and phone when he’s scrounging free coffee from the hardworking
shopkeeper’s he’s sworn to protect.”

“Is that what you do when you are working?”

“Maybe. But, I’m a lot more charming, so it’s not as shameful.”

Admitting to himself that Greg’s boyish grin would certainly prompt the offering of many cups of coffee by admiring café owners, Mycroft waved off the foolishness, then rolled his eyes at Greg’s tapping their wine glasses in victory.

“Here’s to us, Mycroft. Set for a grand adventure tomorrow and who the fuck knows what else in the months to come.”

“A worthy toast and one, I suspect, that is most prophetic for I do foresee many adventures of the most bracing sort.”

“Bracing’s good. Gets the blood rushing.”

“I do not have blood.”

“Then mine will rush enough for the both of us.”
Greg smiled over the rim of his double-cupped hot coffee and drank in the sight of a highly-excited Mycroft, who was nearly quivering with happiness at their day so far, not that anyone unfamiliar with the android’s particularly-placid version of happiness-quiivering would have noticed a thing. When he’d bid Mycroft goodnight last night, it was almost with a spring in his step that the android strode off to his bedroom and the call to breakfast actually had to be made since there wasn’t an android sitting in wait when Greg woke up and shambled out of his own room to start the day. Mycroft’s emergence from his room, proudly wearing the clothes he had sported for their first night out together, made the sergeant shake his head in wonder, since the smile Mycroft wore screamed how anxious he was to leave the flat and take his new possessions into the world to put them to the test.

And tested they were. They’d spent all morning jumping from public conveyance to public conveyance so Mycroft could use his Oyster card like any of the other riders and, as they rode, it was a continuous check of the phone for information about locations they passed along the way. Mycroft’s mobile was the simplest smartphone Greg had ever seen, likely custom-produced for the android services sector, but it easily allowed Mycroft to access Tube and bus maps, as well as all information on every cultural attraction that he had ever heard of and wanted to see or experience. It wasn’t exactly necessary for him to phone for hours of operation or admission costs or anything like that, but Mycroft made every query that went through his head and stayed on his phone a good hour while they walked through the streets, very much like any other person they passed.

And, of course, Greg had Mycroft call Anderson and ask if it was legal for a Police Constable to have a todger the size of an inchworm, which confused Mycroft, then scandalized him mightily as Anderson’s expletive-laden response ripped through the phone’s speaker.

“I suspect you have fooled me into playing a rather impolite prank.”

“I have definitely done that and I’m highly pleased with the outcome.”

“When Constable Anderson retaliates, which I predict is a near certainty, I believe your attitude might change.”

“Not likely. We spend half our time making each other’s lives miserable, so this is just another sad data point on a very disappointing graph.”

“Most quantitative of you.”

“Thank you. How’s the tea?”

“Acceptable. However, I am most eager to explore the various tea options when we purchase groceries.”

“What’s wrong with what I buy?”

“It is rather… flaccid.”

“That’s not good.”

“I agree. I am hopeful to add a more…”

“Stiffened?”
“… robust offering to the cupboards.”

“That works, too. Alright, we’ll see what we can find. There’s lots of choices out there, lots, but most are going to be out of our reach at the moment.”

“I am not averse to beginning our search on the lower rung of the scale.”

“Good! Lowest rung of the ladder for beer, too.”

“I said lower, not lowest.”

“Toffee-nosed fucker. But, I can’t blame you since I’m sitting here with a coffee I could have made at home for a fraction of the cost. Anyway, what’s next on your agenda?”

“I would…”

“Yes?”

“I noticed that I am eligible to join libraries and I would very much like to do that.”

“Get you set up for books? Absolutely! You can download electronic books from libraries now, too, I think, so we can see if that’s something your phone will let you access, as well. If not, we’ve got the laptop and that should suffice.”

Mycroft smiled his most shyly-pleased smile, both that Greg so freely supported his independence and that the sergeant used terms such as ‘we’ and ‘we’ve’ so readily.

“I am already trembling with excitement.”

“Well, don’t tremble so much you spill your tea! Hate to see your out-and-about clothes with a big stain on the front.”

“I will obtain a book on laundering, just in case.”

“Good to see you making practical use of that lust for reading. And, since I’ve come to the bitter end of my coffee, we can make a start on that now. Ready?”

Mycroft finished the final swallow of his tea and nodded, sighing a tiny, contented sigh. All morning behaving as would any free person and that was set to continue on. It was a dream come true, a true and honest dream come true. And… it was even more joyful that Gregory was there to share it.

“Most ready. We must remember, however, that you invited Constable Anderson to visit this evening, though I am not confident he will accept after your incorrigibleness.”

“Wasn’t mine, Mycroft. That was you on the phone.”

“The true instigator of that prank will certainly have been gleaned, for my mature and collegial conduct has already been established.”

“Bollocks. You’ve got an evil side and you know it.”

“That is patently untrue.”

“Evil, evil, evil. I’ll probably wake one morning to find a cock drawn on my face my head shaved completely bald.”
“Doubtful, for I am not practiced with shaving, so I would worry about causing you some form of injury.”

“That doesn’t mean my cock face won’t happen, though.”

“I do have some small facility with drawing.”

“Wonderful. The moment we’re home, I am hiding all the pens.”

Greg gave Mycroft his steeliest glare as he rose from their table and was a little surprised the android didn’t return it in full. Instead Mycroft wore a slightly dreamy look that only Mycroft knew was his reaction to how readily ‘home’ also fell from Greg’s lips. The shelter had never felt like home, but Gregory’s flat… already there was a warm spot in his chest when he thought of the small space they shared. It was highly unusual, but he could not deny it existed.

“That is likely wise. I have not practiced rendering male anatomy and cannot deny I would relish the challenge.”

“No pens and I’m locking my bedroom door.”

“Have I told you, Gregory, that I read once a book on the skill of lock picking?”

Greg’s mostly-unintelligible response and rude gesture were waved off in very professional style by Mycroft, who deposited their cups in the rubbish bin and pointed to the door of the café much as would a schoolteacher ushering out an unruly pupil. There was absolutely no surprise that Greg stopped short just outside the door so Mycroft plowed into him from behind, making the sergeant snicker, Mycroft flick his ear and the young woman waiting to enter the café wish she could find someone in her life to be a cute couple with like those two blokes. They just looked so happy together…

Carrying an armload of books, Mycroft strolled the remaining bit of the way home, beaming brightly and looking as if he was about to float away into the clouds. He now had library privileges. Access to any book he wanted since the man at his side hadn’t thought twice about checking the box on the application to permit him unrestricted access to whatever any human or free android might gain from the library’s collection. And his mobile would extend his reach to the digital collections! So very much wealth now in his hands…

“Someone’s happy, I think.”

“Might that be you, Gregory?”

Greg laughed and feigned trying to steal one of Mycroft’s books, being thwarted when Mycroft moved three paces away and clutched his prizes tightly to his chest.

“Villain. And yes! Yes, that would be me. Toe hasn’t squawked too loudly, probably because I’m happily medicated, but also because of the handy piece of your engineering I’m sporting… the day’s a fine one for being out of the flat, I’ve got beer and I’m remembering a discount voucher I’ve got for takeaway Chinese that spells good things for my immediate future. Life is grand…”

And, it was all the grander because his Mycroft… Mycroft… looked positively radiant. The android had glowed with happiness all day and over the simplest of things. So many little this’s and that’s you scarcely noticed as a free person were profoundly important to someone who lacked basic freedom and it was his mission, clear and straight, to make certain Mycroft got to experience
everything he wanted, no matter how plain or basic it might be. That the android became wide-eyed over the range of tea available at the local market said the amount of fun to be had in their future was enormous.

“Very true. I find myself…”

Mycroft’s pause was an extended one and Greg found himself reaching out to pluck the android’s sleeve and stop them both while Mycroft worked through his thoughts.

“Everything alright?”

“I… yes. I am finding myself somewhat overwhelmed at how grand is life at present. I have not known this, Gregory. Never before have I known such a rewarding, fulfilling and nigh on magical time… it has always been something I have hoped to know, pondered deeply… I have attempted many times to craft at least an outline of the shape of a life that offered such freedom and opportunity, but my attempts failed utterly if I am to judge by the actual quality of what I have experienced in this short time. I am dumbstruck, utterly flabbergasted by what is offered to those who have the freedom to reach out and take it.”

Reaching out on its own volition, Greg’s hand gently clasped the back of Mycroft’s neck and rested there a moment when it was done.

“Everything you want, Mycroft, it’s out there for you and we’ll do whatever’s possible to see you have it.”

Mycroft certainly didn’t lean slightly into the hand resting against his neck, nor did Greg tighten his grip slightly in response.

“You honestly mean that, don’t you, Gregory?”

“I do. What we can get you now, we’ll get and move you forward to the 90-day mark when… well, we know what happens then, don’t we?”

Mycroft whole form seemed to expand with joy at the thought of what lay ahead and Greg did not, in any manner, run his thumb lightly up and down Mycroft’s long neck for a moment before completely not-noticing his actions and giving the android a gentle push forward to start him walking again.

“I believe this shall be the most momentous, yet tumultuous three months of my existence.”

“Depending on how spicy you like your Chinese food, I might agree. Some nights my stomach is as tumultuous as a typhoon, but I still order the spiciest I can because it’s so fucking good.”

“You are positively juvenile, Gregory Lestrade.”

“Guilty. I’ll make certain to creep into your bedroom tonight if the tumult rises so you can share the experience.”

“I am now serving notice that I shall be locking my door.”

“Shite. I didn’t read your lock picking book! My fiendish plan’s been foiled!

Laughing as he darted up to the door of their building, Mycroft stood and tapped his foot with a dramatic show of impatience while Greg slowed his pace to a zombie’s shambo, taking a few decades to reach his companion and open the door so the arms-full Mycroft could saunter through
while Greg groveled and muttered ‘yes, Master… whatever you require, Master’ and continued his shamble up to their flat.

“Gregory… tea.”

“Tea, Master? Of course, Master. One cup of tea the way you like it, Master. Nice and wet. In a cup.”

“Very good. As a reward, you may have one of your bottles of lager.”

“Master is generous. Thank you, Master.”

Chuckling at Greg’s continued silliness, then chuckling harder realizing he was being just as silly, Mycroft took a moment to put his books in the bedroom, carrying one back out to place on the sofa table to sit in wait for him to have a free moment. Not because he had nothing but free moments, but because he chose to make time in his day for a free moment.

“Oh, this is what I needed. A bottle or five of acceptable, but cheap, lager and no shoes on my feet.”

Which Mycroft was just noticing and took advantage of the opportunity to examine Greg’s toe, when he pointed at the offended digit and Greg nudged his chair back from the kitchen table, swinging his leg around for access.

“I do not believe your condition has deteriorated from today’s activity.”

“Good! I do think that splint of yours worked brilliantly. The toe’s a bit sore now, but I’m fairly certain a few paracetamol is all I’ll need tonight to be comfortable.”

“I suppose it is not impetuous to try a lower-potency medication at this juncture, however… might I suggest a quiet day tomorrow to allow your toe all possible rest before you return to work?”

“That’s an idea. Sure you don’t want a day of jogging, then go clubbing all night instead? Actually, you don’t need me for any of that so feel free to jog and dance to your heart’s content.”

“I believe a quiet day might suit me well, also, unless I hear too loudly the call of strenuous physical activity, something I place near the bottom of the scale of possibility.”

“Alright, then, but if you get a less strenuous idea, don’t let me laying about on the sofa keep you from it. I think I’ve got three quid left from the groceries and all that wealth is yours to spend on… not much, but consider it an adventure to find something to boast about like the people on Antiques Roadshow when they’ve brought a vase they bought for £2.00 at a jumble sale and are certain it’s worth Midas’s treasure.”

“I do enjoy that particular program. The historical information is most interesting.”

“I somehow knew that would be the case. Anyway, your tea’s probably ready…”

Greg nodded over to the counter and grinned at Mycroft’s hustle over to try his newly-purchased beverage.

“Well? Does it pass muster?”

“It is a marked step upwards from the shelter’s offering and surpasses what is in the cupboard, so I am very content.”
“When you have a job, you can sample every type of tea London has to offer and find the very best one for you.”

“I shall create a spreadsheet with the laptop to organize my findings and observations.”

“Very efficient. You’ve got just enough time to start on that before Anderson disgraces us… I mean… graces us with his presence. Oh, and take the menu out of the spoon drawer and we can decide what we’d like for dinner.”

“I doubt three pounds will purchase much in the way of food.”

“I’ve got plastic. That way I don’t have to pay for our feast until I’ve got another round or two of wages under the belt. It’s an extravagance, but I think today deserves it, don’t you?”

“I do, at that. I shall leave the choosing to you, however, as I have no familiarity with the cuisine in question.”

Greg gaped at the android and shook his head to dislodge whatever had blocked his ears, because there was no way he’d heard what he thought he’d heard.

“You’ve never had Chinese food?”

“I cannot say I have. Perhaps I have sampled such, though it was not presented with that name.”

“Oh dear…”

“Gregory?”

“My bankcard just started yelling at me and it’s yelling loudly.”

“I… what?”

“You’ve got a book, so get to reading and leave everything to me.”

“Gregory, you are being most cryptic.”

“Clears the colon.”

Making ‘gimme’ motions for the menu, Greg endured Mycroft’s scrutiny, then accepted the cautiously given folded paper before waving Mycroft over to the sofa and emitting an evil-villain laugh while he took his mobile from his pocket. Deciding that Greg had some fiendish surprise in store, Mycroft dimmed his hearing so as to honor his flatmate’s intent and turned to his book on the Cold War and settled into reading. With his hearing at 20% normal volume, the sounds of the flat faded and it was with a genuine startle that Mycroft gasped when a hand rested on his shoulder and gave him a little shake.

“Sounds as if we’re about to have guests. Ready?”

“Oh… dear me, I completely lost track of time.”

“Good! Nothing better than losing one’s self in a book. Food should be here soon, too, and the match is on in a few minutes, so the fun is about to begin.”

Greg’s smile was simply infectious and Mycroft found himself returning it as he set down his book and stood to greet what his mind was now only processing was guests, plural, as Greg opened the door and let two familiar faces and one unfamiliar one walk into the flat.
“Mycroft! You’re alive! One full day with this berk is usually enough to kill any decent person.”

“Thank you, Constable Anderson, I shall wear my lauds proudly. Molly, good evening to you.”

“Hi! I was going to watch a film tonight, but this is going to be so much more fun. I normally don’t watch football, but when it’s a party, how could I say no? And, did I hear correctly that you’re living here now?”

The curious lilt in Molly’s voice for the last few words befuddled Mycroft, which was perfectly fine in Greg’s mind as Molly’s tenacious pursuit of romantic gossip was very well known.

“Yes, Molly, Gregory has kindly allowed me to share his flat.”

“Great! Really, that’s just…”

Molly’s excited quivering and slightly-flailing arms befuddled Mycroft even further until she launched across the room and gave him a firm hug that shocked the android into standing there like a statue until it was done.

“I’m so happy for you! This certainly deserves a party, even if football does have to be part of it.”

While Molly began her interrogation of the android to wring from him every juicy detail possible, Greg sighed and turned to the third member of the arrivals and extended his hand.

“John Watson, I presume.”

Smiling affably and shaking his host’s hand, the least known of the party sized up his host and surroundings, very much liking what he saw. Good basic flat for a solid, hardworking person, who had a strong handshake and an honest smile… he’d fit in very nicely here, it seemed.

“John Watson, yes. And thanks for the invitation. I haven’t been back in London very long and don’t yet know the best pubs to watch the carnage.”

“I can give you a list of some good ones, provided you support the side they support or you won’t leave with your bollocks attached to your body. Glad you could come, though. Molly’s mentioned you before and she only talks about the new doctors who meet her exacting standards.”

“Polite and share their sweets?”

“Exactly. Beer?”

“I think I love you.”

“Long day?”

“Coming off a double-shift and there’s a nasty stomach flu going around London.”

“You poor, poor bastard. Lager it is! And there’s food on the way.”

“I definitely love you.”

“Say that any louder, John, and Mycroft might challenge you to a duel.”

John grinned at Molly who was now in the kitchen pouring a glass of wine for herself and Mycroft,
feeling something fall into place about the ‘flatmates’ hosting the gathering.

“He’ll have his hands full. Army taught me a good bit about the manly combat arts, so I’m prepared. Plus, I fight dirty.”

“Then you’ll certainly get along well with Greg, since he’s a dirty fighter to the core. And a fucking misery of a prank caller.”

Anderson pointed at his sergeant and glared, ignoring Greg’s point at Mycroft in a shameful act of betrayal.

“Yes you, you bastard. Mycroft, you need to learn not to listen to this prat no matter what he says. I don’t care if he says he’s having heart failure, ignore him and carry on as if his ridiculous mouth never opened.”

“I shall make note, Constable Anderson, and implement all measures to verify his veracity before acting upon his ridiculousness. Had I not seen, with my own eyes, the status of his toe, I would surely not have credited his moaning and wailing, for it did have a rather strong tone of insincerity threading through it.”

Anderson’s ‘you finally met your match, you horrible copper’ was in duo with John’s and Molly’s ‘what happened to your toe?’ that had Mycroft answering honestly while Greg waved the ‘no, don’t say anything’ sign into the air.

“Broken! Greg, why didn’t you tell me? Here, let me see.”

Molly had her friend pushed into a chair and sans shoe faster than the speed of sound with John squatting down with her to inspect the damage.

“Ooh… nasty one, mate. Hurt much?”

“Gregory’s pain, Doctor Watson, was dire at the onset, but has been moderated through prudent use of pain medication.”

“That’s not a standard splint, is it? Greg couldn’t make that, probably, so I think you did it, Mycroft. Am I right?”

“Yes, for he did not wish to see a doctor about the problem. I did what I was able, Molly, with household supplies, but I worry it was not up to medical standards.”

“It’s a good job, really. Nice and straight and properly snug, not too snug, which is the mistake people usually make when they do this themselves. I’m impressed! Want to go to medical school?”

It was rare that his talents were so openly appreciated, even for something as random and minor as this and Mycroft found himself glad he did not have a blush response or he’d be bathing the room in a rosy glow.

“I shall study the application procedure and determine if the various requirements fit into my hectic schedule.”

While Molly giggled, Anderson winced at John poking Greg’s toe and Greg’s bitten off curse in response.

“If you’re going to kill him, John, it probably is good to do it now, so we can just steal his wallet, eat his share of the food, drink his booze and not have to listen to him whinge while the match is on.”
“I’ll keep that in mind. Greg, I’ll leave you a prescription for a few more pain tablets in case you need them, but all in all… this looks acceptably managed and on its way to healing. Just take care you don’t bash it into a chair leg or something.”

“Thanks, John. Always wanted a doctor in the family.”

“Give me beer, food and football and you can consider me adopted.”

While John and Greg shook hands on the deal, Mycroft took a sip of his wine and added to his ‘little things’ list that when the knock at the door came for the food delivery, Anderson answered it instead of it being assumed the android would perform the task. Even this John treated him as simply another member of the group! It was nearly surreal, however, the gift horse would certainly not be looked in the proverbial mouth.

“Good god, Greg! How much did you order?”

This time, Mycroft did jump into action, helping the constable with the seemingly endless streams of bags and cartons that made their way into the flat.

“Mycroft’s never had Chinese food, so I decided that he needed a proper lesson in what London has to offer. At least, from my favorite restaurant that does takeaway. Hope everyone is hungry.”

With John and Molly dashing to get plates, Mycroft and Anderson unpacking the feast onto the table and the alcohol being left to suffer, Greg decided that sacred duty would be his and carefully stood to ensure his guests were well provided for in that department. It was a party! Something he’d never really had in his flat because (a) it was small and (b) having people over wasn’t something that immediately leapt to mind when he had an evening free, so this was a treat. And didn’t Mycroft look happy being part of the revelry… no, not everyone treated androids this way, but some people did, more each day, and if he could have a few friends in to help Mycroft realize that humanity wasn’t quite the cesspool it might seem at times, then that was a fine thing. Especially since he’d been aching for good Chinese and this smelled delicious…

John decided that agreeing to Molly’s insistence he come along to meet some of her friends was one of his better ideas in recent memory. Returning to London after his discharge had been a decision he’d started to regret since even the tiniest of flats was draining his wages and so many of the people he’d known seemed to have moved on… but, maybe there was actually hope he could find a few new people to know because nights like this were something he had sorely missed. Though… he did have to wonder about Greg and Mycroft’s relationship. The property mark on Mycroft’s hand meant he wasn’t a free android so how he was living here, with a police sergeant, was something of a question. However, John Watson was not going to be nosy and insult his hosts because… sorely missed nights like this should not be jeopardized for any reason.

“Mycroft! I meant to tell you! John’s in the middle of specialist training! Android medicine, as a matter of fact, so if you have a problem, he’s the man to call.”

Molly tossed a dumpling into her mouth after delivering what she hoped was helpful information for an android whose exact status she didn’t know, but liked immensely, then remembered they were very plump dumplings and had to chew for awhile before she could wrestle the succulence down her throat.

“A… android medicine? There is such a thing?”
The incredulity in Mycroft’s voice made Greg give himself a mental kick because he’d forgotten all about that and it was something he should have asked Stamford about when he visited. Mycroft was eligible for NHS treatment when he was a free android, but he’d heard the paperwork took an age. If it was possible to start on that now, Mycroft could be in the system by the time he was emancipated so any problems with his function could be handled without resorting to a private repair service, which cost more than a police sergeant or a newly-employed android would be able to manage. Fortunately, John was ready to jump in with an answer since Greg’s mental kicking was taking a touch longer than normal owing to the rather liberal amount of alcohol he’d consumed to celebrate the ongoing match and Mycroft’s body nestled against his on the over-occupied sofa. No… just owing the match. Nothing to do with nestling. Nothing at all.

“Since the laws were signed allowing androids to achieve emancipation, the government had to provide for their health care as they would any citizen, so medical programs began offering training in android systems and associated problems to ensure there were trained personnel to handle the new type of patients. It’s an interesting field and I got some preliminary training in the army… when a spot opened at Bart’s in the android program, I decided it was a good fit for me. Give me a broader skills range which will be useful if I want to practice in London, which I do.”

“I see. I applaud your commitment to furthering your repertoire of talents and I offer my thanks for being willing to assist androids in such a manner. When my emancipation papers are filed, I shall certainly seek out your assistance for any medical matter that might plague me.”

Cementing in John’s mind that Mycroft was not a free android and… was Greg rich? He didn’t live like a rich man, so there was a story here and probably a good one, at that. Happily, it seemed as if he might have the chance in the future to ferret out more of the tale as the likelihood of a few pints at a friendly pub with his new cop friends would likely be easy to arrange.

“My first patient! I’ll make certain you’re always shown right in. No waiting for someone who hosts such a magnificent feast when I visit.”

“Gregory, do make certain to budget for feasts should I begin to demonstrate evidence of malfunction.”

John wished he wasn’t such a curious person, because this was going to scratch at his mind for days. Greg would do the budgeting. Meaning Greg held the purse strings, likely because Mycroft wasn’t out earning a wage, despite being clearly able to do so. Definitely an owned android. How on Earth could a policeman afford an android! Especially one as complex as Mycroft. Those models were fantastically expensive and Mycroft was the complete package. Intelligent, highly-unique personality… those sorts of androids were extremely rare and should be so far out of Greg’s reach that he couldn’t strap a jetpack to his back and soar to the purchase price. Actually it was startling to see an android like Mycroft available for sale in the first place. His sort was usually commissioned for specific purposes and by people who could afford that sort of thing…

“Remind me when my wages come in. I’ll put away a stack of cash just for feasts.”

“And you won’t forget your poor and starving partner when feast time arrives, right, Greg?”

“Oh, and me! I’m not exactly starving, but I stand in staunch support of feasts and all other forms of food-based merriment.”

Greg’s loud moan was met with the expected laughter, though Mycroft soothed the sting with a small squeeze of Greg’s thigh that brought an unconscious smile to Greg’s face which had Molly highly anxious for her next coffee meet-up with the policeman, because things seemed to be moving along nicely here and she needed to make certain Greg was doing things… smartly. He had a horrible
history with romance, from what she’d seen and heard, and this was too good to ruin. The couple was just… adorable and that was not a word she used lightly, since it was generally reserved for animals, babies and… baby animals. Some bacterial cultures, too, but they had to be particularly colorful and grow in funny or indecent patterns.

“Fine! Whatever Mycroft wants, Mycroft gets, even if it comes with parasites attached.”

Realizing that proclamation was an incredibly difficult not to notice, Greg cleared his throat loudly, then shoved an egg roll into his mouth so he couldn’t put his foot in there another time. And, of course, nobody but him seemed to be on board with the not-noticing agenda because they were all bastards of the highest order. Well, except Mycroft because he wasn’t a bastard and hadn’t precisely grabbed the correct end of the stick. The android simply seemed pleased they’d be entertaining again in the future.

“And might Mycroft want a film night with pizza and more of this lovely wine?”

“What a delightful suggestion, Molly. Gregory, might your schedule permit a small soiree to view a film? I know you are returning to work soon, however, it would be a collegial opportunity I would hate to see pass by untaken.”

Mycroft wasn’t actively turning his lovely blue eyes into an impossible-to-refuse weapon of Greg destruction, but it amounted to the same and it was only the scrumptious mass of egg roll that kept Greg from spewing out his agreement in embarrassingly-effusive terms.

“We’re on days for awhile, so there’s no reason His Surliness can’t play host when Molly and John are free. I’ll bring the pizza if someone can manage the beer.”

John raised his hand to volunteer and Molly offered a bottle or two of wine and, if she had time, something sweet from the oven, or someone’s oven, as a little extra.

“Excellent. I shall ensure the flat is tidy and welcoming. Oh… I do believe the team we are supporting has done something admirable.”

With the attention snapping back to the match, Greg took time to swallow his food and let the last few moments run through his mind. No backlash from his stupidity and a nicely content feeling from knowing this little evening would have a sibling in about a week. Mycroft certainly seemed pleased and that was… that was a large part of his own contentment. Somehow he suspected the android wouldn’t be quite so friendly with most people, but a small group that accepted him as part of their ranks would have his favor. And this group was certainly head and shoulders above most…

It was fairly late when Greg and Mycroft bid goodbye to their guests with Greg smiling broadly at Mycroft’s lingering look at the door once it was closed behind them.

“Well, that was the sort of night I can’t say I expected, but hoped for if my usual shite for luck didn’t pick this particular time to stand up and dance a jig.”

“It was a splendid evening, Gregory, and I am very thankful you set it in motion. It was the perfect coda to the symphony of the day.”

“Glad you enjoyed it. And it looks like we might see this happen more often than the never I’m used to. Everyone is fairly busy, but a night at someone’s flat or a stop at a convenient pub for pints and conversation is something I can imagine coming together now and again.”
Mycroft’s bright eyes and small grin as the thought played through his mind mesmerized Greg and he wondered how cold the water in the shower could go because Mycroft was amazingly sexy when he was slightly mussed from an active evening and sporting a satisfied smile that pursed his lips in the most inviting fashion.

“I am positively delighted. And Doctor Watson seems a very reputable and interesting man, so his company is something I would like to experience again. How handy it is, too, that his medical skill arrives in our lives at this precise moment for I shall see your prescription filled tomorrow before we begin our quiet day at home and ensure you are able to enjoy our relaxation to the fullest.”

“Which you are looking forward to, as well.”

“An active day today, an invigorating evening tonight and a bit of relaxation tomorrow to provide contrast. I find myself pleased with the balance. Now, I shall tend to the clearing away of the clutter and you shall have the shower you seem to have been wanting since our guests departed. You have been eyeing the door of the bath most covetously.”

Yes, because you refuse to stop being gorgeous and now my brain is on a one-way track that desperately needs derailing.

“One good shower to wash away my sins and then we can see what’s on the telly besides football.”

“You may search for that while I have a shower of my own, so kindly do not use all of the hot water.”

Mycroft naked in the shower. There was no knowing what naked Mycroft looked like, but that was what imagination was for and now was not the time to see it excited as there was far too much excitement, mental and physical, going on at the moment.

“I’ll save a few drops if I remember.”

“Your graciousness is an example for us all, Gregory.”

Turning to begin tidying from their evening, Mycroft missed the soft look Greg gave him which even the android would have had to suspect meant something more than appreciation of his humor. For his part, Greg wondered if he should take a chance and talk to Stamford about… things… because… things… were starting to become more of an issue. Of course, Mycroft hadn’t given clear sign that… things… might be something he appreciated, at least with a certain police sergeant, but… leg squeeze. And he didn’t cringe or slap away any offending hand that said certain police sergeant might use to touch him in what could be considered a friendly way, but also could be considered something entirely different. Maybe a nice shower would help clear his head. Or make things worse because he would be thinking about who would be in there after him. Officially not thinking about anything, at all, for the rest of the night. Maybe for the rest of his life. Depended on how long Mycroft was a part of that life and… things…
Chapter 13

He was having hallucinations. It was possible to have olfactory hallucinations, right? Smelling things you couldn’t be smelling because it wasn’t possible you could be smelling them at that particular time? Luckily, he was a police officer and investigation was one of his notable strengths.

Throwing on clothes and checking his toe for continued attachment to his foot, Greg peeked his head out of his bedroom and swore loudly, though only he could hear it since the profanity never actually left the confines of his brain. Mycroft was cooking breakfast! Wearing the spare dressing gown Greg had found in his closet. Carefully making his way around the kitchen, copying the actions he’d seen yesterday so he could make toast and coffee and… was that eggs? It was! Eggs frying in a pan that seemed to have the android highly pleased. It was… remarkable. Adorably remarkable and that was not what he needed this morning after a cold shower that didn’t do nearly the amount of quelling he’d needed and it had taken a good, long wank to finally see him off to sleep once the night was officially over. Sexiness and adorableness needed to be outlawed.

“Are you going to actually leave your bedroom, Gregory, or are you going to continue to gaze upon me from afar?”

EEP! Caught spying! Perfect. The day was so in hell.

“If I leave I’ll have to help cook, so what’s the benefit for me doing that?”

“That is a credible point and I admire your analysis, especially this early in the morning when you have not the bolstering effect of caffeine in your veins. However, if you do not exit, you also cannot consume that caffeine or any of the associated substances that combine to form your breakfast, so you may wish to reevaluate your stance on the subject.”

“Point taken. I am now leaving my bedroom. Kindly hold your applause until I reach my final destination.”

Mycroft’s snort of laughter was all Greg needed to chase away his cowardly thoughts and begin swaggering towards the kitchen where Mycroft curtsied slightly before handing him a spatula as his royal scepter.

“This looks great, Mycroft. And eggs, too!”

“I observed most carefully your techniques and decided to practice them this morning. I also researched the preparation of eggs and added that to my lesson. I am hoping to receive a passing mark when the meal commences for it would be a tragedy to begin the day with failure on such an important task.”

Looking at the perfectly done toast, smelling the enticing aroma of the coffee and observing the status of the eggs he was poking slightly as his contribution to the meal, Greg already knew the Breakfast Exam score and wasn’t the least bit surprised it was at the top of the scale.

“If looks and smell are anything indicative, I’d say… I can’t wait to eat!”

Mycroft smiled and lost his worry that this was all a debacle only a human would notice. It had seemed acceptable to him, but it was sometimes very difficult to know if his own perceptions aligned with that of humans or not. They were a profoundly unpredictable species, at times.

“Excellent. I wagered that your time of waking today would be similar as for yesterday and you
would welcome a hearty breakfast after the quantity of alcohol you consumed last evening.”

“Big breakfast to hold down the bile? That’s never a poor expectation, so good for you taking charge. I’m not too bad today, actually. Little taste of bottom-of-birdcage in my mouth, but nothing a mouthful of coffee won’t erase. Speaking of, want me to get the kettle going?”

Greg was fairly certain he’d heard his parents have this exact conversation. More than once.

“Would you? I shall plate this portion for you and prepare another for me while I wait for my tea.”

Yes, he was officially in living in the land of Domestic. It was a lovely place, though. They had good coffee. Very good coffee…

“This is heaven. You must have the magic touch for water/coffee negotiations because this is far better than what I usually make.”

“I also researched opinions on the proper ratio for coffee and water and used as my model the position of various preparers who touted their technique to be best suited for ‘hard-working people,’ which I know to be a description you proudly claim.”

Mycroft took time and care to prepare not only breakfast, but a breakfast he specifically would enjoy. That was evidence of something, wasn’t it? Simple flatmates didn’t go to that trouble. But, did the android know that? Maybe Mycroft thought that was typical flatmate behavior. Shit. Why couldn’t life be easy when… things… were involved!

“Well, I thank you for it. This is brilliant – better than what I paid for yesterday!”

Keep your blushless blushes to yourself, too, you adorable pain in the arse.

“Thank you, Gregory. I hoped for an acceptable performance. Of course, this does mean our lunch shall be yours to craft.”

“That’s your game, is it? Well, that’s fine with me because I know for a fact there are a few cartons of food left from last night in the refrigerator and I can heat that up like a paid, certified professional heater-upper.”

“I admit that I mulled that particular option for breakfast, but decided it was a touch too cliché for my tastes. I have seen that particular plan enacted on far too many insipid television offerings to find it appropriate for my contribution to the household duties.”

Household duties… that wasn’t thingy. That was… flatmatey. Alright, apparently he was the only one with… things… on the brain and getting overcome with ridiculousness like a berk this lovely morning. Good to know.

Of course, that didn’t explain the effort into the household duties. Or was that just more desperate clinging to ridiculousness and thingerism? How could a man think with only two sips of coffee in his blood and dressing-gown Mycroft in the room? He couldn’t, and holding him to that standard was cruel and heartless.

“Your commitment to non-clichéd breakfasts is duly noted. And duly enjoyed… this really is good, Mycroft. Toast and eggs done to perfection.”

Said in a mumbled proximity of English as Greg struggled to speak with his mouth full of food. For his first effort, Mycroft was making a grand showing. Which begged the question…
“Ever considered a career in cooking? You certainly have a talent for it.”

Greg swallowed and watched Mycroft consider his question, happy, at least, the idea wasn’t dismissed out of hand. They did have to find the android a job and there would surely be jobs available for someone with cooking talent. Or, there were provisions if an android was enrolled in a school or training of some form. None of the culinary programs were free, most likely, but they might be able to find a way to see his fees covered if that was a direction Mycroft wanted to pursue.

“I cannot say I have done so in the past, but I also have given little consideration to my future employment for… I suppose I was unsure how much say I would have in the matter.”

“Ouch. But, yeah, I understand that. Well, you have full say now, or at least as full as any bloke might when he’s facing the jobs market. Actually, you’re better off since you’re intelligent and pick up things easily, so that puts you far above a lot of the applicants out there who don’t have that versatility. We can look through the adverts today if you’d like, just to see what sorts of things are on offer. Maybe call some of those employment services Stamford mentioned and see what it takes to get you on their ledgers.”

“I shall undertake that tomorrow, I believe, though I can purchase a newspaper while I am obtaining your prescription. Today is a quiet day and I would hate to see that interfered with in any fashion.”

“Sounds good. I’m back at work tomorrow, so you can… oh! Right! Nearly forgot…”

Greg shuffled his chair over to dig through a drawer and produce a key that he tossed to Mycroft.

“Key to the flat. Remember to lock up when you leave, alright? It’s a good neighborhood, but things happen and I’d rather be safe than sorry. We can get you a keyring or something for that next time we’re out or… I probably have a few lying about, so I’ll rummage after breakfast and see if I can find one.”

Getting back to enthusiastically eating his breakfast meant Greg missed the transfixed look on Mycroft’s face as he stroked the key in his hand. He’d never had a key before and it was one more little morsel of the world that filled him with hope there was a true future out there for him as a free android.

“Thank you, Gregory. I shall ensure all is secure before I leave for the day. Ah, my eggs are ready…”

Plating his food and taking a seat at the table with Greg, Mycroft had another sharp inspirational surge. Last night he was surrounded by individuals who viewed him as simply another in of their collective and now he was viewed as an equal, sharing breakfast and whatever the day was slated to bring. Fortune had intervened to coordinate a meeting with him and the man merrily eating his handiwork and that was not something he looked upon lightly. With no other person would he likely have the genuine opportunity to see himself freed so quickly and, in the interim, behave as if that freedom had already been delivered. It was… it was not at all relevant that Gregory himself offered more in terms of camaraderie and companionship than was required for the situation. Not relevant in the slightest.

If, however, he chose to view it as relevant… he would reflect upon the tender smiles that were not shared with others such as Molly or Constable Anderson. The small bits of contact that were given for reassurance, encouragement or congratulations. The ease of conversation and laughter… it should not matter in their relationship, however… when all of this existed, in addition to respect and regard… it was not easy to process into a comprehensible picture. It seemed too wondrous for a
simple collegial association, however… well, this particular area was not his analytical forte, so further contemplation would be postponed until more data could be gathered. Given the nature of their living arrangements, data gathering should be a very simple thing, indeed…

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Smiling at the memory of Mycroft checking three times he had his ID card, Greg’s prescription, money for a newspaper, his Oyster card, mobile phone and key to the flat, just in case Greg stepped out and it was needed for him to get back inside when he returned, the police sergeant looked at his own mobile and decided this was as good a time as any to phone Stamford to ask a few questions. Halfway hoping the shelter administrator would be busy, it was with a tiny moue of disappointment that Greg greeted Stamford’s eager greeting.

“Sergeant Lestrade! Good to hear from you. How are thing going with your new flatmate?”

“Good! Very good indeed. Went out yesterday so he could get used to public transport and had a few friends in last night for the match and Chinese food.”

Unbeknownst to Greg, Stamford had begun making little notes on the anecdotal information he received during their conversations to help bolster the case in support of Mycroft’s emancipation and this was especially helpful news, from the administrator’s point of view. A group of friends, even if small and newly formed indicated the ability to socialize and integrate successfully into society. On the personal front, Stamford was tickled pink that the rather dour Mycroft was getting the chance to spread his wings with fresh faces and enjoy something as simple as a night in with one’s chums.

“My sort of night, by all accounts.”

“You’re welcome to join us. Had a new face last night, actually. John Watson, a new doctor at Bart’s. Mycroft’s getting to meet a fairly diverse bunch, I’d say and having a good time in the process.”

“John Watson?”

“Yeah?”

“Shortish bloke, did time in the Army?”

“That’s him.”

“Good heavens! I had no idea John was back in London! We were at Uni together! I thought about taking the medical path, but one photo of a dissected cadaver did a good job of changing my mind. Bart’s you say? I’ll have to look him up. I’d heard he got shot, actually. Worried quite a bit when I didn’t hear more, but I suppose it’s not important now he’s back and making a name for himself again. John Watson… what a surprise. What a very, very pleasant surprise…”

He and John had gotten into their fair share of trouble together and it would be wonderful to chat about old times and see how his friend was getting along. They certainly weren’t too old to get into a little trouble again, either. Actually, after Mycroft’s flight from captivity, he had grown a tiny thirst for the older, more rebellious days of his youth…

“I’m sure he’d love to hear from you. I got the feeling he doesn’t know many people in London, so any ties would be appreciated. He didn’t mention getting shot, though, but I’ve got no idea how long it takes to recover from that, so… I’ll ask Molly. She’ll know. She’ll already have found out everything about him, especially the bits he wants hidden. Oh! And he’s doing training in android medicine. That’s something you should certainly talk to him about. I suspect reliable android
doctors can’t be too numerous even a city like London.”

“They certainly aren’t. The government’s done a good job encouraging training programs and recruiting candidates into the NHS, but, as with many specialty areas, a hefty proportion of talented people leap immediately into private practice and it’s misery for me to get clearance to access them when one of my charges has a problem. Dear me, John… you are absolutely on my call-today list. Already you bring me gifts, Sergeant Lestrade. I’m impressed.”

“I’ll impress you more and ask you to call me Greg. It’s not as if we haven’t buried a body together.”

“Sad, but can’t be denied. And I’d appreciate Mike in return. Don’t bother asking Mycroft to do the same because I suspect his algorithms would overload if he was asked to use anything other than the most formal version of a person’s name, but that might be fun to watch on a boring evening.”

No, laughing at his android’s personality quirk wasn’t nice, but… it was so very true.

“I’ll keep that in mind. We’re set for a quiet day today, so tonight might need some livening up.”

“Catching up on daytime telly?”

“Doing a little reading, actually. Got Mycroft signed up for library access and he went a bit loony getting books yesterday. He’ll likely have them all read by dinner, though.”

Another note on Stamford’s pad that Mycroft was making productive use of city resources and working on self-improvement.

“He has a voracious appetite for reading, I can attest to that. He filled the request box at every opportunity with books he wanted. I presume you permitted him free access to his reading.”

“Of course! I’m not going to get in the way of that! Man should be able to read what he wants to.”

“I agree. There’s actually a bit of legislation floating its way to Parliament that would give greater access to androids, in terms of books and television. As with most things, it would be at the discretion of their owners, but it’s one step in the right direction, especially for sheltered androids.”

“I’ll pass that along. Mycroft would probably like to know.”

“I take it he’s not home at the moment?”

“No, off filling my prescription for pain meds for my toe, which is still on my foot not that you care a whit, and getting a newspaper so we can scan the jobs listings.”

A note on progressive independence and responsibility went onto the pad, which would be fleshed out with details through the three-month period.

“Excellent. He’s not unfamiliar with the city, heavens knows, but actually being a part of it, instead of trying to avoid being noticed as a part of it are two very different things.”

“True. But, he is doing it and doing a grand job of it. Cooked breakfast today, too! All on his own after seeing me do it once. Even did a bit of research for something new he wanted to try. I don’t think Mycroft will have any trouble once he’s emancipated, at least not with the day-do-day drudgeries of life.”
Another note about responsibility and skills acquisition went onto the pad and Stamford smiled at how fully a blossom could bloom if you just gave it the chance. He was scheduled to appear on an Android Services parliamentary panel to discuss new ideas for improving android turnover at shelters… perhaps some form of fostering program might be worth suggesting. Let the androids, especially those with limited skills or employment options, those who came from highly-restrictive environments, begin to learn new social or employment skills in a more one-on-one situation than provided by a shelter. Finding new owners for these androids was punishingly hard at times as their ability to move into a new job or home service was limited. Here was an exceptional example of what might happen if the right android was matched with the right person.

“I must say… this is astounding progress. I have no doubt Mycroft will be extremely well prepared when the time comes to ink his papers. And it sounds as if he’ll have friends to his name to assist with any bumps along the way once he’s on his own. Friends are one of the hardest things, sometimes, for androids to acquire and having a strong social support system makes a great deal of difference to one getting started with a new life. Are all those he has met so far human?”

“Yes. Should I… is that bad?”

“No, not at all. Eventually, he will find other androids with whom to associate, but it’s not something to force. If your friends are human and accept him in social situations, then there’s nothing at all wrong with it. I would just ask that if he meets other androids you make clear that you’re not upset that he’s gathering non-human companions. Many owners or even those who are simply close to an android can feel threatened by a dynamic that is non-human focused. And, as for any, shall we say, relationship, remember that having friends you don’t necessarily share is healthy.”

Was that an opening he could use? There probably wouldn’t be a better one, so pounce!

“I’ll remember. I did mean to ask… in case the issue arises… do androids… well…”

“Do androids what, Greg?”

“Should I be prepared for… romantic… things?”

Greg couldn’t see Stamford’s large smile nor his mouthing ‘yes, you probably should’ at his phone, but that was something best handled carefully because it would be easy to throw a very large spanner into the works and that was the polar opposite of what the shelter administrator hoped would happen.

“Oh, attraction. Maybe even sex. Good question. The answer is possibly. Androids have programming that may or may not enable romantic or sexual attraction and that isn’t necessarily provided in the specifications we receive when they’re turned over to shelter care. I don’t have that information for Mycroft, actually, so I can’t give a definitive answer, I’m afraid. If I had to hazard a guess, I’d say he likely can experience romantic feelings, it’s not terribly uncommon, but sex is another story. Many manufacturers and programmers consider it a distraction for an android’s function and leave it out of the final build. Some do that for romantic attraction, as well. Mycroft has a diverse and well-developed emotional range, so I wouldn’t be surprised, though, if romance… or more… is something he could experience.”

“Ok… ok, that helps. Is there… just so I’m not surprised, you understand…”

Ask me, Greg. Ask me if androids and humans have a chance. Do it… you’re positively dying to. I can feel you imminent demise from here.

“… can that romantic attraction… or more… be directed to both humans and androids or just androids.”
Good boy.

“Emotional programming runs in tandem with various routines for personality and personal preference. Some androids have a marked leaning towards their own kind, when they have choice, and others tend to associate more with humans than other androids. So, yes, you could expect Mycroft to form connections with either his own or with humans, if he chooses to explore that avenue of his programming.”

Now… make good use of that Greg or heaven help you and Mycroft both.

“Alright, that makes sense. Just curious, you know how it is. Hate to be taken by surprise if he tells me he’s got a date so I act like an idiot and make him feel strange about things.”

“Very forward-thinking. My advice is to behave exactly as you would for any friend who finds a bit of romantic luck, though… I highly doubt that Mycroft has any experience in this area, so patience, support and understanding would go a very long way to help him navigate the situation successfully. He may not even realize he’s experiencing attraction and might need some help recognizing his feelings for what they are. Honest conversation would be my advice. Should the circumstance arise, of course.”

Greg bit his lip and decided honest conversation was a fucking terrifying thing, but… nope, still fucking terrifying.

“I’ll keep that in mind. I do… I want to help Mycroft however I can and if he could use a person to talk to about someone he’s interested in… I suppose I could be that person.”

You’ve already imagined kissing him and you know it, sergeant. And more, besides. Now, try and find out if he’s been doing the same about you. Use proper vocabulary and no euphemisms because Mycroft won’t understand that and you’ll get nowhere!

“Good. He’s comfortable with you, that much is clear, and that will make communication a great deal easier than if it wasn’t the case. And he genuinely likes you, Greg, which is more than I can say for most of the humans or androids Mycroft has had contact with. Mycroft is highly intelligent and clever besides, but that doesn’t mean he can easily fathom out a situation for which he has absolutely no experience or frame of reference.”

“I understand. I meant to ask, not that I know if it’s allowed… where did Mycroft come from, anyway?”

“A private residence. Unfortunately, we often get little information in those situations about the androids we receive and Mycroft doesn’t speak about his time before he came to us. No refusals, mind you, he simply doesn’t initiate any discussion where his previous life factors in and, for the sake of his privacy, I never cried, besides questions concerning existing skills, talents, limitations of work-related function or existing issues requiring repair or maintenance.”

Private residence… that meant Mycroft could have done anything, but, most likely, worked in a simple servile function which definitely would have gotten deeply under the android’s skin, given Mycroft’s sense of pride. Greg sighed and recommitted himself to making this flat a real home for the android where he was co-king of their tiny castle.

“Thanks. That helps, actually. I just want him… I just don’t want to cause offense or stir up bad memories or anything like that if I can avoid it.”

“That’s good of you, Greg, and I’m certain Mycroft appreciates it. He’s a special one and I often
dreaded the day he’d be sold, since so few would want to give his specialness a chance to shine. I’m glad things turned out this way. For him and you both.”

Stamford smiled that Greg didn’t leap onto the last part, likely being a bit lost in his thoughts about a certain special android who’d be returning soon for a quiet day of reading. For his next home visit, he was going to bring various informational packets on housing options and rental subsidies for newly-emancipated androids, but… maybe leave that for awhile. With luck, they wouldn’t be needed…

“He is special, isn’t he? I can’t say these next months are going to be much of a hardship. I’m happy, too, he can keep himself busy when I go back to work tomorrow. I suspect he’ll see everything there is in London before week’s end and have job offers stacked a mile high.”

“Which Mycroft will likely scorn as being beneath his skill level. Though… I suppose he was willing to sell flowers, so he might have relaxed his standards a bit. That was somewhat a sticking point when we discussed training possibilities. He is very aware of what are his intellectual and analytical capabilities and is not content with the notion that he will be consigned to a role where they are not utilized to their fullest.”

“Can’t blame him there.”

“No, but, if possible, try to reinforce the idea that one must, at times, start small and work one’s way up the ladder.”

“That I can do. Already done my police constable time and hope to keep going upwards. Inspector, maybe, in the detective side of things. I can definitely talk to him about that, though, when he gets his feet under him, he’ll probably outpace any career track I set for myself.”

“I’d appreciate that. He’ll value your input and take it more to heart than he might from me. Mycroft can be easily frustrated when events move too slowly for efficiency’s sake and people or androids are operating with less intelligence than suits him. Someone to discuss his frustrations with will help him stay on even keel.”

And, soothe the anger in ways that only someone who cares can do.

“I’ll certainly keep my eyes open for that. He tolerates me well enough, though I know his brain operates on a level far above mine, so maybe he’s learning to mellow that scorn.”

The answer to that is no, sergeant. You’ve connected with him and he sees the whole picture that is you and isn’t judging you by a single element of your being. And he is enjoying the contrasting opinions and thought processes you offer, values your areas of experience and other things that one does when one is being drawn towards a little island of bliss that boasts two inhabitants who have no desire to ever be rescued.

“Perhaps. Another bright point in our conversation! What else can I do for you, Greg?”

“Oh, nothing I suppose. Wait! Yes, yes, there is. Can we get Mycroft’s paperwork started for NHS services? I’ve heard that takes an age and I don’t want to see him in a position of needing help and it being unavailable.”

“There’s some truth to that, because his paperwork has go through the bureaucracy and his emancipation be signed off on before his name gets into the various records for taxpayer services, but, he’s covered for this introductory period and, after that, if he shows a copy of his filed emancipation form, they’ll stamp it at the register office to show he’s officially applied, he can
receive benefits at your local clinic or a hospital. Anything requiring a specialist will require a wait, but that’s not very different than what we poor humans experience.”

“Ok, that’s a weight off my mind.”

And another item on Stamford’s list of pre-emancipation progress. Planning for necessities beyond housing and employment. Perhaps he should consider writing this more formally and producing a template or checklist for androids transitioning to free status. A concise tool to make the most of their planning and ensure the best android service report to support their application. Wouldn’t hurt…

“I’m glad to be of help. Now, I’ve got to oversee installation of a couple of new computers so my residents don’t convince the technicians to give them access to all the porn sites. I’m here when you need me Greg, so don’t hesitate to phone.”

“I will. Thanks, Mike. This has been extremely helpful.”

Setting down his mobile, Greg nodded a few times as if gearing himself up for something, then realized he had nothing to gear up for but a quick trip to the loo and a stop in the kitchen for a little juice. No, that wasn’t true… he was gearing up for something that dealt with a specific area of this conversation that was still fucking terrifying, but… at least not so far out of the bounds of reality that he’d be a complete fool even thinking about it. Mycroft was special… and he didn’t meet special people like that very often. Something about him… it just… felt right. And speaking of right…

“Ah, Gregory, I see you are resting as per doctor’s orders.”

Mycroft strolled into the flat with a smile on his face, a newspaper under one arm and a small bag in his hand.

“I would never contradict my doctor unless I thought they were drunk or planning my untimely downfall. What’s in the bag?”

Mycroft’s smile widened and he sat on the sofa, handing the bag to Greg who opened it and laughed at the large, heavy mug emblazoned with ‘My Coffee is Better than Your Coffee’ in big, garish letters.

“Where’d you find this?”

“There was a rather… upscale… shop near where I obtained your prescription and it was in the window with a rather attractive price.”

“Meaning they were desperate to get rid of it and selling it nearly for free.”

“That would sum up the situation nicely, yes. I was actually able to negotiate the cost down further, so our coffers took only the most delicate of blows.”

Greg grinned brightly and did a little bum dance on the sofa that pleased Mycroft mightily. He has been nervous his attempt at an amusing gift would fail, but that, apparently, was not the case.

“I love it! Really, this is brilliant. Thank you, Mycroft. Truly, thanks for this.”

And, no, Greg did not start to lean forward to give the android a kiss on the cheek. That would be loony and he couldn’t be loony. They’d toss him out of the police service and Anderson would laugh at him!

“You are most welcome, Gregory. Shall I prepare a pot of your cherished beverage with which
to christen your receptacle, which I shall wash most thoroughly before use?”

“My receptacle happily awaits both its bath and its brew.”

Taking the mug back, Mycroft darted off to the kitchen and did his own mental dance at meeting with success making Greg happy. It was a silly thing, but it had seemed an appropriate gift for his Gregory… Gregory… and there was great satisfaction to be taken in being right. And, he must adjust his vocabulary filter to reduce the amount of colloquial speech he added to his repertoire. Just because ‘our’ and ‘my’ was appended to a person’s name in human society, for specific purpose, that did not mean he should implement such nomenclatural distinction for this situation. It was presumptuous, unquestionably.

Or… questionably. Gregory was so happy with his silly, impromptu gift. There had been a tender gaze, as well. Most tender and… focusing now on cleaning and coffee because other lines of thought would require intensive analysis and this was certainly not the time for that. Gregory would not know if he was reading or evaluating, so today’s time with a book could serve dual purpose. There was never a detriment to being efficient and he was nothing if not a staunch advocate of efficiency… especially those as convoluted and complex as… things…
Chapter 14

Shit. Why couldn’t he be a wealthy man and not have to live by the incessant and bastardy demands of the alarm? It wasn’t so much to ask for money to fall out of the sky in large sacks, was it? Big, bulging bags of banknotes… now that was a dream worth having…

Greg nestled down under his blankets for a moment longer and savored the toastiness which was just perfect for the toasty, cozy day and night he’d spent before drifting off to sleep. Long stretches of quiet reading, broken only by sharing a passage here or there and the occasional break for a bite to eat or a hot cup of something to heat up the blood. It was an absolutely stellar way to spend the time and the greatest joy was seeing Mycroft so utterly content with his book, tea and blanket thrown over his legs and feet, which curled up with him in the chair. It was the sort of day that lingered with you long after it was over because it was so rare that you had the time to just do nothing.

Now, of course, he had to pay the price and drag his arse out of bed and return to the working world, but given he’d likely be supervising a desk and chair for a bit, there wasn’t too much to complain about. Except, of course, getting out into the chilly morning and not having a Mycroft around to make desk supervision something to enjoy. Maybe… could Mycroft be an angel two days in a row and have coffee and breakfast ready? It was a lot to ask, quite a presumptuous presumption, but… pleeeeeeeease…

__________

YES!

“Ah, there you are, Gregory. I hoped it would not be necessary to wake you, given your alarm sounded some ten minutes ago.”

“Yeah… about that. I normally roll out of bed a bit after that damned klaxon blares, so it’s not a worry if I’m not swanning out of the bedroom right away.”

“Normally implies there are times that is not the case.”

“Yeah… about that. I’ve been known to oversleep on the very uncommon occasion.”

“How do you, precisely, define uncommon?”

“Well… about that…”

Mycroft tossed a piece of toast at Greg who snatched it out of the air and put it into his mouth to plug the deluge of his humiliation.

“I see measures will have to be taken to ensure you are properly awake and prepared for beginning your day of work, every day that you work.”

“Measures?”

“Draconian ones, if necessary.”

Mycroft’s narrowed-eye glare won Greg’s highly-dramatic gasp as a reward before the slightly-limping sergeant dropped into a chair at the kitchen table.

“I’ll be good, sir, I promise.”
“Excellent. Fortunately, I have a very reliable internal time sense and can easily enforce my edict, regardless of the situation.”

“That’s helpful. How’d you sleep, anyway? Or rest or whatever you call it.”

“Sleep will do as a term, I suppose. And it was most agreeable. I made use of the portable charger Administrator Stamford provided and it granted a most refreshing period of maintenance and rest.”

“Good! I’ll phone an electrician as soon I’m a few quid ahead, I promise, and we’ll get a real recharging outlet for your bedroom.”

“Thank you, Gregory. And, in recompense, you may have coffee and breakfast.”

Greg shimmied in his chair and gladly accepted the hot coffee served in his new favorite mug and only had to wait a moment for a plate to be put in front of him, bacon now being added to the breakfast du jour.

“Bacon! You’ve been researching again, haven’t you?”

“That I have. It is an interesting area of study, the meal traditions for various cultures and I am increasing my repertoire for items appropriate for your morning meal.”

“You’re heaven-sent, Mycroft, do you know that? But…”

Mycroft paused a moment and cocked an eyebrow at his flatmate, who bit his lip slightly before continuing on.

“I don’t want you to think you have to make breakfast for me. It you want to, great! But, you’re not obliged to. I’d never assume that of you. Just… just so you know.”

Mycroft nodded and felt a surge of contentment rise up in him. He had not given that a single thought, but it meant so very much that his companion had and felt it important to offer reassurance.

“I recognize that, Gregory, but I very much appreciate your words. It is important to me that you offer me space in this home and treat me with such equality. It is not something I have ever expected from this world and I am astounded each day by how readily you bestow it.”

Following an uncharacteristic urge, Mycroft ran a hand along Greg’s shoulder and filed away that Greg made a rumbly sound nearly below the threshold of standard human hearing that put the android in mind of the sound a contented cat might make finding an especially-pleasing patch of sunshine.

“You’ll tell me if I act like an arse, though, right?”

“I shall lecture you most sternly.”

“Alright, then. Back to my exceptional breakfast and then… ugh.”

“One should not disparage one’s gainful employment, Gregory Lestrade.”

“Can if I want to.”

“You greatly enjoy being a policeman and I am well aware of that fact.”

Greg raised his foot and whimpered like a teeny-tiny puppy which earned him another slice of toast,
but no sympathy.

“You have promenaded about the flat with notable ease and progressive lack of pain, so your attempts at playacting are failing to inspire pity in your audience. Further, Constable Anderson indicated that you would likely have a restful few days of paperwork to gentle you back into your duties.”

The whining became even more pitiful until Mycroft put another two slices of bacon on Greg’s plate with one non-Mycroft approved banana set beside them.

“Hurray!”

“Would you do me the courtesy of… oh. Dear me, Gregory, does your depravity know no bounds?”

Peeling his banana, cutting it in half lengthwise and making a banana-as-bread bacon sandwich to consume merrily was, in Greg’s opinion, a burst of inspiration, despite Mycroft’s grandly rolled eyes.

“Nope.”

“Apparently. Know now that you shall have no bananas with your lunch.”

Meaning Mycroft was going to make his lunch and that had Greg shimmying in his chair once again.

“Biscuits?”

“You may have two.”

“Only two?”

The pitiful whining began again until Mycroft finally held up three fingers to a happy Yea! from his breakfast partner.

“I see you shall be a difficult one to satisfy, Gregory.”

Satisfy was not a term Greg particularly needed to hear mentioned, especially from the lips that he’d studied over the top of his book yesterday, when Mycroft was too absorbed in his reading to notice.

“Not really. What boy doesn’t like a handful of biscuits with his lunch?”

“You are not well-classified as a boy.”

“An old boy.”

“I stand corrected.”

“Still got my boyish good looks though.”

Greg turned his most innocent smile on Mycroft who couldn’t help but grin indulgently in return.

“That you do,”

Really?

“Oh… think so, do you?”

“I believe I have remarked upon it previously.”

“True, but it pays to check now and again to see if I’m still holding strong against age.”

“I shall inform you the instant you fail to do so.”

That… if a person was so inclined, that person could say said statement implied a degree of… longevity to this acquaintance. Or was this another instance of idiotic thingerity? Still needed to work on those analytical skills…

“Thanks! And you, my fine-feathered friend? What items are on your agenda today?”

“I shall, as decided, make contact with the various employment services available to me and then… I have no firm idea, however, I have no doubt I shall make productive use of the day.”

“That’s good, actually. Make certain to take as much time as you can for fun, Mycroft, because once you become a working man, there’s precious little opportunity for the likes of that.”

“Prudent advice and I shall pay great heed to it. In truth, I suspect it will be difficult to find employment that suits me, but…”

Ok… make ready to follow Stamford’s advice…

 “… I suppose, as they say, beggars cannot be choosers. I may have to endure something not entirely to my taste at the onset of my employment career before I move to other offerings better suited to me and my talents.”

Stamford advice officially not necessary since Mycroft seems to have sorted this out on his own. Well done.

“Yeah, that’s what most have to do. Crawl up the ladder, though, I suspect you’ll leap more than crawl.”

“That is my ardent hope. I…”

Greg was learning the little signals the android emitted and this one meant he had been thinking along personal lines.

“Go ahead, Mycroft. I what?”

“I want to do something rewarding and significant. I know I can; I know if I was but given the chance I could do a great deal, but I have no idea if that chance shall ever be presented. At least, not to the extent that I desire. It is boastful, I know, but I am confident that my abilities enable me to do much, often more than various humans I have observed and I feel the strongest of urges to put those abilities to use.”

“It’s not boastful, Mycroft, it’s honest. Everyone wants the opportunity to see their strengths make a difference. To go as far as they can. I’ve got my own ambitions, for example. I have no idea how far I can rise up the police ranks, but I know it’s higher than sergeant. I’ve got skills and talents, but I also have weaknesses, like all that fucking paperwork and politicking you have to do when you really move into the upper reaches. I’ll find my proper spot someday, though I know it’ll take time and effort and I’ll have to compromise on the things I don’t like to get the things I do.”

“You are very wise, Gregory, and, for that, I may award you something special with your lunch.”
“Yes! Bananas?”

“I recognize the similarity between human and simian DNA is extraordinary, however, I believe you are accessing some highly ancient genes at the moment.”

“Nope, just like my spotty bananas.”

“Let me think on the situation while you prepare yourself to leave.”

Greg smiled the smile he used when he was hoping to pull someone interesting at the pub, then realized it, and stuck his tongue out as he grabbed the last bit of breakfast between a folded piece of toast and marched his way to get those pesky hygiene things tended to so he wasn’t escorted off the premises when he crossed the threshold at work. What was wrong with him using his sexy grin on Mycroft? At breakfast! Ok, the dressing gown made it somewhat appropriate, but since there wasn’t any sexy business beforehand to necessitate the dressing gown, then… nope, that was too much thinking for the morning and it was ending now. Think about police work. Solid, vital public service. That was the direction his brain should be traveling.

Other lines of thought could wait until he was back home and facing a nice night with Mycroft and, most likely, a good film or a film that was so crap it was good unintentionally. Mycroft would be happy from his first full day as a mostly-free and unescorted citizen of London, maybe have some stories to share, and they could be like all the other couples when they met up after hard days doing whatever they did to make ends meet. Just… forget about the couples part. Really, that bit wasn’t necessary whatsoever and completely erroneous besides. Just focus on happy Mycroft and not on any nonsense about couples. Happy, happy, happy…. that was something to look forward to…

That was not a happy Mycroft.

“You look like you’re ready to murder someone or something. Glad I’m commandeering a desk for a few days so it’s not me out there chasing you down after you’ve done the deed.”

“Highly amusing.”

The scowl on Mycroft’s face as he sat on the sofa and flipped rapidly through the telly channels before throwing the remote against the sofa arm said the android was as far from happy as androidly possible. And certainly not amusing.

“Ok… I take it you didn’t have a great day.”

“Very astute of you.”

Snippy. And angry.

“Mycroft… did someone bother you today? Treat you poorly or something? You know, there’s value in having a friend who’s a policeman and…”

“You mean an owner who is a policeman.”

Very angry.

“No… I mean friend. Mycroft, what’s wrong? If you tell me, maybe I can do something about it.”
“I can take care of myself!”

“I never said you couldn’t, but if there’s help I can provide, I’d rather give it than not. Talk to me, Mycroft. You know I’ll listen.”

Throwing his jacket over the back of a kitchen chair, Greg took a seat on the sofa, leaving some distance between him and the android, who didn’t seem certain he was happy about Greg sitting with him or not.

“It matters not. The situation is… I shall deal with it myself.”

So, there was a situation and it had upset the android terribly. Not the way he wanted Mycroft’s first day alone to go, but… you played the cards you were dealt.

“Talking about it will probably help, though. Even if you don’t want me to do anything, just having the chance to talk will likely make you feel better about things.”

Mycroft seethed and Greg was fairly sure he could feel waves of heat coming off the android, which was good since he’d been hoping for a hot cup of something when he got home and that could be awhile arriving.

“You cannot do anything.”

“Maybe not, but… come on, Mycroft. You have me worried, you really do.”

That, at least, seemed to cut through the android’s mood and a small, frustrated sigh preceded Mycroft giving his answer.

“I attempted to phone someone and had the call refused.”

That… no, that didn’t make a lot of sense, no matter how much Greg thought about it.

“Was it a for-pay call or something?”

“No. The party answering simply refused to put the call through to the intended party.”

Intended party. So, someone got in the way of Mycroft trying to contact someone. Could be anti-android prejudice rearing its ugly head…

“Someone kept you from getting information you needed? That may be illegal and I can definitely…”

“The call was of a personal nature.”

Well… that changed things.

“Oh. I see.”

That’s an impressive lie because there is no seeing whatsoever. Unless…

“Mycroft… did you try and phone the android at the shelter? The one you were worried about being deactivated?”

“That is none of your business.”

So, the android at the shelter was the intended recipient of the call. Alright… something to work
“Stamford said androids can only receive contact from those on an approved list. I’m guessing you’re not on this android’s list, are you?”

“It is a travesty. An egregious abridgement of basic dignity.”

So, the answer is no.

“I agree wholeheartedly, but that doesn’t change the law at this point in time. Maybe… I don’t know if…”

“Denying us the basic right to decide to whom we wish to speak! To whom we wish to visit! It is an atrocity and humanity, once again, fails to surprise me with its discriminatory practices and lack of integrity.”

Visit… oh dear…

“Did you actually try and visit this other android?”

“Why do you insist on prying into my personal affairs? I suppose it was too much to hope that you would behave any differently than the other appalling examples of the human species that I must confront.”

The sting of that made Greg sport his own scowl even though he was very aware Mycroft knew it wasn’t true and was saying it just to lash out and hurt someone as much as he was hurting.

“Ok, that’s enough. You know I’m not trying to pry, I’m trying to help. Just to give you the ear to hear what you have to say and maybe offer some advice or suggestions if I can. None of this is right, we both know that, but you also must have expected something like this because you were in a shelter yourself and you know the rules. You may be pissed that your freedom didn’t translate into another android’s privileges, but you don’t have to be an arse to me just because you had a bad day.”

Mycroft snorted loudly and his face darkened thunderously, but he didn’t fling back any words and Greg knew that if there was something the android excelled at, it was word-flinging. Now, though… how to get information about this other android that Mycroft seemed focused on without appearing nosy or, worse, domineering.

“Your life is your life, Mycroft. I respect that and am doing my very best to help you get that life in the shape you want it. Not the way I want it, but how you want it. I… I want to be there for you when you’ve got a problem, like I would anyone in my life, not because I’m trying to snoop or control you, but because… you’re important to me and I like to help the people I think are important.”

That was vastly more… informative… than intended, but it did seem to be drawing down some of Mycroft’s anger, so no mental beating up for the time being.

“It is brutally difficult, Gregory… horrendously difficult to be treated with such disregard by so, so many of your people.”

“I can’t know how that feels, Mycroft, but I can sympathize with what you’re going through and… well, as I said, just try and offer help where I can.”

Mycroft’s expression slowly morphed from scarcely-controlled rage to irritated frustration and Greg held out hope the worst of the storm had passed.
“Very well. Yes, I presented myself at the shelter and was denied admittance, regardless of the ardency of my argument.”

Ardency of argument… an ugly feeling began to thread through Greg’s nerves, partially from hypocrisy at being happy Mycroft wasn’t allowed a visit and partially from being happy because… it was starting to seem as if Mycroft had a highly vested interest in this other android and that… that made his own thoughts about… things… seem misguided. Ultimately, though, that was his own problem, since Mycroft had never given him any firm sign about… things… so being jealous was simply being nasty-spirited and not at all the friend he was claiming to be.

“Ok… we can ask Stamford about that. Maybe he can…”

Oh this was going to hurt.

“… maybe he can get you put on the approved list somehow. He knows all the shelter directors, so if he puts in a good word for you, that should count for something.”

And look how brightly your eyes light up, Mycroft. If a simmering cauldron of jealousy wasn’t slowly boiling your sofa companion, said companion might feel his own eyes light up in response.

“Gregory… do you really believe that may be the case?”

Yes, unfortunately.

“I don’t see why not, unless there’s a regulation that says no android other than a resident is allowed to visit a shelter. It wouldn’t surprise me if there was, though, so don’t get your hopes up too high. It’s a touch late tonight, but Stamford will probably be willing to talk to you about it tomorrow.”

“Yes, I will call him in the morning. Thank you, Gregory and… I apologize for my previous behavior. It was reprehensible of me to treat you in such a manner for I know with great certainty that you… that you do not see me in the same fashion as other humans. It was wrong of me, terribly wrong and I do offer my sincerest apology for that.”

Greg smiled and made it as wide as he could, but what he really wanted was a very large scotch and a chance to mourn the likely passing of his chance for… things. It didn’t influence his liking of Mycroft, nor his respect and commitment to seeing the android set with a free and promising future, but… things had most likely grown wings and flown away…

“And I accept it gladly. It’s, if you’ll pardon the expression, human to want to spread around the anger when it’s eating at you and I have no doubt I’ll do the same thing to you at some point. Just call me out and remind me I’m being a bastard when it happens.”

“I shall and I appreciate you doing the same for me. Not only is it helpful in developing the skills I must garner to more successfully interact with humans, but… it showed me something about myself and I consider that highly valuable knowledge.”

“Good, then! Now, how about a little drink to celebrate and lubricate our way into the rest of the evening?”

“A glass of wine would be most pleasant.”

“One wine for you and a big scotch for me.”

“Oh dear… I have forgotten entirely to inquire about your own day. That was horrid of me,
Gregory, and another failing due to my petulance. Again, I offer apologies.”

“And, again, I accept. It wasn’t too bad, actually, but we can chat about it, and the better parts of your own day, while we drink.”

What did feel good to Greg, a small island of happiness in the roiling sea of dashed hopes and jealous wishes of calamity against a rival of the android persuasion, was the knowledge that he’d come home to a furious, dispirited Mycroft and had helped him find his smile. That was a truly brilliant feeling. It would have been nice if he could have looked forward to adding new and exciting techniques to his smile-making portfolio, but c’est la vie. No spilled milk would see his tears today. He had a new friend and what he anticipated would be a long-term good and loyal friend and that was a lot more than many people had in this world. So… a nice drink with his good, loyal friend and a chat about his own day. Good times. Really, this was good, good, good times…”
Chapter 15

“You dying, Greg? Or just hoping to because your life is so miserable it’s not worth contemplating a future?”

Greg made the expected rude gesture at Anderson, who grinned, took a seat at his sergeant’s temporary desk and tapped the papers on said desk with one finger while pointing to the pen sitting lonely on the desk with the other.

“Sod off.”

“Not likely. They’re looking for people to tunnel into the files area and rescue the remains of the clerks long lost beneath piles of moldering paper and that will not be me. We are officially discussing... stuff... which is vitally important for the area of crime fighting, a story you will support fully or I’ll drop another something heavy on your foot and watch you dance merrily in agony.”

“I hate you.”

“That doesn’t take agony-dancing off my list of revenge possibilities, so consider yourself warned.”

“I hate you even more.”

“It’s a sex thing, isn’t it? Speaking of...”

“No! No, there will be no speaking of... anything. Ever.”

Anderson shook his head no, but took a moment to really observe his friend, who was genuinely upset and not simply frustrated with having to command a desk all day.

“Actually, I think speaking is the perfect thing for today. What’s wrong, Greg? And don’t say ‘nothing,’ even though your mouth is making ready to do that very thing.”

It is not. Fuck you.

“Just regretting the fact that I’m back on patrol in a few days and I can’t have long stretches of time without your ugly face in my field of view.”

“Not even nearly your best try. Does this... this has to do with Mycroft, doesn’t it?”

“Looks like I got here just in time.”

Greg and Anderson looked up to see Stamford’s smiling face and the rest of Stamford pulling up a chair to join the conversation.

“And you’re here because, Mike?”

‘I have regular meetings with the Chief Inspector about android-based crime, both committed by and committed against, and decided that it might be smart to find you to ask about why Mycroft has left me three messages, all saying I have to call him back for an urgent conversation.”

Anderson made a grand show of getting comfortable and motioning Greg to get on with it and full disclosure was expected.
“Shouldn’t you just ring him and ask about that?”

“I will, but this sounds like something I might want another perspective on before I listen to what will certainly be an oration that will fly right over my head, dropping hugely-polysyllabic word bombs right on me.”

No matter how hard he tried, Greg couldn’t deny this was extremely likely to be the case because Mycroft was positively tearing at the walls this morning waiting to call Stamford and had certainly had mentally scripted out his speech while making breakfast. Ugh…

“Mycroft had a… disappointment… yesterday and hopes you can do something about it.”

Now, whatever levity had been in Stamford’s demeanor disappeared because he’d half been expecting Mycroft wanting to know how closely human sexual practices mirrored those on television and film. This, however, sounded legitimately serious.

“What happened?”

“He… you know the android Mycroft was worried about? The one that had him stealing a car to try and rescue? Mycroft tried to call him, then visit, and they wouldn’t let him have any contact. It upset him miserably and he’s hoping you can do something about that.”

The tone of Greg’s voice wasn’t lost on either Anderson or Stamford, who shared an ‘uh oh’ look and settled in for the ‘supportive friend’ conversation.

“I see. Well, that’s rather unexpected. Why the sudden urge for a chat?”

“I don’t know. He didn’t say why and I didn’t ask. He wasn’t exactly happy I was pressing the issue at all to find out why he looked like he was preparing to go on a murderous rampage.”

Another ‘uh oh’ look was shared and Anderson began replanning his evening to include taking his friend out for a good drunk to take away the sting of finding out about ‘the other man.’

“Curious. He never mentioned any friends or… friends…. in his life, while at the shelter, but this android must mean something for Mycroft to get so angry.”

Stamford pursed his lips a moment, then waved Greg away from his computer to take the vacated seat and begin typing, making ‘hmmmm’ sounds as he did so. The “ah…oh…” didn’t fill either Greg or Anderson with hope this would end in Greg’s favor.

“Apparently, this android was abandoned at the shelter the same day Mycroft was delivered to his. And from the same household.”

Greg’s low whistle accompanied Stamford leaning back in Greg’s chair and running a hand through his hair. Given Greg seemed a little in his own world at the moment, Anderson decided to be the policeman in the room and dig deeper.

“Is that… normal? Two androids from the same house going to two different shelters seems suspicious to me.”

“It’s not not-normal, exactly. A home with two androids can’t be a poor one and those types of homes, paradoxically, can have more problems with androids than a less-wealthy one. They tend to tolerate less in the way independent behavior in their androids and can afford to dispose of them and buy a replacement rather than try and work with the android to create a more successful home environment. Some notice two or more androids building some form of relationship and paranoia
sets in over them staging a form of cliché uprising. Then, it’s the households that are seeing a change in circumstances, those are the worst. They get angry that androids require food and maintenance and… let’s say they don’t let that anger go unaddressed. When they simply can’t afford the necessities, let alone the taxes associated with multiple-android ownership, the split them up so there’s no tangible support for their story if the androids talk about whatever abuses they may have suffered before being abandoned.”

Shrugging his shoulders at Greg’s sudden glare, Stamford wished Mycroft had been more communicative about his life before the shelter. There was counseling available for androids who came to shelters from less-than-pleasant circumstances or for those who’d been forced to leave behind androids or humans they cared about.

“Are you saying Mycroft may have been abused?”

“No, I’m only saying there are reasons androids may be separated when they’re given over to the government, so this situation isn’t an unheard of one. What I’ll ask you is… do you want me to try and get him contact privileges?”

Both Stamford’s and Anderson’s hearts went out to Greg who scowled for the briefest of moments before nodding his head in the affirmative.

“If that’s what he wants, then he should have the opportunity. It’s not for me to say who he can talk to or visit.”

Anderson shook his head and considered doubling the drunk his friend would get tonight, even if they had to come to work tomorrow nearly catatonic and keep sunglasses on their face for the entire day. Might as well get started on the drunk rambling now while Greg was sober enough to understand it.

“No, it’s not for you to say, but that doesn’t mean you can’t have an opinion on the subject. Just admit it, Greg… you have your own hopes for Mycroft and they don’t involve any other android, or human, stepping up and gaining Mycroft’s attentions.”

Greg’s ‘I say, how dare you, what foolishness, perish the thought’ face made Anderson roll his eyes and Stamford chuckle while he continued to read through android’s file.

“That’s… that’s ridiculous.”

“See these two people right here? We don’t believe you.”

“I… don’t care.”

“Not believing that either. You need to work on your lying. What do you think, Mr. Stamford?”

“Shite. Utter shite. His ability to lie, that is. I’ve known toddlers better at it than Greg.”

“And Stamford here is a learned man, mate, so you should probably take that seriously.”

Greg’s pout was especially toddler-like, but it broke when Stamford ‘hmmmm’d’ again and leaned back away from the computer.

“No one currently on his contact list and no visitors ever, which isn’t unexpected as most shelter androids don’t know a soul beyond those in the homes or businesses where they worked, but there are a number of notations about anti-social behaviors and issues with authority that have reduced his access to the outside world even more than standard. Limitations on computer use, for instance, so
no email or potential inclusion in some of the support chatrooms that shelter androids can join to speak with others and compare experiences. Book choices curtailed, too. Someone’s been a naughty boy, apparently.”

“Perfect. No wonder Mycroft likes him so much.”

Greg’s eyes flared open and his hand clapped over his mouth for a second before he emitted an ‘I’m so busted’ moan while trying to shrink to the size of a mouse so he could scurry away into a handy hole in the wall.

“You’re sad, Greg. Sad and pathetic. I’m ashamed to be partnered with you.”

The rude noise Greg made gained him applause from more than a few people in the large room before they continued on with their business.

“Now that we’ve established Police Sergeant Lestrade is rather smitten, let me toss in that gaining the object of his affection contact privileges with the possible object of his affection isn’t going to be easy. Mycroft’s a known maker of mischief and that doesn’t sell him as an appropriate visitor for an android with his own record of troublemaking. I may not be able to do it.”

Greg screwed up his face and wriggled in his chair to dislodge the large tree that had gotten wedged up his arse before sighing, both in relief and in defeat.

“Try. Do what you can, Mike. Mycroft obviously has a connection with this android and it’s not right that he can’t at least talk to the bloke on the phone. He’ll appreciate it greatly if you can even arrange for that, I know that for certain.”

“I’ll do my best. And, for what it’s worth… this could simply be someone he became friendly with and Mycroft knows he’s got issues that would make shelter life troublesome. He may simply want to check that everything’s alright.”

“Maybe. Regardless, it’s not for me to put one foot in the way of Mycroft’s personal life and I won’t do it, no matter what the reason.”

“Then I’ll return Mycroft’s call and let him plead his case before I do what I can to set this in motion. Greg, Constable Anderson… I bid you good day.”

Standing up and stealing the pastry Anderson had set on Greg’s desk, Stamford doffed his imaginary cap and took his leave to move onto the next part of his romance-novel day. Normally his work was fairly predictable, so this was something of a treat. Of course, that treat would be soured a bit if there was more than a friendly connection between Mycroft and this other android, but somehow… somehow that didn’t fit with Mycroft’s behavior in regards to a certain handsome police sergeant who happened to sleep in the room next to his own. Something else was afoot and wasn’t it a lucky thing that a policeman would be on scene for the investigation…

“Good heavens… Gregory? Are you… well?”

Greg sashayed into the flat floating on a cloud of alcohol fumes from his many drinks with Anderson, who had phoned Mycroft about their evening out and alerted him that it might extend a bit late due to a ‘hard day’ that needed washing away with potent beverages and rough-tongued conversation. However, Mycroft hadn’t expected those potent beverages to be so large in number…

“Pretty as a picture! No… wait… that doesn’t fit does it? Happy as a lamb? That’s not right.
Doubly not right at that.”

Mycroft escorted his tottery flatmate to the sofa and tried not to laugh as the truth of the situation began to make a place in his mind.

“And is Constable Anderson in the same… contented… state?”

“That evil bastard.”

“Is that a yes?”

“What was the question?”

“Oh dear… let me get for you a glass of water.”

“Nooooooooo….”

“Do you have some moral objection to the substance?”

“It doesn’t taste good.”

“Hydration is not contingent upon flavor.”

“They’re overrated.”

“What is?”

“Hydrangeas. Big, flouncy things. Give me simple little flowers like daisies and violets. Good, proper flowers that you see when you go for a long walk on a spring day. Fucking fancy florist florals… fuck ‘em right into the rubbish.”

Trying harder not to laugh, Mycroft patted Greg’s leg in his best ‘there, there’ manner and marveled at how utterly cute the policeman could be when his blood had been replaced with ethanol.

“Then I shall see you are never burdened by their presence in your vicinity.”

“You’re a right decent chap, Mycroft. Nice, too. Anyone ever tell you you’re nice? You are, so there you have it.”

“Thank you, Gregory. I hope that high esteem will hold when I ask of you a favor.”

“Favor? Name it! Name it and it’s yours! Is it going to cost a lot? I may need to talk to the bank about a loan, but I’ll do it! Beg and cry and whatever I need to do so whatever you need gets done whatever it takes and whatever it costs and whatever… what are we talking about?”

“You accompanying me tomorrow for a small conversation with a colleague of Administrator Stamford’s so that I might gain approval to interact with… someone with whom I have an acquaintance.”

“Me? Why do you need me?”

“Because… the shelter director is rather aware of my, shall we say, checkered past in reference to my conduct under Stamford’s care and… he is not certain I am an appropriate person to associate with… my friend. You shall serve as my character reference and, I suppose, chaperone to ensure I do not attempt to abscond with any shelter residents under my coat or other such nonsense.”
“Does he know I’m a bad character, too?”

“I believe that was kept most confidential.”

“Good, because that would be… bad. If it was found out. It won’t be, will it?”

“I personally guarantee your secret shall be kept safe.”

“You’re very nice, Mycroft. Nice and… you smell good, too. And you have lovely skin. It’s so soft and touchable. And it smells good.”

Greg rubbed his nose lightly on Mycroft’s cheek and sniffed softly while Mycroft sat there struggling mightily not to burst out laughing. Finally, a few strokes of Greg’s hair and a small amount of urging his head back broke the contact so Mycroft could look into the policeman’s eyes.

“Might my smelling good equate to an agreement to come with me tomorrow once you are done with work?”

“What are we doing tomorrow?”

“Going to visit a friend.”

“I’d love to do that! Do I know them?”

“No, however, one day, perhaps, that will change.”

“Ok. Do I have to walk to pay a visit? My toe is mean.”

“I shall meet you at the end of your day and we may take public transportation from there.”

“Are we going somewhere?”

Mycroft smiled and sat close to Greg, drawing the confused head down onto his shoulder and patted it gently.

“I thought a small excursion tomorrow would be enjoyable. Now, would you care to watch something on the television before you retire to bed?”

“I’d love an excursion! And telly. And bed. I should get a telly in my bedroom so I can do two things at one time.”

“But, then, you would not be able to smell my lovely skin.”

“Oh, that’s true.”

More soft sniffing began as Mycroft flipped through the channels, settling on an old film that he predicted would greatly amuse the intoxicated sniffer. Gregory was such a dear man. Great-hearted, stalwart and…

“Gregory?”

“Hmmm?”

“Are you licking me?”

“Uh… maybe.”
“Might in inquire as to why?”

“Most things that smell good taste good, too.”

“An interesting hypothesis. Did your experiment validate it?”

“Yep.”

“My heart swells with pride.”

“What are we watching?”

“I am not certain, however, it is monochrome and the score is rather lively.”

“My favorite!”

“The very reason for its choice. Rest, Gregory. I believe that shall be very beneficial to your condition.”

“What if I have to piss?”

“I shall carry you to the toilet.”

“Can you do that?”

“Easily.”

Greg nestled closer to Mycroft and didn’t precisely notice that Mycroft slouched on the sofa a little so Greg’s head could rest more comfortably on his shoulder. Predicting it would be no more than ten minutes before Greg would be fast asleep, Mycroft settled in to watch the film and let the sergeant process a measure of his overindulgence before waking him and seeing him properly to bed. If the waking wasn’t possible, it would be easy to carry the sergeant to his room and see him tucked between his sheets. He would take care of his Gregory… Gregory… there was no worry about that. Special people deserved special treatment, did they not? Of course, how silly even to ask…

Greg set a hand on Mycroft’s leg, which was bouncing with impatience as they sat outside the shelter administrator’s office, and smiled reassuringly to help calm the android. It had been a surreal day so far and, apparently, things were set to continue along the same path. Waking in his bed, horribly hungover and wearing only his pants took a rather enormous amount of his crippled mental power to fathom and, once he did, it was the effort of his lifetime to drag his carcass out of bed and face the person who had certainly seen him safely into bed and… undressed.

Fortunately, Mycroft didn’t seem at all uncomfortable with the previous night’s outcome and happily provided what he had researched was a sound breakfast for someone ‘debilitated by the outcome of gross inebriation.’ Guaranteed to soak up any residue of alcohol and provide ‘a hearty volume to vomit so the day wasn’t further blackened by a case of heaving up bile.’ Really, it was the most well-thought-out plan Greg had ever heard and, in truth, made it possible, along with two extremely strong cups of coffee for him to make it out of the door without falling flat on his face and crying.

Then it was enduring the harsh treatment from colleagues one expects when one is on the verge of self-inflicted death before his only true, breakfast-making friend arrived, amid many inquisitively-raised eyebrows, to collect the zombie for the excursion that was now about to find it’s payoff. Hopefully. He’d stayed in uniform just in case.
“Sergeant Lestrade? Mr. Cooper will see you now.”

Giving Mycroft’s leg a squeeze to push down the visible irritation at being left out of the statement, Greg rose and nodded at the secretary, then smiled at Mycroft who swallowed and smiled weakly in return. The android was frightfully nervous and being treated like… an android… wasn’t making things easier. Well, Greg Lestrade was on the case and he was going to make this happen no matter how nervous his companion might be. The man had nursed him through a drunk, for heaven’s sake! It was the least he could do…

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Stepping out of the office and closing the door behind them, Greg cut eyes at Mycroft who was failing utterly to hold back a massive smile or his quiver of delight.

“İ can see him, Gregory. I can see Sherlock.”

Not a name that surprised Greg since the android came from the same house as Mycroft. Still… it was a stupid name.

“That you can. Just no starting any riots or facilitating escapes or anything that would cause a disruption. I have a suspicion you wouldn’t get a second chance if you stir up rabblerousing and chaos.”

“No, that much is certain. And I cannot endanger this chance, Gregory. I simply cannot. I have waited… oh…”

Greg found himself giving the overcome android a gentle hug and tried not to feel somewhat disheartened when the android flowed gladly into his embrace. Stupid Sherlock better appreciate this man or he’d have Greg Lestrade to answer to.

“It has been horrible, Gregory, simply horrible to have no contact, no idea of what was his fate.”

“Well, that’s all set to change, so shall we?”

Mycroft stepped out of Greg’s arms wearing a sheepish look on his face that, somehow, Greg could unhappily interpret.

“Would you mind if I spoke to Sherlock alone?”

You can speak to Stupid Sherlock alone wearing a pixie’s hat for all I care. Just ignore that I’m five years old, if you’d be so kind.

“No, not at all. I’m sure there’s a place for me to wait and I’ve got my mobile, so I’ll be entertained. Take your time and don’t worry about me.”

Mycroft smiled and laid a hand on Greg’s cheek before darting off in the direction he’d been pointed, leaving the sergeant to sigh and start looking for a comfortable chair. And coffee. Somehow, he suspected this wasn’t going to be a quick chat…

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Greg was just beginning to nod off in his chair when Mycroft stormed around the corner, accidentally kicking his legs which had stretched out in preparation for a nap.

“We are leaving.”
Greg shot out of his seat, checking his clothes and hair for any singing from Mycroft’s volcanically-fueled laser glare.

“What’s wrong?”

Mycroft not answering, but looking as if he was ready to punch something, set Greg on high alert because he had a feeling if the android decided to throw a punch in this particular mood, whomever or whatever was the recipient wouldn’t walk away from it alive.

“How… come on.”

Looping his arm through Mycroft’s and steering him towards the exit, Greg continued walking down the street until he saw a pub and moved in that direction, nearly pushing Mycroft through the door and towards an empty table in quiet corner of the room. Making the sign for two pints to be delivered, he then turned toward the android who was radiating rage in all directions.

“Alright, tell me what happened.”

“They have him isolated. He is kept away from other androids.”

“Is there a reason for that?”

Like the problems Stamford told me about but I didn’t tell you I know about because that’s sort of a secret, shameful as it is for us talking about you behind your back.

“Supposedly he is… bothersome. He upsets the other residents. That is no reason for him to be excluded! To have his privileges restricted! And he has been mistreated, I know that for certain, though he will not admit to it.”

“How are you certain?”

“I know him, Gregory. I know him better than any and the look on his face when I asked him about his treatment beyond his isolation was all the evidence I require.”

“Staff or other androids?”

“It matters not.”

“No, it does matter, because it we’re to address this then the more information the better.”

“It shall be addressed by my spiriting him away from that pesthole!”

“No, I’m not going to let you do that.”

“Let? Oh, I see. Gregory the Owner again rears his head.”

Count to five… now answer.

“No, Greg the Friend does. You’ll be caught and you will be locked up. Escaping yourself isn’t a crime, exactly, but helping another android escape? Yeah, that is, and it’s taken seriously. It’s the wrong plan, Mycroft. You’ll both end up locked away and I can assure you that you’ll never see this Sherlock again after that.”

The server dropped off their pints and Greg tossed his bank card on the tray to begin a tab. His next statement was going to hurt, but… needs must when the devil drives…
“It is intolerable!”

“I agree and we can start on fixing this tomorrow. Maybe… maybe Stamford can have him transferred to his shelter. You know Sherlock will see proper treatment then.”

“Yet he will still be imprisoned!”

“I can’t change that!”

“You can! Buy him!”

Greg reared back and gaped at Mycroft who looked so desperate now that Greg’s heart fractured and bled out in his chest.

“I can’t, Mycroft.”

“You mean you will not.”

“No, I mean I can’t.”

Reaching for his mobile, Greg tapped away a moment, then handed it over for Mycroft to see.

“That’s my bank records. I can’t buy Sherlock, because I can’t. I can scarcely buy these pints! I’m skint until I get paid and that’ll only keep our heads above water with the rent and bills and expenses. I can’t buy him, Mycroft. I already bought you…”

Mycroft stared at the records and felt a large hole open beneath him to suck him downwards further into despair.

“You… you impoverished yourself to purchase me?”

“I don’t like to think of it that way.”

“Gregory… you had funds, you had monies saved and now… you have nothing.”

“Doesn’t matter. It was that or you being deactivated. And, if it wasn’t for Stamford, what I had wouldn’t nearly have been enough, but… he worked his magic and here we are. If I was a rich bloke, Mycroft, I’d do it. I’d buy your Sherlock and see him freed after his 90 days of waiting, but I can’t. I simply can’t.”

Mycroft continued to stare at Greg’s mobile until the sergeant reached out and carefully lifted it from Mycroft’s fingers.

“So, we’ll need a new idea and the only one I can think of is getting him to Stamford’s shelter where you know he’ll be safe. Then… I don’t know. But that will gain us some time.”

Mycroft seemed to startle out of his reverie and pierced Greg with a gaze that seemed to bore directly through the policeman’s skull.

“You would help me do this?”

“Of course. You… it’s obvious you care for this fellow and… if he’s special to you, then I’m here to help if it’s possible.”

“I love him, Gregory. I love him with all that I am.”
Trying not to wince, Greg nodded and took a long drink of his lager, completely unable to meet Mycroft’s eyes.

“I sort of fathomed that out.”

“And you would still help?”

“Yeah.”

“Why? Why would you go to such lengths?”

Greg took another long drink of his beer and stared into his empty glass when it was drained.

“I told you. You’re… important to me.”

Mycroft stared at his companion blinking in a random, erratic pattern as his processor desperately tried to make meaning of the situation, gasping softly when his calculations, and their several re-checks, all gave the same answer.

“Gregory…”

“Don’t, Mycroft. Just leave it alone, alright? It doesn’t change anything between us and I’m still going to see you freed and set with your new life. And, I’ll do whatever I can to see that life include this Sherlock of yours. You deserve to be happy, Mycroft. I really believe that and I’m… I’m happy to help you achieve it.”

A long-fingered hand reached out and rested on Greg’s, who tried to pull it away but found it held fast.

“Gregory… we have a great deal to discuss, you and I.”

“No, we don’t. It’s simple and clear cut and discussions won’t change that. You love Sherlock and…”

“I do. I do love him. But, not because he is my lover. Gregory, Sherlock is my brother.”

Greg’s eyes shot up and met Mycroft’s tender ones with nothing but extreme shock.

“Your brother? But… you’re an android! You can’t have a brother!”

Smiling and feeling something in his core that he had never before experienced, the android took Greg’s captured hand in both of his and smiled gently.

“As I said, we have a great deal to discuss…”
“What… Mycroft, you can’t mean what you just said.”

“That we have matters to discuss. I promise you that is completely true.”

Greg made a rumbly sound in his throat, mostly in annoyance, because Mycroft’s teasing eyes really didn’t seem to fit with the gravity of the situation.

“Not that you prat… I mean…”

Looking around to see if they were being overheard, Greg took a deep breath and continued on.

“… that you have a brother. That’s not possible. You weren’t… born!”

Mycroft took a sip of his own lager and smiled gently. There was so much in him, so much relief, so great a happiness, that it was staggeringly difficult to process it fully, but what explanation could dribble out of his mouth to remedy his Gregory’s confusion, would dribble merrily.

“True, but… the circumstances are not entirely at odds with that, so my statement is most certainly a valid one.”

“What?”

Now it was Mycroft looking about to verify that no attention was turned their way.

“There are things about me, Gregory, things that I do not know for there are… gaps in my memory that indicate erasure, but…”

“Someone wiped your memory!”

“At some point, yes. However, before that occurred, I must have migrated certain memories to minor subsystems with independent memory cores that are not affected by erasure. Not many, for memory consumes large quantities of storage and these systems only retain small parcels of information, but… Sherlock is my brother. He and I… we are DNA-based androids and we are brothers, I assure you.”

Greg’s eyes flared wide and the policeman side of him began blowing a whistle and holding tight to his hat as he prepared to chase down the felon.

“That’s… that’s illegal! Highly illegal! The illegalist illegal thing possible for androids!”

Sitting on his hands so he didn’t point and do Donald Sutherland’s bit from Invasion of the Body Snatchers, Greg bounced in his chair and wondered how Mycroft could look so serene after that admission. Incorporating human DNA in android design was absolutely prohibited. You couldn’t use it as a blueprint, create components using it, have it involved in directing what amounted to biochemical processes… anything. This was bad…

“Yes, so I gather, which is why it is a secret I never have revealed until now. Not even to Administrator Stamford, though he has been the person I have most trusted until you. I realize most keenly the seriousness of my confession, Gregory, do not believe that ever escapes me.”

Greg kept bouncing in his seat, sporting agitated eyes and a rather sickly smile/grimace that had Mycroft waving at the server for another round.
“Illegal….”

The sibilant whisper of Greg’s voice made Mycroft smile and marvel that this man was a mature, strong, valiant individual one moment and a delightfully childish man the next. The paradox was nothing sort of delicious.

“Are you alright, Gregory? Do you require some form of soothing technique to help you find calm?”

“No only would they deactivate you, they’d burn you to erase any trace of DNA.”

“I am well aware of that, yes.”

The new pints arrived and Mycroft tapped Greg’s pointedly to get the sergeant’s hands out from under his thighs and doing something useful. Of course, adding more alcohol to Greg’s blood after last night wasn’t likely wise but… these were difficult times.

“Torch and pitchforks…”

Mycroft knew that laughing at Greg’s continued stuck-in-a-rut thinking was not entirely the appropriate response, but something in him felt so utterly liberated having someone know his secret that he found he didn’t care in the slightest. The burden had been tremendous… always worried that, for some reason, he would be discovered or that whatever his life had been before would leap out to drag him into the murky depths… Ah, apparently, he was now turning as gothic and theatrical as Gregory in his thinking. Perhaps it was the rather humorous film they had watched last night which prominently featured ghosts and ghouls and a jolly band of hapless individuals stranded at an eerie, looming and isolated house…

“I sincerely doubt that will be an outcome as I cannot imagine there are many vendors in London that offer either for sale.”

Greg continued to bounce in his chair and Mycroft tapped the pint glass again, sliding it closer to his companion, who looked at it as if torches and pitchforks were going to fly out from under the foam and perpetrate their angered-villagers vengeance on his defenseless bouncing body.

“Gregory, please… enjoy a refreshing sip of your lager and try to relax.”

“Villagers…”

“Pardon?”

Snatching the beer, Greg drank a good half in one swallow then breathed hard a few times before shaking his head and sputtering a few seconds as he set his glass back on the table.

“I think I’m ok.”

“If you do not mind, I shall reserve judgement until further evidence has been collected.”

“That’s probably smart. Alright… alright alright alright… Sherlock is your brother.”

“Yes.”

“But you’re not sure of that beyond you have a diverted memory of it.”

“A few memories, actually. I know the fact of it and I have a small portfolio of tiny snippets of him and me together. It is precious little, I admit, but it is enough. He is my brother, Gregory and I
have been separated from him for far too long a time.”

Greg wondered if it was possible that he was still drunk from the night before and all of this was some form of passed-out, punishment dream. Considering that would mean actually having to wake and live this day over again, he started to hope that wasn’t the case.

“And Sherlock? Does he know?”

“Yes. He sequestered certain memories of his own that corroborate mine, though they provide no appreciable increase in detail or understanding of how we came to be or why.”

Ok… time for practical brain to jump back into control and push aside the scared-ninny portion that was screaming at him to hide Mycroft away in a closet or something for the next 90 days, so when the villagers descended on the flat, they’d find nothing amiss and he could politely offer them tea and send them on their way without any silly burning him at the stake or pesky beheadings.

“Then it’s even more important to get Sherlock to Mike’s shelter. You’ve not been discovered yet, but there’s no reason to tempt fate. Then… I don’t know. I need to think and that’s not a personal strength right now.”

Something that had Mycroft’s complete agreement, though a dithering, befuddled Gregory was positively adorable…

“I agree that Sherlock would be better served with Administrator Stamford, however, Administrator Stamford might feel somewhat differently. Sherlock can be… tempestuous. Impulsive. Stubborn, to say the very least. He is one who often raises the proverbial hackles of others and… well, let us say he is something of a handful.”

“Mike handled you fairly well.”

“True, however, I am far more placid and mature in my mayhem. Sherlock is decidedly… chaotic in his behaviors, at times.”

“Wonderful. I think your opinion that Sherlock not being treated well will sway the discussion in our favor, though. If there’s a person more with more genuine concern about android welfare than Stamford, I’ve yet to meet them. I’ll call tomorrow and see if he’s free and we can stop in after I’m done with my shift. I wonder though… I suppose it’s stupid to ask if there’s a chance whoever owned you before is likely to come back and try to find you.”

A question Mycroft had contemplated many times, but never settled on an answer.

“In truth, I have no idea about that, but no one has presented themselves to date and, given Sherlock and I were separated when we were abandoned, I cannot see my previous owners hoping to return us to their household.”

“I suppose not. And you have no clues as to who they are?”

“No. I must have considered that not sufficiently important to try and save. Given they tossed Sherlock and myself into the rubbish, that is rather understandable.”

Maybe, but Greg’s policeman’s senses weren’t satisfied the answer. It was correct, he had no doubt, but…

“Don’t you wonder?”
Mycroft’s eyes took a slightly darkened cast and Greg regretted throwing the android back to thoughts that were, obviously, not the most comfortable.

“At times. I am not unaware of the danger of owning me or Sherlock. as well as what must have been a truly enormous cost for our purchase. That degree of investment, of risk… yes, I do wonder sometimes, however, it is, ultimately, irrelevant to my present or my future, so those times are not frequent.”

Greg still wasn’t satisfied, but if Mycroft had neither interest or memory…

“Do you remember anything about that life?”

Sipping his beer, Mycroft smiled slightly and nodded his head.

“The very few things I was able to hide from the erasure program. They center fully around Sherlock, however… I have images of a large home. I have only the smallest fragments of the exterior appearance, nothing to trace or track, and glimpses of the interior. It was a wealthy residence, that much is certain. I do not have images or impressions of the occupants, though. Again, I suppose I considered that immaterial. I cannot say that belief has changed, so it appears a sound one.”

“Makes sense. And I won’t ask if you know where they got the DNA, because you would have told me if you did.”

“True and, again, it is not something to which I give a particularly large amount of thought. There is a curiosity, though, that I will not deny. Unanswered questions can leave one feeling unsettled, but that feeling is decidedly weak and I… Gregory… I hope you are not intending to investigate the situation.”

No, of course not. Maybe…

“I… no?”

“I would ask you not do that; it could easily imperil both Sherlock and me. I have faith in your skills and your commitment to maintaining our secret, but even the slightest whiff of scrutiny could unnerve those who abandoned me and… I simply cannot condone anything that would bring Sherlock or me into the spotlight. We cannot be exposed, Gregory. The outcome is unthinkable.”

“Yeah, that’s true. It just has my cop senses tingling, but I can’t argue that poking at this will bring anything but grief. If they let you go, they had their reasons and might do something in order to protect their secret. It’s illegal to own you, too, so their neck would be just as much in the noose as yours.”

Mycroft’s eyes widened in surprise as the revelation slammed into his brain with a painful force.

“Oh… Gregory, I had not given that any thought. You did not know of the situation… you could not be blamed in this. It would be a travesty of justice!”

“Given the android I purchased came from a government shelter with full documentation, none of which screamed – ILLEGAL – you’re likely right, but, the law sometimes gets muddled between letter and spirit. I’m not worrying about that, though… I’m just worried about you. And, now, Sherlock.”

That was fine, in Mycroft’s opinion, for he would gladly take on the worry about Greg’s fate onto his own shoulders. It had never occurred to him, never, how that aspect of his life might impact the
man who had shown him such kindness. And offered him… offered him something this android could never have hoped to dream.

“Then we are fortunate, for I have researched most thoroughly the regulations and procedure pertinent to my emancipation and none involve any form of screening or testing for my particular condition. In truth, I am of the mind it is so terribly rare, and clandestinely perpetrated, that it is not considered an appreciable concern for the general android population or humans with whom they interact. I fail to understand why it is a problem, in any case.”

Greg sighed and wished the answer didn’t paint humans in an even more dismal light.

“It blurs the line. What’s human and what’s android. People get very paranoid when they can’t define something in a way that draws a clear line in the sand. Paranoia is behind a lot of laws, unfortunately, and this is one of them. Mistrust, hate, paranoia… that also makes them fairly nasty when it comes to enforcement, too. People are horrid sometimes, I won’t lie about that.”

Mycroft nodded, both in understanding and in agreement with Greg’s assessment of humanity. However…

“There are exceptions, though…”

Looking into Mycroft’s eyes, Greg felt a smile creeping onto his lips that continued to creep until it was a full-fledged grin.

“A few. You’re lucky you’ve stumbled onto just about all of them.”

“Yes, Molly and Constable Anderson are fine examples of humanity at its best.”

“Molly, yes. Anderson is a prick.”

“A prick who jubilantly participates in the male bonding ritual of intoxication when a difficult day has been experienced.”

“A useful prick.”

Mycroft snorted a small laugh, but used the fact that he had his companion’s rapt gaze to push forward with another topic of the evening.

“Better. Joshing aside, Gregory… we have other matters to discuss, do we not?”

Nope. Not at all. See, not one matter to be found for a league in any direction, unless they’re invisible, in which case, they don’t count anyway, sneaky bastards.

“Uh… no?”

Mycroft again reached over the table and laid a hand on Greg’s, happily noting that, this time, there wasn’t an attempt to draw it back.

“I have not forgotten how we came to this conversation, Gregory. Would it help to know that… I am not entirely certain what are the parameters of your emotions, but I find them pleasing. I find… I want to experience more of them.”

Ok, maybe there are a few matters that weren’t completely bastardy and could draw up a chair and join the conversation.

“You… you do?”
“Yes. I have no precise notion concerning what this entails, however… I admit to feeling a gladness when we are together. A desire to continue our time long beyond the moment it must come to an end due to a need for sleep or work. I am… happy when I am with you, Gregory. Even when I have not treated you with kindness, I have never wished to see our association severed and have found great relief in that you have shown patience and understanding during those moments so that I could be, again, someone deserving of your kindness.”

Greg sat still a moment and tried to piece together what the android had said, hoping his mind wasn’t too pickled and frazzled to have missed some very relevant detail that shrieked the picture said mind was forming was tragically and fatally flawed.

“So… I didn’t make an utter fool out of myself saying… what I said?”

“Quite the opposite. It clarified for me many things in my own mind that were somewhat vexing about my own thoughts and feelings. I was surprised by your words, Gregory, but I was glad to hear them. I would see… if it is possible, I would like to explore the implications of this.”

“You… you would?”

“Oh yes. Once my emancipation has been granted, of course.”

What?

“What?”

“Gregory, it is highly improper for an android to be in any manner personally involved with his owner.”

The matters had turned bastardy! Fucking traitors! Get away from the table and take your evil with you.

“But… we’re already personally involved!”

“Yes, but not upon an explicitly romantic path.”

“I… well… it’s… not even a little?”

The tiny, sad-puppy whine in Greg’s voice further boosted Mycroft’s spirits and commitment to seeing what lay along this particular path. However… well, perhaps some concession could be made.

“Only of the most minor form.”

“What’s that mean?”

“I don’t know, however, when I know, I will know.”

“You’re doing that on purpose!”

Mycroft pursed his lips and lifted Greg’s hand, gazing at it a moment before lightly blowing a warm stream of air against Greg’s fingertips, sighing quietly when it was done as the utter bliss of the gesture threaded into his systems.

“Perhaps. We will navigate this together, Gregory, and find a pace that satisfies us both.”

“Oh… ok. That’s fair.”
Greg’s attention focused wholly on his fingers that still seemed to tingle from the unexpected, yet oddly stimulating sensation. Mycroft was alright with going forward. Alright with going forward. Maybe slowly, maybe carefully, but forward. And, now that he thought about it, he really didn’t know what forward meant with an android. What did sex mean to an android, for that matter? Slowly was, perhaps, exactly what was called for, along with a lot of what they were doing right now – talking. Lots and lots of talking. Happily, that was something they seemed fairly good with, all things considered.

“Excellent. I am hopeful, Gregory, of learning what it means to pursue more than a collegial relationship with you. I sense it will be a most rewarding experience and I greatly look forward to it.”

“I do, too. And you’re in charge, alright? You set the limits and what you’re comfortable with?

The smile on Mycroft’s face could be called nothing but smug.

“I am in charge. I rather like the sound of that.”

“Over here, feeling a surprise level of naught. But, I’m fine with that! So… here’s to us.”

Greg lifted his glass and tapped Mycroft’s pint with it, adoring the look of sheer joy that lit up the android’s face.

“A worthy toast. Of course, we will have to see how Sherlock shall factor into the ‘us.’ “

Oh. Yeah. Forgot about Sherlock.

“He’s your brother, Mycroft. There will always be a place for him, regardless of what goes on with us. Maybe not in my flat, since the law specifies every android in a household has to have their own bedroom, but… it’s like any new relationship. We’ll simply have to see what happens as we go along. But, we’ll work on it together, so I can’t see this doing anything but succeeding.”

Greg’s smile won him Mycroft’s in return and another lift of his hand, this time with Mycroft looking a little confused and hesitant, before Greg caught a wisp of inspiration and turned the tables, giving Mycroft’s fingers a soft, kiss that lingered just enough for him to impress the moment firmly in his mind.

“Thank you, Gregory. I was not… entirely certain about how to do that properly.”

Teaching Mycroft how to kiss would be so fucking hot it would probably melt his bollocks. It was worth it, though.

“It’s easy. In fact, why don’t you give it a try.”

Flipping their hand positions again, Greg gave an encouraging nod and Mycroft accepted the invitation, leaning in to gently press his lips against Greg’s fingertips.

“Perfect! One perfectly applied kiss.”

“Thank you, Gregory. I had a gifted instructor.”

Yes, there would be melted bollocks because Mycroft would need instructing for everything and that was… oh, this was going to be fun... a very, very large amount fun…
Chapter 17

“Mycroft… are you certain about this? I know the shelter administrator in question and it is *not* like him to permit any form of mistreatment towards his charges.”

Stamford sat across his desk and stared sternly at the android because the accusation was (a) serious and (b) worried him. The treatment of shelter androids was always subject to scrutiny by androids’ rights groups and black eyes were not something the government wore proudly.

“I admit that I do not know from where the problems flow, but I *do* know that Sherlock is suffering. The isolation, alone, is troubling, but when his only sources of mental stimulation have been curtailed… Sherlock’s mind rivals mine, but it needs continuous stimulation for him to thrive. That is not happening and he is… he is fading. He sits with little to occupy him but the most insipid of texts or films and, without even conversation to provoke argument or, I admit, scorn, he is simply fading away and there shall soon be little left of the android he once was. And, yes, I do think more physical things have happened. I noticed a few repaired areas around his ear, which… well, I am certain you know.”

Stamford sighed and provided the explanation for Greg who was sitting quietly letting Mycroft take the lead before he dove in with support. Not that he had any concrete information, having checked police records for incidents involving the shelter and finding nothing, but he could add his opinion of Mycroft’s utter conviction for this and simply be another voice added to the chorus of pleas.

“When androids fight they often strike at the ears which is a weak point in the overall design. There are certain core processing modules in those regions which, though not vital for survival, can damage an opponent sufficiently to reduce their function quite a bit. The repairs are not difficult, so few shy away from that tactic when the situation arises, much as one of us might break some arse’s nose in a pub fight.”

Having done that a time or two, Greg got the message quickly and wished Mycroft had mentioned this last night as it certainly would have pushed him harder to dig for dirt on the shelter. Though, if other androids were the cause of Sherlock’s injuries, that probably would never be reported to the police. Actually, violence within the shelter would likely never be reported in any case…

“Is that enough for you see him transferred?”

Mycroft nodded at Greg’s question and carefully observed Stamford’s face as the administrator thought about his answer.

“I don’t know. In truth, having an android transferred isn’t difficult and it’s done now and again when one shelter is low on occupants and another is reaching capacity. But… I’d rather not go to George and levy a mistreatment claim as the reason for the transfer. First, I don’t precisely know the reason for Sherlock’s isolation, but it could be specifically to *prevent* him receiving any further injuries. I admit it’s not a stellar solution, but if Sherlock wouldn’t name his assailants, then it might have been the best option for his safety. As for the effects of isolation… that’s a judgement and it’s pitting your opinion against George’s, again, something that’s not easy to argue if I want to see this done pleasantly and with a minimum of resistance.”

Which, to Mycroft’s ears, meant Stamford *would* affect the transfer, but was simply seeking a diplomatic way to make that happen.

“Then might you simply use the redistribution of androids as a reason? I noticed that shelter was
notably more populated than this one and it surely would be budgetarily advantageous to reduce the occupancy, even if by one android. Especially one who has caused the shelter administrator more than a small amount of fuss and bother.”

“Fuss and bother that I’d inherit, don’t forget.”

Mycroft winced and Greg laid a hand on his leg, giving it a gentle squeeze for reassurance, a gesture that was not lost on Stamford who let his mind smile contentedly at the sight.

“True and I cannot entirely guarantee that you would not see your share in the future as Sherlock is ever a contentious individual, however, with my influence that can be moderated and, if he is provided proper mental stimulus, he has less reason to evince his more troublesome behaviors.”

“Restore reading and computer privileges, you mean.”

“Yes, and allow myself and Gregory as contacts so he has individuals to whom he may reach out if he feels the need to discuss a personal matter that he is uncomfortable discussing with you or other staff. Please, Administrator Stamford… I know, I know well, that I was not a model resident, but that was not of your doing. I was keenly aware of how compassionately you managed this shelter and that the androids here were accorded a respect that is not necessarily matched by what they experience in other hands. Sherlock would do well here and I promise that both Gregory and I will assist with his care until we can discover some way to see him purchased and set on the path of emancipation, as I have been.”

Stamford continued to frown but, in truth, he saw no reason not to transfer the android other than it potentially driving off the rails the cheery romantic train carrying these two idiots along to happiness. But, if Greg was actively advocating it, and not between clenched teeth or with a downcast look in his eyes… maybe the situation wasn’t quite what they had believed…

“I can’t promise anything, because it’s ultimately not my decision, but I can call George tomorrow and put in the request. But, let me be very clear about one thing, Mycroft. If this Sherlock chooses to wreak havoc in this facility, I will put in the paperwork to enroll you in android counseling training and have your instruction take place here where you will work full time managing this android so neither me nor my staff have to deal with his nonsense. Do you understand?”

Mycroft’s happy gasp made both Greg and Stamford smile, but Stamford smiled even harder when Mycroft reached over and laid a hand on Greg’s cheek, seemingly to share his nearly quivering excitement.

“I do! I understand most fully and I will do my utmost to curtail Sherlock’s more ridiculous antics. How soon can he be moved here?”

“If it can be done, it could be as soon as the day after tomorrow. The paperwork is fairly straightforward and doesn’t require clearance from anyone higher up the bureaucracy. I should know tomorrow one way or the other if it can be managed and I’ll let you know either way.”

Now Mycroft was nearly glowing with anticipation and Greg simply reached over and linked their fingers, nodding slightly at Stamford for final confirmation that, yes, this was happening and, yes, he expected to be interrogated about it at Stamford’s first opportunity.

“Thank you, Administrator Stamford. Thank you so very, very much for this. I will take great pains to see you not regret the decision.”
“Oh, I’m counting on it, have no doubt about that. Now, how are things with the two of you? Still getting along?”

Greg made a ‘oh aren’t you cute with your little questions’ face at Stamford, but Mycroft sat up even straighter in his chair and began to speak.

“Most certainly. Actually, Gregory has presented himself to me as a romantic candidate and I have accepted his offer.”

Greg’s eyes bugged out and Stamford found himself struggling harder than he ever had in his life to keep from laughing. Mycroft did have his little ways about him… and his own unique ways of expressing them.

“My, this is happy surprise. Congratulations!”

“Thank you. And I am in charge of determining the pace of our romantic development because Gregory is a bit eager to move ahead despite the inappropriateness of anything overly ardent between us, given the android-owner circumstance.”

Stamford had to clench every muscle he had to hold back the laughter and was well aware Greg knew he was doing it.

“I approve. Always good to have a cool head in charge of romantic pacing.”

“I believe that is the case, yes.”

“Well, you have one of the coolest heads I know, Mycroft, when it’s not telling you that stealing a car is a quality idea, so I have great faith you’ll steer this ship like a true sea captain.”

Mycroft’s proud smile made Greg’s heart melt and he gave their linked hands a little squeeze.

“And I’m happy to be his cabin boy or the bloke they have swabbing the decks. I don’t mind physical labor. It’s good for the *stamina*.”

This time Stamford snorted merrily, more at Mycroft’s missing the innuendo and nodding his staunch agreement, than Greg’s attempt at humor. Oh, this was going to be a world of fun to watch. There wasn’t enough popcorn in existence to do justice to the entertainment he was going to experience watching these two lovebirds navigate their relationship.

“Humans do benefit from exercise, Gregory, that is a proven thing. Fortunately, androids are not subject to that particular need and I can continue to happily avoid the rather unseemly rigors of physical exertion.”

Mental note was made by Stamford that his decision to screen job openings prior to discussing them with Mycroft was a wise idea. The android wasn’t… bred… for common people’s work. He simply wasn’t.

“Excellent observation, Mycroft, and, with that, I’ll send you two off so Greg can get in a little of that exercise before the day is done, say, cooking you a smashing meal and waiting on you hand and foot while you watch telly.”

“Oh, I do find that an agreeable suggestion.”

Greg sighed, but had to admit that was fairly in line with his actual plan for the evening so score one point for Stamford.
“Then get started on it! And, I will keep you informed on the situation with Sherlock.”

“Thank you, Administrator Stamford. I am confident you will try your utmost to make his happen.”

Mycroft stood and sighed that Greg stayed in his chair, waiting to be pulled upwards with their joined hands. His Gregory was everything he could ever want in a romantic partner, including providing the playfulness in their relationship that he, himself, would struggle to instigate, though he cherished it boundlessly.

Pushing the now vertical, but immobile Greg out of Stamford’s office, Mycroft looked around his surroundings, which had been his home for a good long while, and felt an ease slip into his frame. Sherlock would be safe here. Safe and supported until they could find some way to bring him out from under the dark shadows of property and into the free world as should be the case.

“Can we stop to buy beer?”

“Under no circumstances.”

“Mycroft mean man.”

“Your consonance does you credit, my dear.”

And, with this man he was pushing, Sherlock would also be safe and supported. There were not many, most likely, who could tolerate Sherlock’s special nature for terribly long, but Gregory… Gregory could. He would be valuable for helping Sherlock find his way in the world. There was simply no question about it.

“Is consonance a brand of crisps? We could use those, too.”

Not a question, not a single, solitary one…

__________

Anderson glared at Greg, who was, for the umpteenth time, checking his mobile which hadn’t sounded once all day. Greg was back on patrol, with the stipulation that he had light duty for another day or two, and doing crowd detail for an environmental rally filled that requirement nicely. The protesters were more than happy to listen to the speakers, give loud support, but deposited their trash in the rubbish bins and didn’t get into fights over stupid things like the football crowd was apt to do. The occasional wandering guitar player made it almost festive, too.

“Expecting a secret message from the space aliens, sergeant?”

“Yeah, they miss you and want you to come home.”

“Oh good. Missed my alien space mum these past few years. Anything besides that, though?”

Greg scowled slightly, but decided some information wasn’t dangerous and, besides, he did have to work with Anderson, so keeping Sherlock a secret wasn’t going to be something he could maintain for long.

“Remember Mycroft’s favorite android? Well… Stamford is trying to get him transferred to his shelter. Mycroft saw his friend and wasn’t happy with how things were going for him and asked Mike for a favor. We’re supposed to find out today if that’s going to happen.”
Greg sipped his coffee and failed to meet Anderson’s eye, so the constable had to move directly in front of him to give him the suspicious glare.

“What?”

“Was I speaking Greek?”

It was technically insubordination to punch a superior officer, but Anderson had no issue with wholesale rebellion against authority.

“Ow!”

“Don’t be a bastard! This is gossip that I have not been made aware of. In fact…”

Anderson punched Greg’s arm again and shook his finger in his sergeant’s face as the cherry on top.

“…that’s worth two punches. The last I saw you, Greg, you were staggering from the cab to your door, prepared to be picking bits of your heart off of the floor for the next few months. Now, you’re helping Mycroft relocate his boyfriend to Stamford’s shelter where, I have no doubt, it’s easier for him to visit? What happened?”

“Uh… Sherlock’s not Mycroft’s boyfriend.”

“Sherlock? Tosser has a hundred-quid name, that’s for certain. If he’s not Mycroft’s boyfriend, then who is he to warrant all this nonsense?”

Some information did not include disclosing Mycroft’s torches-and-pitchforks secret. But, Anderson was a very good policeman and highly observant, so better stick closely to the truth.

“They came from the same household and Mycroft… he feels a bit big-brotherly towards Sherlock. Sounds like the android is very much a handful and has a highly unique personality, like Mycroft does, but is a bit impulsive and maybe immature, if that’s a word you can use for androids. Maybe androids in the same house can grow close, start to feel like family… it doesn’t seem so strange, if you think about it. I also suspect Mycroft simply worries about another singular android being in the world alone, especially since Sherlock’s gotten a bit of rotten treatment at the shelter he lives in now.”

There. That was a profoundly truthful lie.

“That smells like a lie.”

Fuck you.

“It’s my coffee. Got a nice flavored blend and it emits a rich, nutty aroma with hints of vanilla.”

“Your lies smell like burning petrol and Spam.”

“I am now informed of that very important fact. Thank you.”

“You know I’ll get it out of you. You should save yourself the pain and just confess now.”

That was true. Anderson would continue to shove splinters under his fingernails until he broke. Maybe… oh yes, secret weapon coming out of its holster…

“Fine! I was going to wait until film night to say anything, but… Mycroft and I are officially… together.”
“What does that mean?”

“It means Sherlock’s not his boyfriend, I am. As much as a man my age can be labeled that without it being completely embarrassing.”

Look at you gape, Anderson. Marvel at the mightiness of my revelation! And not at the fact that a man my age also shouldn’t be quite so ridiculous, even in his own head.

“You’re dating Mycroft?”

“Yep.”

“So, all of that grand wailing and weeping into your lager went for naught.”

“No, because all that grand wailing and weeping helped push me to… actually say something to Mycroft and, to my surprise I admit, he had something to say in return.”

“And it was a good something.”

“A very good something. Making us a ‘we’ now.”

“How’s the sex?”

“Really, that happy, warm-fuzzies announcement gets made and you jump straight to shagging?”

“Naturally.”

“Alright, I can’t blame you and, for your information… I don’t know. Mycroft’s adamant that the owner-android relationship isn’t appropriate for things like that and so… we’re holding a lot of hands.”

And sitting close on the sofa. Exchanging tender looks. Wrapping arms around waists and shoulders. Laying a soft kiss on the back of Mycroft’s neck this morning while wrapping arms around his android’s waist as Mycroft made breakfast… sex was fantastic, but that was worth its weight in gold.

“Oh… I can understand that. Not the hand-holding part because you’re not thirteen, but Mycroft seeing being owned by you as a bit sticky. Good for him standing up for himself.”

“He has no trouble with that, believe me. Actually, I told him he’s in charge of this completely and can set whatever pace and parameters he wants. I forget that so much is new and unfamiliar to him, so he’s also unsure of how to go about things. I have a suspicion my internet provider is going to wonder about the surge in porn viewing my account is going to show these next three months.”

“Bollocks. You’re already in the upper echelon of perverted users and you know it.”

“Not… entirely true. But, yeah, you have a point.”

Anderson got quiet for a moment and Greg braced for something either disgustingly filthy or honest and concerned.

“Are you happy, Greg? Is it… does it seem like what you wanted?”

Honest and concerned it is. And exceedingly easy to answer.

“Yes to both. I am happy and this is what I wanted. We seem to fit well and I just like being
with him. All we’ve done since he moved in is watch telly in the evenings and have one night out at a pub, but it’s like I can’t imagine anything more rewarding that sharing those bits of time with him.”

“Did you notice how outlandishly besotted that last bit sounded?”

Yes, but I was hoping you didn’t.

“Ummmm…”

“You are completely lost to the bachelor world, you might as well face that now. Have you told Herself yet?”

“My answer to that would be no. My answer to your next question is also, no, I don’t want you telling Molly for me.”

“It will save you a lot of broken ribs from the hug she’s going to give you.”

“I’m going to wear my riot gear when I give her the news.”

“Just let Mycroft tell her. He can withstand a full-on Molly hug better than anyone I’ve ever seen.”

“That’s an idea. Film night’s three days away and I likely won’t see her until then, so he can be my human shield. Or android shield, in his case.”

Anderson nodded at the sagacity of their plan and mentally rubbed his hands that any prank Greg pulled in the next couple of days could be countered by a quick text to Molly saying Greg had something very important to tell her and wanted to do it right away. It would be the sweetest of revenge…

“Then there we have it. It’s good when…”

Greg’s mobile sounding made both men jump and it was two ears pressed to the phone when Greg saw it was Mycroft calling in.

“Hello, love.”

Swatting at Anderson who started giggling, Greg crossed his fingers that Mycroft was calling with good news.

“Gregory… I am so happy to have reached you. Are you free for a moment to speak?”

“I am at that. Watching protesters having a good day spreading their message. What can I do for you?”

Physically crossing his fingers, Greg hoped dearly that Mycroft’s next words weren’t ‘we need milk.’

“Gregory… Administrator Stamford was able to affect Sherlock’s transfer. He will be delivered tomorrow to his new home.”

The sheer glee in Mycroft’s voice was mixed with an enormous amount of relief, something Greg understood completely, since he was experiencing that himself.

“That’s great news! I knew Mike could do it. You’re going to be there to welcome him, right?”
“Undoubtedly. And, I would hope that you would join us when you are relieved of duty.”

“That’s certainly possible. I’d like to meet the person you’ve going on about nonstop. Anderson here thinks I’m hoping for an android threesome, but he’s a filthy-minded lecher, so it’s not surprising.”

And, as hoped, Anderson’s quick and tetchy rebuttal did a grand job of notifying Mycroft that their conversation wasn’t exactly private and a little caution was warranted.

“I… I have no idea what is the basis of your jest.”

Something Greg was rather content to let stand for awhile. Mycroft’s anticipated porn surfing would fill in the blanks quickly enough without him having to do the deed himself.

“Let’s just say It’s a cop thing, for now. Well, given this happy turn of events, I see my special pasta being on the menu tonight and the last of that red wine you enjoy so much. Excellent news deserves excellent food and I can’t think of anything more deserving that Sherlock’s good fortune.”

“I agree. Oh Gregory… I am overwhelmed by this, I truly am. I shall utterly be beside myself until tomorrow.”

“Well, if that means there’s two of you, we’re back to android threesomes and my night just got even better.”

“I am now suspecting something salacious in your words.”

Greg could hear Mycroft narrowed eyes over the phone line and predicted the laptop was about to be put into hard use.

“That’s because you’ve got good detective senses. Alright, I should likely get back to pretending to work, but I am glad you phoned, Mycroft. I’m so happy for you.”

“A tizzy! I am simply in a tizzy!”

Greg laughed and wagged his finger at Anderson who mouthed ‘he’s as daft as you’ at him.

“Make tea. It’s a time-honored cure for tizzies.”

“Superb idea, though I shall surely need several. Goodbye, Gregory… do enjoy the remainder of your day.”

“Bye, Mycroft. I’ll see you soon.”

“Are you’re certain this Sherlock isn’t the real boyfriend?”

“Yes, I’m certain. But, I anticipate he’ll be part of our lives, given how concerned Mycroft is about him. Little brothers always are…”

Truth! Lots of delicious truth to erase the lingering sour taste of lying to his partner.

“Well, that’s your problem and not mine, thankfully. What is my problem, however, is that nice coffee cart wandering by again and I could murder a cup. Need a refill?”

Greg downed the last bit of his coffee and nodded eagerly.

“Make it a double.”
Shaking his head in a very obvious display of abject disappointment, Anderson plucked the cup from Greg’s fingers and stalked off to get their much-needed hot coffee. Greg was over the moon and, honestly, there wasn’t a thing wrong with that. His partner deserved it after the line of truly romantic disastrous choices he’d made in the past. Mycroft was… unique… but maybe that’s what Greg needed. Someone truly unique who needed a grounded, solid bloke in return. Whatever the reason, Anderson genuinely wished them well for, if two people ever deserved happiness, Greg and Mycroft were certainly good candidates. Besides, there was far too much fun to be had with their love-soaked, turtledove-ing to hope this ended at any point except never…

Greg watched his android putter about the kitchen and smiled broadly at the sight. Tizzy was right… Mycroft had floated on a cloud of joy all of last night and that joy hadn’t abated in the slightest this morning. He was humming! Humming happily and readying the coffee. One good puff of wind and there was little doubt Mycroft would float away so light was his mood. That certainly called for a little neck kiss…

“I am well aware you are attempting to creep towards me, Gregory.”

Damn android hearing!

“There’s no Gregory here. I’m a fiendish ghoul hoping to make breakfast out of your tasty flesh.”

“I believe ghouls are known for their taste for human flesh, so I cannot say I feel particularly endangered at the moment. Would a sausage sufficiently assuage your hunger for flesh?”

“Oh, sausages! That’ll do nicely, thank you.”

Taking a tiny nip of Mycroft’s neck with his traditional morning hug, Greg noted that Mycroft’s humming took on a more contented tone and he lingered a moment with his arms around Mycroft’s waist, watching over the android’s shoulder as he worked.

“Do you know what time Sherlock is supposed to arrive at the shelter?”

“Administrator Stamford could not provide an exact time, however, I intend on arriving somewhat early and… I would like to inspect the available rooms and choose the one best suited for Sherlock. One that offers a nice view, perhaps, of the gardens. Also… would you mind if I moved a few things to Sherlock’s room from this flat? A few simple items, such as the headphones you say you do not use and perhaps my radio, which has an output for them? Sherlock is highly musical and appreciates his music played at a volume that might disturb the other residents.”

The memories Mycroft had protected of his brother made Greg exceedingly curious as to what the fuller picture of their life looked like, but he’d promised not to investigate, so that canvas would have to stay mostly empty. Besides, with luck, he’d have Mycroft and Sherlock in his life for a good long time to make any number of fresh memories they could call their own.

“If that’s permitted, then take whatever you think will make him more comfortable. Just… you might want to be mindful it doesn’t seem like he’s receiving special treatment. I don’t know how it is with androids, but humans can get resentful about things like that and I know you want Sherlock’s stay to be a better experience than he had at his former shelter.”

“Oh… oh, you do have a point. I had not thought of that, but you are correct and it is certainly something to consider. I shall discuss matters with Administrator Stamford and have him decide
what is appropriate and what is not. Some androids do enter a shelter with possessions from their past situation, but I would not want Sherlock to appear especially privileged as he would loathe the increased attention and scrutiny.”

“That sounds smart, though, I expect no less from your genius brain.”

Greg didn’t need to see Mycroft’s face to know the android was smiling with a particular combination of delight and smugness that Greg was coming to know very well and enjoy immensely.

“Nor should you, for my genius is rather remarkable.”

Deciding not to risk a swat on the bum, then changing his mind and doing it anyway, Greg drank in Mycroft’s startled squawk as he snatched a slice of bread and began munching while Mycroft turned and wagged the coffee scoop under his nose.

“I shall tender a complaint to your superiors for police brutality.”

“That’s ok. It was so very worth it.”

Mycroft fell into a brief moment of his random blinking that made Greg grin, because it meant his android was rapidly processing something unexpected.

“It… it was?”

“Yes, and don’t pretend you don’t know why.”

“I… I would never presume to predict.”

“Wrongity wrong. You know very well what I mean and you’re particularly proud of what I mean, too.”

Mycroft tried to hold his stern glare, but it crumbled to pieces as his self-satisfaction made it’s way through the existing cracks.

“My bottom is most aesthetically pleasing.”

“Precisely. And it’s right and proper to pay appropriate tribute to such an aesthetically pleasing thing.”

“I see.”

After thinking a second, Mycroft gave his own swat to Greg’s bottom, laughing that the policeman shimmied happily when it was over.

“I find that I must concur with your analysis, Gregory. I shall remember this when you are behaving in a particularly childish fashion.”

Which simply ensure that childishness would be a frequently visitor to their home, but Mycroft’s genius had both predicted and welcomed that fact. His Gregory’s bottom was most aesthetically pleasing and tactilely satisfying, as well.

“We’re a perfect match! And, soon, baby will make three. Oh, don’t forget we’re having people in soon, so tell Sherlock to behave on that night because I don’t want to be called out to chase him down while you lot eat all the food and drink all the booze.”
Mycroft smiled gently and took a second to simply experience the now-familiar sensation of being a part of something. It was a tremendously uncommon thing in his life, singular in many ways, but he could not deny it was something he was quickly growing to covet.

“I shall see he is locked in a closet or dungeon cell so as not to interrupt our entertaining.”

“Good! I wonder… do you think Mike would let him out of the shelter to join us for the evening? It’s just a film, and I’d told Mike he should join us sometime, so maybe the two of them could have a night out with us. What do you think about that?”

Mycroft coughed a moment in shock at the idea, but, as he thought more about it, couldn’t see a reason to oppose it. Sherlock was… Sherlock, but he would be out in the world one day and the more positive interactions he had with the human population, the better he would adjust. Truly there was not a better situation with which to begin with that than sharing a small amount of time with people proven to view and treat androids with respect.

“I shall make that very proposition to Administrator Stamford. It is a highly intriguing idea, Gregory, and one I would not have considered. You do not mind having Sherlock step into your social circle?”

“Of course not! Unless he’s a bastard, then I’ll boot him down the stairs.”

“Oh dear…”

“I mean… a bastard in how he treats people.”

“Oh dear…”

‘I won’t boot him! I promise I won’t boot your brother, no matter how he behaves, but I can’t promise I won’t drag him by the ear to a quiet spot for a little chat if he’s crossed a line.’

“Then we are in agreement. I desperately want for Sherlock to have a successful and meaningful life, but he will need guidance and help for that to occur. Having known you, I find myself believing most forcefully that you could be extremely helpful in enabling him to achieve those goals, though he will loudly voice his opinion to the contrary.”

“I’ll do my best. He’s your brother, Mycroft, and that means his welfare is important to me. Talk to Mike and see what you can arrange and we can make a start on that successful and meaningful bit. As it is, besides you, we’ll have two doctors, two policemen and an android services professional in the flat. That’s a lot of good, hard-working people for Sherlock to get to know and, maybe, get to like. Start building a support system for him early, so he’s got people there to give him a lift up when he needs one.”

Mycroft could only hope the goodwill of the people he had met extended to someone as tempestuous as his brother, but one never knew if one never tried.

“Yes, that is sound trajectory to follow. Oh! Gregory, we had best get to your breakfast! The clock is working against you this morning.”

Greg looked at the time, made a rude noise, but threw himself into helping Mycroft get food ready for the both of them. His toe was behaving better, so a little dancing around the small kitchen wasn’t going to do it any harm. That he knew Mycroft was watching every slightly-sexy dance step made it all the more pain-free. It had been a long time since he’d been in the clubs hoping to capitalize on the idea that good dancers were good lovers, but that didn’t mean he’d forgotten the moves. Right now, Mycroft would get the dance steps. In three months, he’d get something very different, in
addition to Breakfast Dance Party with Greg Lestrade. Though, now that he thought about it…

Mycroft moved like a jungle cat no matter *what* he was doing, which meant… yeah, the laptop had best be ready for serious use because this was going to be the longest three months of his copper’s life…
Chapter 18

Mycroft looked around the small room and pronounced it acceptable. It had a view of the gardens and the selection of bird feeders Administrator Stamford maintained, which offered a diversion with their continued activity as hungry birds squabbled for seed, and was the last along its corridor, so there was only a room on one side, currently unoccupied and a room across, which did have an occupant, but who was one of the shelter’s quieter and more agreeable residents, in Mycroft’s opinion, and would not be the sort to ruffle his brother’s rather flamboyant feathers.

And, given permission was had to add a few personal items to the room, the radio with headphones now sat proudly on the small table, along with a selection of books he had obtained from the library that should occupy Sherlock until he could put in his own request slip for the shelter’s weekly library run. Further, one blank book and a selection of pens and pencils awaited the room’s new occupant and Mycroft was particularly proud of that. When he had sequestered certain memories, he had, apparently, taken great pains to choose them not only for their individual value, but for their ability to paint an overall picture of the person who was his brother Sherlock. A tiny memory of knowing his brother was ferociously observant and dedicated to testing his observations married with an even smaller one of Sherlock’s hands furiously writing information about something made for an image of an android who could have been a scientist if he had been born a human and, perhaps, could be still if the opportunities could be found to support that talent. However, for now, a journal to scribe his thoughts and outline plans for what his future might hold would be a luxury his brother would not have known from his previous situation and, hopefully, would appreciate.

“Mycroft?”

The android whirled at the familiar, yet unexpected, voice and smiled genially at John, who was standing in the doorway of the room.

“John, it is good to see you. Gregory mentioned that Administrator Stamford claimed a previous friendship with you and I see that does appear to be the case.”

“Oh, Mike and I go back to the dawn of time, which explains why we’re both old and rubbish. Actually, though, I’m here to look over the new android and document any existing problems he might have for the shelter records. I need practical experience hours towards my training and Mike penciled me in on the shelter’s approved list of medical resources, so I can help the residents and get my hours clocked as a bonus. You know the new arrival, correct?”

“I do. Sherlock served with me in my previous situation and… it is good to see him come to this place where I know he will receive caring and respectful treatment.”

“You don’t get better than Mike for doing the right thing for people, humans and androids alike. Anyway, I was sent to tell you the van’s just left the other shelter so Sherlock should be here in… whatever London traffic decides to permit. Need any help getting things ready?”

“Oh, hmmmm… I was considering looking for something to enliven the walls.”

“Good idea. I doubt there’s much here, but I know a shop that has a fair selection of inexpensive posters and such and we could get there and back before the van arrives.”

Mycroft blinked at the surprising offer, then smiled sadly that it was not one he could accept.

“That is most appropriate suggestion, unfortunately, I am not in a position to fund the purchase of
even a blade of grass at the moment.”

“Is film night still on this week?”

“Yes.”

“Then you can donate an extra slice of pizza and a couple of your and Greg’s rations of alcohol to me to offset the few quid we’ll spend on a poster or two and tape.”

“Donate we shall. That is an exemplary compromise, John, and I know Gregory will happily agree to his part of the terms.”

“Let’s go, then. Hate to miss the big arrival because we’re thumbing through pictures of John Lennon or Einstein.”

“Sherlock would likely very much appreciate Professor Einstein sharing quarters with him.”

“Then this is definitely the shop to visit.”

John left to tell Stamford where they were going and Mycroft breathed in a hearty lungful of contentment. Already the few people he knew were showing willing to help Sherlock have a comfortable stay and demonstrate that humans were perfectly capable of acting as friends to those of their type. And, with John having met Sherlock, convincing Administrator Stamford to attend film night, with Sherlock in tow, might be somewhat easier than expected. Sherlock would know four people in attendance and that would certainly make the case for effective socialization training a strong one. And, furthermore, John was a doctor, which Sherlock could find intriguing… that benefit was also one to consider…

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Smiling at the product of his and John’s work, Mycroft turned to his partner in decorating and was happy to see it was shared by John. They had found the expected image of Albert Einstein, as well as a rather striking periodic table, and John had added as a welcome gift a science-fact-a-day desk calendar whose ‘facts’ Sherlock would certainly dispute with some regularity, but it would offer him the springboard to initiate conversation with the other shelter androids or to inspire a trajectory of research to verify his assessment of the information. Either way, it was mental stimulation and that was crucial for Sherlock’s well-being.

“Oh… well, I must say… very nice.”

Mycroft and John turned to find Stamford looking at the space and nodding approvingly at the additions.

“Very well within shelter regulations and not likely to single Sherlock out for any resentment, as we have a number of residents whose rooms look very much along these lines. Nicely done, gentlemen.”

“Thank you, Administrator Stamford. I am most grateful that John was willing to assist with this as I am certain it will make Sherlock more comfortable in his new surroundings.”

“Which is a very good thing for any new android. Now, I did want to…”

What Stamford wanted was interrupted as a staff member darted into the room, whispered something in his ear, and darted off after Stamford nodded sharply.
“Sherlock’s here and… there’s a problem.”

Mycroft’s eyes flared wide and he began running towards the shelter entrance, skidding to a stop when he saw his brother standing there, scowling thunderously, wearing torn clothes and sporting obvious evidence of some form of fight.

“Sherlock!”

“Should I thank you now, Mycroft, for delivering me to purgatory or can that wait until I find something less ventilated to wear?”

“Oh no…”

Mycroft ran forward and was quickly followed by John who began looking over the android but, Mycroft with some relief, didn’t touch Sherlock with this initial examination. His brother absolutely would not respond well to that, especially given the already distressing circumstance.

“What happened… may I call you Sherlock?”

“It is my name. What would you call me? Wilberforce?”

John’s eyes might have narrowed at both the words and the tone, but Mycroft heard beneath the surface a somewhat startled brother who had, in no manner, expected respectful and dignified treatment, let alone from a human he had never met.

“Do pardon him, John. Sherlock’s tongue is often sharp, but the blade is small if one gets to know him.”

“Do not apologize for me, Mycroft!”

“Shhhhh… Sherlock. Let the good doctor examine you so we might see what you have suffered from this… what in the world did happen to you?”

Something Mike wondered, too, and had been in conversation with one of the staff riding in the transport van to ferret it out.

“Apparently, Sherlock here and another android they were taking to a jobs skills assessment got into something of a tussle. Sherlock, is it true that you instigated the incident?”

Mycroft sighed and hoped the answer to that was ‘no,’ but held out no real hope he’d be proven correct.

“The dolt took offense when I stated that his jobs assessment was unnecessary because the only skills he possesses are those associated with the lowest strata of the menial class. Or, perhaps, law enforcement.”

Mycroft and John shared a look and were happy Stamford was willing to take up the discussion as they already were thinking about Greg’s arrival later today and the likelihood the policeman would put Sherlock’s head through a wall.

“Might I ask how you determined that, Sherlock?”

“I have eyes. His manufacture was not for intellectual pursuits and his abilities to comprehend any text beyond the level one must master to read the various tabloids that the shelter staff seem to devour as if they were messages sent down from their rather illiterate god. As for fine motor skills,
ha! Precision work will forever be out of his reach and he demonstrates no evidence of programming specific to ingratiation or servitude, pushing even more job possibilities off of the proverbial table. I could go on, but I assume you see my point. Or not, if you are too stupid to follow basic reasoning, either way I simply don’t care.”

Mycroft groaned aloud and waited for Stamford to send Sherlock back to the van, wishing the administrator would do it quickly so his mourning could begin.

“That’s very observant of you.”

“What? I mean… of course it is.”

“However, a jobs assessment will go into greater detail and they’ll provide a broader and deeper picture that will help that android match with a suitable buyer who can see them, hopefully, set with a fulfilling job and a sense of accomplishment. While I won’t argue your findings, let’s discuss how you presented it to your companion. What could you have said to get your point across, but without it seeming mean-spirited or condescending.”

“I… that is… well…”

Mycroft gaped at Stamford who simply waited for Sherlock to push something out of his mouth besides stammering and found himself holding his breath for Sherlock’s answer, something John seemed to doing, as well.

“Go ahead. You’re obviously an intelligent lad, so I’m certain you can come up with something.”

“Naturally. I suppose… if it was required…”

Sherlock’s scowl deepened and Mycroft started breathing again because it was clear his brother was considering an actual answer and not simply continuing with his acerbic declarations.

“…I could have made the menial work seem not so… undesirable.”

“Very good. All jobs are valuable, Sherlock. They make a contribution to society and that isn’t something to scorn. You’re quite right, though, that some androids are not designed for highly-skilled work, but that’s not to be looked down the nose on, for the work they do provides valuable service, often to humans and androids both. Now, if you’d agree, I’d like Doctor Watson here to look you over for any problems, while you have a chat with Mycroft and myself about what life is like here. I’d like very much to hear your own expectations and what I can do for you to make this a successful stay. Will that be alright?”

Now it was Sherlock gaping and Mycroft hoped his own display of emotion wasn’t as glaring as he feared it was. This… this was exactly what his brother needed. People who could withstand his acid flow, then close the spigot in a way that made his brother not fight to turn it back on at an even faster rate. This is how his brother would learn, how he would feel secure and want to reach out to, perhaps, deepen the connections he was forming. It was what he had hoped for and, apparently, that hope had not been in vain.

“It… I suppose it would not bother me unduly.”

“Then there we have it. We can talk in my office and then we’ll get you settled in your room. Mycroft and John have given it a few special touches I think you’ll enjoy very much.”

Smiling warmly at Sherlock, Stamford motioned him towards the office door, then nodded for the
other two men to join them. It wasn’t the most peaceful of arrivals, but it was a beneficial one, in the administrator’s opinion. He now had a good idea of Sherlock’s personality, which was that of a highly-intelligent, somewhat arrogant android, who put up large, thick walls against the world and used cutting words and his intelligence to keep those walls in good repair. However, he was also clearly in need of people who understood him and were willing to work with him and not strike at him to accomplish goals. Which would be the subject of tomorrow’s discussion. Short- and long-term goals that were helpful and realistic for his new charge.

Who definitely had a strong connection with Mycroft. There was a brotherly relationship there that was highly fascinating, but certainly explained Mycroft’s near-obsession with escaping so he could, most probably, find a way to help Sherlock do the same. Having Sherlock here, where they could easily communicate and visit was sure to be beneficial to both, with Mycroft being a powerful support for Sherlock as he transitioned to this new shelter and looked forward to the future. And, it should help Mycroft feel more at peace and stable in his own domestic situation. Oh yes, and the other half of that domestic situation was scheduled to stop in later. That was going to be fun to watch. Hopefully, the sergeant didn’t have a baton with him or John would be making another call to connect Sherlock’s head back onto his shoulders…

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“Knock knock…”

Mycroft smiled widely and turned to see a very familiar pair of eyes peeking around the corner of Sherlock’s door.

“Gregory! I am happy you were able to join us.”

Sherlock’s snort was loud and clear and Mycroft swatted his brother’s leg in rebuke. After his arrival, Sherlock’s behavior had tempered, certainly due to having a clearer understanding of his new situation, and they had enjoyed a highly-productive conversation with Stamford and John about Sherlock’s new home and the services he could expect. Hearing his ability to access information was no longer restricted had made Sherlock deliriously happy, though in ways only a brother might notice, and, as he had hoped, John’s training in medicine, especially android medicine, interested Sherlock greatly and it was all he could do not to shout in joy when John passed Sherlock his email address and mobile number so that Sherlock could ask questions about the work.

“Wouldn’t miss this for the world. Care to introduce me?”

Rising and giving Greg a kiss on his cheek, which made Sherlock gasp in surprise, Mycroft cleared his throat and made the appropriate introductions, noting the hesitance with which Sherlock took Greg’s outstretched hand to shake.

“So… you are Mycroft’s coital partner.”

Greg’s jaw dropped and Mycroft glared at his brother, who smiled smugly in return.

“Uh… no. Not yet, at least. If I play my cards right, though, this delicious body will be mine to plunder soon enough.”

Running his hands wildly over Mycroft’s shoulders, arms and back, Greg grinned at Sherlock who made a rude noise and waved off the nonsense with a flick of the wrist. For his part, Mycroft rolled his eyes, but, secretly, let loose a large sigh of mental relief because this first meeting could have started on a far worse foot, despite him taking great pains to prepare his brother for the fact their lives had now grown to include another person.
“A buffoon. How appropriate for Mycroft, who has naught for humor or playfulness in his demeanor, so your unholy combination meets somewhere in the banal and boring middle ground.”

“Thanks, lad! A very effective way of saying Mycroft and I are perfect for each other.”

Sherlock’s pained shake of his head was further evidence to Mycroft that his brother was willing to give this new dynamic some benefit of the doubt. If Sherlock truly disapproved, he would have already launched a devastating verbal attack, especially since the new arrival was still in uniform and somewhat in need of a shave.

“Your delusion is not my concern.”

“Great! Oh, and look at all of this. Your handiwork, love?”

Sherlock gasped again and Mycroft remembered that his brother had naught for experience seeing him involved with someone so openly affectionate. Or… with anyone at all.

“Mine and John’s. He was most gracious to escort me on a shopping trip and funded the wall decorations and Sherlock’s delightful new calendar. Our own contributions, along with his, make this a most pleasant room, I do admit.”

“John was here? That’s a lucky thing since…”

Greg’s raised eyebrows reminded Mycroft he’d neglected to discuss something with Stamford and, also with Sherlock.

“Ah yes… I did not have opportunity to broach the subject, however… Sherlock, if Administrator Stamford gives permission, would you care to join Gregory and me in our home for a film? Certain of our friends shall be there and they are individuals I am confident you will find of interest.”

Realizing there were several things in that sentence that would have produced this somewhat stunned silence in his brother, Mycroft cleared his throat and smiled the smile of ‘now is not the time to raise the ‘our home’ or ‘our friends’ issue, thank you very much,’ and hoped his brother correctly interpreted the message.

“I can think of nothing more boring.”

Though the small flash in Sherlock’s eyes said that was not entirely the case and he was simply hoping to gather more information before making a decision.

“Oh, well, I doubt John will have the same viewpoint.”

“John?”

Ah, brother… I was not incorrect in believing the good doctor somewhat piqued your curiosity, at least, enough that you would appreciate another opportunity to verify or refute the observations and conclusions you have made about him.

“Yes, he has visited with us previously, being a friend of Molly, who is training as a pathologist in the morgue at St. Bart’s.”

That truly piqued Sherlock’s interest, as Mycroft suspected it might, as Sherlock’s scientific curiosity about the morbid things in life was rampant.
“Constable Anderson, Gregory’s partner shall also be in attendance. While I am well aware law enforcement holds no interest for you, what might is the fact that the constable is studying to take up a career in forensics.”

Making very certain not to laugh at Sherlock nearly quivering with anticipation at the thought of such a wealth of resources at his fingertips.

“We are only to view a film and enjoy a simple repast, but if you would care to join us, I shall speak to Administrator Stamford about allowing it. Perhaps he might even choose to participate, as well, and that would be another individual with whom you are familiar, so the situation is not so uncertain.”

An impatient, ‘as if I care about that’ wave greeted the end of Mycroft’s speech, but Mycroft could easily see his brother was caught like a fish on a hook. The gentle rubbing of his back indicated that his Gregory was noticing the very same thing.

“The boredom will still, without question, threaten to end my existence, but it might be slightly less lethal than what I shall endure here.”

“A happy thing for us all. Now, shall we sit and converse for awhile? I am very anxious to hear about your day, my dear, as, I am most certain, is Sherlock.”

Greg rubbed Mycroft’s back a moment more, then removed his jacket and had a seat at the small table by the window. So far, so good, in his opinion. Sherlock was certainly a mouthy little berk, but he’d seen that type before and knew well that the mouthiness and disdain was a great shield when you didn’t want people to get too close to you. Given Sherlock had been ripped away from his brother and tossed into a shelter, that was a very easy thing to understand. Now, it was on them to get the lad to understand that not all humans were that way and that, with a little work on those social skills, he could make some true and positive connections with people and parlay that into a life he’d be happy with.

Of course, if Mike allowed Sherlock out for the night, he’d warn Molly and Anderson what to expect with this new face in the crowd. Understanding when someone was being an arse didn’t necessarily soothe the sting and you didn’t come out for a fun night with friends to have a woodpecker with an ice pick taped to its bill having a go at you for a few hours. Maybe an offer of a do-over was in order if this all went to shite. They were closing in on the next round of wages, so a few quid towards a ‘sorry about the woodpecker, here’s an especially plump egg roll for your troubles,’ wouldn’t sink his financial ship. Of course, convincing them to have another film night with woodpecker might take more than egg rolls. Best start tucking money under the mattress, just in case…
Chapter 19

Mycroft smiled and pushed the coffee and pastry closer to Stamford, who was giving the android a look that Mycroft correctly interpreted as ‘are you joking?’

“I assure you this is not a jest, if that is your concern, Administrator Stamford. And do try the pastry. I remember you having a fondness for cream and this one is rich with its particularly delicate succulence.”

Something Mike knew very well and it was only through an act of extreme will he hadn’t yet reached out for a bite since he’d missed breakfast due to oversleeping and was aching for something to fill the growing hole in his stomach. Especially a something that was particularly delicate in succulence. However, first things first…

“Mycrof… you are asking me to allow a newly-arrived resident out for a night when I scarcely have taken his measure to know if this is wise.”

“I can assure you, with profound confidence, that the decision would not be an injudicious one.”

“Setting aside the fact that Sherlock nearly caused a fight at breakfast when he declared a resident to be malfunctioning as evidenced by the amount of salt he was putting on his food, weren’t you the one, quite rightly I might add, concerned that the other androids might view Sherlock as unfairly privileged? How would it appear if he was able to come and go to parties and the like?”

Mycroft groaned loudly at Sherlock’s already-ridiculous behavior, then scowled because he had to credit the administrator with a valid point concerning special treatment.

“It is not exactly a party, per se, merely a collegial gathering of acquaintances.”

“That is not even your third best level of argument quality, Mycroft.”

Villain.

“I… fine, I admit that it is not a privilege accorded other androids, however… perhaps it should be. Perhaps socialization skills would be bolstered by further exposing the shelter population to typical forms of social interactions, such as nights in the cinema or meals taken in a restaurant.”

There, that was better. At least, it was… wordier.

“And how many of our residents will enjoy those opportunities in their future?”

Mycroft’s scowl deepened, but Stamford was extremely sympathetic towards the reason, not that he would make this any easier for Mycroft. The issue here was a serious one and he wasn’t going to make a decision unless he was certain Mycroft was fully aware of possible repercussions and he had a better idea as to why his former charge was so fervent in his concern about Sherlock. This was unusual, to say the least and the reason for it was something he’d best know before going forward.

“Few would see those opportunities, I concede. Though it should be otherwise.”

“I agree. If I was assured, Mycroft, that our residents would have those opportunities granted them, I guarantee that would already be part of our program, however… one day, Mycroft. One day that will change, I truly believe it will, but that day is not today.”
Fidgeting in his chair, the android had to admit that if he lived here still and knew another android was gaining such entertainment options... it would rankle. The very last thing Sherlock needed was to start his life in his new home on a sour foot.

“I see the legitimacy of your reasoning, however...”

“You hate it.”

“Yes! I do... Sherlock should have the ability to enjoy what I enjoy... a simple experience that draws together those who would support him and add richness to his life. Is it so ridiculous a thing to ask?”

“Not at all. It is the barest minimum, but I can tell you that countless humans don’t have that either. They work, return home and sit alone in their flats watching telly because they have few or no friends, for a variety of reasons, and/or no money or ability to take themselves out for a drink at their local and mingle with strangers. I know this existence seems terrible to you, Mycroft, and it is, but, on the surface, many humans endure the same. I won’t say it’s as bad, because humans never have that property mark on them, but... don’t believe that all humans are able to experience a happy, friend-filled life. They aren’t and they don’t.”

That did little to moderate Mycroft’s discontent, but it did remind him that the human population was not uniformly provided with opportunities of any form. His Gregory spoke of that often, seeing it, and its effects, in the course of his work.

“Granted, but is it not the mark of kindness to extend such opportunity when one can?”

“And if it only shows a person what they’ll never have again?”

“They can boast of having it once. That is better than never.”

“Even if it only deepens existing resentment?”

“It is their individual character choosing to view the situation in that light. Not all would do it. The choice should be given.”

“Choice is intentional. Thrusting a choice on someone is rather against your entire argument, I’d say.”

Mycroft seethed and fidgeted more sharply in his chair, especially when Stamford finally plucked his pastry off the desk and took a large bite.

“Oh, this is very good.”

“I do not appreciate your smugness.”

“Was I being smug? Oh, sorry about that. I thought I was giving you a bit of a push to reexamine your thinking by challenging your statements and not accepting them wholesale.”

Blackest of foulest of villains.

“I am not a child.”

“No, but I have concerns about your reasons for proposing this and fighting so hard for it. Your dedication to Sherlock is highly intriguing and... passionate, to say the least. Normally, I find you the most logical and analytical android I’ve ever met, but that changes radically when Sherlock is the
focus of conversation. Do you blame me for wanting to press you on the matter, both to learn more about your relationship with him and to shine a light on your own decision-making priorities? If I review my file, I think it’s actually part of my job description.”

“I… I am no longer under your purview.”

“No, but Sherlock is and it is his welfare I am trying to safeguard. You want what’s best for him, Mycroft, but so do I and I have to deal with the reality that he is not a free android and will live here until a purchaser can be found that matches well with his skills and abilities.”

“No! I will see him free!”

Stamford gave a little mental smile at Mycroft’s unflagging fervor, both for freedom and Sherlock. Add Greg to that and you’d likely rounded out Mycroft’s list of most important things in his life.

“And I am completely convinced you both mean that and will do your utmost to make it happen, but let’s work to see his present doesn’t suffer for your hopes and dreams. I will work to gain Sherlock the best possible future, Mycroft, I would do that for any in my care, but I will put my foot down if I believe what you are championing isn’t in Sherlock’s overall best interest. If… and I honestly can’t believe I’m saying this to you of all people… if I think you’re behaving emotionally and not rationally or reasonably, I will challenge you and, ultimately, deny your requests if I believe you’re not thinking clearly and, ultimately, putting Sherlock’s welfare at risk. I owe it to him to be the cool head that has a lot of experience in how shelter life and the real world treats androids. Now, can you give me a reason to permit this that isn’t entirely based on you wanting Sherlock to have a nice night out, which might get him into another fight the morning following his film foray?”

Mycroft snatched back the coffee, took a long drink of it, remembered he wasn’t fond of coffee and pouted all the harder. Evil man shoving… emotion… into his face. No forgiveness, not a bit, would be awarded due to perceptiveness. Maybe he was making an emotional decision… what of it? Sherlock or any android was not pre-empted from emotional concerns. Humans based riotous amounts of their behaviors on emotionally-driven decisions, so why was it inappropriate for him to do so for Sherlock? It was not tolerable that they should be denied this simple thing, when so many, many others were out of their reach.

“Should I?”

“What?”

“If Sherlock was, say, my brother, as a human can have a blood relative, would you not argue that an emotionally-based position was highly appropriate and, frankly, expected from me?”

Stamford’s small smile told Mycroft he had scored a point and, potentially, it was a point Stamford was hoping he would make.

“I would expect exactly that, actually. It would be helpful, Mycroft, if I better understood yours and Sherlock’s relationship. I do want to work with you towards his future if that is a future you intend to be a part of, but it would make that work easier if I knew the specifics of how you viewed each other and how you perceive your relationship’s structure.”

Nosy, evil, villainous man. However, it would not be possible to keep up the façade of a concerned friend for the duration of Sherlock’s shelter stay, so some story must take its place that was closer to the truth and easier to maintain.

“Our relationship is, I suppose, one that mirrors a human family. If I was to put words to it, then
I view Sherlock as a younger brother. I feel responsible for his welfare and seeing him reach his *staggering* potential. I have the strongest of urges to protect him, guide him, mentor his transition to an independent life... he is someone in whom I am deeply invested and... if it is proper for an android to say they love, then I love Sherlock as much as I believe a human would love the one who shares their blood. He is eternally dear to me and... it has been an unceasing ache in my chest that we have been separated for so long, though that I can see him now... visit and speak to him... that ache is lessening.”

Stamford nodded and thought about Mycroft’s words. Androids *could* form emotional attachments, that much was certain, but they were generally romantic or friendly in nature. Forming family bonds with another android was extremely unusual, though not unheard of, though, only the most advanced models were designed with that capacity and, often, more for experimental and research purposes than for a real desire to see the androids’ lives benefitted by family structure and support. It raised the question, yet again, about Mycroft’s history and, *yet again*, failed to provide any real answers. However, unusual or not, cooperating with family to benefit one of their fold was part of social services work and, though it had been a long time since he had serviced any human clients, he remembered the basics.

“Thank you, Mycroft. I suspect that wasn’t easy to say, but it will be incredibly beneficial to Sherlock that I have a better idea of how you and he view your connection so I don’t step on any toes or take a path that runs counter to one you’ve already tried to start him on. Having common goals and strategies is crucial for moving people and androids forward in life. Are you willing to do that? Work with me towards maximizing Sherlock’s potential for whatever his future holds?”

“I… I am exceedingly willing. I realize that I am rather lacking in resources and opportunities to provide tangible assistance to… my brother… and I would welcome joining forces, so to speak, for his benefit.”

“Excellent! I assume you hope that Greg will be part of this, as well.”

“I do and Gregory seems most willing to play his part. He got on very well with Sherlock last night… or, as well as Sherlock gets on with anyone when he firsts meets them… and was not deterred from his commitment to lend his proverbial sword to the cause.”

Something that didn’t surprise Stamford in the slightest. In truth, he was happy that Mycroft had someone in whom to confide his feelings and worries about Sherlock, because family troubles were the *most* troublesome, at times, and it was apparent that Mycroft and Sherlock should be expected to demonstrate familiar patterns one observed for a highly-protective older brother and a rather younger chaotic sibling. Mycroft was going to need a strong shoulder to lean on and Greg’s seemed stronger than most.

“Good. I’m very glad to hear that. Now, back to our original conversation…”

“Social skills!”

Mycroft’s rather blurted answer startled both Stamford and Mycroft, himself.

“You already mentioned that so, is there is something you want to add or…”

“Yes, I do, thank you. Sherlock, as you have observed is a highly-complex individual who would be best situated in a professional situation that benefitted from his complex nature and intelligence. Often, those situations are collaborative in nature and with individuals having their own complexities and mental strengths. As you have seen, Sherlock’s social skills are abjectly substandard for that type of interaction and giving him training where he must learn to successfully
interact with a diverse population of learned individuals certainly is warranted.”

“Hmmm… there’s a point in there somewhere, but I don’t think any of Sherlock’s future employment possibilities will be in the area of party planning or film watching. No, I take that back, I suspect he would be a ferocious film critic, but would certainly be rather boring to read after awhile since he’d likely hate everything that was produced.”

“True, but I suspect you gleaned my actual meaning and are simply provoking me to further draw out my ideas.”

“Guilty. It’s a good technique for smart bastards like you, though, you have to admit.”

Mycroft sighed loudly and let his shoulders slump from his normally perfect posture.

“What do you want of me, Administrator Stamford? Tell me plainly and I will make my best attempt to comply.”

The weight of frustration in Mycroft’s voice wasn’t lost on Stamford, who gave himself a small kick for forgetting the person in front of him had only limited experience with most things in life… including arguing, to some degree, for the point of arguing…

“I’m sorry, Mycroft. If it’s any consolation, I really did forget I was talking to an android and treated you like I would any human who was in your position. Arguing with me about androids’ rights issue, I mean. I have to be very careful that people who want to start a program, propose a bill, change a regulation or anything like that is really thinking it through from all sides and not making a judgement based on a narrowly-focused viewpoint. It puts me on a lot of committees, which is part of why I am more than ready for retirement in a century or two, but… I truly want what is best for your brethren. I’m simply not used to having this conversation about someone for whom the term ‘brethren’ is to be taken more literally.”

Oddly, that made Mycroft feel worlds better. All he wanted was to be treated as would be any human though, apparently, it wasn’t always as satisfying an experience as he might hope.

“Ah, I understand. And, in truth, I recognize both the validity and prudency of your concerns, I simply…”

“The thought of your baby brother sitting alone in a shelter when he could be making friends and enjoying a night of entertainment makes you sad, angry and frustrated.”

“Unquestionably.”

Stamford took another bite of his pastry and stared at the android who was clearly feeling the burden of older-brotherhood and decided a compromise was in order.

“I suppose your suggestion of social skills training or, at least, evaluation of them isn’t the worst possible reason for letting Sherlock out for a night. I’ll be there to observe how he interacts with people and that would give me concrete data to use to help smooth his rougher edges and gain greater insight into his personality. And it will give me time to observe how he interacts with you and Greg. Family dynamics is critical in human services and I think that’s very much how I’m going to have to proceed here. Treat this as a human situation and use that eye when I’m making observations, drawing conclusions and formulating strategies. Which I will discuss with you on a regular basis, so you can give me input on them. How does all of that sound to you?”

It sounded like Sherlock would have his evening and that he and Gregory would be actively involved in all stages of Sherlock’s development and progress. It sounded like a dream, actually, but
now was the time to snatch what was offered and not dwell on the metaphysical texture of the moment.

“It sounds most acceptable. And we are very happy you will be joining us, as well. It is a pleasant collection of personalities that shall be gathered and…”

“You’re still a bit overwhelmed by it, aren’t you?”

Yes. Though… it was diminishing.

“To a degree. I genuinely had not anticipated being so readily accepted by Gregory’s friends.”

“More humans than you would imagine have little problem accepting androids, Mycroft. Or, they accept them as well as they would a human with a similar personality. You’ll still meet your fair share of bastards that will behave very differently, but use those who support you as your strength to weather those encounters as best you can. Or to help you take revenge. Friends are good for holding people down while you get in the kicks.”

Mycroft snorted a laugh and felt more of the pressure in his chest easing. This was going to difficult, of that he had no doubt. Now that he was able, he would have to put tremendous effort into assisting Sherlock while, at the same time, preparing himself for his own upcoming emancipation. But, he did not have to endure alone, that much was certain, and it greatly would be of comfort in the coming days.

Of course, finding a way to earn his own monies was now critical due to his Gregory’s financial situation, the need to save for Sherlock’s freedom and keep the man smiling at him awash in pastries and coffee to help soothe the irritation one commonly encountered with any extended contact with Sherlock. Administrator Stamford would offer his goodwill regardless of Sherlock’s conduct, however… purchasing a sweet, creamy insurance policy would in no manner be foolhardy…
“Mycroft... Mycroft... Mycroft, my cock’s lonely, so why not hop on and take a ride?”

“Hmmm? Of course, my dear. Just a moment.”

Greg shook his head and watched his dear android hustle and bustle about the flat, tidying what had already been tidied twenty times before, lost in a hectic haze of making certain everything was absolutely perfect for their film night. If there was one speck of lint anywhere or the tiniest spot on a glass, Mycroft would probably have a systems crash in mortification. He was so desperate to see this first introduction of Sherlock go well that Greg was certain nothing had happened today that wasn’t specifically about tonight’s festivities and, if the breakfast panic that a film had not yet been chosen was any indication, the day had taxed his Mycroft’s nerves to their fullest. It was truly a tragedy that androids couldn’t get drunk because that was exactly what Mycroft needed tonight, once they’d settled in with their guests…

“Mycroft, the flat is immaculate. It’s never been this clean and tidy. Never. You’ve practically polished the rug, for heaven’s sake! Sit a moment and relax, love. I promise the dirt devils won’t creep out of hell and spoil your hard work if you simply take a moment to catch your breath.”

The dithering over that suggestion made Greg smile as he was absolutely convinced Mycroft was imagining grubby little imps squirming their way from the between the floorboards to spread dust, dirt and germs all over his spotless handiwork.

“Come on, Mycroft. Right here next to me. I’ll even give you a hug to make it all worthwhile.”

That finally broke through Mycroft’s mental block and he quickly moved to the sofa to take advantage of Greg’s outstretched arms.

“There… doesn’t that feel better than giving the floor another sweep?”

“It does. Oh Gregory, I am simply nervous that… this needs to go well for Sherlock’s sake.”

“First, I can assure you that none of our mates are going to care if the lampshade is a bit dusty or there are water spots on the glasses. They’re here to enjoy a night with people they know and like; that’s all that really matters. The flat is unbelievable, love, you’ve done a miraculous job making it perfect for our guests and, now, you can relax and just enjoy things. It’s going to be alright, Mycroft. I really and truly promise you that everything is going to be fine.”

Something the android greatly wanted to believe, however, it was so difficult to put his full faith into that belief, given the unpredictability of both humans and Sherlock. He had little experience with the former, he would admit, but his forays into London during his escapes had been, at times, a bewildering array of experiences that defied simple logic and analysis as the human population seemed to conduct themselves without regard for either. And Sherlock… he was a stochastic element of inexpressible proportions and that made for a potentially disastrous combination.

“Mycroft… I can feel you worrying…”

Sighing and laying his head on Greg’s shoulder, Mycroft took a moment to simply blank his mind of everything but the strength and warmth of his Gregory’s embrace and the highly-pleasurable aroma of his skin. Humans were strongly affected by scent and, apparently, so were some androids as he found his nerves quickly settling as he simply breathed and let his senses savor the riches he was offered.
“I find it difficult, when Sherlock is involved, to be in any state other than a concerned one, however… this is becoming a powerful remedy for that particular condition.”

“Then take advantage of it whenever you’d like. We’re going to have a great time, Sherlock will meet a few people and…you said he seemed to already have taken a liking to John, right?”

“Surprisingly, yes, though ‘a liking’ is not exactly how I would express it. His interest has been sparked and that, alone, is most unusual. I am hopeful that it leads to a growing acquaintance and I am aware that Sherlock has already emailed John several times with questions about human and android systems. I am very excited about that, Gregory… Sherlock is not an easy personality to which to warm, however, John has responded to the emails with laudable timeliness and detail of answer. Is it poor thinking to believe this indicates a reciprocated interest?”

“Not necessarily. It could just be politeness on John’s part, but I’ll keep my eyes open tonight for evidence one way or another. John’s a smart man and I’d wager he’d appreciate getting to know another smart person who’s interested in similar things as him.”

Mycroft nodded and snuggled deeper into Greg’s arms to gain a final measure of comfort before drawing back and nodding again, this time with conviction.

“I agree. Oh, I believe I hear someone on the landing…”

Turning toward the door, Greg waited for the inevitable knock, because Mycroft’s hearing was not something to doubt and shouted for them to enter when the knocking was over.

“Hi!”

“Molly, good you could come. And is that a cake I see in your hands?”

One large smile was turned towards Greg and one cake was handed to Mycroft who had vaulted off the sofa to unburden their first guest, before he began to pour a glass of their inexpensive, yet agreeable, wine for him and Molly both.

“I’ve been dying for tonight, actually. Busy, busy, busy at work which isn’t really a happy thing, if you think about it, but it does keep me on my toes. Now, I’m ready for… oh, thank you, Mycroft… a few glasses of wine and some greasy pizza to reward myself. I’ve already eaten about half of my intended cake batter, so I’ll probably avoid any of the baked version, but you never know. Wine is good for changing your mind about things like that.”

Taking the beer Mycroft was handing him, Greg gave the android a ‘see, no reason to worry’ grin and delighted that the nervous tension was definitely easing in Mycroft’s frame.

“Then I shall make certain to quickly devour your portion, Molly, so that your change of view does not leave me without sufficient quantity of what appears to be a most palatable cake.”

And, if his android was making jokes, the worry had to be on the decline.

“It’s fattening, too, which makes it especially good. Keep it away from Greg, though. He’s got to watch his waistline from all the arse-sitting he did with his toe.”

Greg mournfully patted his stomach and stuck out his bottom lip at Mycroft and Molly’s laughter.

“Your physique is still most rugged and enticing, my dear.”

Molly’s loudly sucked-in breath had Greg bracing for impact and was happy she chose Mycroft as
her target, since the android could use a good dose of cheer to chase away the last vestige of his worries.

“That sounded official!”

“It is. Gregory is now my romantic partner.”

“Yes! Oh, I suspected that’s what would happen, but it’s super to know I was right! You’re perfect for each other; I knew that the first time we met.”

Now it was Greg’s turn, but he got the very-expected punch and nodded contritely as Molly dressed him down for keeping her in the dark about this turn of events. While the battery continued, Mycroft opened the door in response to more footsteps, letting in John and Anderson, each laden with their promised provisions.

“The pizza and beer are here. The party can now begin.”

John held aloft his prizes while he admired Molly’s punching talent and Anderson simply smiled smugly at Greg before dropping the pizza boxes on the sofa table.

“Harder, Molly. He’s a bastard and deserves a proper thrashing.”

“She beats him to death, then we’ve got to bury the body and I didn’t bring a spade. Only beer.”

John’s highly-logical train of thought had Mycroft’s approval and he gladly relieved the doctor of his gifts so John could take possession of the chair and open his lager with a satisfying ‘pish.’

“Oh, that’s the stuff. Perfect for the end of a shite day.”

“Did you have one, too? Mine wasn’t… that… but I don’t think I had a moment to sit since before dawn. Got called in early and we’re short of assistants, so… where’s my wine?”

Retrieving her glass, Molly dropped onto the sofa next to Greg, propped her feet on the table next to the pizza boxes and sighed loudly after a long sip of her drink. Waving Mycroft to take the seat on the other side of him, while Anderson dragged the emergency cushion over to make a seat for himself on the floor, the process of complaining about the day began in earnest and it was a good ten minutes into that, and closing in on a need for a second round of drinks when the final knock on the door sounded and Mycroft’s nerves shot back to the top of the scale.

“Go ahead, love. The honor’s all yours.”

Greg gave Mycroft a reassuring smile and a quick kiss on his cheek, which made Molly giggle and Anderson clearly state how public displays of affection did not match well with his beer, but did set the android in motion with at least the semblance of a confident strut to his walk.

“Ah, Administrator Stamford, how delighted we are that you could attend. And… hello, Sherlock. Please, come in and see Gregory’s and my home.”

Stamford caught Greg’s eye and the two shared a look at the tremulous tone in Mycroft’s voice. What this meant to him, both having a home and being able to welcome his brother to it, each man knew very well and the slight scowl on Sherlock’s face didn’t sour their enthusiasm. And, Greg noticed, Sherlock sported a set of clothes that certainly wasn’t shelter issue, so Stamford had clearly turned his hand towards shopping yet again.

“This squalid tenement scarcely merits the term.”
Stamford’s rolled eyes was his only response, deciding that it was a good idea to be a touch hands-off and simply observe Sherlock’s behaviors as the android was free to express them. Maybe that wasn’t the best idea, but… that would be Mycroft’s problem to manage. Might as well observe that, too, while he was here. Best to be efficient when you had forty fingers in fifty pies…

“My ecstasy at your approval simply soars. Now, let me make introductions. Molly, you have yet to meet Administrator Stamford who oversees the shelter where I resided and where Sherlock now lives. And I believe you, also, Constable Anderson have yet to meet Sherlock who is…”

Mycroft cut eyes towards both Stamford and Greg, who gave him small, encouraging nods that kept the android going forward.

“… is, for all intents and purposes, my brother, who I love dearly and am delighted to have with us tonight.”

The strangled rattle of annoyance was exactly the sound a little brother would make when his older brother dove headfirst into public sentimentality and it married well with Molly’s audible delight.

“Your brother? Really? That’s… that’s amazing! I didn’t think androids had family, so it’s brilliant to know I was wrong, since why shouldn’t you have family. If you care for someone like a brother, then it should count… at least, I think so.”

Mycroft’s heart expanded in size from the supportive words and Greg could swear he saw the android’s chest puff out accordingly.

“Thank you, Molly. I do consider Sherlock my true brother and I… I am happy you advocate for our relationship.”

“He’s cute, too. That helps. Hi, Sherlock! Good to meet you! Mr. Stamford, you too.”

“Oh, please call me Mike. Once the tie can be loosened I wave goodbye to the Mr.”

Molly grinned and took a sip of wine, only to discover her glass was empty and handed it to Greg, while making a shooing motion with her free hand.

“Wine!”

“Yes, Your Majesty. Mike? Beer, wine or scotch?”

“Since those three don’t layer well, I’ll just have beer, thank you. Depending on how the night goes, I may try your scotch.”

“That’s a plan I can support. John, Anderson?”

Two empty bottles waggled emphatically at Greg, who made prize-winning put-upon groan before rising to play bartender. It was then a quick nod to Mycroft to take his vacated seat so he and Sherlock could settle on the sofa, something which Mycroft quickly took advantage of after making a ‘drinks for us, too?’ gesture at his partner.

“Good to see you again, Sherlock. And, yes, I should be able to drop by a few of my old medical books for you read but, no, I can’t bring you a human stomach. With or without contents to examine.”

Mycroft moaned slightly at John’s words, but noticed that none of the other guests seemed particularly shocked or distressed by Sherlock’s request.
“That is unacceptable.”

“It’s a bit too far over the illegal line for me, I’m afraid, and Mike would have my guts for garters if I presented you a smelly, drippy stomach to defile his lovely shelter.”

“Both illegality and cleanliness of the shelter is not my concern. My inquiry is and I require a human stomach to verify my hypothesis.”

Anderson shot a look at Greg who just shook his head and kept gathering drinks, as well as plates for their pizza, so Mycroft wouldn’t worry about drips and drops on the floor and sofa. Cleanliness might not be Sherlock’s concern, but his brother didn’t share that opinion.

“What inquiry might you be pursuing.”

“Why do you care, Constable Anderson? It is not an arrestable offense to conduct a scientific investigation.”

“I’m not entirely sure about the not-arrestable part, actually, because possessing human organs is something law frowns on, but I was more curious than anything. However, if you’d care to make your statement, I’ll take it down so we’ve got a head start on things when you’re staring down the judge who’s trying to decide if you’re a creepy serial killer or just mental.”

“It is not mental to pursue science!”

“So, you’re not denying the creepy serial killer bit. Thank you, sir, I’ll add that to the report and keep it on file for when the bodies start to surface.”

Sherlock’s affronted expression made Anderson grin, Molly giggle loudly and Greg begin pressing alcohol into people’s hands for it was wildly apparent that it was going to be needed. However… things weren’t going badly! Sherlock was being an arse, but the response to his arse-ishness was sure to please Mycroft, since it was exactly the sort of nonsense one expected when a group of human friends got together and were feeling particularly ridiculous. Even Mike looked content with things, which had to be a good sign…

“If you believe for an instant that I would be so incompetent as to dispose of the bodies in such a way that what passes for the police in this city would find them, then I suggest you change your profession from one that is already lackluster to one even more rudimentary such as counting grains of sand on the beach.”

“Thank you, again, sir. I’ll add pride in your victim-hiding efficiency to the report. Anything else you’d care to add, such as time and date of your intended crimes or motivations for the psychiatric sector to ponder for the next few years?”

Molly reached over and swatted Anderson on the head, then started tossing plates to her audience so the eating could begin.

“Don’t let him bother you, Sherlock. If you want to get a look at a stomach, then you should come to the morgue. We’ve got lots, so there’s likely one that suits your purposes.”

Sherlock’s delighted gasp and quick turn of his head towards Stamford who made a ‘we’ll talk about it’ gesture did a lot to further cool Mycroft’s burning nervousness. Sherlock was… not being entirely horrid and having some degree of positive interaction with their guests. At least, not depressingly negative interaction with their guests and that was… good! His brother’s own nerves were strained, that much was certain, but Sherlock’s behavior was staying mostly on the passing-mark side of the line and that was, if he was to be honest with himself, more than he had predicted.
“I shall! The morgue, you say… John, your usefulness to me is at an end. I now have unfettered access to all the human body parts I desire.”

John took a large bite of pizza and made a grand show of chewing nonchalantly in response to Sherlock’s words, which Mycroft interpreted with some shock as an attempt to provoke a response by the doctor. Apparently, dear Sherlock was most fascinated by John… it could be simply curiosity about a human who showed him unfamiliar cordiality and respect or… yes, he would believe the former possibility but, secretly, hope for the ‘or.’ No older brother would do less…

“Fine by me. You weren’t getting your smelly stomach anyway. Hope you like cats, though, because I suspect Molly will leverage her generosity to gain cat minding duty from you when she goes off for a weekend. Not allergic, are you? One of hers is about as fluffy as a Santa’s beard and twice as big.”

“Shhh… John. Stop wrecking my fiends plan.”

Sherlock shot a glare at Molly who shoved pizza into her mouth to stop the oncoming fit of giggles and Greg simply leaned back from his position on the floor, budging closer to Mycroft so he could lean against the android’s legs and lightly stroke his ankle. Mycroft was following every letter of every word being spoken and from his posture, wasn’t displeased with the flow of the conversation. Stamford still seemed to be of like mind so it was time for him to do his own relaxing and take a moment to think about what the future held. This. This was likely what the future held and that was a future that had his full support. A night with friends now and again, him and Mycroft sharing the time in between and Sherlock slotted in there somewhere depending on how his future played out. But, given the most stubborn android on the planet was committed to seeing Sherlock freed, it was probably wise to start planning on a LOT of Sherlock in the lovely future stretching out in front of them.

“I will not act as a nanny for cats!”

“Administrator Stamford, do you not agree that my brother’s job skills portfolio would be laudably enhanced by the addition of ‘trained cat minder’ as an item of mastery?”

Now Sherlock was glaring at Mycroft, who simply smiled at Stamford who was doing his own bit to wind up Sherlock with a very convincing show of deep, contemplative thought.

“Yes… yes, it might. The pet care industry is booming, actually, and there could easily be a new firm looking for trained help that could withstand any number of bites and scratches, as well as not have a worry about any parasites or what not that a human might contract from tending to the cat box. I think we’ve struck upon a very promising idea. How many cats do you have, Molly? A good herd of them would be marvelous for giving our Sherlock here the best possible training for his future career.”

“I WILL ROAST AND EAT ANY CAT I AM FORCED TO OVERSEE!”

“That’s alright with me, Sherlock. I’m growing a little irritated with Mushroom lately and a proper roasting and eating is likely what he needs. I’ve lost three plants to him in the past two weeks, the evil thing.”

Anderson and John snickered at Sherlock’s confused annoyance and a shared nod preceded the decision to toss the poor android a bone and move the conversation to another direction.

“As long as that’s not our next night-out feast. Cat gives me indigestion something awful and Greg complains enough already about having to ride in the car with me on patrol. I do not want to
hear his shrill, old-lady voice going on about my cat farts. Speaking of, what’s our film for the night, Greg, who smells like a cat-roast fart on the best of days and has no right to criticize me whatsoever after one pasty that was undoubtedly past its prime and not at all my fault in any way?"

“It was not one bad pasty, it’s your entire ill-spent life that erupts out of your arse and you know that’s the case. Anyway, after much thought and discussion, it was decided that we’d watch Night of the Living Dead. Then, Mycroft overruled me and we’re forced to go with Bringing up Baby, instead.”

Now it was Greg getting the head swat, from the android who was blissfully enjoying his ankle rub, and Stamford added that to his mental list of details for the night. So far, Sherlock was getting a good ribbing, but he started it, so it was deserved and it was exactly the sort of ribbing any human would get, so no worries there. They’d talked about tonight and what to expect and, as anticipated, Sherlock tossed his advice to be polite and listen more than speak this first time out straight into the bin and was blazing his own trail, but… that could be considered a blessing in disguise. Might as well let the lad get the full experience right in the face and gauge how he sorted matters out. So far… not so bad.

And then there was the happy couple who were (a) happy and (b) a couple. Very much a couple, actually. Working together as a unit, showing small bits of unforced affection and… being indistinguishable from any couple hosting a party in their flat. If you didn’t know their situation, the notion that Mycroft was still owned would never cross your mind. Stable, solid couplehood was going to be very helpful in moving Mycroft forward with his emancipation and settling him into a new life, and… as a side benefit… there was nothing better to manage a bratty little brother than an old married couple who would provide a united front against the brattiness, but show unwavering, unconditional support at the same time, something this as-good-as old married couple would excel at.

And the less thought about John the better. He knew that look. He’d seen that look. The one John was shooting Sherlock when Sherlock wasn’t looking. Not that the android could decipher it, since there was a chance of zero that Sherlock had ever been in a pub with someone giving him the ‘I do like the look of you,’ grin, but he’d been with John enough times to have seen that look and this was going to be… complicated. Very complicated. Just what an overworked shelter administrator needed – more complications. Exactly when did he become a nanny of particularly troublesome androids and the humans who fancied them? That memo must have gone into his spam folder. Oh yes, the scotch was definitely going to be hit tonight and hit hard. And, in a few days, the pints would be hit hard when he dragged John out for a night of their own. One ignored the John Watson grin at one’s peril…

Mycroft was certain that Sherlock cared little for the film they were watching, or the food and drink that was flowing freely, but… his brother was engaged in the moment and that was a glorious thing to behold. He was holding himself a bit apart from the others, as was Sherlock’s way, but he was closely observing everyone, carefully listening to their conversation and making his own contribution to it when he was drawn out of his shell, which was often. It seemed that no one minded having to reach out a bit to encourage Sherlock’s participation and, with that show of effort, his brother was included. Not kept apart, not shunned, not ignored… included in the merriment in a way that was certain to be confusing Sherlock mightily, but his own eyes recognized the signs of cautious relaxation in his brother’s form that signaled he was beginning to feel sufficiently safe to, perhaps, open himself a bit more and, at the very least, agree to attend another such gathering. It was a thing to warm the heart and his lack of one did not in the least diminish that sensation.

“Another! Film and wine both”
“Some of us have to work in the morning, Molly.”

“Philip Anderson is a horrid spoilsport. Sherlock, kick him.”

With a small shrug, Sherlock gave Anderson a kick that Mycroft was relieved to see, fell well short of what Sherlock could do if he put any force into it.

“Police brutality!”

“I think you have that wrong way around, mate.”

“Your medical credentials don’t make you a law expert, John. Plus, you’re a bit drunk.”

“That I am. Mike, you won’t toss me off the list for the shelter just because I’ve had a bit too much beer, will you?”

“How much is it worth to you?”

“Uh…. eighteen pence.”

“You always were easy, John Watson. Sherlock, you see this? This is John Watson at his finest. The pride of English masculinity, cheaply bought with lager and lucre. This is why we’re in desperate, desperate straits in this country.”

Yes, Stamford thought, he might be a little tipsy, too, but it was worth a touch of silliness to see how…

“John is competent in his profession and possesses the required attributes to be considered male. I fail to understand your jest.”

… Sherlock reacts. Complications abound… just glorious…

“I’ll explain it to you later, lad. And, by rights, I should see you home now, as well. They’ll be wondering if we decided to hit a club or two and that won’t look good on my annual review if the staff starts telling tales. Ready to go?”

It didn’t take a genius to interpret the look on Sherlock’s face, which for a brief instant flashed a clear desire to say no. For Mycroft and Greg, both, it signaled a little victory celebration once the others were gone and for Stamford… more complications. Well, the cat was out of the bag and now his job would be to see it didn’t run off and get into the neighbors’ rubbish or any drop dead birds on the doorstep.

“The sooner I am out of Mycroft and Lestrade’s pig sty the better.”

“Going by the state of your room, Sherlock, I’d say that’s the pot calling the kettle black. Mycroft, bring along some petrol and a torch the next time you visit so we can give your brother’s room a quick cleaning, alright?”

Mycroft startled a bit hearing ‘your brother’ fall so easily from Stamford’s lips, but he rallied quickly.

“I would suggest, also, a surgical mask for you as I have full faith the contagion level of that space is rather dire.”

“Ooh! Can I have a sample? I’m always up for a little ‘identify the microbes,’ when Bart’s is a bit slow. Philip, want to join me?”
“Absolutely. I’m doing Microbiology next term, so that’ll give me a head start.”

“You are all as insipid and humorless as Mycroft, so it is unsurprising you have allowed him to join your flock. As Lestrade is fit only for egg gathering, I suspect the income from raiding your nests is what funded the shocking quantity of alcohol he consumed this evening.”

“It is very true that I like to keep hands as close to Mycroft’s egg layer as I can, but he’s not given me anything to sell yet. Guess I’ll just have to continue fondling until I earn my prize.”

Mycroft and Sherlock’s widened eyes made Greg laugh and give his android a kiss on the cheek, allowing Stamford to use the distraction to stand, check for wobble and stretch a little in preparation for the walk to the tube station. They’d taken a cab here, but a trip on the tube would be another little experiment for the evening, one that would give him time to walk awhile with Sherlock and have a chat to debrief the experience. The likelihood this would be repeated was looking to be high and any concerns or discomfort needed to be dealt with quickly. As it was, Mycroft would be descending tomorrow to do the same and getting his own information now would be important in broaching what was sure to be lengthy, ardent pleas for Sherlock to visit again.

“Well, let’s let Greg get on with his fondling and we’ll say our goodbyes. Thank you both for inviting us. Mycroft, I’m sure I’ll see you tomorrow. Greg… no need to visit, I remember what you look like. Everyone else, I hope to see you again very soon. Come along, Sherlock, you may not be ready for bed, but I certainly am.”

For a moment, Stamford thought Sherlock might decide to lay siege to his chair, but slowly, the android rose and scowled a moment before speaking.

“I had an appalling time, however, I expected that, so I can at least say I was not unpleasantly surprised.”

The humans in the room and the other android took great pains not to laugh and, instead, started the round of goodbyes, nice to meet you’s and hope to see you again soon’s. But, nobody was surprised when Mycroft rose to see Stamford and Sherlock out or that Stamford walked on ahead while Sherlock lingered behind at the door.

“I am very happy you came tonight, brother. And, as you observed, so is everyone else.”

“I care not what they think.”

“Of course not, but it is a fact that deserved stating. I shall see you tomorrow, so is there anything I might bring? Anything you require?”

“A human stomach.”

“That request has been well and truly laid to rest.”

“Not if I can find my way to the morgue.”

“I shall speak to Administrator Stamford about extending your off-premises privileges. However, please do not attempt an escape to satisfy your urge for organs. I know firsthand that it is not a tactic that will prove successful and it will gravely injure any chances of being allowed any privileges in the future.”

Which from the darkening expression on Sherlock’s face, had been his plan, but Mycroft felt he could douse that fire and preserve harmonious relations between his brother and Stamford.
“Now… have a good night, Sherlock. I am… I cannot express how good it is to be able to see you like this.”

That his brother whirled and followed after Stamford might have angered any other person, but Mycroft knew very well the action for what it was. Sherlock was profoundly uncomfortable expressing his emotions and would flee rather than express his own relief and happiness that they were together once more. And, that the togetherness seemed, at least for now, something that wouldn’t change.

“Well, on that note, I should likely call it a night, too. Someone has to manage hungover Greg and that someone, unfortunately, is me.”

Anderson drained the last of his beer and raised his hand for Mycroft to give him a pull upwards, something that amazed the android, but delighted him profoundly.

“Thanks. Watch that one doesn’t oversleep, will you, Mycroft? He’s late for our shift and it’s me the Inspector gives the evil eye.”

“I shall ensure Gregory is not a moment late, even if I must escort him to you myself.”

“Excellent. Molly, want to share a cab?”

“Yes! That will save me some time getting home. Greg, finish my cake then bring me the plate, will you? Mycroft, thanks so much for having me over. It was great to get to meet your brother, too. We’ll do this again soon, right?”

“I… that shall be the decision of Administrator Stamford. At least, for Sherlock’s participation. However, I would be most happy to host another evening at any time you are available to attend.”

“Brilliant! John, you work on Mike and let’s see what we do to get him and Sherlock back for another evening. I’m having a lot of fun with this, actually. We should definitely do it more often. John, coming with us or…”

“I’ll take the tube, thanks. I’m the other way, anyway.”

“Ok, well, I’m ready. Greg, Mycroft, thanks again!”

Anderson and Molly bid their final goodbyes and John took a moment to reflect on the fact that he’d just enjoyed another night of socializing after a long spell of doing very little of it. It was… putting some energy back into him that, now and again, he’d worried that he’d lost.

“Do you two need any help clearing away the mess or am I free to flee, too?”

“Thank you, John, but Gregory and I shall tend to that. Thank you for coming tonight. You are always welcome in our home anytime you would like to visit.”

“Thanks! And I’ll… I’ve got an appointment scheduled for Thursday to stop in at the shelter, so I’ll check on Sherlock to see how he’s adjusting. I know you’re doing that, but it’s always good to have evidence from another pair of eyes.”

Greg simply smiled at the doctor, but infused it with all the ‘you fucking liar’ he could possibly muster. Happily, he noticed that Mycroft wasn’t fooled by the off-hand casualness either.

“That would be most appreciated. Sherlock seems to tolerate your company better than that of most of humanity, so he will surely be content to see you.”
“Really? I mean… always good to know I’m not being readied for a toss out the door. But, speaking of that, I’ll toss myself out, if you don’t mind. You two can get on with the tidying and fondling and whatever else you do when my back is turned.”

Hustling out the door before he said anything else to make him look foolish, John waved goodbye and hoped that Mycroft and Greg hadn’t picked up on the fact that… nothing. There was nothing to pick up on. He was certainly not a bit intrigued by Sherlock’s intelligence or uniqueness. That was silly. As silly as thinking the android really did look good in plum and Mike had done a stellar job picking up a cheap set of clothes so Sherlock didn’t have to come tonight in bland, obvious shelter garb. That would just be silly right off the silliness scale. Positively ridiculous. But… if Molly could get Sherlock to the morgue, then maybe he could get Sherlock out for… some reason or another. He could surely think of something important and educational to get Mike’s approval. Or just buy the bastard some of the expensive brandy he loved. John Watson was not above direct bribery in the name of… silliness. The direct approach was often the most successful, anyway…

Mycroft closed the door after John and turned to look at Greg, who smiled widely at the glow that was shining brightly in his android’s lovely eyes.

“IT was a success, Gregory.”

“A smashing success, I’d say. Everyone seemed to like your brother, even with his foolishness. Think Mike will let him out again?”

“I do not know, but that will be the focus of my discussion with him tomorrow.”

“For what it’s worth, I think he will. It has to be good for Sherlock to interact with people, as well as spend time with you in a more… domestic… setting. And, of course, sneak away with John for some quality snogging.”

“Ah… you also noticed the signs.”

“They were flashing neon, love. Couldn’t have missed them if I’d passed out.”

“This is extremely unexpected, I must admit, but I am most anxious to see where it leads.”

“I just told you. Snogging. Snogging and wandering hands and mussed clothes and all that sort of thing. Which, if you want to join me here on the sofa, you can have a little taste of yourself.”

Greg’s provocatively-wiggled eyebrows made Mycroft laugh and feel something in him loosen just a little as he moved towards the sofa and, after looking into Greg’s eyes, laid a gentle, lingering kiss on his lips.

“Oh… I approve of that. Can I have another.”

“Well, since you asked so nicely…”

Leaning in again, Mycroft gave his human another kiss, experimenting a moment with different pressures and positions until he heard Greg sigh rather sexily and noticed that his hands had taken to start running up his partner’s chest and neck in a rather forward manner for someone who had set clear limits on their physical interactions.

“Oh, I do apologize.”
“Don’t, because you know I liked it. And I’ll tell you plainly that you are a very good kisser and I can’t wait for the time we can take that further so you can set my toes curling.”

“I… well, thank you. I shall do my best to satisfy. When the time comes.”

“When the time comes. Now… cleaning?”

“I think simply putting away any remaining food and disposing of the pizza boxes shall suffice for now. I will do the washing and hoovering when I have seen you off to work in the morning. At your duly appointed time.”

Greg’s rude noise made Mycroft laugh and decide it was perfectly appropriate to give his human another small kiss on the lips as a reward for his eternal juvenility.

“You’re a hard taskmaster, Mycroft. I want you to know that.”

“You’re a hard taskmaster, Mycroft. I want you to know that.”

“Thank you. I prize being successful at whatever I attempt.”

This time, it was Greg leaning in to give Mycroft a quick kiss on his lips, then one on the tip of his nose before hopping up from the sofa and starting to pick up empty beer bottles. Tonight had meant the world to his android and it had gone perfectly. Or as perfectly as anything could go with Sherlock and their eclectic group of friends. Mike would put up a perfunctory fight, but would let Sherlock out again, there was really no doubt about it, and that would help his Mycroft feel better and better about both their futures. Of course, now they had to think of a way to get Sherlock the future he deserved. Time to start researching his family tree to find any rich relatives he didn’t know about. Or start looking for some side work to boost the coffers. Sherlock’s purchase price was probably in line with Mycroft’s and… yeah, the rich relative idea was the best plan for now. Unless Mycroft proved a dab hand at counterfeiting…
Chapter 21

Stamford loved his job. He really did. It was interesting, made a difference… and now it was a colossal quagmire of hurlyburly as the Mycroft-Sherlock support network seemed hellbent on putting their unique forms of pressure on him to give Sherlock a degree of privileges equal to that of the Prime Minister. Mycroft had delivered a speech he’d likely spent the entire night crafting, replete with 60-syllable words and small, orchestrated hitches of breath and voice to add to the emotional appeal of his oration. Greg had made a quick call to, on the surface, to say thanks for stopping in last night and to add to the pitch for Sherlock to have another night out with their merry band. Then, it was John having his own go at presenting a case. Not that he was obvious about it, but knowing the little misery for a hundred years made it easy to read between the lines. That would be pursued in more depth later, but now…

“There is no reason I cannot go to the morgue.”

“There is every reason, Sherlock, however, if you can give me a valid, jobs or skills-related issue for it, then I might be able to justify the request.”

“That I desire it should be enough.”

“No, and that’s true for anyone, human or android.”

“Perhaps for the lowest-strata of society, but for those of us actually possessing intelligence, that should not apply.”

“I’ll agree that some people have fewer overall restrictions, mostly because of money, though, not intelligence, but for the vast majority of the population, we have to follow the rules. And my rule is that requests have to be reasonable and have a purpose. I’m responsible for you, Sherlock, and I have to safeguard you whether you like that or not. Now… reason.”

Sherlock snarled and glared at Stamford, who held the android’s eyes until Sherlock huffed and gave him a disdainful flick of the wrist.

“You yammer on and on about jobs and skills. I would argue that while I am conducting my experiment, I will likely be forced to work under the restrictions and limitations of their system and, therefore, learn what is required to perform a job in such a setting.”

“That is the most generic answer I’ve ever heard. A piece of chalk could do better.”

“You are impossible to satisfy!”

“No, but you’re not even trying.”

Sherlock gritted his teeth, as much for the fact that Stamford had correctly read him as for his efforts being thwarted.

“Fine. Whatever work I hope to do in the future may involve techniques that Molly could demonstrate and could require access to the sorts of tools and resources that the morgue will provide. Having a real sense of what is available and making a start on gaining the necessary skills is something I would prefer to see begun sooner than later. I have been moldering for an eternity and that is not acceptable from any perspective. I would think you would applaud my initiative.”

“See? Was that so hard? Don’t expect people to simply accept what you say on face value or
grant your wishes for no reason other than you want them, Sherlock. Nobody really gets that bit of grace. We all have to explain, justify, defend, clarify… you have to be prepared to do that, as well. Do you actually have an idea about what forms of jobs you would like to pursue? You seem to have firm ideas about what your interests are and those interests will make for some… rather narrow avenues of jobs placement.”

“My interests are perfectly suited to the career path I wish to pursue.”

“Which is?”

“None. I have no interest in any traditional form of employment.”

Stamford found himself both surprised and unsurprised by that, but wasn’t quite certain what to do about it.

“That will make you very difficult to place with a purchaser.”

“I do not care for I have no intention of being purchased.”

Again, there was a complex mix of surprised/not surprised swirling in Stamford’s head as he tried to decide on a strategy for moving forward. But, when in doubt, stall or seek more information. Why not do both?

“Can you tell me how you plan on achieving that?”

“It matters not.”

“It matters lots.”

“It is for Mycroft to handle the details.”

Now, that was interesting…

“Why on Earth would it be Mycroft’s responsibility?”

“Because it is.”

Sherlock was a little brother! Dear lord, but there was just no denying that fact.

“I’d say it wasn’t, actually. Each person is responsible for their own future and path in life.”

“Pfft. Mycroft enjoys being a meddlesome busybody, so granting him the opportunity is a kindness and one for which I should be praised.”

Little brother with a crown on his head! As human as humans could be…

“Let’s set aside the lauds and laurels for a moment, shall we? Mycroft has his own affairs to manage and that’s going to take a great deal of physical and mental effort, so I would say that placing him in charge of your life, in addition to all of that, is not well-described as a kindness.”

“Then his fawning concubine can do it.”

That wasn’t the worst description of Greg that Stamford could think of, the concubine bit notwithstanding.

“Greg works for a living, remember?”
“What he does with his time while he is not working towards my betterment is not my concern.”

“Funny. And don’t even suggest that Greg’s going to take a second job or script a cheque for your purchase because he’s not going to do that.”

“His poverty did not even make the latter a consideration.”

“Good to know you’re not entirely loony.”

“That implies you believe me partially loony.”

“True. How about we agree that we’ll coordinate with Mycroft for plans concerning your life, but those plans will focus on and center around you, your choices, your goals and what he and I can do to help you achieve what you can of those goals and hopes. Unfortunately, we have to leave things a bit open-ended since… since we, ultimately, don’t know your fate, be it as a free or purchased android, but… we’ll work to maximize the situation for you no matter the path you follow.”

“I have already made it clear that I will not be purchased.”

“That’s a wonderful dream and desire, Sherlock. An admirable aspiration and if that can be achieved, I’ll do what I can to make it happen, but… let’s have a back-up plan, alright, in case that goes awry? Or doesn’t happen as quickly as you might want?”

Sherlock’s rude noise was a good indicator of his feelings on the subject, but Stamford took it as a good sign anyway. The android wasn’t stupid and certainly not unaware of the realities of his situation, so this was, somewhat, a show for show’s sake. And that was fine. There was nothing wrong with a bit of theater, as long as there was real understanding beneath it all.

“If it makes you happy and earns me my visit to the morgue.”

Little bastard.

“Let me speak to some people I know at Bart’s and see if we can arrange something.”

“Now.”

“No, because I have a meeting in ten minutes, then I have fourteen hours of paperwork ahead of me for the afternoon. Tomorrow, I’ll see about making some calls.”

“Paperwork is boring.”

“I agree! However, without it, we’ll not have electricity or heat for the next month and I won’t be able to provide transportation for any of you lot or bring in medical personnel for your maintenance and repair. It’s a pesky thing, you know, what you have to do to actually see your work and life run properly, but one does what one must.”

“Boring. I have neither the inclination nor the intention of descending into the depths paper pushing”

“Let me guess – all that is for Mycroft to bother with.”

“Finally, you speak sense.”

Stamford laughed and felt he had Sherlock’s number. This wasn’t going to be as difficult as he had originally thought; not easy by any stretch of the imagination, because trying to direct Sherlock in a
positive direction was going to be like swimming through treacle, but... it was difficult with familiar colors, textures and shapes. And, that would help him help his other client, Mycroft, effectively manage his own urges to dive in and do everything Sherlock expected him to do.

Of course, he’d have to drag Greg into the group discussions, along with a couple of private conversations about keeping Mycroft from following his natural instincts to cater to Sherlock’s brattiness, which would not be good for Sherlock’s long-term development or Mycroft’s nerves. It was certainly time to call the support personnel together for some general discussion on the android brothers and begin to lay down concrete strategies and plans. Drag John into it, too, that evil elf. He was positioning himself to be part of their little tribe and there was going to be a cost for that. A cost that could begin very soon since the paperwork this afternoon was going to make this administrator very, very thirsty…

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“How thirsty are you, you bastard?”

“Very thank you, so expect to keep the pints flowing.”

John shook his head and settled back in his chair, remember the many, many nights he and Stamford had closed down their local and had to be ushered out the door by a few burly lads who were more than ready to go home and the drunks were making that a bit difficult.

“You haven’t changed at all, have you? And that’s not a compliment, by the way.”

“I’ve gotten fatter.”

“I wasn’t going to mention that.”

“You’re nice John. Wait, I’m thinking about some other bloke.”

“Ha ha ha. You’re still lacking a sense of humor, though. Never had one and never will.”

“Poor me. Oh well, if my charges care, they’re just gossiping about me behind my back and not laughing in my face, so I’ll cope.”

“Androids are polite that way.”

Now, that was an opening for the conversation Stamford wanted to have and that opening was wide as a river.

“Not all of them. I can think of one, specifically.”

“Oh, you mean the Prince of Curls? Where did those even come from, anyway? Usually, androids are fairly standard in what comes out of their heads, something I wish could be said for humans.”

“I wondered about that, too, because Mycroft’s hair is a bit atypical, when compared to the norm, but, they’re both built along a very high-end design, so that might explain it. Both Sherlock and Mycroft have a level of intellectual function I’ve never seen, so it stands to reason that they’d show more diversity in all their characteristics than the standard androids. Temperament, for example. Sherlock’s got a fiery temperament, which is terribly unique in my experience. That should make you happy, though. You always appreciated a bit of pepper in your food. And your men.”

John nearly spat out his mouthful of beer and coughed harshly once he’s swallowed, glaring at the
smirking Stamford as if was trying to melt his spectacles with the heat of his irritation.

“Wrong.”

“Right. I remember… Jacob was his name? He was a fun one. How many times did you have to collect him from the police for whatever mischief he’d been causing.”

“He was an activist! They get arrested all the time.”

“Not for trying to steal a sheep from one of the city farms!”

“They thought it was being abused!”

“Bollocks. Him and his mates were drunk off their arses and thought it was a lark to steal a sheep, which they wrote something very rude on, if I remember, so the poor thing had to be sheared before the little children visiting the farm weren’t scandalized.”

“I… yeah, ok. He was a bit colorful.”

“So’s Sherlock, which explains the attraction.”

“And we’re racing back to wrong at lightning speed.”

“There’s nothing strange about it, you know. Human-android romances aren’t common, but they’re not as rare as you might think, either. Look at Greg and Mycroft! That’s a proper couple if I’ve ever seen one. If they were any more smitten, it’d be embarrassing to watch. Almost as embarrassing as the eyes you’ve been giving Sherlock that he’s surely not to have noticed or understood if he did. You’ll have to make a firmer move that that, John, if you want to woo the fair android.”

“There is no wooing!”

“You’re so cute when you protest the obvious.”

“There is nothing obvious about me.”

“Except you’re interested in Sherlock and want to get to know him better on a personal level. A highly personal level.”

“You need more beer.”

“That’s true, but not relevant. I approve, if that matters to you. So, I suspect does Mycroft. He’s more socially aware than Sherlock, I’ve noticed, and I have little doubt he’s noticed your pining, burning interest.”

“There is no pining! Certainly no burning!”

“I think I smell smoke.”

“No you don’t, you bastard. No smoke, no burning, no nothing.”

“I can hardly see you for the billows of smoke rising from your trousers.”

John seethed as Mike smiled merrily and waved over the server for another round. From the administrator’s standpoint, this was going about as expected – with as much as difficulty as extracting a molar from an elephant’s mouth. John Watson had many strong, fine qualities, but
discussing feelings and having honest conversations about personal issues did not rank among them. However, best get this sorted now while the pain could be moderated by lots of alcohol, which was a tool of choice they both could enjoy.

“Mike, you know as well as I do that Sherlock is a shelter android. They’re… not allowed that sort of thing.”

“Ummmm, that’s not precisely true. Surprisingly, there’s no specific regulations about shelter androids and humans doing the sorts of things that your trousers have been thinking about. However, I will admit there are certain concerns we’d have to discuss before you made your big, yet likely watery and vague, move on Sherlock. It is a slightly tricky situation and I’d not be doing my job if I didn’t see it managed properly.”

“That makes it sound like you’re some form of android pimp.”

“I actually know a lot of those fellows! That industry is heavily regulated and they’re savagely professional about the whole business. Say what you want about sex work, but their androids are some of the best treated and tended to I’ve ever seen and they prosecute to the limit anyone who abuses one of their workers.”

“Something I’ll keep in mind if I ever want to pay for sex, however…”

“However, you probably couldn’t afford it since those services go for very good money, so you’ll have to do what everyone else does and see what you can have for free. Now, let’s talk about your intentions towards Sherlock and I’ll tell you what I can allow and what I can’t, given the situation.”

The fresh pints arrived and John drained a good third of his in one swallow. Stupid, idiotic Mike. Why couldn’t he actually be stupid and idiotic! Or, at least, unobservant. At least he didn’t have to worry about any sharing stories with others, because nobody was better at keeping confidences than Mike Stamford, even if he was a stupid, idiotic completely shit excuse for a friend…

“Maybe… maybe I think Sherlock’s a bit more interesting than the average person I run across in a day.”

“Oh, I’d agree with that. I’m simply curious as to what that means to you, in terms of what you’d like to see happen between you and him. Friends, more… I’m wearing two hats for this, John, and not asking purely out of nosiness.”

John drained another third of his pint and grudgingly recognized that Stamford did have a duty to his residents so his annoying nosiness wasn’t just… nosy.

“I know… and you’ve a right to, I suppose. You’ve got to look out for Sherlock’s best interests.”

“I do, at that. Yours, too, really. We’ve known each other a long time, John, and I don’t want to see you hurt or disappointed by any of… whatever you’re considering.”

“I can’t say I’m considering anything, actually. Maybe a few thoughts floating through the brain, but I can’t say I have any intention of following through with them. Just… thinking about the possibility of what might happen if I did, if you know what I mean.”

Waffly as ever. John Watson was a man of dogged consistency, but that did mean once he set foot on a path, he tended to follow it to the end. So, point him in the right direction and shove…
"I don’t think it would be lethal if you actually explored that possibility.”

“No, but… would you agree that it would be easy to hurt Sherlock, given the circumstances?”

Point scored and Stamford was enough of a man to admit it.

“Yes, I do agree, that’s why we’re having this little chat. If you want me to fan away the smoke and shine a little light on things, then I’d say it would be good for you both to get to know each other better and see how well you interact when there aren’t others around to complicate things. I let Mycroft leave the shelter for a night out with Greg soon after they met and I could permit that for you and Sherlock. Something simple like a few drinks or a quick meal. Or…”

Oh why not…

“… maybe combine that with a tour of Bart’s? Sherlock does want to see the morgue and play with body parts, and you might escort him for that, then off for a touch of time to celebrate his first jobs-based learning experience.”

“I… that’s not the worst idea you ever had.”

“No, that would be the time I decided to try contact lenses and was punished by the spectacles gods most severely for my lapse of reason. I inhaled one when it fell off my finger trying to put it in and it landed on my lip.”

“I’m glad I wasn’t there for that or you would have made me dive in and try to get it out of your nose, something that would not have brought joy to my day. But… you’d… you’d really let Sherlock out again for something like a bite to eat?”

“I’d let him out for a real chance to explore a potential interest that would improve his skills and, therefore, marketability. What happens after that is something I don’t need to know about, now do I?”

“I suppose not. Do you think he’d agree?”

“I do. I won’t deny that a part of that agreement will be because it will gain him what he wants, in terms of getting his coveted stomach, but… he’s noticed you, John, and in a good way, which is something I can’t say for his noticing the other shelter residents or anyone who has visited the shelter in the miniscule time he’s lived there. Or the people he’s seen on TV, heard on the radio or glimpsed out the window, passing by on the street. So… hurray!”

John sighed loudly and looked at Stamford, trying to detect anything that might say his friend was anything but honest and found, as he expected, nothing of the kind. Mike Stamford didn’t tell easy lies in place of difficult truths, so if he thought a little time together with Sherlock was a smart plan…

“I’ll think about it.”

“You are the most cowardly person on the face of the Earth.”

No trouble with difficult truths at all.

“I’m not! I’m just… truthfully, I’m just not certain I’m ready for something besides something quick and casual, which is not, even I know, something Sherlock’s going to appreciate.”

“You’re correct on that score, but you’re a lying tosser about the first part. You are ready for something more or you wouldn’t be interested in Sherlock who you know won’t comprehend or
accept a quick shag and a hearty wave goodbye. Take him to Bart’s, let Sherlock enjoy whatever disgusting thing takes his fancy, say hello to Molly, then stop in at that… you remember that Chinese restaurant we used to visit? It’s still in business, still excellent and still forgiving on the wallet.”

“I’ll…”

“If you say you’ll think about it, expect me to get up, laugh at you, leave and completely forget to toss any money on the table to pay my half of the drinks. Do you really want that? Are you, John Watson, prepared to fully stand all the rounds we’ve been drinking and quaff the last one with my mocking laughter soaked into the foam resting on the top?”

“Why are you pressing for this? I thought you’d be against this sort of thing with your bots!”

“I’m against things that negatively impact my androids’ lives. If Sherlock is determined to know you better, I suspect he’ll make me, Mycroft, Greg and himself loony trying to see that goal achieved. Frankly, I’m just hoping to see whatever happens is started and settled sooner rather than later so, one way or another, everyone’s curiosities and expectations are satisfied. You’re right about the potential for Sherlock being hurt and a good way to avoid that is simply to have cards on the table so he can see if they’re the sort he wants to pick up and add to his hand.”

“No matter what cards he picks, it’s all for nothing if he’s bought next week, now is it?”

John was thoroughly annoyed that the point he’d intended to score bounced off of Stamford’s smiling face and landed back in his pint.

“Sherlock says he’s not going to be purchased.”

“And… what?”

“He says he is not going to be purchased.”

“I don’t… what does that matter?”

“If you’d asked me a few weeks ago, I would have said it didn’t matter at all but… there’s something about Sherlock and Mycroft that’s different enough that… I find myself believing him. There’s no logic to it, certainly no practical basis for placing any faith in it, but… I thought it most likely that Mycroft would live his whole existence in a shelter of some form and he found a buyer that I’d never have thought would own an android in the whole of his existence. Sometimes you have a feeling, John, you know how that is, and you know how often that feeling proves justified. I’ve got a feeling about this and I’m finding myself willing to, at least, make some decisions based on that.”

“You’re…”

John was going to say ‘the most practical man I know’ then remembered that, of all the people he’d known before he left England, Stamford was also the one with the biggest hopeful streak and was a staunch and strident supporter of old-fashioned romance. Perfect.

“… wagering a lot on a hunch.”

“Not wagering, so much as hedging a bet. Get to know Sherlock, John. Let him and you see what this mutual interest is all about and then… we’ll go from there. If anything, it’s clear to me that Sherlock needs all the socialization practice he can get and if you can do nothing more than let him work on some strategies and try different tools to better interact with people, then I consider your and my time well spent.”
Maybe it was the rather excellent ale he was drinking, but Stamford had no trouble admitting to himself that this *was* a risk, but one he was willing to take. True, the risk was somewhat small since finding a buyer for Sherlock would be near to impossible given the android’s personality and guaranteed sabotage of any efforts towards that goal, but it *did* exist and he was willing to take it to… see two worthwhile people have a chance at happiness. Heaven knew John needed that… poor berk had a stellar record for pulling at pubs, and an abysmal one for anything real or meaningful.

And, a few phone calls to some of their common acquaintances said John had a rough time, after being shot and was struggling to find his footing now that he was in London again. Oddly, someone like Sherlock would be very good to help with that as Sherlock had no sense of social correctness and would as the questions, make the observations and proclaim the conclusions that John might hate, but needed to hear to work through his own problems and move forward. As good as John could be for Sherlock, Sherlock could be as good for John and that was worth whatever risk was involved.

And, now, time for some information about that whole ‘getting shot’ business and what was going on in John’s life that a good friend, and trained professional, might lend an ear to and offer what help he possibly could. Oh, and time for something hearty to eat to put something in the stomach besides beer. Since Greg crossed paths with Mycroft, his own social life had certainly seen a boost in excitement and there was no reason not to take full advantage of things. He wasn’t going see a bonus in his wages for all of this personalized service, so he had to grab his benefits where he could. Fortunately, pub-based benefits were some of his favorites…

“Fine! Fine… I’ll talk to Molly and find a good day to bring Sherlock for a working visit.”

“Excellent. I think a celebration is in order, don’t you?”

“What are we doing now?”

“Celebrations require food, John. Do you see food? No, no you don’t. Fix that, like a good chap, while I pay a visit to the loo.”

Stamford winked and rose from the table to make room for more beer in his bladder while John made strangling motions behind the administrator’s back. Mike Stamford was… the… worst, no… most pathetic, also no… shit. He was a true and proper friend who cared and acted on that caring in real and tangible ways. John H. Watson was a lucky bastard to have a friend like that and he wasn’t the sort to look a gift horse in the mouth. Of course, if that gift horse tried to wriggle out of paying his half of these festivities, that mouth might be missing a few teeth. A gummy smile from Mike would certainly be something Sherlock would want to investigate in his loudest and most irritating way… no matter the outcome, John H. Watson could claim victory. The night was suddenly looking up…
“If you touch me again, I shall break your fingers off, melt them down and find a mold of a hippopotamus to cast a paperweight in your likeness.”

Greg plucked Mycroft’s hand off of Sherlock’s jacket, which Mycroft had straightened three times, along with tidying a few of Sherlock’s stray curls, wiping a nonexistent smudge off of Sherlock’s chin and various other things that betrayed an older brother’s anxiousness over a new and important event in his younger brother’s life. Ostensibly, Sherlock was simply going to the morgue to learn more about various procedures and analytical techniques, but none of Sherlock’s growing family were fooled into thinking that was all that was going on. The fact that John called Mycroft and asked if it was alright to take Sherlock out for the day really said all there was to say. Their little boy was going on a date and Mycroft was as proud as any big brother could be over that. And just as nervous.

“Pshaw, Sherlock. I am simply mending the various atrocities you have perpetrated against your grooming and garments, so you do not embarrass either yourself or John while in public.”

“We are going to the morgue. I sincerely doubt that any of the denizens will be in a position to offer fashion commentary.”

“One practices social graces when one can, brother dear. Gregory, do you feel Sherlock is properly presented to be seen by the various humans, alive and dead, he shall encounter today?”

Greg made a long, deliberate show of thinking and walking a circle around Sherlock, humming the most grave and somber of hmmmmm’s before answering.

“No.”

The shocked gasp from both Mycroft and Sherlock made Greg laugh before reaching into his own jacket to extract a final flourish for Sherlock’s outfit.

“I know you don’t feel the cold as badly as we do, but a jaunty scarf is never a bad idea. Thought blue would do you well, lad, but if you don’t like the color, I can dig through my things for another one.”

Sherlock scowled as Greg tossed the scarf around his neck and gave it a quick tie to nestle it around the android’s neck, but didn’t immediately snatch it off, which was an encouraging sign.

“I feel defiled by your effluvia.”

“Is that another word for scarf? What language is it?”

“Your lack of education is appalling, Lestrade.”

“But my scarf looks smashing, if I do say so myself. Love, what’s your opinion?”

Running a hand along his human’s back, Mycroft marveled anew at how easily Sherlock had been accepted by the policeman, who had already seen his life substantially changed by adding an android to his days.

“It is highly flattering. Truly the pièce de résistance for Sherlock’s appearance.”
And, that his brother was not further offering protest after a quick glance in the mirror said Sherlock agreed with that assessment.

“It is a horrendous debacle of fabric, however, it does offer a measure of warmth and, for that practical aspect alone, I shall deign to continue wearing it.”

“Smart decision, Sherlock, since morgues are cold, but remember to tuck away the ends if you’re not wearing a lab coat so they don’t dip into things that are going to start to smell quickly if they don’t already.”

Greg turned towards Stamford’s voice and nodded his agreement, having spent more time in the morgue than any person ought to in this life.

“Administrator Stamford, let me, once again, thank you for allowing Sherlock this chance.”

“You’re welcome, Mycroft. How could I say no since this could one of London’s new pathologists in a few years! Or a histologist or even a forensics fellow like Constable Anderson. Careers exploration and skills training are something that will always have my approval. And what are you and Greg off to after this one’s been evicted from my care? I take it the sergeant has a day of leisure to his name?”

Mycroft’s large smile said that yes, Greg had a day off of work and that they had plans for it that suited the android very, very well.

“Gregory learned of an open rehearsal for an upcoming symphony concert and we are to attend that this afternoon. For the morning, we are performing some household errands and returning home for lunch so Gregory’s stomach does not rumble during the symphony performance.”

Sherlock’s rolled eyes was waved off by Stamford who beamed at the obviously pleased Mycroft, who was seeing his own life actually erupt with experiences that the android had been longing for.

“Am I interrupting something?”

All eyes turned towards John, who the humans in the room happily noticed and shared a grin over, had gone to some lengths to ensure his own appearance showed his features and form to best effect.

“Not at all! Greg and Mycroft were simply delivering a scarf for Sherlock before going off on their own business. Which will begin now so you and Sherlock can get up to your own mischief.”

Taking that as their rather pointed cue, Greg looped his arm around Mycroft’s and smiled at his partner’s clear desire to stay and do a bit of interrogation.

“Off we go! Come along, Mycroft… you can hear all the details tomorrow.”

Gently tugging the android towards the door, Greg gave Stamford a knowing grin and John an ‘I like you, but that can change if you do something evil to Sherlock’ version before making a start on the main parts of his and Mycroft’s day. An off day that only needed a few necessities tended to was a rarity, so this would mostly be a day for enjoyment, both of the activities planned and the person he’d planned them with. Mycroft had nearly started running for the door of the flat when he’d heard they’d get to hear a live classical concert and it was all he could do to keep the android calm through breakfast and on the way here, since that excitement, added to Sherlock’s situation, was almost too much for Mycroft to bear. If his dear android wasn’t back here first thing tomorrow morning, there would be a very surprised policeman wondering why.

“Well, Sherlock… ready to go? I told Molly we’d be there fairly early, so…”
Sherlock started striding out of his room and towards the exit while John was still speaking, so Stamford had the opportunity to laugh and ask if the doctor had condoms in his wallet before John was speeding away, as well. With both of London’s most complex androids occupied for the day, one overworked shelter administrator could actually get ahead on some of the work required for his other residents. No playing favorites in his job, that much was certain, though some androids did offer a bit more diversion from the routine of the job than did others. And more of an opportunity for a good, hearty laugh at the humans who trailed after them…

“Mycroft… this is loony.”

Hiding around the corner of the shelter to watch Sherlock and John leave and tail them at a safe distance wasn’t exactly how Greg expected their day to continue but Mycroft seemed to have other ideas.

“It is not loony, it is prudent. I simply wish to observe their interactions for the short time required to walk to the tube station. Ah…I believe it is safe to proceed.”

Which meant scurrying to the edge of the drive and looking around a tree to make certain there was an acceptable distance between them and their counterparts before starting again to walk, although at a more leisurely pace.

“Alright, then, it’s not loony, it’s spying, which I would have thought beneath you.”

“Pish and tosh. One does what one must to achieve one’s goals.”

And that, it seemed, included dragging one’s human into the doorway of a shop when John stopped a moment to pick up a discarded cup on the sidewalk to toss in the bin.

“And we’re back to loony.”

“Our mission cannot be discovered.”

Greg’s pained sigh lasted as long as it took for Mycroft to drag him back again onto the sidewalk to continue his observations.

“What in heaven’s name can you gain from watching two blokes walk to the tube?”

“I can judge their body language for signs of comfort and rapport.”

“And what does the judge have to say about that?”

“I am… forming conclusions.”

And now it was another drag out of sight as their targets stopped to view something in a window, though Mycroft peeked out of their hiding place to continue his spying while Greg took note of the coffee on offer by their current reconnaissance spot and quickly purchased two cups to warm his and Mycroft’s James Bonding.

“I… oh, thank you, my dear. Look… Sherlock is paying attention to John’s words.”

“And that’s worth noticing?”

“For Sherlock? Unquestionably.”
After a moment’s thought, Greg had to admit he agreed.

“So, does that mean we can go find my socks now?”

“No yet. There is certainly more information to be collected.”

Bouncing up and down like a disgruntled toddler was a wasted effort on Greg’s part as Mycroft simply pfft-ed at him and went back to scrutinizing his quarry.

“Ah, they are again walking. Come, Gregory. We must make haste.”

The young couple at the table near where the espionage agents had been standing shared a grin that clearly acknowledged they knew who wore the proverbial pants in that relationship, something that would have made Mycroft exceedingly happy had he still been there to notice it.

“Can we just agree they seem to be getting along nicely and… blimey.”

Mycroft’s loud squawk at Sherlock rounding on John and giving him a full-force fiery kiss startled a nearby pigeon as well as several passers-by, and had Greg, this time, dragging Mycroft off the sidewalk before their presence was discovered.

“Gregory! Did you see!”

“I’d be blind if I didn’t. What… what the fuck, Mycroft?”

“I have no idea! That is…”

Mycroft eyes were so wide, Greg prepared himself to shove them back in if necessary and readied to yell for John since an android doctor would probably useful in re-eyeing a dumbstruck Mycroft.

“Ok… ok ok ok… no more spying, no more observing, no more anything. Off we go for my socks, our other errands, the lovely lunch you’ve got planned and a long afternoon of music.”

“We need to…”

“Do exactly as we’d planned, Mycroft, and let them… sort all this out on their own. You can play Spanish Inquisition tomorrow.”

Mycroft fretted and dithered and, by the time he peeked back towards Sherlock and John, they had disappeared.

“Gregory…”

Taking his android in his arms, Greg made what he could for calming shhhh’ing noises and wrestled with what to say to draw down Mycroft’s manic energy.

“No rushing to the morgue, love. Let’s just… this is their business and not ours. I didn’t see any bodies lying on the sidewalk or a blood trail, so no deaths or broken noses to worry about. Tomorrow will be soon enough to ask whatever questions you’ve got for Sherlock. If there are any real problems, I’m certain he, John or Mike will phone us and let us know.”

“I…”

A gentle kiss of his own calmed Mycroft enough to steady his breathing and earn Greg a grudging nod of agreement.
“Administrator Stamford will certainly notice something amiss and take all relevant steps to soothe any distress on Sherlock’s part.”

“Then, there you have it. Sherlock’s a… well, I was going to say a grown man, but let me change that to an android who has some ability to lead his own life and we’ve got to respect that, but step in if he seems to need some help with the aftermath. Ok?”

No, it was NOT ok, but Mycroft knew Greg had a point and that any overt intrusion would simply trigger Sherlock’s incalculable stubbornness and leave them unable to provide any discussion or assistance if… if Sherlock was in need. Cutting off his nose to spite his face was another small memory of his brother that Mycroft had stored, likely for situations just like this.

“It will have to be, I suppose.”

“You’re trying to remember what time the shelter doors open in the morning aren’t you?”

“Technically, they are never closed as there are staff present on premises at all hours, however… I doubt they would appreciate my arriving before the sun has risen in the sky.”

Which, Greg had little doubt, Mycroft would do, if it wouldn’t jeopardize Sherlock’s future chances of having days or nights out of the shelter because he interrupted someone’s much needed nap with his incessant banging and yelling on the front door.

“I suspect you’re right. Come on, love, let’s see our own day started and… be happy?”

The glint in Mycroft’s eyes said ‘happy’ was going to be a complicated thing until tomorrow, but Greg dedicated himself to doing what it would take to somewhat shift Mycroft’s mind off of his brother. Maybe the music would help… his android got dreamy eyed when he heard a particularly well-played piece of the classical tunes he loved so much and dreamy eyed was much better than glinty eyed any time…

“SHERLOCK! WHAT IN THE…”

“Shhhhh… quiet John. We have only a moment before we can make our escape.”

Sherlock grabbed the just-kissed John and pulled him along the sidewalk at a pace that had John nearly running to keep up with the android’s much longer legs. When they’d gone down the steps of the tube station, John finally jerked away and stood glowering at Sherlock, who glowered back with what John was unhappy to see was a very sexy intensity that threatened the force of his own rather dowdy glower.

“No. No more running. What in the hell was that about!”

“What was what about?”

“Kissing me!”

“Oh! Yes… Mycroft and his henchman were attempting to spy on us and I ensured our escape from their nosiness.”

“Wha… What?”

“My brother believes himself supremely talented at everything, but he is grossly mistaken. I
noticed their lack of presence ahead of us when we left the shelter and took pains to catch a glimpse behind us, should they be skulking about, which they were.”

John tried to stop the rapid spinning of his brain and felt no surprise when it made a rude gesture at him and kept on spinning.

“All of that… was just to throw Mycroft and Greg off our trail?”

“Did I not make that clear? Dear me, I thought I’d used sufficiently simplistic language.”

“Shut it, you! I… you kissed me!”

“Did you hit your head at some point and suffer brain injury?”

“No… at least, I don’t remember doing that. Of course, it’s hard to remember much of anything when YOU KISSED ME IN THE MIDDLE OF LONDON!”

“The center of London is quite a distance from us, actually. Shall I purchase for you a map?”

John’s hands around Sherlock’s throat were handily blocked from a full throttle by Greg’s scarf, a bit of information Sherlock would certainly not share with the dastardly, snooping policeman. Fortunately, the number of concerned looks surrounding them caught John’s attention and he quickly dropped his hands, began whistling and, linking his arm with Sherlock’s, frog-marched the tall android to a quiet spot to continue their chat.

“Sherlock… you don’t kiss a person like that!”

“Oh? I thought I had performed the procedure correctly. Very well, I shall study the matter further for the next time.”

Next time? John didn’t know whether to groan or smile.

“That wasn’t what I meant. You… you kiss someone when you want to demonstrate affection, not to lose a tail.”

“That is incorrect. I have watched any number of dreadful films and televised claptrap where the use of a kiss was precisely for the reason I implemented ours.”

“I… ok, in Fantasyland that might be true, however, in reality, it’s simply not done.”

“And your expertise on the subject? Might I see your certification?”

“Funny. It’s just… that’s an easy thing to misinterpret and you shouldn’t do it lightly. It could hurt a person’s feelings when they realize you… didn’t mean it.”

“Misinterpret? That is… oh…”

John absolutely saw the moment the light went on in Sherlock’s head and felt his own agitation plummet. The android had no real idea about kissing and it wasn’t fair to get angry when he made an honest error based on inexperience and lack of understanding.

“… you believed that I had amorous intentions towards you.”

“That’s not what I said, but… kissing someone, especially like that, would lead a person to have those sort of thoughts, I suppose.”
“I see.”
Sherlock’s grin slowly spread over his lips and in such a way that had John’s temperature rising and his hands feeling around for a chastity belt.

“I… doubt it?”

“Wrong. But, given our upcoming appointment with Molly, we can postpone this discussion for a later time. Perhaps, at dinner?”

“What?”

“Our day shall be a full one and one that is very likely to be somewhat… messy, yet you are dressed in what are clothes most unsuitable for those circumstances. I suspect your attire is more focused on the post-morgue portion of our day, which, to follow human patterns, would involve dinner.”

“I… I just wanted to…”

“Appear smartly dressed when you escort me out for the evening. Don’t worry, John, I do approve and am very much looking forward to our evening. Mycroft seemed suitably content with his various food and drinks experiences with Lestrade and I fail to see why yours and mine will not meet, likely exceed, their lackluster standard.”

“Oh. Alright?”

“Very good. I knew you would see my point. Eventually. Ah… I believe our chariot is arriving. Shall we?”

John looked at the people moving towards the platform and nodded rather dazedly, which was enough for Sherlock to grab his hand and drag him along, both to board and to pay Sherlock’s reduced fare as an accompanied android. It would be Sherlock’s secret that Greg slipped him a £10 note (that was the near the bottom of Greg’s sock-drawer residing, hands-off-you-bastard-this-is-only-for-last-minute emergencies situations, cash supply) when he fiddled with the scarf around his neck. John was gainfully employed, but he had no other source of income and, combined with the £20 Stamford handed him before Mycroft and his pet policeman arrived, this was a nice beginning to his supply of personal wealth. After he funded the microscope he desired, he could begin, perhaps, to contribute to his and John’s nights out. Because there would certainly be more than this single one. The rather fetching flush on John’s cheeks after their kiss really left no other possibility on the table. Which certainly met with his approval...
“Molly…”

“Ummm?”

“Molly…”

“Ummm hmmm?”

“MOLLY!”

The mobile flew out of Molly’s hands and it was only blind luck that it didn’t land in the opened-up corpse lying on the autopsy table.

“Sherlock!”

“I have asked you three questions, none of which have received an answer.”

“Oh! Oh… sorry about that. I was… distracted.”

“Yes, that much was evident. Texting, I believe. It seems an efficient means of communication and one to which, apparently, you are addicted.”

“I’m not! It’s just… sometimes it’s important.”

Sherlock cut eyes over to John, who was merrily enjoying the fact that Molly had to deal with the tall git while he could sit a moment and fantasize about… things. Things of a nature that were not subject for discussion now, at dinner or in the near future. However, since his mind would not be required to make a direct report that his mouth had to voice, he could enjoy a little things-fantasizing while he had the opportunity…

“And might you disclose the nature of your ‘important’ interaction.”

“Uh… no.”

“Your reticence betrays the fact you are hiding something.”

“It does not!”

“That is a decidedly poor rebuttal.”

“It is not!”

“My point is proven. Now, given you are unwilling to disclose the nature of your interest, I must assume the subject is either embarrassing or…”

“It’s not embarrassing!”

“… OR it concerns matters you do not wish to disclose to me.”

“I… no! That is to say he… no.”

“MYCROFT!”
“He started it! He texted me first and it would have been rude to ignore him.”

Sherlock locked eyes with Molly, then darted towards her mobile which, despite her being closer, he was able to snatch up to start reading the exchange.

“Hmmm… boring.”

“It’s rude to read other peoples’ texts, Sherlock.”

Molly’s annoyance wasn’t nearly hot enough for her to miss the quick look Sherlock shot John, who nodded yes to her assessment, prompting a disgruntled scowl from the tall android brandishing her phone and a reluctant return of her property.

“Perhaps, but when I am the subject, I do believe a review of the rules is required.”

“Mycroft just wanted to know how you were doing and I think that’s very nice of him, actually. Exactly what older brothers do for younger ones, though… Mycroft does look older than you, but he was designed that way. Is he genuinely older? You could have been built and activated first, which would make you older in reality and complicate things a little.”

John looked over at Sherlock who had gone blank in the face except for an irregular blinking that continued for a moment until the switch seemed to be flipped to bring him back from wherever his mind had gone.

“I… I don’t know.”

“Really? I think that would have come up in conversation at some point.”

“It… it may have. I do not remember.”

Now it was Molly looking at John, because androids typically had excellent memories and Sherlock, all things considered, should have had a better memory than most. But, androids did have their individual differences…

“Oh… well, I guess it’s not important, really. He certainly treats you like his younger brother and you act like one, too, so date of activation doesn’t really factor into things. And you should be happy for that! How he treats you, I mean. It’s good to have someone care and watch out for you and take an interest in what you do.”

“Mycroft is a portly busybody who loves nothing more than keeping his flabby thumb directly on my life and the lives of any around him. Lestrade will soon be so squashed flat that he will meet the geometrical definition of a plane.”

“Sherlock… your brother is not at all what I would call fat. Is there something wrong with your shapes perception? John! I think you need to give Sherlock’s visual sensors a diagnostic because they’re not working properly.”

“My eyes are perfect! Fat… is a state of mind.”

“Fat is a state of body and you’re just being evil.”

Happy that he wasn’t really necessary for the conversation, John simply enjoyed the back-and-forth and felt a wash of relief that Sherlock, minus Mycroft’s and Stamford’s hands on his reins, was treating Molly about as horridly as he did… well, him… which was a strangely tolerable horrid because it didn’t take long to fathom that a great deal of Sherlock’s horridness was simply his way of
interacting without an obvious sign of growing connection with the other person in the conversation. If you really watched and listened… Sherlock liked Molly and it was clear that Molly liking him was a large factor in the android’s own feelings.

And, speaking of feelings… that would not be done. Nope, not at all, not for any reason and not in any case. Things-fantasizing was permitted, discussion of the things being fantasized about was not. Yes, the acerbic android correctly deduced their dinner plans and, yes, he’d certainly shown his own hand during their… moment of buccal contact… which sounded balls even in his own head, so erasing that last bit and just thinking the word ‘kiss’ which didn’t burble his internals nearly as much as saying it out loud, thank you very much, but… feelings were not on offer for discussion at the present time. How is a fellow supposed to discuss what he doesn’t understand? Expecting that from a person was pure silliness and he’d tell Sherlock that very thing at dinner.

No… wait… that would just entice Sherlock to probe deeper, because it would seem like he was hiding something. New plan… talk about the weather from egg rolls to fortune cookies and if that topic ran dry, move to football or flowers. Anything but feelings… Say No to Feelings! That was his new cause. Just needed a sign in big colorful letters and he’d be set…

"NO!"

Greg plucked the mobile out of Mycroft’s hands and put it in his own jacket pocket, glaring at the android who made an aborted attempt to steal it back.

"You need to relax."

"How can I relax when Sherlock… pleeeeease…"

"Did Molly say Sherlock seemed confused, unhappy, angry…"

"No, however…"

"Then relax. Molly would have been honest with you if she noticed anything strange, or stranger than expected with Sherlock, because she’s the type to act on a worry and try to help. Did she mention the kiss?"

"No…"

"Then I can guarantee that nobody shared that piece of information with her or she’d be congratulating you on Sherlock’s new love life and begging for more details. He and John aren’t trumpeting any new status, so… relax."

Mycroft squeezed Greg’s new package of socks with a force that made the sergeant worry the fluffiness and warmth were now officially dead and he’d be dragging paper-thin bits of cloth over his feet in the morning.

"Don’t murder my socks."

"What? Oh… yes, I shall do my best to curtail my murderous urges."

"Good to know. Now, we have a nice bit of time for some walking and window-peeping, into shop windows, not houses because I’d have to arrest us for that, and then we’ve got just enough money for a few groceries before we start for home. I get my pay this week, so our next foray into the wide, wide world of shopping will see you sorted for some new clothes."
The idea of anything new and, more importantly, *his* always brought a smile to Mycroft’s face and a shine to his eyes, something that made Greg happy for more than a single reason.

“It *would* be pleasant to have a few additional choices for my daily dressing.”

“We’ll find some things that do that mix and match business with what you already have and that should give you a respectable amount of options. It'll take some time to build a real wardrobe for you that you deserve, but… we’ll do what we can.”

Mycroft reached over and grabbed Greg’s hand, squeezing it lightly, then gave his human a small kiss.

“I am utterly content to bide my time until I may sport a wardrobe worthy of my majestic stature.”

Laughing at the android’s supremely smug expression, Greg took Mycroft’s hand, kissed it and made a little curtsey for the finale.

“Majestic is the word for it, too. Yours is a body that makes all other bodies weep with envy.”

Preening was utterly inappropriate and gauche, in Mycroft’s opinion, however… sometimes it might be allowed, at least for a brief moment.

“Thank you, Gregory, though I believe yours is easily an aesthetic match for mine.”

‘Oh, you like this common policeman’s bits and pieces, do you?’

“Unquestionably. I ruminated often upon it’s… stellar qualities after we met.”

“I like the sound of that.”

Greg also liked the sound of his Mycroft losing his palpable concern over Sherlock and letting other parts of his brain take control for awhile. If the fucking three-month wait was over, he could use other techniques for soothing his android’s mind, but until then… conversation would have to do. And a few new shirts, a pair or two of pants and some socks of his own. No plain, sturdy policeman’s socks for his android, though… nice-looking socks that proper posh people wore would adorn Mycroft’s feet, because if there was anyone more proper and posh than his Mycroft, their socks were spun with gold thread and lined with banknotes.

“Well, if you’d like, we can scour my poor-quality offerings for something that might look nice on you, if it fits, for our concert today. *I do* have more scarves and… yeah, a green one for you would be a good choice. Blue would be gorgeous, too, but Sherlock’s already got that one. Regardless, scarf or not, you’re the most gorgeous… I suppose I should ask because I’m not sure about things at times… is it alright if I call you a man? I know the term gets used mostly for humans and ‘male’ gets used when pointing out a female versus a male-designed android, but… is it offensive to you if I refer to you as a man?”

Mycroft’s eyes widened a little in shock, more at the fact he’d never particularly thought of that issue, than the issue itself.

“I do not, at all, find it offensive! I am actually most happy, Gregory, that you gave thought to the fact and chose to broach the question.”

“I’m trying, love, though I know I still make mistakes sometimes. Fortunately, you don’t hit me too hard when I do.”
“That would mar your majestic body and the ruin would be nigh on criminal.”

“True. Anyway, regardless, scarf or not, you’re the most gorgeous man I know and you’re going to have all eyes on you this afternoon, as you always do when we’re out and about.”

Stealing a quick kiss from his android’s lips, Greg stared a moment into Mycroft’s beautiful blue eyes and vowed, as he did every day, to keep this special man safe and see he had every opportunity he could ever want in this life. A simple policeman might not have much power for things like that, but Greg Lestrade had never let anything stop him when he put his mind to a job or a goal…

“The only eyes about which I care, my dear, are yours.”

“Flatterer. We’ll see if you’re still saying that once you’ve got expensive clothes and an important, influential job and all the handsome lads are throwing themselves at you for any form of filthy fun you might desire.”

“Dear me, I may have to hire a secretary of some form to manage my bustling schedule.”

“Sherlock needs a job.”

“Ooh… that is an intriguing suggestion. And, to liberate him from the shelter, I would first have to purchase him, which I do admit that is a highly amusing idea. I suspect, though, that he would function appallingly at his tasks simply out of spite and my means would, ultimately, be counterproductive to my desired ends.

“Sherlock’s unemployed again!”

“Verily, I believe it is the case. As am I… that must be my next order of business.”

Greg took Mycroft’s hand and, once more, began walking him down the street while the android thought about the future, deciding a stop in the bookshop a few blocks along was a nice way to spend the upcoming half hour or so. Let Mycroft see what books might take his fancy for the next trip to the library and maybe find a few of his own that appealed. Actually, Mycroft might enjoy working in bookshop or library if there was an opening available. Surrounded by books all day and people who actually read them… finding employment that kept the android engaged, interested and not eternally irritated by the people around him was going to be difficult and no stone could be left unturned.

Not police work, though. Mycroft would go loony after one week on the job! He’d make a cracking Chief Inspector or higher, but not a typical constable or even sergeant plodding along on patrol. A nice administrative post where he could manage all the minions and tend to all the fussy paperwork Stamford said Mycroft both enjoyed and had a raging talent for. That skill was going to be important when it was time to prepare the all-important emancipation package. And their taxes. Buying a home. Not that it was time to think about that last bit, but… if that ever did come about, Mycroft would be the man to conquer the paperwork mountain. Couples cooperated on things, didn’t they? He’d happily keep the pencils sharpened and the kettle going as his part of things. Very important to keep the scales balanced…

“Hmnmnm….”

“Good hmmm or bad hmmm?”

John watched Sherlock hesitantly taste the food on his fork and the expected dramatics that went
with it such as visual scrutiny and a fair amount of sniffing.

“It does not inspire disgust.”

“We have a winner! And, I agree with that, too. Used to come here a long time ago when, I suppose it was the parents who ran the show and, now, it’s just as good as ever. And they certainly aren’t misers with the portions. Easily enough for some to come home and make a grand breakfast for a hard-working man.”

“Who would that be?”

“Bastard.”

“I am unfamiliar with the individual.”

John stole a large, plump piece of pork off of Sherlock’s plate and waved it menacingly in front of the android’s face.

“You’re lucky you made a good showing at the morgue today or you’d be wearing this on the end of your nose.”

Sherlock’s immediate instinct to comment on the fact that, barring hollowing out the center of the morsel, affixing it to his nose would be impossible was quelled by the self-satisfaction he was feeling over John’s evaluation. Of course he had made a good showing, he was a genius after all, however… it was pleasant to have corroboration for his observations. Especially, if he was honest, when that corroboration was from John. The doctor was particularly capable in expressing ideas and providing… corrective instruction… that made sense and was not… it was somewhat infantile to be concerned about the phrasing of such things, but, there were times when the cruelty of words was more difficult to bear than others. That was not proving to be relevant with John as his words, though honest and direct, were not hurtful.

“Molly properly recognized my exceptional skill level.”

“She did say you had a talent for the work. Think it’s what you’d like to do when… you have an opportunity?”

“Unlikely. While the skillset of a pathologist offers appeal, the daily drudgery would bore me into shutting down permanently.”

“What might keep you functioning, then?”

Sherlock’s face adopted that dissatisfied expression that John had come to know very well in their short acquaintance.

“I do not know. Nothing that has been paraded before me as an option has any appreciable degree of interest. At least for pursuing for any length of time. The acquisition of skills and knowledge is always useful, provided, I should add, the skills and information are useful, however, to work day to day on the same thing… the concept is intolerably tedious.”

Strangely, John understood perfectly Sherlock’s meaning. He enjoyed being a doctor and he’d enjoyed being in the Army, however, there were often days where… there simply wasn’t any excitement to speak of. Not that he needed a lot, because a good afternoon on the sofa with a film or an evening at a pub were more than acceptable ways to spend time, but for his day to day labor, something a bit more diverse would be nice. That was one of the reasons he was pursuing training in android medicine. It was something new that offered a measure of variety to his patients and their
problems.

“I think a number of people go through that, trying to match interests and talents with a career. Some simply have to make their own. Maybe that’s something you can do.”

This expression was deeply thoughtful and pleased John more than a little, since it meant Sherlock was actually giving his words real and thorough consideration. The android was a genius, from what he could discern, and it was a little worrying, at times, that his own brain would be able to keep up or offer any interest to one operating at that high a level. Apparently, he wasn’t doing too terrible a job of engaging with Sherlock’s intellect, even if it often seemed his words simply acted as a springboard for Sherlock’s own ideas to erupt. If Sherlock was bored of him or his brain, that would certainly be expressed loudly and clearly.

“That is not an unlikely scenario. What is required is experiencing as much as possible so that I might establish exactly along which lines my efforts should be placed.”

“I think Mike will support that, as long as your lines aren’t ridiculous, dangerous or mental.”

“My faith in that is not as robust as yours. I was required to humiliate myself in the most disgraceful manner to secure even this small measure of freedom.”

“You mean he made you ask and actually give a good reason for wanting a day out?”

“As I said, humiliation and disgrace.”

The world of work was no more ready for Sherlock than Sherlock was for it.

“Poor you. Well, if it helps, I know Mike will ask me about today and I suspect he’ll phone Molly for a report, too. Since it really was a worthwhile experience, those reports will go a long ways towards gaining you another bit of jobs exploration. You could shadow me for a day of rounds with my android patients, for example. Maybe go with Greg and Anderson for a tour of the police station and…”

“I would rather drink lye.”

“As a doctor, I cannot advise that as a method of getting out of Bring Your Child to Work Day. Anderson said he was hoping for work in Forensics and that seemed to interest you… maybe they could drop you with that group for a few hours to see what they do when investigating a crime.”

“Hmmm… that would be marginally less disheartening than following Lestrade while he issues citations for unsanctioned dog defecation and chases street urchins.”

“You make police work sound so very, very sexy.”

“Someone must, for it certainly cannot do so on its own.”

John sometimes hated his giggly laugh, but it married quite nicely with Sherlock’s deeper chuckle so… maybe it wasn’t so bad after all.

“There’s your job! Sexifying police work.”

“That is not entirely unsound, though, if it requires substantial dealings with the public, I shall reconsider the option.”

“And you’ll have to tolerate Mycroft’s yelling that Greg is sexy enough for the whole police
service in Britain, which will be loud, incessant and probably supported by photos he’s snapped of Greg’s out-of-condition body.”

“What a ghastly thought; it has nearly put me off my dinner.”

“Oh, I’ll have it then.”

John’s reach was countered by Sherlock’s lightning-quick grab of his fork and using it to pin John’s sleeve to the tabletop.

“Wrong.”

“Greedy.”

“I prefer to think of it as being territorial.”

“I’ll storm those borders before the night’s over, Sherlock, just watch and see.”

Realizing how utterly tawdry that sounded, John coughed and took a quick sip of water, hoping Sherlock didn’t catch the correct end of this particular stick.

“I have two hands, as well as a knife to supplement my weaponry. My plate shall remain under my control.”

Stick-end taking avoided!

“Fine, you gluttonous android. Guard your plate with your life, but when the fortune cookies arrive, expect the battle to begin in earnest.”

“What is a fortune cookie? It sounds preposterous.”

“Oh, you’ll find out when you watch me eat yours and laugh at the wealth, prosperity, good fortune, love, long life and all the rest that I’ll have and you won’t.”

“Is this some form of children’s story?”

“Yes, because I’m telling it to you.”

“Your attempts at humor are as pathetic as Mycroft’s. I shall obtain a book on the subject for you to study to improve your skills.”

Which simply cemented in John’s mind the fact that there would be more time spent with Sherlock, and that the android thought that the case, too. Since Sherlock had no tolerance for doing things he didn’t want to do, spending time with Doctor John Watson was on the list of want-to-do activities, and that was a fine thing, indeed. A very fine thing in point of fact.

“I shall also obtain a book on the various physical expressions of intimacy common with humans and study that one myself. We shall discuss it during our next evening out, which, I expect, will be soon. Use whatever leverage you have with Administrator Stamford and see that we are free for some form of recreation within the next few days. Mycroft said that films viewed at a cinema had an enhanced enjoyment quality, so we might consider that a possibility. I also have interest in various museums and we may visit those as well. Use your judgement as to what Stamford will approve and choose accordingly.”

Since John’s brain had stopped functioning at ‘physical expressions of intimacy common with humans,’ Sherlock’s continued words counted as wasted breath, not that the android noticed. As
rabbit-in-the-headlamps as was John, Sherlock was the driver of the car, late for a meeting, going forward at speed, assured that any rabbitish acquaintances were ready to jump into the passenger’s seat and start rummaging for the map. And, despite the lack of appropriate ears, John was a very appropriate person to have along, sharing the ride. It would require far more data than he currently possessed, but… John was different than most humans and that difference was both intriguing and refreshing. And, in the interests of full scientific disclosure… it was also enjoyable and stimulating. Now, he just needed the time to learn the extent of where this could lead. And what he would need to do to ensure that nothing, such as an interested buyer, obstructed his plans…
“You look happy.”

Greg smiled at Anderson, with exactly the sort of smile that said ‘I know you’re being an arse so fuck off you wanker,’ then huffed a breath of warm air onto his hands to keep them from freezing.

Crime scene duty was never fun because it was never terribly interesting for the ones only tasked to keep the curious away and kick reporters in the shins if they tried to sneak their noses into things, but when it was cold and damp, that love of job and duty took a further downturn.

“I’m a wet flannel that’s been tossed into the freezer. Of course I’m happy!”

“Daydream about Mycroft warming you up. That will put a smile on your face. It’ll nauseate me, but I’m a proper friend who will endure the stomach distress to see you helped in your hour of need.”

Now Greg’s face held a real smile and Anderson patted himself on the back for a job well done. Thank you, Mycroft, for providing powerful Greg-managing tools to improve the efficiency of their working relationship. And to manipulate his sergeant whenever the situation called for it.

“He’d do a brilliant job of it, too. I watch him and it’s obvious he’s… he’s got a sensual side. Likes experiencing things with all his senses and taking his time to really take in the fullness of whatever he’s doing. When it’s me he’ll be doing… oh yes…”

“Yeah, enough of that. Nausea already too much to endure, even as your friend. You have one of those countdown things up on your bedroom wall, don’t you, striking off the days until you can dive into the pool of ravishment.”

“No… not yet. Once I get paid, I can make the investment.”

“Paper, pencil. We’ve got that at the station.”

“Too much work. Besides, I’d make the lines for the grids all crooked and Mycroft would melt down.”

“He does seem fussy about that sort of thing, sensuality aside.”

“It’s orderly sensuality. Part of why he’s unique.”

“Speaking of unique… Sherlock?”

Another real smile lit Greg’s face and he paused a moment to remember breakfast, which consisted of Mycroft tossing toast onto the table in front of him, but no plate, and pouring coffee into the sugar bowl by mistake since he was fully focused on getting to the shelter as early as possible. Finally, two large policeman’s hands were applied to the android’s back and with a quick press of a jacket into Mycroft’s arms, the world’s most protective older brother was shoved out of their flat with the door firmly closed behind him. Not that Mycroft noticed since the sound of running feet was very audible in the corridor.

“He had a proper date with John, that included dinner after their visit to the morgue, and it’s all hands to push for another as soon as possible. Sherlock stole one of the staff member’s mobiles and texted Mycroft a flurry of information this morning before I was even awake.”
“A thief and a runaway… that’s a quality set of family traits, I must say.”

“Means they’re well-matched. And Sherlock… Mycroft said he was very excited about it all, though I suspect only Mycroft could have deduced that from Sherlock’s messages.”

“Another besotted human-android couple. Maybe there’s hope for me yet.”

“I’ll talk to Stamford about it. He probably knows a nice lady android who doesn’t mind an ugly-faced, sour-tempered prat holding her hand.”

“WooHoo! Once in awhile I’m actually happy to know you.”

“The feeling is mutual. That’s good, too, since you’re next to babysit Sherlock during his careers training.”

“What!”

“He wants to see the forensics side of policing and you’re best qualified for that. You also know that lot fairly well and can cushion Sherlock’s crash landing onto their patch.”

“No. Absolutely not.”

“He asked for you by name. I think you have a new friend and you need all you can get, you irritable berk.”

“No. On both counts.”

“I’ll clear it with the Inspector, so you don’t have to shuffle into his big, intimidating office, with your hat in hand, like Oliver Twist asking for more gruel.”

“No!”

“Fine, I’ll ask Stamford to ring him and make the request. It might sound more official anyway, coming from Sherlock’s shelter head. You might even get a week of Sherlock minding that way. Mycroft would be very happy about that and a happy Mycroft means a happy me.”

Anderson scowled darkly at Greg, who was wearing his merriest grin yet and rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet as he contemplated the rewards a happy Mycroft might bestow.

“I am not going to be tasked with holding back the entire Forensics unit while they try to murder Sherlock with their bare hands!”

“Bring one of the sniffer dogs with you, then. Some of them have a properly nasty temper.”

“I’ll pay you cold hard currency to shake that foolishness right out of your head.”

“No. But, for curiosity’s sake, what figure were you thinking of?”

“Whatever you want.”

“Too low. Happy Mycroft’s worth more than that.”

The frustrated toddler noise that erupted from his constable satisfied Greg on a primal level and he considered his botheration a job well done. He hadn’t actually been serious about the whole business, but giving it a little thought, and the enormous amount of amusement to be taken from Anderson’s agony, this plan was now a go. He’d phone Stamford to get things started as soon as he
had a moment away from the person most likely to destroy his mobile the moment it came out of his pocket. Anderson was a sneaky, swift bastard, too and there clearly was murder in his eyes. In truth, it was a fairly good look for him…

__________

“Stop smiling.”

“Gregory tells me I am most adorable when I smile.”

“You appear gaseous, which is not even possible for an android.”

“I stand corrected. Now, do reveal the details about your day at the morgue, brother dear. Your texts were most illuminating, however, kindly do not again ‘borrow’ a mobile from one of the staff without first asking permission.”

“The lout never noticed. I returned it to his pocket before the discovery was made.”

“And, did you erase the texts, so there was no evidence of your pilferage?”

“Do you believe me dimwitted?”

“No, however you, as well as I, often lack certain information and facts about the world around us due lack of exposure to said information and facts.”

“There remains no trace of my loan.”

“Excellent. Then we shall consider that matter closed. Now… confess.”

“I find you boring, fat and humorless.”

“All things I know well, so regale me with new tales of your deeds and misdeeds.”

“I refused to eat the offal they served at breakfast and was forced to take what nourishment I could from the dust above the doorframes and long breaths of the fetid air that wafts about this asylum.”

“What a bracing morning you had. Now let us move back temporally and discuss yesterday’s events.”

“Which are my business, so… no.”

“If I have a better idea of how you perceived the success of your day, I might be able to parlay that into a stronger argument to Administrator Stamford to award you additional opportunities to explore jobs possibilities. I suspect Doctor Watson would welcome escorting you, say, for additional excursions to St. Bart’s or the android clinics in the city.”

“John has already suggested that.”

“How felicitous! I am certain you found that a superb idea.”

“Hmmmm… in point of fact, I find myself wearying of John’s company.”

Mycroft’s near-choke had him miss the tiny smile on Sherlock’s lips.

“You… you cannot mean that, brother.”
“Why not?”

“Your texts! They were unfailingly laudatory of your day!”

“Having had time to think since then… my mind is changing on the subject.”

“But… but… but…”

“Yes? Have you become some form of uninspiring cuckoo clock?”

“Sherlock… your regard for John could not yet have waned! Not after you and he…”

Mycroft realized his shock was allowing his mouth to go in prohibited directions a touch too late and, from his brother’s triumphant smirk, Sherlock was well aware of his failure.

“You are inexcusably nosy, Mycroft, and yesterday, you disgraced yourself utterly with your conduct. I would spit upon you if I could be bothered to manufacture a sample for the occasion.”

“I see… you were aware of my presence.”

“From the onset. Your association with the lummox has reduced your intelligence to the level of a piece of dung.”

“Incorrect. And it was my concern for you that had me behave, perhaps, a touch impetuously.”

“You violated my privacy. That rather ups the stakes for both ‘a touch’ and ‘impetuously.’ “

“There is no privacy to be had on a city street, brother, so your argument is without merit.”

“My argument is replete with merit since you had no business spying upon me.”

“I shall not apologize for taking steps to ensure your day began on a positive note.”

“Pfft… how much positivity could be gained walking to the Underground.”

“Nevertheless, I have a responsibility towards you and I will see it met when and how I see fit.”

“You are an overbearing, supercilious, martinet and I will not stand for more of your nosy-parkering.”

“I am an android who loves my brother and desires to see him happy.”

“Tend to your own affairs. Speaking of which, how horrifically has Lestrade defiled you while you have been in his clutches? Are you still attempting to ward off his advances with the excuse of class status?”

“Not class status, brother. It is a sensitive and complicated dynamic between owner and android, one not conducive to a fully-consensual or equitable relationship.”

“Blather.”

“Incorrect. And Gregory supports my position.”

“He supports the idea of taking you in his ape-like arms and enacting his lusts upon your body.”

Something Mycroft fantasized about far more than he would admit. The internet posited such a wealth of titillating possibilities for Day 91 of his post-shelter existence…
“Correct, however, he is a gentleman and, further, respects both my wishes and my body. We are content, at present, with chaste embraces and simple kisses.”

“Which are certainly fish-like in their coldness, unlike the one John and I shared.”

Mycroft’s brain leapt at the line Sherlock had thrown out and gleefully grabbed at the hook.

“Yes… that was a particularly passionate example of the breed.”

“Why you would expect any less from me is beyond my understanding.”

“And was John satisfied with the experience?”

“Most satisfied, actually. He was decidedly put out when I informed him that I initiated our kiss purely to send you into one of your fits of hysteria and give us a chance to escape your spying.”

“You… oh. Oh, I understand.”

“No, I doubt you do, but that is fine because as I previously stated, my business is not yours to mind.”

Mycroft narrowed his eyes at his brother and turned the full force of his observational talents on Sherlock, catching a sufficient number of minute clues to feel his surge of disappointment sink back down like a heavy stone. Yes, Sherlock may have hoped for a diversion, however, there was more to the action, either in original intent, or in the effects in the aftermath. The romantic forecast was still a highly positive one…

“Of course and I will pry no further. Now, shall we discuss the practical experience you gained and how it met your expectations?”

“Have you nothing better to do with your time?”

“Nary a thing! My attention can fully be yours for the entire day.”

Sherlock’s death rattle and fall back onto his bed was in line with Mycroft’s expectations and he budged his chair closer to the bed to continue their discussion. So far, their conversation was yielding great rewards and, with work, the rewards would continue to flow. Dear Sherlock… such an exceptional talent that was finally able to seek its conduit into the world. Gregory would be thrilled with the developments. Tonight, they could relax on the sofa, listen to a recording of the same delightful piece of music they’d seen performed live yesterday, sip a glass of wine and share the stories of their day. And, tonight… he might allow Gregory to rub his feet. It seemed to be something humans did on occasion and it appeared to be most enjoyable, by all accounts. Of course, he would ensure his feet were scrupulously clean beforehand as a courtesy. It was only fair as his human might be engaged in the activity for some deliciously-extended time…

“You actually did it, you bastard!”

Greg looked up from the sheaf of papers he was thumbing through and braced himself for the annoyed constable bearing down on him. It had been several days since their conversation on a certain subject and that subject was now coming to a head.

“What, prithee, mean you by ‘it,’ dear fellow?”
“Fuck you, Greg Shakespeare and your little dog, too.”

“Did Shakespeare have a dog? I don’t remember that from school, but I slept through a lot of my lessons.”

“You actually cleared Sherlock’s shadowing me with the Inspector!”

“Actually, Mike did that and I just reaffirmed that you were well-suited to show Sherlock that side of police work and other general policing skills. If it’s any consolation, the Inspector now very firmly knows you want to move over to doing the forensics part of investigating and actually said he’d keep an eye out for your application when a position opens.”

“He… he did?”

“Yep. I think he was impressed that you stepped up and volunteered to offer a service to our android citizens, one of them at least, and it’s always good to be noticed in a positive way, unlike the way you normally get noticed by every person in the entire world. Mycroft was very happy at the news, too. Very happy indeed…”

So happy he’d nearly burst with energy and that made getting some languid, romantic music going so he could teach his android how to slow dance a very easy thing to accomplish. Holding his Mycroft and gently turning him around their small flat, while they simply enjoyed the feel of each other’s bodies and the sensation of being perfectly content with the moment and the person they were sharing it with… life was good.

“Ugh… I don’t want to know what that means. In all seriousness, though, Greg… what am I supposed to do? I’m not allowed to actually do anything with the forensics teams and we can’t work a case, so…”

“About that… you’re going to be temporarily assigned to a case that involves a good deal of diverse forensics work so you will be able to participate, at least to a limited degree. It’s only for three days, but that’ll put your foot more squarely in the door and gain you a chance to show your skills to the Inspector who will supervise your work, so… use this as an opportunity! It’s a tiny one, I admit, but if it goes well, maybe that can be leveraged to a more extended trial posting. They do those, you know, for people to see if the job really fits their skills and interests and act as an audition for the ones doing the future hiring. It’s not a guarantee of anything, but… it’s something extra to add to your application when a permanent post does open.”

Anderson’s scowl didn’t diminish, but it did take a more contemplative cast, leaving Greg somewhat confident that the carrot he’d just dangled was doing it’s intended good works.

“I suppose there’s some truth to that.”

“There’s a lot of truth to it. AND once they meet Sherlock, the fact that you can manage his chaos is going to be another skill in your portfolio.”

“I don’t even have faith I can even keep him in the building!”

“Run out to a pet shop and buy a leash and collar. One of the small collars that’ll fit over his wrist, so it doesn’t look like you’re both into some kinky sexual stuff that has no business in the workplace.”

“Can you take this at all seriously?”

“No, I believe that far above my level of capability. Or interest. In fact…”
Catching sight of the parade coming up the corridor, Greg grinned gleefully and reached out to spin Anderson in the direction of his destiny.

“… looks like the fun is about to begin.”

Anderson’s long, pained groan was completely ignored by Greg who smiled widely at Mycroft and Stamford who had escorted Sherlock for the start of his first day at work.

“Hello, love. This one give you any trouble? I’ve got the power to arrest him if Sherlock’s been a mischief.”

“Sherlock’s conduct has been exemplary, my dear, so scripting Page One of his inevitable police file does not need to begin at this time.”

And by exemplary, Mycroft meant his brother had only caused his standard amount of mayhem during dressing, discussion of proper conduct and expectations, transport to the police station and the brief walk through the building, which was filled with a myriad of individuals who made exceptional targets for Sherlock’s observational skills and complete lack of either verbal filter or volume control.

“Administrator Stamford, I’m sure Mycroft’s gushed his gratitude all over your nice jacket, but let me add my bit to the deluge. This is a wonderful opportunity for Sherlock and it’s a joy for us to host him for this experience.”

“Eloquently put, Sergeant Lestrade, but somewhat incorrect as I believe you are being rather royal with your use of ‘us,’ when it’s Constable Anderson who is going to be doing all the work.”

“And I couldn’t be happier for it! Philip here has been positively glowing at the thought of doing this bit of community service. Look at him… he lights up the room.”

Sherlock and Mycroft both memorized the gesture Anderson threw at Greg as it was a new one in their experience, as was the one Greg enthusiastically returned.

“Ignoring you now, Sergeant, and focusing on our community-minded constable… I do appreciate this, Philip, as this is a genuine interest of Sherlock and I have had, in the past, a series of productive discussions with various members of the police echelon about bringing more androids into the police service. If we can document a successful model, that would make acceptance of the idea and budgeting for it a lot easier to promote. This is a very good first step towards that goal and Sherlock has been fully apprised of how important his role is in the whole affair.”

“Your voice is still yammering in my head, Stamford, like the incessant banging of an out-of-tune gong.”

“As you can see, fully apprised. Now, I shall leave my charge in your care and return to my other duties. Mycroft, are you going to stay awhile or do you want to me to drop you at your flat?”

“Thank you for the offer, Administrator Stamford, however… I have some shopping to do.”

And, though there was no reason to do so, Mycroft immediately pulled out his wallet and proudly held up his bank card, which he and Greg and gotten yesterday when they had used Greg’s meal break to set up a bank account for the android and transfer a portion of Greg’s newly deposited wages into it so Mycroft had at least some degree of financial freedom.

“Oh, very good! Then, I’ll leave you to it. Sherlock, your transportation back to the shelter will be on time, so kindly don’t make the driver wait while you… do whatever it is you’re doing when you should be returning home.”
With a smile and a nod, Mike made his way towards the exit, leaving Sherlock in the many hands of individuals who would get him pushed in the correct direction to begin his day. The reports from Sherlock’s stint at the morgue were highly positive, so there was some confidence this three-day experience would show a marked degree of success. Of course, with Sherlock, a sliding scale was necessary for evaluation, however, his own capacity for fiction when writing reports was improving by leaps and bounds lately…

“Are we ready to begin? I refuse to continue standing here with the riff raff and criminals.”

“There are police officers here, too, you know.”

“Who did you think I meant by riff raff, Anderson?”

Being grabbed by the arm and dragged towards the start of his work made Sherlock snort loudly and Mycroft found himself somewhat beside himself at the sight of his brother storming along another path to his future.

“You alright, Mycroft?”

“Oh… yes. Simply wistful.”

“They grow up fast, don’t they?”

“That they do. I assume you have your own busy day ahead.”

“Always. But, I will have time to check in a few times to see how things are going. And, yes, I will inform you immediately when the checking in is done.”

“I would be most grateful for that. I am hopeful for glad tidings, but I will understand if the tidings are of a slightly bleaker nature.”

“He’ll do fine, love. Do you know where you’re going for your new clothes?”

As if Mycroft’s intense scrutiny of the adverts in the newspaper this morning, and interrogation of his breakfast partner as to the most likely places to find good bargains for quality clothes, was not a strong clue as to the android’s answer.

“I believe so. If nothing satisfies me, then… I shall simply have to explore further the offerings of this fine city.”

“Meaning you’re going to have fun wandering about and stopping in where something looks interesting.”

“That is a secondary consideration.”

The disbelieving expression on Greg’s face made Mycroft laugh and reach out to quickly run a hand along his human’s jawline. His Gregory knew him very well…

“Very well… I will admit to an ever-present curiosity about London and am most content to take what advantage I can of opportunities to explore it in more depth.”

“There’s not much to explore for inexpensive togs, I suspect, but have fun anyway. I’ll let you know if I’ll be late.”

“Excellent. Enjoy your day, Gregory.”
“You too. Keep watch on your bank card, though. Pickpockets aren’t a thing of the past, you know.”

Laughing at Mycroft’s grand display of protecting his new connection to the real word, Greg gave the android a quick kiss and, after a look around, a small pat on the bum before making his own way towards what the day had in store, knowing that Mycroft was most certainly watching his arse as he walked away. The android had a particular fondness for that particular piece of anatomy and there was absolutely nothing to complain about for that.

While Greg made an effort to showcase his luscious bum to best effect, Mycroft enjoyed the view and threw his mind towards his own plans. Sherlock would steal someone’s mobile at some point, so data would come from that direction, his Gregory would keep his word and stop in occasionally to verify Sherlock was doing well and being treated appropriately so more data would flow from that path. And, he may, only may, have texted Molly about Sherlock’s new adventure and there was a 96% chance she would pay a visit and provide a summary of her observations. And John had also, during one of his frequent phone conversations with Sherlock, learned of this particular turn of events and... well, the percent chance that he would make an appearance was also rather extreme. That should suffice, for now, in terms of monitoring Sherlock’s progress but, tomorrow, a small request to observe for an hour or so the work in which his brother was engaged would not be amiss. After all, he had his own jobs plan to formulate and that could only be affected through the collection of information. That this particular career direction held no interest whatsoever was completely… marginally… beside the point...
Money, money, money… a pocketful of money…

Or, to be more precise, a small quantity of funds on a bank card that was fully his to spend as he pleased. After his Gregory’s wages had been deposited, they sat together and crafted a budget that permitted all necessities to be managed, Gregory’s savings to start again to grow, at his insistence, and a measure of independent funds to be put in his own personal account, at Gregory’s insistence, so that he had a true taste of freedom he had only before known when Stamford had given him monies to enjoy nights in his policeman’s company. That money had been earned, of course, and so had this windfall as his human had successfully argued that the work he did to keep the flat in order and prepare their meals meant he should share in the funds earned from his human’s police work. The true war had been over the amount, as dear Gregory wanted to allot more, but he championed the savings situation and it was a rather intense battle to settle on a value on which they both could agree.

And now he had to decide what to do with his money. Gregory had begged him not to purchase groceries or household supplies, as that was already factored into their budget and to work, instead, on building his collection of personal possessions. The question to address was what personal possessions he needed or wanted to acquire. Clothes was primary on the list, that much was certain. Beyond that… it was rather difficult to know what he wanted as he had virtually no experience with what was on offer! Or the cost of such things. While walking with his Gregory, he had taken only cursory notice of the various offerings in the various shops, but not with the mindset that he could actually own what he was seeing. Owning anything was still a rather startling concept and it would take time to fully embrace the notion that, yes, he had the right and ability to purchase something and call it his.

“Oh, do pardon me.”

Thinking and walking was not a recommended act when one was thinking so deeply that one completely failed to remember that other individuals were occupying the street.

“Mycroft! Hi! Oh, this is a surprise, but a good one, though.”

The happily-smiling face of Molly Hooper beamed up at Mycroft, who found himself in the very new situation of having a chance encounter with someone he recognized.

“Molly, dear me, yes. I… I must say I never expected today to meet anyone I actually knew since the number of individuals I know can nearly be counted by the fingers on a single hand.”

“Well, I shall now inform you that this area is fairly popular with the Bart’s staff, since we can nip out during breaks and do a bit of shopping and not be late for work getting back. I actually have the morning off, so I’m getting a few things before it’s back to the coal mine. What are you shopping for?”

The question of the day.

“Clothes, to start. Gregory has provided me with funds to begin growing my wardrobe and that shall be my first challenge to conquer. Beyond that… I suppose it depends on what remains in my account once the clothing costs have been paid.”

“I love shopping for clothes! This is a good place for it, too, since they’ve got great stuff if you
know where to look.”

Oh, do tell.

“And where might the ‘where to look’ locations be found?”

“Leave this to me, Mycroft. I’ll see you with some smart choices that will make Greg’s tongue hang out of his mouth.”

“Heavens, that sounds dreadful!”

“Sorry! Sorry, it’s just an expression. Means he’ll think you look amazing and sexy.”

“Does it? Well then, carry on.”

Molly grinned widely and readied herself for a much better morning than looking for sensible knickers, which had been her goal for the day. This could be fun enough that frilly knickers were warranted! Maybe nobody would know she was wearing them but herself, but the most important person to make happy was herself, so silk and lace loomed quite nicely in the future…

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“Well, doesn’t this look cozy.”

John smirked at the utterly disheveled PC and the equally disheveled android, who looked as if they’d been rolling in a rubbish bin which, from the smell, actually might be the case.

“Your mockery is not appreciated, John.”

“I’ll save it for someone else, then, Sherlock. Caught the killer yet?”

“If Anderson would simply show any degree of competence, and spine, we would have done so an hour ago.”

“Wrong, you bastard. First, you only have a theory that’s based on how a McDonald’s bag was folded before it was thrown into the rubbish. Second, neither of us has any authority to do anything in this investigation but take orders from the people who actually know what they’re doing and aren’t ready yet to present a case to the Inspector in charge of the case.”

“Boring. And inefficient.”

“Police procedure and legal.”

Sherlock’s disdainful wave won him flick on the ear from Anderson, which started an argument involving a great deal of colorful gesticulation, and language, that satisfied John about his decision to pay a visit today because the entertainment value of the trip would be worth the effort.

“Boys, if I find your bottle and teddies, can we calm things down a bit?”

Now the gestures and language were aimed at John who had to admire the instant partnership formed from a common annoyance at him.

“I’m going to tell Mycroft and Greg about your conduct, young men, and then you’ll wish you’d shown better manners.”

Now it was hissing and spitting like angry alley cats, which John would have given his left bollock
to be able to capture on film to enjoy over the years.

“You are a traitorous blackguard, John.”

“And fuck you for good measure!”

“What’s this? My mobile? Readying itself to… hey!”

Exactly who grabbed the phone out of his hand and how it ended down the back of Sherlock’s trousers was a mystery John had no desire to pursue.

“Why are you even here, you miserable doctor? Don’t you have patients to kill? Go do something I can arrest you for.”

“I could murder my patients because it’s a sure thing you two wouldn’t be able to prosecute me. Actually, I was on my way to Bart’s, then remembered it was Sherlock’s first day at police school and the opportunity of photographing this for posterity was too tempting to deny. Of course, with my phone shoved in Sherlock’s arse, that urge is waning rather quickly.”

“I find your lack of support disturbing, John.”

“Thank you, Darth. Want to choke me with your mind?”

“That is ridiculous. Choking requires the use of hands and those are demonstrably absent from my data processing systems.”

John and Anderson shared a look that sealed the deal on the film that would feature in their next movie night.

“I stand corrected. Here’s an idea - how about you go and wash the stink off of you and we can have a quick cuppa before you get stinky again?”

“That is not the worst possible suggestion. Come along.”

It was a contest as to whose eyes were wider in shock, John’s or Anderson’s, as the android grabbed John’s hand and began dragging him towards the showers. The pleading look, however, that John threw back to the PC shifted Anderson’s position from shock to glee, since this bit of amusement was a fitting end to digging through bins. And how lucky that he needed a good shower, too, so he wouldn’t have to miss one second of it…

I cannot believe this.”

“If you are having difficulty recognizing reality, John, ask me and I will inform you if you are inhabiting a hallucination or properly perceiving the real world around you.”

“Funny. Why do I have to be in the shower area with you?”

“So we may continue our conversation.”

“We could do that after your shower.”

“That is unnecessary, given we are both perfectly capable of speaking in a room provided with running water.”
John’s agonized sigh made Anderson cackle evilly and look around the curtain of his shower stall to make a rude noise guaranteed to get up John’s nose.

“You’re an arse, Anderson, and don’t let anyone tell you differently.”

“I have an arse, you mean. Want to see it?”

“John is inspecting no buttocks but mine!”

Anderson’s laughter at John’s seething brought Sherlock stepping out of the shower, dripping wet and naked, to see what going on.

“Why is Anderson braying like a mule?”

If John had whirled around any faster, he would have given himself whiplash, but it wasn’t fast enough to miss... the vision of a very human-like naked Sherlock was now fixed in his mind and there was little doubt it would pay a vision in his dreams with some embarrassing regularity. Sherlock’s designers had been extremely talented at their job...

“Sherlock... please go back in the shower.”

“Why?”

“You’re... you’re naked for heaven’s sake!”

“Which, given you are a doctor, should not inspire prudery.”

“I’m not a doctor and I have no interest in seeing your cock waving about.”

“Why are both you and John imagining extremities in situations where they do not exist? Neither my central data processors nor my penis are provided with hands or arms.”

Turning back to face Sherlock, who was obviously going to be stubborn on this issue, John steeled himself to the gloriously-naked visual onslaught and hoped his panting didn’t interfere with his ability to speak.

“Sherlock, stop bickering with Anderson and get back in the shower.”

“I refuse.”

“Nobody wants to see your naked, gangly body, you ridiculous android! John there looks near turned to stone from the experience.”

“I fail to see... oh. Is... is there something wrong with it?”

Sherlock’s uncertain tone and the more uncertain look on his face punched both Anderson and John in the heart and they each made mental note to remember the android wasn’t fully conversant in everyday human banter. And, since he made the verbal faux pas, the PC decided it was his duty to step in and provide damage control.

“No, Sherlock, there isn’t. It’s got all relevant bits and there’s not a flaw to be found with any of them. People just usually keep those bits out of sight when other people are about. For instance, nobody wants to see John’s naked, doughy body either.”

“That is untrue. I have interest in doing that very thing.”
John decided that Philip Anderson leering at him was the most annoying thing in the universe. In addition, of course, to the android standing in front of him with a highly erotic show of water and soap suds moving tantalizingly across his chest, belly and legs.

“And we are now officially done with the topic of nudity. Sherlock, I’ll say thank you for not agreeing with Anderson’s completely inaccurate description of my body and then I’ll say to get your very appropriately-formed one back into the shower to finish washing so we can have a good cup of tea. That’s precisely what’s called for when a day has taken a turn for the naked.”

Sherlock narrowed his eyes at John who made shooing motions with his hands until the android stepped back into the shower to continue rinsing the morning off of his skin. Admittedly, he’d only made a start in android medicine and didn’t know too many androids personally, but John had never run across one as… Sherlock… as Sherlock. Were his designers and programmers in some contest to create the most singular android in the history of the breed? If so, a perusal of the newspapers should find out who they were because there was no doubt this was a contest they easily won…

Anderson wisely decided that John’s much-needed tea break was best taken without his presence so the doctor and Sherlock could have a moment alone while he went for further directions from the forensics team. So far today, they’d made a solid contribution to the investigation and… it was simply affirming to him that this was the career path he wanted to pursue. Yes, it could be smelly, dirty, hard work, but it was interesting, challenging and used a larger range of his skills and talents than was being tapped on patrol and the other duties he saw as a police constable. Greg may actually have done him a favor, the bastard, but that would not be information shared with the insufferable sergeant. Mycroft was going to richly reward the oaf for this bit of meddling and that could cover his share, too…

“Good, we are alone.”

John was fairly certain those words had initiated some startling things in more than a few films he’d seen, but crossed his fingers this wouldn’t be added to that register.

“Why?”

“Because I can do this and not inflame your matronly instincts.”

Before John could protest that he was many things, but a matron was not one of them, Sherlock leaned in and pressed a soft, gentle kiss to the doctor’s lips.

“Also, as we are not being observed, my intentions cannot be misinterpreted or called into question.”

“I… that’s true. That’s very true. Lots and lots of truth there.”

“Excellent. Now, you mentioned tea. I believe the kettle is in the break room behind that door so you may begin preparing our beverages whenever you like. I have not inspected the quality, but I suppose I can make do with whatever the dull palates of the zombies who shamble among the corridors find agreeable.”

It was a mark of the daze he was in at the moment that John turned to get started on their tea without at least a solid punch to Sherlock’s arm or a smack to the android’s imperious skull. What was happening? How… how had he already gotten firmly involved with Sherlock when he was supposed to still be in the ‘well, let’s see’ stage? Was it witchcraft? The android certainly had his
own brand of magic which, apparently, extended towards mesmerism and... making a chap throw caution to the wind to start thinking about what their 'I’m off to Bart’s, see you later’ kiss was going to be like. He was in a net! Caught in a net made of witchcraft and sultry kisses that... well, the kisses part was nice but the witchcraft was still a bit worrying. Maybe it was time to invest in one of those amulets that warded off hexes and blatant acts of witchery. One of those tinfoil hats, too, so Sherlock couldn’t use secret mind-control powers, either. Yes, that last bit was a touch silly, but the way the android saw into peoples’ heads at times... time to check the DIY shops for lead foil and a book on origami hat making...

“__Yes, this is more along the lines I was hoping to discover.__”

After exhausting the standard chain shops for anything remotely appealing to either of the shoppers, Molly went against her instincts and steered Mycroft to a second-hand vendor who she’d visited often when she wanted something nice, but at a price she could afford.

“I would have brought you here straight away, but... I didn’t know if you’d be comfortable with the idea of buying clothes someone had worn before.”

Mycroft paused a moment and admitted to himself that it was a valid concern on the pathologist’s part.

“That is most understandable and I thank for considering it, but... I find that I am more energized by the possibility of clothing of better quality and appearance than put off by the pre-owned nature of the garments in question.”

“Then we’re in the right place! There are a number of shops like this in the city, so you can investigate the others when you have the chance. They really do have nice things here and aren’t evil about setting their prices. Some of the stock is a bit rubbish, but if you’re willing to take the time to look through what they have, you can always find very nice bargains. The time part is what usually keeps me from stopping in very often, but I’m never disappointed when I do. Ready to get started?”

Mycroft’s small smile as he looked over the various racks and hooks of offerings was the only answer Molly needed and a quick push forward got the android moving towards his starting point. Shopping with another person was always more fun than shopping alone and Molly was ridiculously excited to start having Mycroft try things on so they could get a good idea of his tastes and what looked best on him. Greg was going to owe her *many* cups of good coffee for kitting out his android with clothes that would turn heads. Of course, it would probably make Greg wildly jealous, but that would in no manner reduce the size of the quality-coffee invoice she would present. His seething jealousy would just serve to keep the cups hot when he brought them around to the morgue...

“__Tea break is over, you layabouts. Sherlock, we’ve got work to do and it’s in a nice, clean lab this time, so well done us.__”

Anderson wouldn’t admit to spying on the couple for a few seconds before he officially came around the corner to make his announcement, but he *was* spying and Greg would be happy with the report. If anyone, seeing John and Sherlock alone together, didn’t immediately think them a comfortable, contented couple, then those people needed to have their head examined. Of course, John now looked as if he was checking for any signs of lingering besottedness, but that would change soon enough when he simply admitted that he had fully gone and joined Darth Android on the dark side...
“Very well. I am sufficiently ill from this horrid tea that another sip would begin to corrode my internals. John…”

Bracing himself for their kiss, John felt a touch foolish when Sherlock handed him back his mobile, especially when he realized that Anderson was fully aware of what the stiffening and straightening of his spine indicated. More layers of lead foil for his new hat might be necessary.

“… as I suspect Mycroft will text you for information, tell him his weight generates sufficient gravity to collect satellites, then refuse.”

“I will not say that, but I also won’t disclose any of your naked prancing, because he’ll probably lecture you for it and that’s all something best forgotten.”

Which would not be happening anytime in the near future because that whole scene was forever burned into John’s blissful brain.

“Very well…”

Now, unbraced and unsuspecting, John was quickly drawn into Sherlock’s goodbye kiss, which was longer and more fiery than their earlier one and left the human somewhat at a loss for breath when it was over.

“I shall phone you tomorrow and set a date for our next romantic evening. Mycroft can sort out the permissions with Stamford.”

Rising and making an impatient ‘well, what are we waiting for’ gesture at Anderson, Sherlock glared at the constable’s grin at John, but followed along with no further comment other than a quick look over his shoulder and his own smile at John’s slightly dreamy expression, which softened the doctor’s face in a way that had Sherlock’s staunch approval. This romance business was an easy thing if one had a talent for it and is was clear that he did. Not that he ever before had any interest in pursuing this skillset, of course, but John was a rather electric inspiration for exploring his decidedly stellar ability to be a romantic partner.

Next time, he would need to take the doctor’s pulse during their kiss to monitor heart rate. That was an objective indicator of enjoyment, as was pupil dilation, which had already been noticed during their interaction in the shower. There was another indicator, too, however, the apparent increase in volume of John’s groin area could be attributable to how he was standing and specific folding of the fabric of his trousers. That evidence would have to stay in the anecdotal, but not empirical category for now…

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Ok… one Sherlock seen successfully to his waiting ride back to the shelter. One Anderson checked for permanent damage, mental or physical. One quick word with the Inspector in charge of the NSY’s hottest new forensics team. All the loose ends of the day properly tidied and, now, Greg Lestrade could open the door of his flat, step through, and not have to fake a smile to keep Mycroft from going into a tizzy of worry.

“Oh… fuck me.”

Taking that step through the door brought Greg face to face with an android in rich charcoal trousers and a handsome pullover in a shade of blue that made his eyes glow like sapphires and emphasized the creaminess of his flawless skin. He was… breathtaking.

“I take it you approve, my dear?”
“Approve? Mycroft… you’re stunning! You could go right into one of those fashion mags!”

“How kind of you. I was rather pleased with this particular ensemble. As well as with the others I acquired today.”

Mycroft’s highly-satisfied smile nuzzled Greg’s nethers rather shamefully and the policeman hoped the small growl that rumbled in his throat wasn’t audible to the android’s extremely-sensitive hearing.

“Someone had a nice time shopping, I see.”

“A most delightful time, in point of fact. I was fortunate to bump, literally, into Molly and she escorted me to several establishments that offered clothing I was willing to purchase.”

“I… Mycroft, you didn’t rob a bank or anything, did you, because I know how much money we put into your account and…”

“Fear not, Gregory, I would not dishonor your chosen profession by resorting to banditry. To both Molly’s and my surprise… I am not entirely opposed to perusing second-hand clothing shops for my wardrobe. What I could afford of new merchandise was simply deplorable both in style and quality and what was acceptable was far beyond my financial reach. This compromise works very well. Come, see what else I was able to acquire.”

Greg’s slightly gaping mouth gave Mycroft an ‘ah ha’ moment as he finally understood Molly’s tongue hanging out comment, and he laughed as he took his human’s hand and led him into his bedroom to marvel at the more populated closet.

“Wow! You did well for our lack of money!”

“I may have used certain negotiating skills to best effect.”

Greg shook his head in disbelief at the new shirts, jumpers, trousers and…

“A suit! You bought a suit!”

“And a tie! Actually, I purchased two and Molly presented me one as a gift. I do have to begin seeking employment soon and a suit is most appropriate to wear for interviews and such, is it not?”

“I… yes, I suppose so, but… is anything left of the sales clerk or did you negotiate them down to bare bones and gristle?”

“There was a few wisps of hair remaining, also, if memory serves. In truth, I was fortunate that the trousers were crafted for a gentleman possessing long legs and the jacket was tailored to a trimmer frame. Apparently, it had been sitting for some time in the shop as few visit to purchase garments such as suits and fewer still found this one properly sewn for their proportions. The young woman in charge was most eager to see it leave and willing to discount the price quite substantially when I demonstrated interest.”

Greg lifted the suit out of the closet and softly whistled at Mycroft’s good fortune. With a crisp shirt and tie, his android would cut a striking figure and, yes, that would be good for making an impression for employment interviews. it would also make a good impression when he saved some cash and was able to take this gorgeous man out for a special dinner at one of those restaurants where you had to look smart or they wouldn’t let you in the door. Hopefully, he could probably find someone to lend him a nice suit when the time came…

“You’re going to look like one of those ultra-powerful financial sector blokes or government men
“I think that is a look I would wear well.”

His human’s sharp bark of laughter gave Mycroft his own grin and he took Greg’s bestowed kiss as tribute for his growing skills with humor.

“You will! You’ll wear it amazingly well and I’m going to be a misery thinking about all the people ogling you with their lecherous eyes.”

“My virtue shall not be compromised by anyone sporting lecherous eyes, my dear. On that you have my word.”

“Shite. That leaves me lonely then, because my eyes will be the most lecherous of the lot!”

Shaking his head in fake exasperation, Mycroft took the suit and hung it back in the closet, replacing it with himself as the focus of his human’s attention.

“And I will revel in them. For you, I grant eternal dispensation to ogle with abandon.”

Wrapping his arms around Greg’s waist, Mycroft began what was fast becoming his favorite activity – kissing his human until he could feel Greg’s heart beating against his own chest.

“Abandon will be the truth of it, too. No matter what you wear, you fill my eyes, Mycroft. Right now, you’re a jewel more beautiful than any in the Queen’s treasure. I have to say, your taste in clothes is brilliant and I can’t wait until we get a little ahead in the bank so you can indulge yourself a bit more.”

“Hence my impetus to quickly find employment. I am finding the acquisition of attractive clothing most enjoyable.”

One nip to the tip of Mycroft’s nose was Greg’s response, along with marrying his giggle with Mycroft’s happy laughter at his own jest.

“I wholly support you finding a job purely to adorn yourself with fine clothing.”

“Then we are agreed, which is always a pleasant thing.”

“Too true. And, to celebrate, how about we stop in at the pub for a pint or two? I’ll phone Anderson to join us and you can interrogate him mercilessly about Sherlock’s first day at work.”

If Mycroft’s eyes got any wider Greg worried he’d have to reach out and drag the lids down manually.

“That is an exemplary idea. I received very little in the way of data today and am very anxious to have a fuller picture of Sherlock’s progress.”

Meaning his android would redouble his spying tomorrow, but that was for others to deal with and Greg was more than happy for it.

“That’s our plan, then. Let me change into something more in line with your lovely outfit and run a razor over this stubble, so I don’t shame you in public.”

“Clothing, yes. Stubble… no.”

“My Mycroft likes the rugged look?”
“At times. And this is one of them.”

Gently rubbing his roughened cheek against Mycroft’s perfectly smooth one, Greg purred like a contented cat, then gave his android one more kiss before getting himself ready to properly escort the fashion model out for a few drinks. He’d have a stiff one ready for Anderson, too, because the chance it was needed was very, very high. His own streams of information today were a bit more robust than Mycroft’s and… Sherlock’s exploits were already becoming legendary. Useful and productive, but legendary. As in there would be legends about the tall, dark-haired android that terrorized the NSY while helping solve crimes and making deductions that impressed and annoyed even the most jaded of forensics experts. Mycroft would be so proud…
One tall android and one scruffy police constable having a slapping-hands fight wasn’t, from one perspective, quite what Greg expected to see when he paid a visit to the hard-working duo but, from another, it was exactly what he expected to see, though he wouldn’t let his brain think about that too much or it might short circuit.

“This is absolutely the opposite of the definition of professional conduct, lads.”

The in-unison ‘he started it,’ had Greg doing a brief reality check that he was not, in actuality, a primary school teacher.

“I don’t care who started it, because I’m ending it. Do you two do any actual work or do you just argue and flail at each other all day?”

“We would accomplish boundlessly more work if Anderson was not rigidly and ridiculously welded to the evidentiary rules.”

“You can’t simply go in front of a judge and say ‘I know he did it because of the types of sweets wrappers on the floor of his car and the smudge on the glovebox!’

“I fail to see why not. It is absolutely incontrovertible.”

“Only to you! Something that seems impossible to get through your thick head!”

Wondering if he should simply come back later, then realizing this likely went on all day, Greg cleared his throat and made his best ‘settle down’ gesture, which earned him his own slapped hands and instigated a three-person slappy-flaily war that fortunately ended before anyone with sacking powers walked by.

“Sherlock, Anderson’s right. You’ve got to connect all the dots into a straight line that the average citizen on a jury could follow and see your point. Your brain might only need two dots to make a picture, but everyone else needs lots of dots, so work on adding all you can to make the evidence as clearly incontrovertible as you believe it to be.”

“Boring.”

“But necessary. We’re often very sure about someone’s guilt or innocence, but our opinions, even when we’ve got some bits of evidence to support them, aren’t enough. Not to mention, whatever barrister is acting for the defense is going to kick at every one of those dots, looking to cast doubt on them. They will succeed sometimes, so the more dots you have to start, the more are left standing when it’s time for judge and jury to make a final decision.”

“Once again, lesser minds make complex what should be simplicity itself.”

“A burden we all must bear. Now, are you and my PC going to play nice and create lots of dots today or do I need to see you assigned to vehicle maintenance to wash some cars?”

“Sherlock’s right, Greg, you’re a humorless lout and we’re ashamed to even know you.”

“See! Already you’re cooperating again. Just needed that bit of a push in the right direction. Now, speaking of pushes, I’m off to push another criminal into jail through my incontrovertible testimony in court. Sherlock, remember to phone your brother now and again so he doesn’t worry
himself to death.”

“If he is so feeble that his systems erode from lack of communication, then I consider it my contribution to the evolutionary advancement of androids by culling the herd of its weakest member.”

“Nothing warms the heart like a brother’s love. Anderson… just don’t kill him, alright?”

The ‘I make no promises’ followed Greg down the corridor as he moved towards gathering his things for an hour or two in court, which was always such a joy. But, the day already had that feel to it which signaled crime was in the air, and that would make the afternoon a lively one, at least. A few easy calls for some petty burglary, being a public nuisance or the ever popular ‘I know my neighbor’s up to something, so go and arrest them’ was likely awaiting him and that wasn’t something to moan about. Get out and about, maybe do a few turns in a patrol car with one of the PC’s milling about hoping to do something other than act as tea boy for a higher-ranks meeting… good weather always made for active days and, after the drudgery of court, that would be a blessing. Just had to be certain he didn’t get assigned to the case Anderson and Sherlock was working on or he’d have to deal with their tantrums which was not described in any manner as a blessing. There wasn’t enough after-work lager in the world to make up for that agony…

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Insipid. Boring. Tedium. Ugh… physical labor…

Mycroft scanned the jobs listings and pointedly refused to notice that the piece of paper he’d placed next to him to record possible options remained as blank as the moment he’d set it on the kitchen table. He needed employment. He needed it for a variety of very serious and vital reasons, however… this was deplorable! When he had made his various… sojourns… from the shelter, any employment he could secure was acceptable because his opportunities were profoundly limited, but now… now that he had choice, he was finding those choices decidedly not to his taste.

No, that was not perfectly true. There were a great number of possibilities that were not uniformly odious, but they required assets he did not possess. Degrees and certifications, experience… an android could attend university, but that took time and funds, neither of which he had in abundance. And the only way to acquire experience was to gain a foothold in the desired field, which was not possible since all posted positions required experience in the first place! It was a perverse carousel that closed the door on anyone not having some special, undisclosed route into the walled city and that person was certainly not him.

But he absolutely could not postpone this initiative since, first, he needed gainful employment for his emancipation application. Or as a codicil to this first point… admission to an educational institution, which could be considered a Plan B, should it ultimately be required. However, the second imperative was as critical as the first – he simply needed money. Funds were necessary to purchase his brother from the shelter and that amount would certainly be substantial. He had not outright asked Administrator Stamford the actual figure, but as price was based on quality and versatility, Sherlock’s price would be nearly as dear as his. Given the rather dubious workings instituted to secure his purchase, a second round of financial finaglings would likely be noticed, so… he would have to stand Sherlock’s full or near-full cost.

Then it would be finding a new residence, as Gregory’s flat had only one extra bedroom, which meant a maximum legal occupancy of one household android. A larger flat, of course, meant a larger rent and they were already stretched to the very limit of Gregory’s wages. He could, potentially, set out on his own and find a residence purely for Sherlock and himself, but that would still require funds and… the thought of it was repugnant. It was, perhaps, presumptuous to believe
that where his path lay was wherever his Gregory could be found, however… there was no forward road he could envision that did not include that single, central truth. Admittedly, he had consumed enough media content to recognize that one’s first romantic interest occupied a disproportionate and distorted importance in one’s psyche and emotions, but he had, on multiple occasions, disengaged certain algorithmic pathways to disconnect the inappropriate effect of those factors and still come to the same conclusion. The variables were not so legion that a proper analysis was prohibited and he had not shirked from any of the countless he had run. Gregory was a *mate* for him and, by all calculations, he served that role for his human, in return.

And, that human was a hope he’d never believed possible. A dream he always believed unachievable. Even among the android community, he had not gained any true friends and certainly no interests for romance, but… it had been an utterly natural thing with his Gregory. It was as if he’d found the place in this world where he had been intended from the dawn of time to stand. There was a great deal more he wanted from this life, a tremendous amount he wanted to change and promote, but none of that did he imagine occurring without his human supporting him and sharing in the alterations his growth brought to their *shared* lives.

Now, the challenge was to begin *adding* those alterations to their shared lives. Besides the enormous alteration that was Sherlock, that is. Speaking of… he had yet to obtain any reports on his brother’s shenanigans yet today and that could be taken either as a gladdening or worrying thing. Fortunately, he had PC Anderson’s mobile number and could easily rectify this oversight. They could not afford a second night at the pub tonight to tease from the constable another day’s worth of information, so a less alcoholic approach was required. Given the inevitable need for sharing grievances with a sympathetic ear after a day with Sherlock, a further teasing would not likely be difficult to accomplish. The future promise of a robust cup of coffee hand-delivered by a grateful police sergeant would be added to sweeten the pot, though, if necessary. Dear Gregory certainly would not mind contributing his efforts towards this most worthwhile goal… he was a beautifully amenable and cooperative individual…”

“Mycroft… you promised Anderson and Sherlock what?”

“The most minor of things, my dear.”

“Coffee is minor. A cream-filled pastry with chocolate glaze is not.”

“I have made several phone calls to bakeries in your area and, I assure you, have located the one offering that selection at the lowest price, which is, I feel, a most reasonable one given the succulence of the morsel.”

“A bakery which will take me a half-hour to walk to!”

“You have access to plentiful vehicles.”

“I’m not taking a police car on a pastry run.”

“I am given to believe that is a highly typical use for them.”

“You’ve been watching too much telly. If you want the Dynamic Duo to have a completely unwarranted treat, then you can bring it to them yourself.”

“I am entirely too busy for that.”

“Your Jobs Possibilities notepaper is still blank, isn’t it.”
Evil man. Your correctness neither negates nor diminishes your evil.

“Balderdash.”

“Now that we’ve established it is… take a break and get out for a little fresh air and spying. They’ll be in the lab all day, from what I gather, so you have time to meander around the city for awhile and clear your jobs-looking head before bringing them their promised booty.”

“It is… chilly.”

“And the sun’s out, so the chilly is better described as brisk, which is a positive word. Embrace the positivity.”

“Ugh…”

Greg smiled widely at his mobile and imagined the look on his android’s face. Mycroft had boundless energy and motivation for what he wanted to do and zero for what he didn’t or believed he could get someone else to do for him. It wasn’t possible not to adore this man.

“Take a few minutes to look for any android services centers along the way that might have jobs listed. I know you’ve made some connections at a few, but the more that get to know your face, the more likely they’ll remember you when something juicy comes across their desks.”

“I suppose that is a beneficial action.”

“Try not to sound so enthusiastic. The neighbors are going to start banging on the walls from all your yelling and jumping.”

“The neighbors are at work, so I am free to indulge in whatever manner of revelry I choose.”

“Then go and indulge your need to start checking off boxes on your emancipation application and make your payment for your espionage report.”

“I am beginning to rethink my use of operatives for this particular mission. They are not especially cost-effective.”

“Sometimes, it’s just better to do things yourself and this appears to be one of those times. Goodbye, love. Have fun job and pastry shopping.”

“Your amusement at my plight is duly noted, Gregory. I am now reconsidering preparing that rather delicious-seeming chicken recipe for our dinner.”

“Me no have yummy chicken, you no have yummy chicken.”

“Drat. I cannot argue against your superlative implementation of logic.”

Hearing his human laugh was one the loveliest sounds in Mycroft’s memory and it was so wonderfully easy to bring it to the fore.

“I’m nearly a computer with my superlative logic. I’ll let you know if I’ll be late, alright?”

“Thank you, my dear and… do have a productive remainder of your day.”

“You, too.”

Staring a moment at his now-silent mobile, Mycroft made a slightly rude noise at being unable to
convince his human to perform the necessary errand, then squared his shoulders to do the deed himself. Mental note made to not again negotiate with factors outside his control and second mental note made that Gregory’s emergency sock-drawer fund would not suffer too harshly from delivering unto him a small loan. His bank card had been somewhat… drained… by his clothes purchases and the small bit remaining needed to stay in his account for… reasons of the utmost importance which would be precisely determined at a later time. Besides, as soon as Gregory’s next set of wages was deposited and his share was granted, the loan would certainly be repaid. Unless, of course, he found his own employment first and started a sock-drawer fund of his own…

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“Look at you two, I can see how much you’ve fattened from those pastries Mycroft brought. I’m going to have to roll you out of here when it’s time to leave for the day.”

Two rude gestures flew in Greg’s direction and he waved them off with near Jedi-like waving-off powers.

“You are inane, Lestrade, since androids do not deposit adipose and Mycroft never dragged his sluggardly construction here to bring our expected tribute.”

Anderson’s mournful nod confirmed Sherlock’s statement and Greg knew he shouldn’t be worried about it, but worry was there nonetheless.

“He never came?”

“Did you fail to understand my simplistic words? I chose them specifically for your education level.”

“No, I did, but… he was going to come here after he took a little time in the city, maybe checking android centers for jobs listings. He didn’t call or text, either?”

Now, Greg’s worried expression was starting to be matched by Anderson who realized that they hadn’t endured any Mycroft check-ins since the first one a number of hours ago. He and Sherlock had been incredibly busy and hadn’t noticed the lack of contact, which was a decided break in Mycroft’s pattern.

“No, he didn’t, now that you mention it. Sherlock, is that normal for your brother?”

Now, three faces were wearing expressions that agreed missed pastries wasn’t the most concerning thing about the day.

“It is not. Lestrade…”

Sherlock pointed to Greg’s pocket, which had Greg racing to draw out his mobile and place a call. Which didn’t have a reassuring outcome.

“Voicemail. Let me text him. No, that’s stupid. If he wasn’t in a position to answer, he won’t be in a position to respond to a text. No, that’s not true, I’ll do it anyway.”

The slightly panicked tone of Greg’s voice stoked Anderson’s own instincts because, even though this could all have a very simple explanation, such as Mycroft’s mobile being dead, it was actually rather late for him to have dropped off their coffee or returned home and called to say he wouldn’t be visiting at all.

“Thoughts, Greg?”
“I… I don’t know. He wasn’t particularly happy having to come do his pastry-placation himself, but I had the distinct impression that was going to be what he’d do. Maybe he left a message with… let me call the flat first.”

Sherlock turned his own analytical talents to the situation and, factoring in the reactions of the two policemen, he was not pleased with the results.

“Do you know the route Mycroft was taking?”

Greg listened to the flat’s phone ring and shook his head ‘no’ to Sherlock’s question.

“Very well. Do you know more about his intended plans?”

Terminating the call, Greg clamped down on what he wildly hoped was ridiculous worry and let his brain try to do some actual work.

“Not really. I know which bakery he was going to visit and reminded him that there were android services centers on the way, too, that he hadn’t visited. Besides that… probably some general walking and taking in the city.”

“Mycroft would combine all of that into the most efficient trajectory. Knowing the bakery that was his final destination facilitates calculating the most probable route and possible alternates.”

Greg dove back onto his phone and found the address of the bakery, put it on a map and handed his phone to Sherlock who spent a few moments conducting his own research before handing it back.

“I believe I have the most likely route to search. We shall begin now.”

Greg did a quick mental look through his work duties, then his eyes gave a quick look at the clock on the wall and decided a generic ‘out on patrol’ self-assignment was neither dereliction of duty nor a complete lie. He would certainly keep an eye out for any crime while searching for his android and leave Anderson, if needed, to manage it while he and Sherlock continued on.

“Are you two able to leave whatever it is you’re doing?”

“We actually just finished a series of tests, Greg, and the rest can easily wait for tomorrow. Sherlock, you agree?”

Sherlock’s exasperated waving was not a yes or no, but more a ‘who cares’ that Greg found himself agreeing with completely.

“Then I’ll tell your supervisor Sherlock wanted a look into what a standard policeman’s duties were like so he had… a better idea of how they contributed to an overall investigation or some nonsense like that. Just give me a minute.”

Stalking off to free the forensics pair for the last bit of their day, Greg checked his phone for any response to his text, then swallowed hard before deciding to grab an android-locating scanner to bring along with them. Mycroft would probably think it was insulting when they found him enjoying a stroll in the park or something, but he’d deal with that when the time came. An insulted Mycroft was far, far better than a Mycroft who needed help that this human couldn’t give because he couldn’t find him. London was big city and not everyone in it was exactly accepting of androids, especially those off on their own behaving like any human might. His android was strong, he was smart, but… the police handled enough cases where strong and smart hadn’t been enough. Not nearly enough… not at all…
“Anything, Greg?”

Anderson looked over from the driver’s seat to his partner who was studying the android tracker and snarling.

“Nothing. Sherlock? Any suggestions for another route?”

They’d driven Sherlock’s most likely possibility for Mycroft’s path to NSY and two alternates, finding nothing on the tracker that indicated the presence of the android they were seeking. And, which was making Greg ill to think about, the tracker would still function if the android was powered down or… physically incapacitated and unable to walk or cry out.

“Nothing with a substantial probability of yielding results. Mycroft is not a terribly creative individual when he has an objective, not veering from the most direct path to meeting it unless…”

“Yeah. Unless he’s forced to. We haven’t had reports of android thieves in the area and that generally gets police notice quickly enough. If he’s not in the vicinity, then… he’s not in the vicinity. Alright, time to do this on foot and ask some questions. Anderson, back to the bakery and we’ll move backwards from there.”

The PC nodded and mentally prepared the fastest route back to the bakery Mycroft was supposed to visit and hoped some basic interviewing of shop employees along the way back to Greg’s flat would yield some sort of clues. Greg had left a dozen messages on Mycroft’s mobile and phoned their flat two dozen times, but there was no word of the android. It wasn’t quite at the point where they would file a missing android report, but it was getting near to it and that would put more patrols on alert to keep eyes open for their friend. If, heaven forbid, a day passed, they could get NSY’s Android division officially involved in an investigation and that would open more doors for resources and manpower. But… that was getting ahead of things. Time to see what they could do on their own first. Not to be smug, but this car was filled with people who were pretty fucking capable at this sort of thing…

Huddled around the small table, scarcely tasting the coffee going down their throats, Greg, Anderson and Sherlock ran their minds over the information they’d gathered and worked to make sense of it. Mycroft hadn’t reached the bakery, but had made an appearance at two android services centers on the first half of his journey. In the second half, they’d found one delivery driver who thought he’d seen the android and, following the direction the driver indicated, spoke to a postal worker who was fairly certain Mycroft and continued on towards the bakery, but… no one after that point had any information to offer.

“What’s next, Greg?”

Anderson almost hated asking the question because the look on his sergeant’s face said that ideas were in short supply.

“File a report, I suppose. We can’t cover all of London ourselves, so having Mycroft on the missing androids list will put more eyes on the situation. I’ll… I’ll talk to the Inspector about getting it priority attention note and seeing if he can move this straight to a real investigation and not simply a lost bot hunt. Sorry, Sherlock… I know that’s a slur and I’m sorry for saying it.”
“I care not. What does have my attention is that you are simply washing your hands of this while Mycroft remains missing.”

“I’m not washing my hands of anything. There’s only so much Anderson and I can do officially, but we can broaden the search and put some pressure on those who can officially take this further to give the case their attention.”

“That is unacceptable.”

“It’s all we can do. An official investigation can do things like obtain surveillance footage from businesses or traffic cameras to see if anything was caught on tape, but…”

“You can do that yourself.”

“No, we can’t. We can collect it once the proper paperwork and orders are given, however…”

“You are useless!”

Sherlock’s agitation was painful to watch, but it matched what was in Greg’s own heart so he had nothing but sympathy for the android.

“No, we’re not, but we’re not detectives or Inspectors or anyone who can get that sort of thing done.”

“Uh…”

Greg’s head swiveled towards Anderson who had that look on his face that said he had something to say but wasn’t completely certain it was the best thing to say at the moment, given the circumstances.

“Well?”

“If we can find any shops or such with cameras that might have caught things in the street, there’s nothing that says we can’t simply ask to have a look, is there?”

“Probably, yes, there is.”

“Oh. Well, since I didn’t know that, it’ll be easy to ask forgiveness if we’re caught. Besides, it’s not as if we’re actually pursuing an official investigation where we have to worry about rules of evidence.”

“And if it turns official, then whatever we find might get tossed out for being obtained illegally.”

Sherlock had listened very carefully to the discussion and decided his belief that humans were stupid and inefficient was, again, confirmed.

“This is ludicrous! Mycroft is missing, potentially… in peril… and you are worrying about legal niceties? I am utterly disgraced, Lestrade, by your cowardice.”

“Damn it all, Sherlock!”

“What good will your legal compliance do if Mycroft has been deactivated and disassembled? There could still be time to rescue him!”

Greg gritted his teeth, but… Sherlock had a point. Bastards who stole for parting out to shady repair businesses did their work fast. And, if Mycroft was stolen for other reasons, they could be moving him out of London and that would make things miserably difficult for any investigation, official or
“Alright, but you, Sherlock, do not open your mouth once because we need to be as gracious and non-threatening as possible, neither of which is your strength.”

Sherlock’s mouth opened wide for his response, then snapped shut has he privately admitted that Greg had a point.

“Good. Anderson, you and me going forth with our most affable, just looking for a bit of cooperation, demeanor and let’s see what it gains us.”

Anderson nodded and hoped Sherlock truly understood his sergeant’s message. The public was a tricky beast and you had to be very careful dealing with them at the best of times, which this certainly was not. Maybe they’d be lucky and the majority of the citizens they’d talk to would be women. Greg had a talent for charming women and having them overlook his many, many negative qualities. Better not mention that to Mycroft, though. When they found him. The android seemed as if he would have a fairly wide jealous streak and domestic disharmony in the world’s happiest home was to nobody’s benefit…

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It had taken a long time and many world-famous Greg Lestrade grins, as well as Philip Anderson patented logical appeals, but they had worked their way through a diversity of video footage until they found something they both hoped and didn’t hope they’d find.

“That’s not good.”

Anderson winced at the sight of a large black sedan pulling up next to Mycroft as he checked his mobile, which certainly didn’t inspire confidence that this encounter was going to be a joyful one, especially when two large men got out and approached the android as if they were on a mission.

“No… no it’s not. Sherlock, do you… recognize them?”

The intensity of Sherlock’s scrutiny of the piece of video footage kindly provided by a bookshop with tables on the sidewalk, outside their windows, was nearly palpable in the air and Greg could only hope it would get them somewhere, especially since… his Mycroft was obviously becoming agitated as the men spoke to him.

“I do not. And they are providing a paucity of clues as to their identity. Note that the vehicle’s licensing information is not visible and the faces stay angled so that a clear image is not presented. It is…”

“As if they know they’re being taped or, at least, it’s possible and trying to take steps to avoid being identified. That’s not a cheap car, either. This doesn’t have the feel of a typical android grab. Anderson what do…”

Sherlock’s loud squawk interrupted the question and it matched well Greg and Anderson’s gasps as they watched Mycroft slump slightly after one of the men reached up and put his hand against a spot on Mycroft’s neck.

“Sherlock! Does… Mycroft doesn’t have an… off switch there, does he?”

“No. Stop the recording and rewind it slightly.”

Anderson quickly complied and complied again to Sherlock’s next command, which was to magnify
the image as much as the small in-shop viewer could manage.

“There. That is the reason.”

Greg looked at the blob amongst the other blobs and shook his head in confusion.

“What? What am I supposed to be seeing?”

“Yes, I forgot that humans have poorly-developed visual senses and cannot apply an algorithmically-enhanced resolution compensation to images.”

“Yeah, we lost that card in the great evolution game of Old Maid. Will you just fucking tell me!”

“It appears to be a small device adhered to the inner surface of the man’s finger.”

“So?”

“Given Mycroft’s immediate response, I suspect it generates an electromagnetic pulse which could disrupt Mycroft’s function to the point of shutdown.”

“Is… how much damage would it do?”

“Unknown. A low-intensity pulse might simply disrupt function, without causing lasting damage. Larger pulses could cause issues requiring physical repair or…”

“Or the issues could be permanent. Anderson, start it again, we need to see what happened.”

The recording began playing and Greg saw what he expected to see, which was Mycroft being supported into the rear seat of the vehicle, which sped away into traffic, though…

“Stop. Rewind and magnify it again. Sherlock, can you read any of the plate number?”

Sherlock turned his visual abilities to their highest level, but gained only partial information.

“The first three numbers are 909.”

“First three numbers?”

“Did I pitch my voice in a frequency beyond your range of hearing?”

“Three numbers means some form of diplomatic plate. Hold on…”

Grabbing his mobile, Greg did a quick search since those numbers didn’t ring a single bell in his memory, and let loose an eye-watering expletive when he got his answer.

“The International Coffee Organization? What the fucking hell is that about? And why do they even have a plate code?”

Glaring at Sherlock and Anderson as if they had an answer and were keeping it from him, Greg seethed and struggled to swallow the massive ball of fear and worry that had leapt up when the shock from seeing Mycroft’s abduction abated enough to let it push through. Anderson’s was nearly as big, but he was able to give a reply anyway.

“It’s got to be fake, Greg. Or stolen or… I don’t care how much the world loves coffee, they don’t have a need to go about stealing androids. Bastards have enough cash to buy their own.”
“Ok… fake plate. That would catch some traffic officer’s notice though, you’d think. Would they stop the car, though? That type of plate means a bollocks-kick of trouble if you piss them off. Why do that? Why?”

Greg’s slightly panicky ramble had Anderson putting the video file on the small flash drive attached to his key ring, despite their promise to the newsagent manager that they wouldn’t copy the file, then clear this throat to get his sergeant’s attention.

“Let’s find out. We can access the records and see if this is real and who it might be stolen from. If it’s fake… we’ve got something more to track, a moving vehicle. We both know people who’d let us take a look through traffic camera footage.”

“Mount an investigation! What is… Mycroft was abducted and you both continue to treat this as some form of… prank!”

Sherlock’s wrath was actually more than slightly terrifying and Greg made an optimistic mental note to give Mycroft the full report when they found him. His dear android would be thrilled…

“Neither Anderson or me thinks that, Sherlock, and you know it. It’s just…”

Honesty or not? Honesty… it was harsh, but helpful, at times…

“… a stolen android doesn’t rank highly on the priority list. Yes, we can go through channels, but it will take time and by then… let’s see what we can do on our own, and quickly, first. Then we can move it to official channels if we have to.”

Sherlock’s snarl was ferocious, but he didn’t immediately take out Greg’s throat with his teeth, something that brought the police sergeant a world of relief.

“We should be given the same consideration as any human!”

“Yeah, I agree. And if that was a human, the wheels would also move at their normal pace, which isn’t nearly as fast as victims’ families want. Now, do you want to stand here and keep arguing or see what we can do with traffic footage?”

Rather as expected, Sherlock shot out towards the car, leaving Greg and Anderson to race after him so the android didn’t somehow hotwire the car and drive off, leaving them behind. Not that it would avail him much, but Sherlock wouldn’t realize that until more precious time had been lost and… they didn’t have that much to spare to begin with…

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Why he was bringing takeaway to feed three arses who couldn’t be bothered to phone, only text ‘bring food for 3 of us’ was beyond John’s comprehension, but since the idea of food and unwinding after a miserable day of work wasn’t the worst idea at the moment, he’d visited his cheap Chinese food connection and agreed to Greg’s royal demands. Of course, those royal demands had best be supported by opening the royal wallets to pay for some of this or heads would be knocked together.

“Why are you three all the way…”

John nearly dropped his arms-full of bags seeing the distraught look on his friends’ faces, but rallied and got the food on an empty desk before standing to huddle with them around the computer they were accessing.

“Alright, what’s wrong?”
While Anderson filled John in on the situation, Sherlock continued to move at android pace through the video footage, using a few tricks Anderson knew to get into video feeds they certainly didn’t have authority to access, and Greg began removing cartons from John’s horde because if he didn’t get something into his stomach soon besides coffee and bile, he’d disgrace the floor with his vomit. The plate number was fake and that lead led nowhere, but Sherlock had been able to track the car with some degree of success, though it was glacially-slow going, and it was only because they had an especially-capable android on their team that they’d seen any success in these few hours.

“Fuck… why didn’t you phone me earlier! Sherlock… are you alright?”

John’s hand landing on Sherlock’s shoulder was shrugged off, but John didn’t particularly mind, since the speed with which Sherlock was working required complete concentration, even for an android, and distraction wasn’t helpful, though the understanding look in Greg’s eyes was a comfort.

“Sherlock’s doing ok, John, or as ok as can be expected. And, we didn’t call you because… I don’t know what you could have done. I felt bad even texting you for food, but…”

“But that pale, slightly green look on your face is something I recognize well from many shifts when you can’t stop to eat and hope caffeine will keep your stomach from staging a revolution.”

“That’s pretty much the case. Thanks, though. Really, if…”

John shoved a plastic fork and a carton of food into Greg’s hands and one into Anderson’s who had to have it waggled in front of his eyes for the image to finally register.

“Eat. If Sherlock finds something, we’ll need to move fast and everyone will need their strength. Android gangs aren’t nice people and I’ve seen the damage they’ve done both to androids and those that have tried to prevent their abduction.”

John’s use of ‘we’ had Greg and Anderson sharing a look while they shoveled food into their mouths. Another hand on deck was not something they’d refuse, especially one who’d done time in the military.

“We’re eating! Can you… what about what Sherlock said for Mycroft being switched off. Have you dealt those EM pulses before?”

“Sorry, Greg, I haven’t. But I can say that android circuits are typically shielded from standard levels of potential interference and disruption, so this would have to be something focused, strong and purposeful.”

“Will it…”

Greg’s helpless expression encouraged John to push the policeman’s fork back into his food and make ‘eat more’ gestures until Greg got started.

“I can’t say what it will do or not do, but… I can’t imagine they’d do anything to damage Mycroft’s systems too badly, if they want to turn a profit. Raw structure is one thing, but functional management systems is where the higher profits can be found. That being said, you also have to know where to sell the higher-end components and the average berk don’t have those connections. These don’t sound particularly average, though, which is a good thing.”

A very good thing in Greg’s mind since the idea of rescuing Mycroft, only to have his android harmed was… it was not something he could easily let sit in his mind. He wasn’t allowed to carry a firearm, but a knife and baton would be coming with him in case he needed to relive some rage by showing Mycroft’s abductors the error of their ways.
Sherlock’s hands began flailing around and snatched Anderson’s mobile which was held in the air. That Greg’s rang at the same time was a coincidence that didn’t fill the sergeant with glee.

“Uh… yeah?”

“Sergeant Lestrade… would you care to explain why Sherlock’s driver had to return to the shelter without his passenger?”

Shit! Stamford! Forgot all about that!

“No… I mean, yes, but… you won’t like it.”

“Oh god, what’s he done?”

Greg quickly made his report to the shelter head and was simply happy Stamford didn’t interrupt so he could tell the story quickly, keeping the words from sticking in his throat. Talking about it didn’t make the story easier to bear, no matter how many times he did it.

“This is… I don’t know what to say, Greg. I keep my ear closely to the ground for this sort of thing and that’s not a scenario I’ve heard before. How is Sherlock doing?”

“Good, on balance. He seems to have gotten a lead and it following it as we speak.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

“I can’t think of anything, but if we need help, I’ll call.”

“Good. Keep Sherlock as long as you need to and if there are any resources I can throw your way or permissions to secure, I will do whatever I can. Keep me informed, alright?”

“I will, I promise.”

“I’m so sorry, Greg… I know you’re worried sick and I am miserably sorry this happened.”

“Me, too. Oh, gotta go now.”

Greg ended the call because Sherlock was rising from his chair and another bolt towards a vehicle was not in order until they had some form of plan. And could gather up the food.

“What do you have, Sherlock.”

“The vehicle was glimpsed by a camera at a motorway services area and then by another for a clinic several miles away. The road passing by leads to a sparsely populated area and that would be an exceptional location to bring androids for disassembly. There are a manageable number of addresses to check and, even with accessory buildings, the tracker should be able to detect Mycroft.”

“Wouldn’t that be turned off? I mean, a simple ‘off’ wouldn’t do it or broken limbs, but this…”

John laid a hand on Greg’s arm and distracted him slightly while Anderson grabbed jackets and started handing food bags to Sherlock.

“The location tracker is one of the most highly shielded parts of an android. There’s a decent
chance it’s still functional, though it can be manually deactivated if you know how. It can also be manually *reactivated* using your tracker, if you have the authority. Do you have Mycroft’s ID number?”

“Yeah.”

“Then I can do it. My credentials are far enough along that I’m licensed to work on tracking systems, so I can flip it back on, if necessary, as long as it’s not permanently damaged.”

Greg drew in a large breath and nodded sharply, willing himself to believe there would be no damage and their search wouldn’t be a fruitless one.

“Let’s go then. I’ll… make some excuse for keeping the vehicle beyond our shift, so you three go ahead and give me a moment.”

Watching three bodies dart towards the door, Greg took a moment to indulge in a few more large breaths and used them to steady himself. This was a nightmare, but… maybe it was one that wouldn’t last much longer. Then, his Mycroft would be home and he’d do everything in his power to remind him that, though some humans were fucking arseholes, there were countless who weren’t and, further, one *specific* one who cared deeply and… would act on that caring whenever and however his android wanted. Safe, happy and… cared for. His Mycroft deserved all of that and much, much more. Like synonyms for ‘cared for.’ One in particular. But that would have to wait until he was certain his android was thinking about synonyms, too. And, since they *would* get Mycroft back, and he *would* be well and whole and fully functional… that was a conversation he could start looking forward to in the future…
Anderson was a bit hesitant to let Greg drive, since his sergeant was vacillating between a number of powerful and chaotic emotions that could wrap their vehicle around a tree, but the look on Greg’s face when he’d broached the question of taking the wheel himself was steely enough to cut through the tree they’d head towards and fell it before they arrived, so fatal disaster avoided. And, with Greg driving, he could throw a full meal down his own throat, hand Greg things the sergeant could eat with his fingers so a case of hunger-shakes didn’t derail their plans, whatever those might be, and serve to keep Sherlock’s hands off their frazzled driver, because the android seemed to believe that smacking Greg on the shoulder or head at random intervals would magically transport them to their destination. One random interval being now.

“Sherlock! Stop hitting! Do you want to get us all killed?”

“If Lestrade’s pensioner-pace of driving would kill anyone, Anderson, it would be the pensioner’s wife who suffered heart failure chasing after the slow-moving vehicle to give her spouse his forgotten dentures.”

“First, you bastard, we’re not going slowly, and second, this isn’t official, so blues and twos isn’t appropriate. Besides, it would call attention to what we’re doing and that’s what we’re supposed to be avoiding.”

John drew Sherlock back from attacking their chauffer and shoved an egg roll into his mouth so it had something to do besides hurl insults. This was visibly causing Sherlock to teeter on the edge of unraveling and John did not want to know what an android on a rampage was capable of. Though, now that he thought about it, Sherlock on a rampage might be exactly what they needed, depending on the size of the opposition they met and how eager they were to defend their prize.

“How much longer, Anderson?”

“Not long. We should be turning off the motorway soon and then… we’ll have to see. It’s a shame you don’t have your medical bag with you, John, because it might be needed.”

Something John, himself, had realized early on, but there was a lot he could do with little, so he wasn’t too worried. The Army taught you nothing if not how to improvise when the situation called for it.

“I’ve got a bag of tricks that’ll do, even without an official medical bag, so… let’s just hope we don’t need any of them.”

Now, the idea of a rampaging Sherlock was souring in John’s mind, because rampagers often caught their own fair share of damage and the image of an injured, malfunctioning Sherlock wasn’t one his brain liked one tiny bit.

“I second that. And while we… oh, we’re turning.”

Three sets of eyes joined the driver’s, who was now keeping close watch for the clinic in the video footage, which they passed ten minutes after leaving the motorway. Following along the same road the only bit of good feeling that lived in Greg’s chest was that the road didn’t fork or branch off, but simply led to a series of long drives that meandered to houses. After driving past a half dozen or so and seeing the same pattern, the rescue party doubled back and took a moment to steel themselves for phase two of their mission, while Greg laid out the plan.
“Listen, you lot… trespassing is illegal, so don’t get caught. If we do get caught, we say we’re looking for a lost child or dog and that we didn’t want to interrupt their evening by banging on the door. Whatever you do, don’t start interrogating anyone or demand entry into their house to search it. Sherlock, that last bit is really for you, since I know that’s exactly what you’ll want to do, but we can’t so just tell yourself no now and save us all the headache.”

Sherlock’s affronted pout did nothing to erase the ‘curses, foiled again’ expression that flitted across his features before the pout settled in and took hold.

“Instead, lad, turn those android senses of yours up to full, so you catch what our eyes and ears can’t. That might be the only way we get information from inside a house where the curtains are drawn or a building without windows.”

With that olive branch extended, Greg nodded at Sherlock, knowing his own desire to simply barge into every house along this road and start searching matched Sherlock’s point for point. But, if they all ended the evening in jail, there could be no hope for finding his Mycroft, functional and intact.

“Alright, then… let’s go.”

Hoping that the local police didn’t patrol this quiet area after dark, since their own police vehicle was sure to raise questions, Greg led the other three down the long drive and heaved a sigh of relief that the owners of this house didn’t seem to home and they were able to look around freely. Handing John the android location scanner, Greg then waited for the doctor to input a long series of codes, walk around with it, then return shaking his head.

“Nothing. If Mycroft was here with a switched off tracker, it would have flipped back on. Given there’s nothing else to indicate he’s here… on to the next house?”

A quick round of nods had the men dashing back to the car to drive along to the next house, which had a few small outbuildings, but proved to yield as little as the first house. The same was true for the next five they investigated, though several of those were clearly occupied and a few close calls at being spotted had the rescuers wishing they had some form of invisibility powers. Or a very large quantity of alcohol to steady their growing cases of nerves.

Two more properties were inspected, to no avail, and a third one was nearly missed since the slight opening in the trees for the path to the house was only caught by Greg’s peripheral vision after he’d passed it by. Backing the police vehicle and risking taking it down the drive to keep it out of sight, Greg hoped his police instincts were on point, because this felt… right. Sometimes you just knew, in his job. That was the suspect you’re looking for, that’s the witness who’s lying, that’s the building you need to check for their imaginary lost child or dog… you just knew and that was the message screaming through his mind. A quick look at his partner said Anderson was having the same feeling and two cops with their antenna raised said prepare for action.

“John, Sherlock…”

“I know, Greg. I’ve got that feeling, too.”

Oh yes, must remember John’s a military man.

“What feeling? Why are you three… oh. Ah, then my own observations are likely correct. You do suspect this is Mycroft’s location.”

“Yeah, Sherlock, we do. Secluded, lots of trees to muffle noise and dissuade people wandering by while walking their dogs and the like… let’s go, gentlemen. Remember… the goal is to get
Mycroft back, not go wrathful on whoever took him.”

“*I shall* be wrathful, if I so choose. Do not attempt to impart your ridiculous human sense of morals on me, Lestrade.”

“I’m not, I’m saying that wrath takes time and that leaves more opportunities for things to go wrong or someone who’s out buying beer to come back and add their fists to the fight.”

“Oh. Very well. However, I still maintain that humans are ridiculous.”

Snorting a much-needed laugh at Sherlock’s stubbornness, Greg opened the door and got out of the police vehicle, checking that his few bits of personal weaponry were present and easily accessible, then started down the drive, with the others following close behind. When a surprisingly-large and well-kept house appeared through the trees, the men drew closer together and stopped at the tree line to visually survey the scene.

“Lots of clear ground and high vantage points for taking shots.”

“Thank you, John, I’m now pants-wetting scared.”

“I am not changing Anderson’s pants!”

Greg let the whispered bickering carry on as he took his own stock of the situation. John was correct and, if this *was* a high-end android theft ring, they wouldn’t have any ethical concerns about shooting people attempting to steal *their* stolen androids. And, though he hated the oily sensation of the thought in his head, wealthy interests often had an unhealthy influence on local police, so simply running to the local lads for reinforcements might not be the best idea. And, wealthy definitely seemed to be the case here. Very nice house, with garage, what appeared to be a stable, the outline of gardens… shit. And more shit! There were shadows moving in front of the windows. Why couldn’t these bastards be out for a curry?

“If you three are finished, here’s what I suggest. Let’s check the garage and stable first, but don’t open any doors or windows because they could be alarmed. In fact, we’ll approach, but keep a distance while John checks for Mycroft’s location tracker. It’s too dark for me to see from here, but there could be motion lights and we don’t want to trigger those until the very last second. Sherlock… can you make out any more? I don’t know how well you can see in the dark, but…”

“I can visualize a variety of non-visible light wavelengths and have enhancement algorithms to promote visual acuity with very low-light situations.”

“Really? Ok. Then… do.”

Sherlock’s exasperated pfft preceded him taking a moment to use every tool he possessed to image the situation and draw what conclusions he could from the profile.

“There *are* motion-detection systems in place, though they seemed focused around the main house and not the other buildings. There is a lingering IR signature in the garage, which I suspect is from engine and exhaust system heat from the sedan that transported Mycroft. There are also heat signatures from the stable that are large, indicating horses and not humans. In fact, I do not detect any humans outside the main house, so I recommend circling around to the rear of the garage and starting our investigation there.”

“Alright, that sounds good. Stay alert, everyone, and be ready to move quickly if we have to.”

Staying close to the trees and moving fast, the group covered the distance to the garage in short order
and all gave a mental ‘hurray’ when cautiously approaching the structure didn’t set lights and alarm klaxons blaring. However, the hurray died away as quickly when a peek in the window showed… a garage. The familiar sedan was parked next to several other vehicles, but there were no people present, the sort that one would expect to find guarding an expensive storehouse of androids and their parts.

“Should we go in and see what information might be in the car?”

Anderson’s idea was a good one, but Greg wasn’t quite ready to potentially trip a wired door or window.

“Not yet. If we can’t find Mycroft on the premises, then that’s our Plan B. John, what’s the scanner say?”

The doctor quickly checked the instrument for any sign of Mycroft, then set it to initialize a turned-off locator and met with more failure.

“Nothing. Let’s try the stables.”

Moving rapidly to the next building over, the rescue party went through the same routine and gained the same lack of results. Horses, hay and not much else, though one mare seemed to have a fascination with Sherlock and kept trying to eat his curls, much to the humans’ amusement.

“This is not funny.”

“Oh, it is, lad. Believe me, as the oldest bastard here and with the most experience at things that aren’t funny – this is not an example of the breed. What’s your hair made of anyway that has her so interested? Oats? Sugar? I didn’t realize android technology was quite so green and environmentally-friendly.”

While Sherlock stewed and tried to distance himself from the horse who had his hair in her teeth, the other three used the moment to mentally prepare themselves for what had to come next, which was a check of the main house.

“If your lady friend can spare you a moment, Sherlock, want to run those eyes of yours over the house and give us the best chance of approaching it without being spotted?”

Sherlock glared at Anderson, but turned his glared towards the house and analyzed what he could detect for security devices or patrols.

“The exterior appears to be well covered by motion-detection lights and, now that we are closer, I am reading very faint traces of electrical systems with a different signal output than standard household wiring, in association with doors and windows.”

Greg huffed out an annoyed breath, but he honestly didn’t know why.

“Alarm system, then. Well, we can’t say we didn’t expect that. Anything working in our favor?”

“Let me circle the house and I can provide a fuller picture.”

It wasn’t a good idea to split the group, but Greg nodded and felt no surprise that once Sherlock eased himself away from his new acquaintance, John peeled away with him to accompany the android as he skirted the property, well away from the dwelling, something that took enough time for Greg and Anderson to sit a moment and let their batteries recharge. That proved to be a forward-
thinking idea, since Sherlock returned with hesitant look on his face.

“Got something, lad?”

“There is one motion sensor that is misaligned based on the overall pattern the others form. It appears to leave one area at the rear of the house accessible.”

Greg began to scowl, then startled slightly when Anderson began to laugh.

“There’s a door in that area, isn’t there, Sherlock?”

“Yes. How did you know?”

“Every big house needs an out-for-a-smoke door or an out-for-a-shag door that won’t wake the rest of the house when you scurry out to have your needs met. Admittedly, it could be the door the cook uses to leave out scraps for the cats and everyone got tired of lights going on when Fluffy darted in for a bite of food, but, either way, it’s an opening we can use.”

With a touch more optimism than they’d felt up to this point, all four made their way towards the rear door, staying far away from the building, until they saw their potential entrance.

“Straight on?”

John looked up at Sherlock who shook his head slightly.

“Based on my analysis, I would propose… that you follow me.”

Not waiting for agreement, Sherlock started off and each of the others filed in behind him, waking single file until, somewhat to their surprise, they reached their destination.

“Well done, lad! If androids have these sorts of abilities, I’m surprised Stamford’s not been able to push through his ideas of getting more into the police service.”

“Androids do not have these sorts of abilities, Lestrade. I do. Well, and Mycroft, but he is not here to be of any use.”

Greg shared a look with Anderson, who shrugged his shoulders, then with John who cleared his throat in a way that said it was likely best to leave the subject alone since Sherlock’s ego wouldn’t react well to a lecture about the abilities of certain military-grade androids or those designed for specific research purposes. However, John had to concede, he’d never heard of an android with the capacity to muster all their talents with such analytical precision.

“Then let’s get your brother here and he can toss in with his opinion. Next obstacle – locked and wired door. Ideas?”

Greg looked between his companions and, this time, it was Anderson clearing his throat and motioning to the discrete console located between the door and one of the windows that he had peeked through to find that, yes, they were at the kitchen entrance. Greg’s uncomprehending expression reminded Anderson, however, that not everyone had a misspent youth to their credit.

“Probably a zone-based system with the kitchen getting its own access since there’d be deliveries and goings on at all hours that you’d want to leave the rest of the house ‘on,’ while this bit was ‘off.’ And, for the cook or whoever to run out for something and be able to set the zone to ‘on’ from the outside, so this door isn’t un-alarmed while they were out.”
Refusing to take time to ask the PC why he would know so much about grand houses and their secrets, Greg simply pursed his lips and made a ‘ok, so what do we do?’ gesture.

“I’ll need… anyone got some wire? One of those multi-tool knives?”

Officially time to ask the PC why he would know so much about grand houses and their secrets.

“How do you know how to disable an alarm?”

“My mum worked in a house like this and… I practiced.”

Oh good, his PC was a housebreaker. Lovely. But, given the circumstances, complaint would not be made.

“Ok then. Gentlemen… check the pockets.”

An inventory of their assets, and a quick dash by Sherlock back to the stable to remedy their utter lack of useful tools, finally gained Anderson what he needed and more than a little pride rose in Greg’s chest at how fast his constable was able to circumvent the alarm and, further, pick the lock on the door. Letting Sherlock listen in through a small crack, the other three peered through the windows and were happy their lack of visible villains was supported by Sherlock’s claim that the kitchen was empty.

Creeping inside, and with the growing realization that they were in enemy territory with (a) no real plan besides ‘grab Mycroft and run,’ (b) not much in the way of weapons and (c) inside a structure for which they had no idea of floorplan, Anderson, John and Sherlock each tucked a kitchen knife into their pockets, while Greg checked his was still ready for service, then turned to John to motion him to use the scanner to give them some idea of where to go.

“No tracker online, but… yes! They’d turned it off. Mycroft’s here and probably one floor up, by the looks of things.”

Three hands reached out and kept Sherlock from simply racing off and those three hands retained their grip until Sherlock breathed through his urges and, finally, slapped them off to signal he was back under control. Filing this away as another story to tell his Mycroft when they were safe at home, Greg gave Sherlock a smile, then fixed Anderson with a look, that the PC shot back, along with a ‘what?’ shrug of his shoulders.

“You’ve got experience in houses like these. What’s the best way to get upstairs without prancing about in the open?”

“Well, don’t prance, for one thing. Besides that… there’s the servant’s stairs. This house is old enough and big enough to have them, most likely.”

A quick check of doors found the stairs in question and, happy they hadn’t been ripped out, the four moved up them as quietly as they could, pausing at the door that most likely led to the next level of the house with Greg stopping Anderson’s hand on the knob.

“Sherlock? Ears?”

A press of the android’s head to the door preceded Sherlock turning the knob and peeking around before opening it wider and cautiously stepping through to signal the all clear.

“John? Narrow things down for us.”
Checking the scanner, John pointed left and Greg looked out at the long corridor that was marked by doors on each side, but no people, and joined Sherlock in the hallway, with the others following.

“Any more narrowing you can do?”

“Right side. Near the end.”

Passing the first set of doors, the group slowed after they hit the halfway mark, with John checking each door until he stopped and sighed loudly.

“Behind this one.”

Sherlock dropped like a stone and peered through the old-fashioned keyhole, snarling slightly at what he saw.

“What’s wrong, lad?”

“Mycroft is deactivated.”

Greg swore under his breath, mostly because it could mean they’d have to carry the android out and not rely on Mycroft to run with the rest of them back to the car.

“Can you or John turn him back on?”

“Possibly. But, I will not know without an examination.”

“Then that’s our next move. Is… is the door unlocked?”

Surprisingly, it was, and the rescue team felt only slightly embarrassed by leaping into the room to shock and subdue their non-existent opponents. With that incident best forgotten, John and Sherlock moved to the bed and, after a moment, shook their heads in a way neither Greg nor Anderson particularly liked. The not-liking was quickly confirmed by John’s assessment of the situation.

“I’ll need to get him to hospital to see what’s going on. The standard startup methods aren’t working and I don’t think we have time here to do anything more detailed.”

“Fuck. You’re right, though… Sherlock, can you carry him?”

In the blink of an eye, Sherlock had his brother slung over a shoulder and was speeding back towards the servants’ stairs. As the other three raced after him, only Sherlock and John had made it onto the stairs before a man, handgun visible in the shoulder holster he was sporting, stepped out of a room further along the corridor and began shouting to raise the alarm.

Moving as if their lives depended on it, which was possibly the case, the rescuers barged into the kitchen, startling two other armed men who had started making sandwiches. John and Greg followed instinct and leapt forward, wrestling their opponents to the ground while and delivering a few solid punches to keep them down long enough for Sherlock and Anderson to clear the kitchen door before running out themselves, at full pace, not stopping to look back as the sound of voices grew louder behind them.

When the first shot rang out, as well as the order to stop running or there’d be more of them, none of the four felt inclined to comply until a shot landed an inch from Greg’s foot and another whizzed past John’s ear. As unofficial leader of this merry band, Greg barked out the only order that mattered and hoped the android didn’t stop to argue.
“Sherlock! Keep running, get Mycroft out of here!”

Preparing to lead their attackers on a chase away from the two androids, Greg darted left then stopped in his tracks seeing the now brightly-lit faces of the large team of men, standing down on a hand-signal order from one of their number who was using his other hand to press against the small speaker in his left ear. John and Anderson followed suit, though Sherlock smartly kept running as if the devil was on his heels, and the three humans gaped at the scowling faces that continued to stare at them for a moment longer, before returning in the house and shutting the door behind them.

“What the fuck was that all about, Greg?”

“What, John? Your military opinion?”

“Orders from higher up.”

Greg nodded and felt a very ugly notion thread its way into his brain.

“That seemed to be given when I yelled out to Sherlock.”

Now it was Anderson’s turn to feel the ugliness and he scratched his head, hoping that would shake out the nasty, but it stubbornly refused to die away.

“Meaning… they didn’t want him damaged.”

Not one to be denied his share of ugly, John sniffed and cocked his head slightly as he looked around for something to punch, swearing softly when there wasn’t a target nearby that wouldn’t hit him back and call him a bastard.

“No damage… because, maybe, they want him, too.”

“Fuck.”

“Double fuck.”

“Triple fuck.”

Deciding that standing there was not terribly helpful and could irritate their counterparts into simply shooting them out of spite, Greg looked towards the path to the car and took a deep cleansing breath.

“Alright, now that’s out of the way, how about we three fuckers catch up with our savior before he drives off and leaves us behind.”

Opting for jogging instead of high-sprint running, the three humans made their way towards the hopefully-waiting car and mentally planned their next move. Get Mycroft to hospital so John could do diagnostic work, open an official investigation on the situation, secure a protection detail for Sherlock and… whatever else was necessary. This wasn’t a simple android grab, it was something else and that something else was well organized and well-armed. The important thing, for now, though, was that Mycroft was safe from whatever was planned for him and… maybe he had some idea of what was going on. All they had to do was switch him on to find out. Greg could only hope that the ‘all they had to do’ wasn’t going to be as difficult as he somehow feared it would be…
If Greg never again had to see his android lying in a hospital bed, still as death, he’d be a happy man. An ecstatic man, actually. For the entire ride to Bart’s, he’d hoped and prayed for some small sign, some little signal that Mycroft wasn’t as… off… as he appeared to be, but nothing happened to give him the slightest relief on that score. Now, John was racing to get the necessary equipment for an examination and he was filling out the paperwork to have Mycroft admitted as a patient, just in case this wasn’t something quick and simple to fix. A call to Stamford had the shelter head on the way to help with some of the forms and to debrief the situation, which now seemed to threaten one of the androids under his care.

“Greg?”

Speak of the devil…

“Hi, Mike. Glad you could come, I just wish it was for a happier reason.”

“So do I, but I’d say things are a bit happier now than when I last spoke to you.”

“I hope so… though, he’s just… lying there.”

Stamford crossed to the bed and ran an eye over Mycroft who, at least, showed no external signs of physical mistreatment.

“True, but that’s not necessarily something to worry about. What did John say?”

“Only that the standard methods of switching Mycroft back on again didn’t work and he’d have to look into it further. He’s getting some diagnostic equipment right now. Sherlock’s with him. Anderson’s getting coffee.”

“And you’re standing guard.”

“That’s about the truth of it. This… this wasn’t like anything I’ve dealt with. This was a… there was a small army there! Well, that might be an exaggeration, but I’ve dealt with android theft rings and they are not, not even remotely, as tightly-organized and professional as this lot. Military, government… that sort of thing. I’m not too proud to admit, Mike, that I am truly scared right now. For Mycroft and Sherlock both.”

Stamford laid a hand on Mycroft’s shoulder and gave it a squeeze, even though the android wasn’t capable of feeling it.

“I’d say you have a right to be, too. Mycroft is a very advanced android, that’s true, but it’s difficult to imagine this degree of effort being used to capture and detain him. Were there… was there any sign of other androids on the premises?”

Greg winced slightly and shrugged his shoulders.

“I don’t know. We were only focused on Mycroft and… I didn’t really think about others once we really got into the house. We had a scanner, though, and it didn’t indicate any androids, but they could have had their location tracers disabled like Mycroft. I’m sorry… I just was too… everything began to happen quickly and…”

“It’s alright, Greg. You’re not responsible for the world’s android population. Besides, you
found Mycroft and that could lead to who did this and put a stop to what they’re on about, as well as free any other androids they might have taken. Have you made any report to the police?"

“I did, actually, at least, a preliminary one. Called it in while we were on our way here. I’m waiting to hear what will come of it, but I have no idea when that might happen. The fact that armed fucking men actually chased and shot at us lit a fairly large fire under certain arses, though, that much is certain.”

“I expect it would. Does Sherlock have any idea of what’s going on?”

“No. And it’s been eating away at him, too. This… this truly hit him hard and I think he’s very worried that they’ll try again. And try for him, too.”

“Well, that’s what you’re here for, right? Guard the gates with sword, pike and mace?”

“My face is probably stubbly enough right now to make a fairly formidable mace. And I’ve got a pencil and knife to serve for the rest, so I’m ready!”

“Ready for what?”

Greg and Mike turned to see Molly hovering in the door of Mycroft’s room, wearing a worried and anxious look on her face.

“To guard Mycroft from the Huns or space aliens or whatever else might be lurking in the shadows. I… I take it you heard what happened.”

“I saw John and Sherlock racing about like their trousers were on fire and made them tell me what was going on. I’m so sorry, Greg! This is… it’s not fair, not one tiny bit and I hope the people who took Mycroft are caught and brought to court so we can all sit, watch the trial and make rude gestures when the judge isn’t looking.”

“That’s the best plan I’ve heard all day.”

“Thanks! He… he is alright, isn’t he? John said there wasn’t any physical damage, but…”

Molly quickly took one of the chairs and budged it closer to Greg because it was her firm belief that good energy was like a field force and, therefore, stronger with proximity.

“We don’t know, honestly. Mycroft… he can’t be turned on right now and… we won’t know more until then.”

“Did you try dancing naked?”

“WHAT!”

“You said he can’t be turned on right now, but I suspect a bit of waggling your waggles would bring him around quickly enough. Go ahead. I’ll watch and take video in case it doesn’t work now but he wants to see the show later on.”

Greg laughed a hearty laugh, much more than the joke deserved, but it was as if something had cracked in his grief and he felt, if only for that moment, that everything would be alright and his android would be awake soon to watch those waggles waggling whenever he so chose.

“Oh no, Greg’s laughing. Did someone call the men in white coats to take him away? They can take awhile to get here and I do not want to sit on him to keep him from running naked through the
halls with his willie waving in the wind.”

Anderson had no idea why that made Greg laugh even harder and had Molly and Stamford joining in, but it made the thought of another long drink of this hot and welcoming coffee a highly welcome one.

“It seems your friends are rather keen you see you in the buff, Sergeant Lestrade. I think you’ve got your holiday gifts sorted already. I’ll take a copy for the shelter, too, so the residents can have a bit of excitement on Christmas morning.”

“Perfect! Video footage of me in the clothes nature gave me dancing away to something fast and filthy so things really jiggle about. Jingle about, is more like it. I can put bells and a pretty little bow on my…”

Three biscuits were shoved into Greg’s mouth and Anderson’s, ‘you two can thank me later’ earned more laughter, which served to confuse and annoy Sherlock when he and John returned to the room, wheeling in a sizeable cart with a large monitor sitting on top.

“Frivolity is certainly inappropriate for this situation. I am disgusted, yet again, by the human species.”

The mixture of rude noises and ruder gestures that greeted Sherlock’s remark scandalized the android, especially the one from John who had no idea what was going on but certainly had to side with his human brethren on the ‘sod off, Sherlock’ front.

“Just a little laughter to keep our spirits up, Sherlock. Why don’t you tell me what you and John found at your jumble sale to help your brother?”

Sherlock glared at Greg, but chose to hold off further chastisement until he was certain there had been no disrespect shown to Mycroft. His brother was the most odious creature ever created, however, nobody but him was allowed to treat Mycroft with the contempt he so rightly deserved.

“John says this is the standard diagnostic station for android systems. It, supposedly, runs analysis routines and allows for the examination of… I lost interest after John’s first sentence since he said I couldn’t touch the equipment.”

“John’s a wise man. John? Wise man? Want to tell me what you’re going to do?”

John nodded and finished setting up his equipment before answering.

“This is going to run some standard tests of Mycroft’s systems to see what, if any, damage is present and then let me examine areas of his memory and programming for things that might be impeding his start up. It truly could be something minor that I can fix easily. If not… well, that’s another reason we’re here. I can order specialists in to look at him, blokes that are more engineers and programmers than anything, but they know the deeper-level construction issues better than a doctor would, just as any human-medicine specialist has a better grip on their specific area than I would.”

At least, to Greg’s mind, that made sense and… was comforting. Having Mycroft treated like a human patient would be treated and not a laptop you brought in because it won’t turn on made him feel a world more confident about the situation. That John was there overseeing the whole business raised the confidence even higher. Stamford’s nodding support of the plan was another tick up the scale.

“Don’t be miserly with those specialists, John. Mycroft’s still covered by his introductory-period
NHS access and the provisions for androids are surprisingly generous. We’ve worked hard to get androids properly cared for and it’s for circumstances like this I’ve drank many a cup of tongue-stripping tea, eaten a frightening number of rubber chicken dinners and listened to countless, boring politicians go on and on at endless committee meetings and awareness-raising social events. Let me actually see all of that suffering pay off, will you?"

As the discussion in the room veered towards the toxicity of the standard catering for committee meetings and fundraisers, John turned his attention towards his instruments and started looking over the preliminary results. There was no surprise in the fact that Sherlock stood directly behind him, pressed against his back, and read over his shoulder.

“That is supremely uninformative.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Each line of data says – ‘Unable to Perform.’ “

“Yes, and that’s highly informative, from my perspective. Mycroft’s not just off, he’s completely devoid of function.”

That caught Greg’s ear and his ear was extremely unhappy at the news.

“John… are you saying Mycroft’s d… dead?”

That stopped the rubber-chicken conversation cold in its tracks as everyone shot a panicked look towards John, who was shaking his head in such a way that didn’t confirm or refute their fears.

“No… that’s not the way to look at it. It’s… ok, even when androids are shut down, there are basic routines that continue to ensure survival until they’re reactivated. Very rudimentary things, like the clock on your computer continuing on when you shut down for the day. They have a capacity to store power and keep going for a very, very long time in that state, so you can power them back up and their memory is intact, their systems function properly, etc. But… you can turn that power source off, too, and that’s what’s happened here.”

“Is it… John, be honest with me… have I lost him?”

The pain in Greg’s voice shattered the heart of everyone in the room, so John’s smile in response seemed a touch out of place, unless the doctor had something very hopeful to say.

“Just because of that? No. It’s highly unusual, very highly unusual, but they do it now and again for certain repair procedures, such as replacing critical circuits or doing a full memory erase, but all you do is implement the steps for rebooting from the ground up and, with a little external power to start things off, the android is good as new.”

Greg’s mind had wandered a little at the ‘full memory erase’ piece and he shot a look at Sherlock who was chewing his lower lip and staring worriedly at his brother.

“Do you know if Mycroft’s memory was erased?”

Looking back over his shoulder, John wished this answer was as comforting, but not everything could be good news. At least, not all at the same time.

“No now. Once he’s got some power flowing in him and his systems begin to come online, I can check. It’s not a quick powering-up and there are places where it’s sort of designed to go slowly so an engineer or technician can check the progress and stop if something seems wrong. I’ll know
more once I begin. Greg… ethically, I do have to inform you that, as with all serious medical procedures, there are risks. We have the proper equipment for trickling in the startup power and the right bits to properly monitor and affect repairs, but things *can* happen, and if you want to wait and get another opinion, I won’t be offended.”

Molly reached over and grabbed Greg’s hand and it wasn’t lost on the police sergeant that he was being treated like a spouse whose loved one was facing major surgery. His Mycroft *had* to wake up so the android, once again, could be part of this group who had so much love and acceptance to give, even to a ridiculous, unshaved human like him.

“Mike, any experience with this sort of thing that you’d like to share?”

“Nothing more than what John’s already said. Androids are highly resilient, but, they’re not immune to complications during the repair process. It’s rare, though and I’ll be honest, if you do nothing, *that* is how Mycroft will remain and, without his standard continuous background routines running, he could begin to degrade like the computer or external drive you put away for a few years and now doesn’t turn on anymore or behaves badly when you do get it to fire. You do have a comfortingly-large window of time to decide, though, so don’t worry anything will happen if you want to research this further yourself.”

That was not going to happen to his Mycroft. No… not under any circumstances. Mycroft would never forgive him if he dawdled and fretted and the android that finally returned to him wasn’t the same as the one taken away. Mycroft would *hate* to have anything wrong with his function. That made the decision an easy one.

“Go on, then, John. Do what you have to do and we’ll have to deal with any problems if they arise.”

With permission given, John began setting up and didn’t mind a bit that Sherlock scrutinized every motion he made with a searing intensity. They weren’t really brothers, in the human sense, but Sherlock and Mycroft certainly saw themselves that way and he’d never disparage that viewpoint. Sometimes, the best families were the ones you built yourself.

Sherlock’s scrutiny was supplemented by Anderson’s who had a professional interest in the proceedings and had John giving a running commentary on what he was doing and why, something that further gave Greg hope this would end well for his android. You couldn’t doubt John’s competence, given the diversity and complexity of questions Sherlock and Anderson were asking, which were boosted by a few thrown in by Molly and Mike. When John finally stepped back a moment and sighed, after looking at the monitor, Sherlock nearly shoved him out of the way to view the data himself.

“Mycroft is coming back online.”

“That he is. At least, for this initial phase. It will be a few minutes before we’ll get any useful information besides status reports of his most basic functions, so if anyone needs the loo or another coffee, now’s the time to go.”

To everyone’s surprise, Greg was the one who rose and asked what people wanted in their coffee or tea because he was making the trip. Once he got the orders, though, there was little surprise he didn’t leave the room alone.

“I can carry it all, Mike. Got pockets and everything.”

“I know you can, Greg, I simply want the chance to ask how you’re doing when you don’t need
to put on a brave face for the others.”

“Ha! My brave face isn’t very brave, I suspect. Probably have my worry written all over it with big, thick strokes of the worry-pen.”

“That’s very true, but it will help if you give some voice to those worries.”

“What’s to say? Mycroft was snatched and had something done to him that normally doesn’t get done to androids unless there’s a pretty fucking drastic reason and now… if something goes wrong and Mycroft suffers permanent damage or malfunction, he’ll be devastated and I have no idea what I’ll be able to do to help him with that.”

“See? You had quite a lot to say on the subject. And all of it’s valid… this is an extremely upsetting situation, Greg, and no one expects you to view it any other way. When John brings Mycroft around, and I do believe that will happen, he’ll have to deal with his abduction and the implications of it. He’ll need you to be strong for him and you need to do what it takes to keep your strength. Talking to friends, making certain you sleep and eat well… it’s easy to focus purely on the one who’s sick or suffered a trauma and neglect yourself, but it’s harmful for both of you in the long term. I’m here whenever you need to talk, Greg, or to have that objective third-party assessment that what you’re doing, both for him and yourself, is healthy and positive. Use me at will.”

Stamford’s jolly smile made Greg laugh and he wondered what the world would be like with more men like Mike in the world. A wildly-fucking better place that it was now, no doubt about that…

“I will. And I’ll do it in a way that won’t make Mycroft jealous.”

“Good! Androids have a strength they generally don’t show and I can’t easily do my job with my legs wrapped around my neck like a pretzel.”

“I can see where that would be an impediment.”

“Glad we understand each other.”

And Greg absolutely did. He had help and support in this and, though he’d never given that much thought in life, it settled something inside of him so his stomach wasn’t quite so queasy. He was going to have to be strong for Mycroft and for Sherlock, too. He’d have his own talk with Sherlock when they had a moment alone and no matter what happened in the coming days, he’d do his very best for the brothers, offering whatever he could to help them through this and see whoever was responsible for it caught and prosecuted. In the meantime, he’d ask Molly if she wouldn’t mind stepping in now and again for some day-brightening duty. Mycroft had been glowingly happy after their day of shopping… admittedly, Sherlock didn’t seem the glowing type, but the power of Molly Hooper on a mission was nothing to take lightly…

John had said it would take time. John had said it would likely be slow going. John didn’t have to be so bloody right, miserable bastard, because this was excruciating!

“If your legs do not stop bouncing, Lestrade, I will tie them together and then to your chair. You are distracting me from my work!”

Which, for Sherlock, meant looming like a vulture over John and questioning every speck of information that flashed across the monitor.

“Then find some rope, because until John has news for me, I’m going to continue with my
ritualistic dance of nervousness.”

Molly took away Greg’s sixth cup of coffee and set it out of his reach, gaining approving nods from Anderson and Stamford for her wisdom.

“Nooooo… don’t deprive me! That’s my life’s blood right now!”

“You have enough coffee in you that I’m going to worry about dehydration when the increased urination begins, and the thought of you dry and mummified from water loss is too icky to contemplate right now, so… do you want to play cards? The nurses probably have a deck and we can pass the time with a bit of gambling so I can win funds for a new purse.”

As Greg considered the suggestion, because anything to take his mind off the waiting sounded good to him, John’s hmmm… had everyone turning his direction to wait for more than a contemplative hum.

“John! I demand you disclose your thinking!”

Waiting being an easier task for some than others.

“I… I’ve never seen anything like this, to be honest. A lot of… whoever designed Mycroft certainly didn’t follow any typical models. This is… I don’t know what to make of a lot of it.”

Ok, that was not exactly what Greg was hoping to hear and his legs began bouncing even faster.

“Do we… need one of those specialists you were talking about?”

“I… no? I mean, I don’t understand exactly what this is saying, in terms of detail, but every one of Mycroft’s self-diagnostic processes is returning ‘Status Normal,’ which is the important thing. Whatever this rigmarole of code and circuitry is all about, it’s working properly, so that’s a blessing. But… wait a moment… that’s odd.”

Sherlock desperately scanned the readings and silently raged, not for the first time, that it was illegal for shelter androids to even research android construction or programming. What did the dolts fear? That he’d create an army of androids bent on the destruction of the human race and beyond the ability of humans to destroy? Oh… yes, that was likely exactly what they feared…

“What! What is wrong with Mycroft!”

“Sherlock, that thing next to your very shouty mouth is my ear. Kindly remember that for the future.”

“Satisfy his curiosity, John, and we can all hear what’s got you bothered.”

Sherlock pointed at Anderson in triumph and John’s pained groan had Molly snickering in delight and, on Greg’s part, admitting that Anderson and Sherlock had a strange and tumultuous alliance, but one, Greg hoped, would mean the constable was another direction Sherlock could turn if he simply needed to let off some steam about tonight and whatever might be lying in wait.

“Fine! Remember I said that one reason they do this degree of powering down was prior to a total memory wipe?”

That queasy feeling in Greg’s stomach smashed back into him and he quickly checked for the location of the nearest bin, just in case.
“They wiped his memory!”

“What? NO! Sorry, Greg. No, that’s not what I meant, though, stopping when I did wasn’t smart, in hindsight. But… Mycroft’s memory structure… it’s… wrong. It’s been tampered with, but not recently. Certainly not today.”

Greg caught Sherlock’s eye and a silent conversation confirmed for Sherlock that Mycroft had shared details of their past with his paramour. It was not really for anyone else’s ears, but this could be information John needed to help his brother, so some revelation would have to occur.

“Mycroft… Mycroft, before he was deposited at the shelter… his memory was erased.”

Molly’s loud gasp matched well, with Stamford and Anderson’s bitten off curses and John’s second contemplative hum.

“Sherlock… I know you and Mycroft came from the same household…”

Sherlock screwed up his face at the doctor’s unspoken question, but recognized that lying wasn’t the best option at this point.

“If you are asking whether I, also, experienced a memory erasure, the answer is yes.”

Another round of affronted noises greeted the confession, but John’s shaking head acted as an odd contrast to the group opinion.

“No… no you didn’t. At least, not if you had the same thing done to you as Mycroft did.”

Now, Greg was on his feet staring at the monitor, though he hadn’t a single clue about the string of numbers and diagrams he was seeing.

“What do you mean, John?”

“Mycroft’s memory was never erased. That actually gets logged which, yes, can be altered, but a medical scanner can detect tampering like that and I’m not seeing any trace of that. What did happen… it’s as if massive sections of his memory were… quarantined. Partitioned off so that he can’t access it. This is… this is very high-level work, because memory issues show up in an android’s general behavior and can be tested as we could for humans with memory damage. I’ve never seen any indication Mycroft had memory gaps, especially ones this enormous, meaning they routed all his processing pathways so cleanly around the quarantined areas that it’s as if they’re not there.”

The quiet in the room as everyone tried to imagine that, as well as who might have done it to the android, was broken when Sherlock snarled loudly and whirled John around to look him in the eye.

“Can you release the memories?”

A question that had been part of the rest of the group’s reflection, but Sherlock was quicker to ask.

“I… maybe. With that level of precision recoding, I could easily do more damage to his memory by releasing the trapped ones than letting them stay where they are. Besides, I would never do that to Mycroft would his explicit and informed consent.”

“Then do it to me!”

“Again, I wouldn’t even consider attempting it without doing a LOT of research and consulting
real experts in the field. I’m not joking, Sherlock… this is not something anyone would try without a great deal of preparation and weighing costs versus benefits.”

Sherlock’s frustrated roar had Stamford, now, on his feet, drawing the android away from the monitor and out into the corridor for a quiet chat, something Greg would have been willing to do if his feet weren’t frozen to the floor as he desperately sought to make sense of things. The only movement his body seemed to allow was a slow turn towards his dear Mycroft who continued to lie peacefully in his bed.

“Then forget that for now, John. Maybe… maybe we can get some answers when we find out who took Mycroft and… that can be more information for him and Sherlock to use when deciding what they want to do. Is there, though… is there a way to find out who built Mycroft and Sherlock? They might have, I don’t know what they’d be called officially, but blueprints for them that might help you if they decide they want their memories freed?”

John whoof-d out a breath of air and did some scrolling through the very long data stream, stopping now and then to type in commands and, finally, directly connect a lead to the panel he’d exposed in Mycroft’s side.

“All right, that’s thing number two I’ve not seen before. I can’t find any manufacturer or designer information anywhere. No model or patent numbers, no corporate names or logos… nothing. I admit, for experimental models, that can be buried deeply, but it can usually be dug out with this equipment and… nothing.”

“Wonderful. Another fucking mystery.”

“I am sorry, Greg. It’s not… it’s not illegal not to sign your work and shelters, hospitals and the like don’t require it or even need it, usually, so there are no regulations about it being accessible.”

“Bloody perfect… tell me this, at least. With all that ‘Status Normal’ business from earlier… will Mycroft wake up?”

“I won’t say I’m certain of it, because it’s never wise to tempt fate, but… I’d say it’s likely. Not in the next few minutes, because there’s still a way to go in the rebooting process, but… maybe another half hour? It could be longer, though, so do not start a stopwatch.”

Thirty minutes had never sounded like an eternity before, but Greg would be surprised if Sherlock’s leg-tying threat wasn’t made good at some point between now and the final minute of the countdown.

“Ok… then we forget about the memory issue and just concentrate on Mycroft waking up, so he can be part of any decisions or actions about where we go from here. Molly… you said something about cards?”

“Yes! I did! I’ll find some and check on Sherlock and Mike while I’m at it. Poor Sherlock… this has to miserable for him. I won’t call him out when he inevitably cheats at our game, since I know he’s having a rough go of things.”

Admiring not for the first or last time Molly’s practical view of things, Greg smiled and prepared for the longest wait of his life. His Mycroft would wake up, he would. There simply was no other way this was going to end, so sayeth Greg Lestrade. Adding in a mental finger pointed emphatically in the air for good measure. Maybe two. And another specific two for the bastards who did this to his beloved android. It’d be the whole fist if he had a chance with them away from official and disapproving eyes…
The thirty-minute mark came and went with John reminding everyone that there were no set time parameters for this and Mycroft’s processes were humming along as they were supposed to be, as best as he could determine, given Mycroft’s uniqueness, so the card game continued in earnest and it was only some paranormal sense that had Greg looking up from his cards fifteen minutes later and dropping them as the darted over to Mycroft’s bedside.

“Mycroft?”

“Hmmmmmm?”

The hum served as enough of an answer for the rest of the room to leap up and mass around the android’s bed waiting for his next show of consciousness.

“Can… can you give me a little more than that, love? Maybe let me see those gorgeous blue eyes of yours?”

Mycroft frowned slightly as if he was perfectly content to keep those eyes closed, but Greg’s soft stroking of his arm drew the android the rest of the way to awake and he startled slightly at the loud cheer that rose when he opened his eyes and, finally, smiled up at Greg.

“Gregory? What is going on?”

Greg leaned down and kissed his android, savoring the feel of his soft, responsive lips, then drew over a chair to sit next to the bed.

“You’re in hospital, love. Do you… do you remember what happened?”

Mycroft’s eyes flared open and looked around confusedly before shaking his head and growing an almost fearful look on his face.

“I do not. Gregory, please, what is going on?”

“I’ll tell you everything I know, but can John give you a check first just to see that everything’s functioning properly?”

“I… I want to know what happened to me.”

“Shut up and let John practice his hoodoo and witchery on you, Mycroft. It is enough that I have had my day completely upended by your foolishness and I have no patience left to spare for further of your nonsense. John, begin.”

Shoving John towards Mycroft, Sherlock kept his eyes locked on his brother, cataloging every detail to reassure himself that Mycroft was functioning normally and there were no discernable effects from his ordeal. For his part, Mycroft saw the profound distress and worry his brother was screaming into the room, though he was the only one able to notice it. The rare demonstration of brotherly love, albeit in Sherlock form, was the greatest gift Mycroft could have hoped to receive at this point. That, of course, and the look of pure devotion his Gregory was wearing on his gently-smiling face.

“Very well. I shall submit to the witchery, however, that does not preclude one or more of you telling me what has happened and why it has ended with me waking in a hospital bed.”

A round of nods sealed the agreement and chairs were pulled closer to Mycroft’s bed, with Anderson taking Sherlock’s place as vulture looming over John to watch the various tests being performed as
Greg prepared to take point telling the difficult tale. The fact that he couldn’t let go of his Mycroft’s hand might be a problem, since he tended to use a LOT of gestures when he told a story and this one, if looked at the proper way, had some exciting bits that certainly deserved a touch of animation from the storyteller. Hopefully, he wouldn’t wrench Mycroft’s arm out of its socket, but they were in hospital, so that could be fixed quickly enough…

But, arm or no arm… his Mycroft was back with them. The android he was mulling synonyms over was back and aware and seemingly just as amazing as he was before he was abducted. There would be time, time aplenty, to continue mulling those synonyms and, one day, probably sooner than later knowing his impulsive self, he’d let his Mycroft know what he was thinking. And feeling. With a nice dinner, a bottle of proper wine, not the cheap stuff they bought for the flat, and some music to dance to once his little speech was over. It would be a little one, too. Just three words. Four, if he added ‘Mycroft’ at the end, but that wasn’t much of an addition. Might even leave it off. Mycroft knew his own name and it wouldn’t be as if he’d be saying “I love you’ to some ghost in the room, for pity’s sake…
Chapter 30

Greg was a little concerned that Mycroft remained silent during the extended round of discussion as the details of his capture and rescue were recounted and that concern grew from seeing the fear that tinted his android’s eyes as the discussion turned towards John’s discovery of the memory manipulation that he and Sherlock had experienced. It wasn’t fair. Not in the slightest. Mycroft had finally found a clear path to the freedom he so desperately wanted and that path was now fraught with rocks, brambles and scary things that went bump in the night.

“Mycrof? How… I know this is a lot to take in, but we’ll talk a lot about it, alright? John, can he come home tonight or do you want him here for awhile?”

John knew what Greg wanted to hear, but it was his day, apparently, to be the harbinger of doom.

“I’d prefer to keep him here a couple of days. Sometimes problems don’t show up right away and I’d rather not have Mycroft home alone when something happens.”

“I will stay with Mycroft!”

Sherlock coughed slightly to camouflage his volume-heavy outburst and scowled at Mycroft who was smiling at him as if he was seeing the sun rise for the very first time.

“John? Would that work? If… oh… I suppose that’s not really possible though, since Sherlock’s not allowed to…”

Greg’s train of thought was derailed by another small cough, this one from Stamford.

“If Sherlock promises not to do anything rash or impetuous, I can permit him to remain with you for a day or two. I’ll record it as home caring training, the likes of which his brother is supposedly doing. But, I do agree with John that Mycroft should spend a little more time here. Given the apparent complexity and uniqueness of his design, it might be worth bringing in someone with a greater knowledge of this sort of thing to look over Mycroft’s information and have a peek at things, just to be certain there’s not a subtle issue that a non-specialist might miss.”

Molly and Anderson’s nods of agreement added more votes to the no-go-home position, leaving Greg to sigh and, with more than a little regret, add his vote to that side of the line.

“I see your point. How does this sound? John, could you get someone like that in tomorrow?”

“Possibly.”

“Then, Mycroft definitely stays overnight and, if we’re fortunate, he gets checked quickly and Sherlock stays a couple of days at our flat to monitor that he doesn’t show any additional problems. I can claim a case of the plague and have tomorrow off, I suspect, so I can be here tomorrow to keep an eye on things and meet with the specialist, if they pop in. Love, is all of that alright with you?”

Not a question Mycroft found easy to answer since he was having a tremendously-difficult time processing the enormity of his experience and the overwhelming outpouring of care and concern from the people clustered around him, but he rallied quickly, not wanting to appear as if the feared malfunctions were happening now.

“I believe that is a sound and prudent plan. And…”
The difficulty was cresting! No… must draw down the surge of emotion and say what must be said…

“… I cannot express how grateful I am for all of your efforts. Truly… I am astounded and greatly touched that you would go to such lengths for me.”

“Ugh…Mycroft is attempting sincerity. Stamford! Take me home. I require a shower to wash the insipidness off of my skin.”

Reaching out with his unshod foot, Mycroft pinched Sherlock’s leg with his toes, gaining a shrieked yelp as his reward. The others may not hear the deluge of relief threading through Sherlock’s voice from knowing his brother was, so far, unaffected by his ordeal, but Mycroft did and was thrilled for a few days with his younger sibling so they could share their own conversations about all of this and… connect. It had been so very long since they had real quantities of time to simply talk without worry of other ears intruding on their discussion.

“Perhaps it is wise, Administrator Stamford, to return Sherlock to the shelter, for rest and his much-desired shower. If he is to nursemaid me, he must have a full reservoir of strength for I do intend to make use of his offer to the fullest extent possible. Do you know how to cook, brother dear? If not, best learn.”

Before Sherlock could begin orating on the inanity of that statement, Mike gave Mycroft a wink and began pushing Sherlock towards the door yelling his goodbyes over his shoulder, along with a reminder to let him know what happened with the specialist visit. With that signal, Anderson drew a breath and decided he’d be the next to leave since it was very late and the morning came very early for working people.

“Well, if the exodus is starting, I’ll follow in its wake and give you two a little time alone. I’ll see Sherlock and Stamford make it to the shelter alright and check they’ve got staff there to keep watch if our armed friends come visiting. Did the Inspector agree to a protection detail, Greg?”

“He’s checking into it. He’s not sure if he’s even allowed to use police resources to guard an android, but he said he’ll increase patrol presence in the area tonight and for the next couple of days regardless.”

“Good, then. Molly, I’ll happily escort you home, too, and, by that, I mean, sit next to you on the Tube since I’m two stops down from you anyway.”

“My knight in shining armor! Yeah, I should probably get home and check on my cats. The last time I didn’t tell them I’d be home late, they somehow opened the cupboards and ate all of my Jammie Dodgers. How they opened the packages, I have no idea, but they didn’t leave me one, the evil things. Mycroft, I’ll stop in tomorrow and see how you’re doing. Do you need anything, like oh!”

The males in the room patiently waited while Molly dug in the messenger bag she’d retrieved from the morgue when she announced she was taking the rest of the day off, and marveled that the heavy socks she drew out had taken that long to find.

“Warm socks!”

“Do I want to know why you’ve got socks in your handbag, Molly?”

“Greg, you’ve been to the morgue. It can get cold, especially when you stand in one place for a long time doing an autopsy. These are clean, though, so don’t worry about a thing.”
Laying the socks on Mycroft’s lap and pointing to his naked feet, it was a quick grab of jackets before the next two visitors were out of the room and John began to make his final checks so he could get home, himself, for a little sleep. He’d want to be back early in case… well, just in case.

“Mycroft, try and get some sleep if you can and try not to worry. I honestly don’t believe there will be any problems, so consider my wanting a more experienced eye just a precaution. I will try and get someone in tomorrow, but it could be the following day depending on availability.”

“I know you shall do your best, John, thank you. Truly, thank you for your efforts. I had worried somewhat about android care in London’s hospitals, but I see it is most laudable.”

“We do try, but don’t take that as license to decide on some reckless life as a football player or stuntman so I have to see you every other day for some repair or another.”

“I can assure you with absolute certainty that will not occur.”

“Alright, then. I’ll be going home now, but the nurses will look after you and there’s an android doctor on premises at all hours, so if there is a problem, someone will be here to tend to it until I can be called back in. Greg, you get some rest, too. This will be an uneventful night, I have no doubt, so take advantage of it.”

With that last bit of reassurance, John rolled the medical cart out of the room and only stopped to make a copy of the results to carry home with him before making his way out of Bart’s. If Sherlock didn’t escape and race here tomorrow, which wasn’t at all unlikely, then he’d be certain to call or stop in at the shelter at some point to share whatever they learned about his brother. Maybe Mike would let Sherlock out for the evening tomorrow if Mycroft was still waiting for a specialist, so he and Sherlock could have their own talk about today. The android was highly disturbed by all of it and a conversation away from everyone else might be helpful. Besides… he simply wanted his own moment to reassure himself that Sherlock was safe and not poised to suffer Mycroft’s fate. That was not something he wanted to think about… not even for a moment…

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Greg waited until John was gone to smile widely and hop into bed next to Mycroft and take a moment to kiss his propped-up android with a passion he’d been desperate to show since Mycroft woke.

“I was so scared for you, love. When you didn’t arrive at the forensics lab, I was beside myself.”

Mycroft stroked Greg’s cheek and felt the minute trembling in his human’s body as the memories of the day rose again in Greg’s mind.

“And I am eternally thankful for it. So few would have done that, Gregory. You risked your life! You could have been killed!”

Now it was Mycroft lightly trembling and Greg held him gently to comfort them both.

“I had to find you, Mycroft. I couldn’t rest until I knew you were safe. That’s why John’s advice is falling on deaf ears. Until we know what happened and why, you and Sherlock both are in danger and I’m not going to rest until we get to the bottom of this.”

Mycroft nestled deeper into Greg’s arms and breathed in his human’s scent. To go to such lengths… all for him. It was beyond belief, indescribable… and made him adore this man with a strength he didn’t realize he could experience.
“Do not endanger yourself, though, Gregory. It is not my wish that you suffer while trying to protect me.”

“I’ll make them suffer, don’t think I won’t.”

“So savage…”

“Which you’re enjoying.”

“I admit I am. I do… I recognize that my physical strength outstrips yours, but I find myself decidedly soothed by your protectiveness.”

“Good, because that won’t change. And Sherlock’s included in that, don’t think for a moment he’s not.”

Another thing that soothed Mycroft more than he could express. While he might be strong, he was only a single person, and an owned one, at that. His Gregory had a much-greater reach and access to potent resources for keeping a weather eye on Sherlock and seeing him safe from harm. As well as seeing others safe from harm caused by Sherlock’s personal brand of mayhem.

“I know, my dear, and my heart beats stronger for it.”

“Strong enough to talk about what John said about your memory?”

Yes, there was that, wasn’t there…

“In truth, I have no idea what to say. I have always known there existed memories I no longer could access, but I believed them erased. That what I perceived was, for lack of a better term, the holes where once existed. Now, I know that is not the case and… it is not something I can easily contemplate. My life is still with me, yet I cannot experience the evidence. My life with Sherlock… all of that remains when I had thought it lost forever…”

Kissing Mycroft’s temple, Greg began to realize just how important those memories were, beyond the possible solution to their current mystery, and knew that if Mycroft chose to have them released, he’d support the decision wholeheartedly.

“Are you going to tell John to try and fix the situation?”

“Not at present, no. I am ferociously anxious to see it happen, but I believe the need for research and study cannot be ignored. Sherlock would be utterly distraught if any diminishment of his mind occurred due to the procedure and I cannot allow that to happen. My brother is with me now and we have the opportunity to create new memories, giving the old ones less urgency than if that were not the case. I will want them opened, but only after proper consultation and preparation.”

“Something you can work on with John, I suppose, since we don’t know who built you, we can’t get help from that direction. I presume you would have said something if you know that information…”

“I would have revealed it instantly, but there is nothing in my memory concerning where I was made or for what purpose. John was truly that surprised by my design?”

“He said he’d never seen anything like it. I’m sure he’ll let you examine anything you’d like, though it might feel odd to have a look into your own workings. I can’t even take a peek when I’ve had a paper cut; I don’t think I’d fare well if someone let me see inside my guts or brain.”
“Fortunately, I believe I am made of sterner stuff and, yes, I would very much like to examine John’s findings, though, I doubt I can add much to his musings. However, now that I am not in a shelter, I can begin to study android function and systems and, perhaps, gain some insights that a human might overlook.”

“Whatever I can do to help, love, just let me know. Get you books or… maybe there are classes for that. We can look at the budget and I know we can find funds for that if it’s an option.”

Mycroft knew with crystal clarity that his human would dive further into poverty to see him with anything he wanted and it would be his mission to see that never happened.

“I know, Gregory, and I will surely make use of your offer the moment it becomes necessary. Now… surely you are exhausted after your experience. I am feeling most hale and healthy and will happily take a chair and let you have the bed to sleep.”

“I can sleep just fine with you in the bed next to me.”

“Gregory, it is not proper for you and me to share a bed.”

“It’s just sleeping! I’m not going to ravish your luscious body, though I can’t be responsible for dreaming about that, so ignore any moaning you might hear.”

“I was more concerned with the nurses who might visit to check on my well-being.”

“I wouldn’t be concerned about that. There’s not enough room for another person to fit and, while I admit that if there’s anyone as deserving of a rest as a copper it would be a nurse, I’m still not budging over to give one a chance for the proverbial forty winks.”

“Gregory… whatever shall I do with you?”

“Kiss me?”

Mycroft’s glower immediately vanished and he fell into a long kiss that lingered until a nurse did pay a visit and chastise Greg for unduly disturbing her patient. A quick shoo-ing moved the sergeant to a chair and a wagged finger rebuked Mycroft for letting his lust imperil his health. It was only after a rather wordy apology that Mycroft earned the late meal tray John had ordered, which the nurse wisely suggested he guard from thieving hands, since Greg’s lips were licked quite loudly when the lid was lifted.

“You shall not steal my food, Gregory. The nurse hath so decreed.”

“One bite.”

“No.”

“Two bites.”

“That is nonsensical, since I prohibited a single bite just seconds ago.”

“I know, but I’m trying to distract you so you don’t notice… victory!”

Greg held the stolen bread roll above his head in triumph, oof-ing loudly when Mycroft poked his ribs and retrieved his edibles.

“If the hospital restaurant is not open, I am more than willing to guard myself while you leave the premises procure your own meal, my dear.”
“I’m not hungry. I just wanted to bother you.”

“Glorious. Behold! There is a television. Make proper use of it.”

“It was nice of John to get you a private room because of the security issue. I’ll see if I can find one of the action-y films I like or a good science fiction classic to watch. I know how happy that will make you.”

This time the roll was thrown at Greg, who caught it and took a large and satisfying bite, while Mycroft laughed. No, Greg wasn’t leaving to eat, no he wasn’t going to sleep. Not tonight, at least. He was far too nervous and far too scared of leaving his android alone to do any of that. Maybe tomorrow he could have a quick bite once there were more people about who might spot a couple of suspicious blokes making their way to Mycroft’s room but, until then, his arse was warming this chair and his eyes were on his dear android. Nobody was touching one hair on Mycroft’s head while Greg Lestrade was on the case. Fingers would be lost if anyone tried and a few more body parts besides…

With Mycroft finally agreeing to a rest and recharging session, Greg had time to contemplate matters and by the time morning rolled around his brain was hurting from the continuous loop of the previous day’s events rolling over and over in his imagination, too often veering from reality to ‘what if’ and his heart leapt more than was healthy when Mycroft again opened his eyes and stretched slightly in his bed.

“Gregory, do tell me you saw some sleep this night.”

“You saw some sleep this night.”

“You are being difficult, aren’t you?”

“Am I supposed to say that, too, or is the game over?”

Lacking something to throw at his human, Mycroft simply crooked his finger to beckon his good-morning kiss and reveled in the sensation of said human’s warm lips against his.

“You are most fortunate you are a spectacularly attractive individual, Sergeant Lestrade.”

“Since it won me you, I would agree. How are you feeling this morning, love? Notice anything amiss?”

Mycroft paused a moment and ran a series of assessments, none of which gave him cause for concern.

“I do not, though it is unknown if I would perceive any malfunction should it happen. I shall have to rely, also, on the observations of those with whom I associate, I presume.”

“Sherlock will be good for that. He’s got the best eye of all of us. Something that very much became useful when we were looking for you. I had no idea of all the things you could do! I’m actually a bit jealous.”

“I am a man of many talents.”

“That is very true. Such as kissing! You’re amazingly talented at that.”
“Thank you, Gregory. I am finding it one of my more useful skills.”

“Just don’t look to it to earn a wage, alright? I’d like to think I’m the only one getting to enjoy your masterful… ness.”

“That is not a word.”

“Yeah, I realized that once I got started.”

While he bantered with his partner, Mycroft made note that the human had not seen a bit of sleep during the night and, most certainly, not a bite of food. His dear Gregory had stood guard vigilantly and ensured his own rest was safe and undisturbed. Was this… no, it was inappropriate to ascribe to his human’s actions any particular descriptor, but… no, he should reflect further on the matter before drawing any conclusions. The concept of ‘wishful thinking’ was not unknown to him and did not seem a productive use of mental energy. Though, if he was to make a wish, a certain depth of emotion from his Gregory, one named with a small, beautiful term would be the prime candidate…

“Then I need not deliver a lecture. Might I ask what is our plan for the day?”

“I am officially sick and have the day to recuperate, though the Inspector will know I’m lying and give me the bent eye over it, so we have the day to do as we please! As long as what we please is relaxing shamelessly until the specialist arrives and if that’s not today, then I’ll make arrangements to have someone here to keep an eye on you while I’m off chasing criminals.”

Realizing it was useless to argue his lack of need for police presence, Mycroft simply nodded and swung his legs out of the bed, smiling that Greg shot to his feet in response.

“I am simply going to take a shower, Gregory.”

“You don’t have clean clothes.”

“Ah, yes… there is that.”

“I’ll phone and see if Molly can bring something with her when she comes in for work.”

“Gregory, do not bother Molly for such an unimportant thing.”

“Want one of those gowns that tie in the back and everyone can see your arse?”

“I… though my bottom is of exceptional quality, I do not like the idea of it being visible to anyone who might care for a peek.”

“Then Molly it is! I’d ask Anderson, but he doesn’t work here and I think it’s more out of the way for John to stop at our flat. We’ll see she’s rewarded for the bother when we have our next film night.”

“Very well. I shall postpone my shower until then and we might simply spend time… do you believe the morning newspapers are available?”

“I think I can risk a quick dash to the waiting room or nurse’s station to find out.”

“That would be most appreciated. I do prefer to keep informed on current events.”

Knowing his android memorized every word and analyzed every pattern he read, Greg smiled and started his quick dash to see what he could find. No more than a moment, though. It was still very early and the nurses and other personnel remained too few and far between for his comfort. Later,
though, he’d have to find something to eat as his stomach was hosting nothing but acid and that was starting to wreak a fair degree of havoc. He wouldn’t ask Molly to add that to her burden, though, since he wasn’t sure he had the cash to repay her. He may not have the cash to pay the nice people serving food here either, but he was still in uniform and that was usually good for a free coffee and sandwich or pastry, especially with the Greg Lestrade pleading-eyes thrown in for good measure. Maybe Molly could bring him some clothes, too, though… smelling like a compost heap wasn’t helpful when one was hoping to beg a little free food from kind and well-washed citizens…

“Greg! You left your cave!”

“John! You’re short!”

The round of not-too-rude-we’re-in-public gestures was a quick one as John joined Greg at the small table in the hospital coffee shop.

“Tall enough to kick your arse.”

“True.”

“How’s the coffee?”

“Hot and strong.”

“Perfect. Give me a moment.”

While John got his coffee, Greg rolled his shoulders and gave his head a shake. Molly had gladly delivered some clothes for both him and Mycroft, so they’d both had showers before changing, but it hadn’t done much to put spring in his step. If Mycroft couldn’t come home tonight, maybe Stamford would let Sherlock come and sit with his brother for the night while he got some sleep. Anyone trying to snatch Mycroft again would have to face a tetchy, highly-capable android and one who might actually have less regard for breaking the noses of anyone who threatened Mycroft than him.

“How tired are you, you useless policeman?”

“Oh, lethally, but I’ll manage.”

“Did Mycroft, at least, get any rest?”

“He did, actually. Ate, too. Molly brought a change of clothes, so he’s cleaned and dressed, as a bonus. All in all, a successful night and morning. Now, we just have to see what the specialist says and maybe this will be the only morning he has to spend here.”

“Unfortunately, that won’t be the case. I couldn’t schedule anyone until tomorrow afternoon, but… Greg… are you ok?”

Greg’s eyes were wide and he was losing color in a way that made John worry another hospital bed would be needed for his obviously-exhausted friend.

“You didn’t find anyone to see Mycroft today?”

“No, but I told you that was possible, so I don’t see why…”

“John… the only reason I’m here right now is a bloke with proper hospital credentials stopped in and said he was the android specialist assigned to see Mycroft.”
“Name of Fleming?”

“No.”

“Shite.”

Before Greg bothered to answer, both men were on their feet running towards Mycroft’s room and Greg growled loudly finding his android still in bed but, very clearly, switched off again.

“John!”

“Hold on, let me see… oh. He’s coming back online. Just needed the normal start up step. I’ll check that… Greg… where’s Mycroft’s property mark?”

Grabbing Mycroft’s hand, Greg stared at the unmarked skin and shook his head in confusion.

“I… it was here! Before I went for a bite to eat it was definitely here!”

“Well, it’s not now. Oh… is that your envelope on the nightstand?”

Greg’s eyes shot over to where John was pointing and the order for gloves was barked out before he had time to consider if that was polite or not. Fortunately, John acted with military instinct to a barked order and had a pair of exam gloves in Greg’s hands before a minute had passed. Donning the gloves and carefully opening the envelope, Greg felt his heart lurch and he gasped loudly seeing what was inside.

“What is it? Greg, what’s wrong?”

Removing the sheet of paper, the police sergeant held it up and was happy John’s reaction was as sharp as his own.

“Is that… do you think it’s real?”

“Get a scanner.”

John raced away and Greg took a few heaving breaths while Mycroft came back online, much faster, he was relieved to see, than the night before.

“Gregory? Gregory… I was turned off again. This time, I remember it and…”

“Shhh… it’s alright, love. I’m here and so is John. Or he will be in a moment. Which is now.”

John barreled into the room and turned on the scanner, studying the readings and inputting a long series of codes before looking up in disbelief at Greg.

“It’s deactivated. Properly, as it would be for…”

John motioned towards the paper still in Greg’s hand, leaving Greg to muddle through some explanation to the increasingly-agitated Mycroft.

“Gregory… something is going on and I.. tell me, please!”

Taking a seat on the side of Mycroft’s bed, Greg took a deep breath and handed Mycroft the paper.

“I… I do not understand. This… it makes no sense.”
“No, it doesn’t, but the property mark is off your hand and your location tracker has been officially deactivated. Barring finding out this paper is a forgery, which I don’t think it is… you’ve got your emancipation, Mycroft. That’s the right certificate and when it’s granted, they do whatever it is they do to erase your mark and deactivate your tracker. I don’t understand it either, but… you’re free.”

“Free? I… I am free?”

“It appears so. I have no idea who could have done this or how it was done in the first place, but… I don’t own you anymore. You’re a free android. You are completely free, love. I… oh god, I’m happy and terrified for you at the same time!”

What Mycroft was feeling could not be put into words because there were no words for it and John quietly left the couple alone so they come to grips with this highly suspicious and joyful event. Freeing an android wasn’t easy and certainly not if they had a rightful owner so this was undeniably tied to the high-level security force that had been guarding Mycroft yesterday. For now, he’d be ecstatically-happy for the android, but keep watch for more trouble from whoever was pulling these strings. Actually, along those lines, another examination of Mycroft’s systems was likely in order. Someone got in here and tampered with the android, so there was no telling what other things they might have fiddled with while Greg was out of the room. Better safe than sorry…

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“Mycroft… are you… how are you doing?”

The android had remained silent, staring at his certificate, and Greg gently rubbed Mycroft’s leg until he finally received some answer to his question.

“I… I cannot believe this. It… it is true?”

“I’ll make a call and see if the proper paperwork has been filed, but I suspect it has been. I don’t see how, but I’m fairly confident that you, Mycroft, are now exactly where you wanted to be in life. How does it feel?”

Mycroft tried to answer and Greg took his android in his arms the moment the tearless sobs began. Androids couldn’t cry, but they could shake and heave with emotion and Greg was content to hold his android until the moment subsided. Yes, he would check the paperwork and yes, this was certainly part of whatever reason Mycroft had been taken but, if this one good thing could come from his love’s ordeal, he was tempted to say it was all worth it. Of course… now they had to check on Sherlock, but ‘now’ was a relative term. Mike would have called if anything strange had happened so, this moment was all for Mycroft and Mycroft alone. His android certainly deserved that and it was his honor and joy to protect it with all he was worth…
“I’m seeing the same thing, so… I have no idea how, but this is official.”

Greg gave a large thumbs-up to the still overwrought Mycroft whose face lit up with a nearly manic grin as he threw himself back on the bed and laughed loudly.

“You’re sure, Mike? No odd fiddly bits that make you suspicious?”

“No… and I’ve seen enough of this particular set of forms to know.”

Having already had Anderson do one check, Greg had decided a truly expert eye for this was needed and, after he had talked Stamford down from the ceiling, the administrator had launched into the records and took no small amount of time studying Mycroft’s new file.

“How the fuck could that happen?”

“Your guess is as good as mine. If this was twenty years ago, I’d say someone slipped a clerk ten quid, which did happen with some frequency by the android-rights groups, but there was enough bureaucracy to catch the scheme before it went very far, though a few androids did get freed that way. What a mess that was in the courts… anyway, this is flawless. It’s fake, of course, because we know Mycroft didn’t submit any forms or have his interview or pay the processing fee or any of the other hoops that have to be jumped through, but… even the handwriting is perfect! I know what Mycroft’s handwriting and signature look like and this… someone saw every possible detail met. Unless you have a reason you want to contest this… Mycroft is a free android and there’s no way to prove otherwise.”

Two thumbs up made Mycroft laugh louder and wrap his arms around himself since his Gregory’s were otherwise occupied.

“Well, since there’s no possibility I’m contesting it… I suppose you can strike us off your client list.”

“Excellent! It was slightly professionally shady to get drunk with one of my cases, but there goes that moral dilemma out the window. When shall we schedule the celebration for Mycroft’s new status?”

“I… as soon as Mycroft gets checked by a real android specialist. Though…”

Greg smiled at Mycroft and tossed him the remote for the telly before making a ‘gonna grab coffee’ sign and walking his mobile out of the room to continue the conversation.

“… I have to say that as happy as I am, I’m worried beyond belief, Mike. Some bloke sauntered in, turned Mycroft off, did whatever he had to do to disable Mycroft’s tracker and property mark and have all the necessary paperwork filled out, stamped and filed. There has to be a reason for that and, given what’s happened, I can’t imagine it’s a charitable one.”

“I have to agree and I’m more concerned than ever, now, for Sherlock. There’s an ulterior motive to all of this and I think we can agree that any notion of this being about android theft or parts selling is officially dead and buried.”

“No question about that. This is… this is about Mycroft and Sherlock and them alone. You sure there’s no information about where they came from?”
“I’m very sure and I did check again after you bought him. Mycroft was delivered to another shelter before he was moved to this one with three others to help balance resident numbers. The director there says he was delivered by two men who simply accompanied him to the door, declared he was being abandoned to the state and left. No possessions, no clothes besides what he had on his back… it’s not unusual, in fact, that’s a fairly common thing and it was designed to make it easier for people to simply give up their androids and not have other, more destructive options, seem more appealing. Sherlock was delivered to the shelter you collected him from and with the same routine.”

“Bollocks. Any… would there be a paper trail for when his previous owner purchased him?”

“Yes, but that’s… that’s one area the bureaucracy hasn’t quite… tracing an android’s purchasing history is virtually impossible. Their names can be changed, the ID number… let’s say there is enough territoriality remaining in local councils that ID numbers are changed every time an android purchase is registered in a new district. If we knew where Sherlock and Mycroft came from, I could make a few phone calls and track that down, but… given his memory situation, I suspect that’s information they don’t have.”

“That’s likely the case. At least, not in their accessible memory. It’s probably there behind the great fucking wall, but I’m not certain it’s worth trying to crack into that until every other possibility has been exhausted.”

“I agree. This isn’t over, though, you do know that.”

(Of course I know that! Freeing Mycroft is just another move in whatever game’s being played, though… I’m not going to raise that point with him right now. He’s floating on a cloud at the moment and I am not going to be the one to punch a hole in it.”

“He’ll punch his own hole soon enough, don’t fool yourself. As soon as the euphoria ebbs a little, that intellect of his is going to remind him about the bigger picture and he’ll be as anxious as any of us about it. Do what you can for him, Greg.”

“I will.”

“Especially since you don’t own him anymore.”

“Yeah. Got that.”

“No, you don’t or your voice would have had a completely different tone. You don’t own him, Police Sergeant Lestrade. There’s no, shall we say, imbalance in your relationship. At least, not of the owner-android sort.”

“Oh…. ohhhhhhhhhhhhhh…”

“That’s the tone I was waiting for. Do what you can for him, Greg. You’ve got more tools now and I suspect they’ll all be needed, but remember…”

“Mycroft’s still in charge, as far as I’m concerned, more tools or not.”

“Perfect. And… he should tell Sherlock soon. It could be a touchy subject and might best be done in person. Want me to send Sherlock over to you today?”

“I… let’s see what happens with the specialist so we’ll know where we’ll be. John’s going to redouble his efforts to get someone in to see Mycroft today, given he’s been meddled with a second time, but if tomorrow is the earliest we can have someone do the exam, then Sherlock could start his Mycroft minding tomorrow and they could have a chance to chat before we all descended in the
evening for a congratulatory drink or eight.

“I do like the way you think. Let me know, Greg, and I’ll keep digging around for whatever I can find about Sherlock’s and Mycroft’s previous situation. I did check with Mycroft’s name once, since I’d never heard it for an android and found nothing, but I wasn’t as keen to really get my hands dirty as I am now. I’ll let you know if I find anything.”

“Thanks, Mike. I’ll phone later.”

Continuing on for his cover-story coffee, Greg smiled at the memory of his android’s unabashed joy and made a vow that no matter what was going on, Mycroft’s freedom was the important thing at present and celebrate that they would. In grand style, too. Maybe a small party tomorrow and… well, at some point another subject could be broached and, with the reminder that he was fully in charge, his dear Mycroft would be given the ‘go’ signal for whatever might take his fancy, whenever his fancy wanted to be taken. Or do the taking. Anything was fine with him. It was enough to imagine the warm tangle of naked limbs that would, one day, be him and one extremely gorgeous android. And it would be good for security! Who’d be able to steal his Mycroft away when he was being held like a ship in the Kraken’s arms… nobody, that’s who. And pity the poor bastard who tried…

“Tea!”

“One tea for my Mycroft and one coffee for me.”

“Sleep would be a better remedy for your condition, my dear.”

“And I’ll get my share tonight. I was thinking, though, that, when you’re discharged, we could have our friends in for a little party to celebrate your emancipation. Nothing fancy, but something to commemorate the occasion.”

“What a superb idea! I have never believed myself a social creature, but, for our small circle, I find their company most enjoyable. Do… do you believe Sherlock could join us?”

“Already asked Mike and he said yes. Actually, I think if Sherlock found out Stamford was coming to our flat for a party, your brother would throw a typhonic tantrum and bring the shelter down around their ears, so the ‘yes’ might more have been for self-preservation than goodness of heart.”

“Either way, it is a delight. And… a good opportunity to inform Sherlock about my change of status. I… still cannot believe it, Gregory. I am free! I cannot describe how, but I feel notably different than I did but yesterday, simply from knowing I am no longer enslaved. There is an indefinable sensation of… oh, it is fruitless to attempt to give words to what I feel. My future is mine to craft, my choices are mine to make… when you purchased me, I saw the chance arise and it has been glorious, but now…”

Nearly vibrating with glee, Mycroft didn’t protest his tea being confiscated before he was wearing the liquid as part of his smart ensemble of camel trousers and a deep green jumper that added a touch of warmth to his cool skin tones. Molly had definitely enjoyed her freedom to clothe the android, but Greg didn’t have a single complaint to offer. As it stood, not a person in London would look at his Mycroft and see anyone by another human passing them by on the street…

“You deserve it, love. As much as you’ve wanted this, you absolutely deserve it.”
“Thank you. I just…”

That wasn’t a joyful, gleeful, blissful expression. Looked like the intellect was raising its hand to be called on…

“Yes?”

“I am not unaware of the circumstances of my emancipation, Gregory. Something nefarious is afoot and I am not blind to fact that my freedom was gained to serve some purpose we have yet to determine. I am committed to learning that purpose and making sense of yesterday’s experience, which put you and the others in such danger. Is it… is it inappropriate… is it wrong to be so jubilant when I know heinous interests are behind my freedom?”

Greg smiled and set down their beverages on the nightstand, laying a hand on Mycroft’s leg and giving it a small squeeze.

“It’s not inappropriate at all. Yeah, someone did this for a reason and I can’t imagine that reason is a good or helpful one, but as long as we realize that, we can keep our eyes open for the fallout and handle it when it comes. I don’t imagine the bastards that took you realized exactly who you had on your side. You’ve got a very impressive team backing you, love, and that’s going to make it hard for them to get a second chance for snatching you up or whatever the hell they have planned. We’ll find out who’s responsible for this, I promise, and they won’t be happy they thought interfering in your life was a good idea.”

Mycroft practically purred at the menacing tone in his human’s voice and leaned in to kiss him, surprising himself somewhat at the passion he was infusing into their embrace. Gregory was a fantastically masculine man with a depth of heart that… oh dear, Gregory was moaning again. Oh dear... again.

“You like the feel of my skin, don’t you love?”

Given my hand has found its way twixt your shirt and skin, I would have to agree.

“It is a remarkable sensation beneath my fingers. However, I realize that is not fair to you to given…”

“It’s perfectly fair. You’re free now, Mycroft. Remember?”

It took a surprising number of seconds for Mycroft’s mind to grab hold of Greg’s meaning and Greg had a good laugh at the utterly astonished expression that leapt onto Mycroft’s face when he realized a very specific thing that had changed in their relationship.

“I do and… dear heavens. That does alter things a bit, doesn’t it?”

“I’d say so. But, let me say this so you don’t even have to wonder. You still have the captain’s hat for this, Mycroft. We move at your pace, what feels comfortable for you. I’m perfectly happy with that and don’t think otherwise.”

One section of Mycroft’s brain took in that information and felt rather smug about his continuing role as arbiter of their intimacy, but another section was busily remembering all the… activities… he had witnessed in his recent explorations of said intimacy in various print and online sources and experiencing somewhat of a rush of… well, lust was a rather crass word, but it would do. He could pleasure his Gregory! And receive pleasure, in turn… this day continued to deliver its gifts, and in magnificent form…
“Something for which I am most grateful and I shall wear my hat most proudly.”

“I should find a crown for that lovely head of yours. One of those tasteful ones that says ‘here’s a proper king,’ not a shiny, jewely thing that looks fake even when it costs a billion pounds.”

“That shall be added to our shopping list, along with milk and bread.”

“We may have to visit two shops for all of that.”

“Verily, I believe that to be the case.”

Giggling at their silliness, Greg nestled against Mycroft and drew him back to lay against the raised end of the hospital bed, so they could recline and talk or watch telly or whatever took their interest this fine day. What they really needed was a laptop for Mycroft to use to learn more about his rights and responsibilities now that he was a free android, but that could throw some cold water on things so rethinking that particular idea. No need his Mycroft learning about things like taxes on this happy day. Or voting. Dear heavens, but Mycroft was going to be a ferocious citizen when it came to voting. Probably get all involved in local elections and campaign for candidates he liked. He could even run for office himself! Yeah, not the time for researching rights and responsibilities… he wasn’t going to leave his android alone for the amount of time it would take to gather together the paperwork it would take to join a party and get on the next ballot for selecting their local MP…

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“I am here. Leave.”

Greg and Mycroft turned towards the door of the hospital room and marveled at the dark and glowering figure standing there as if to reap their souls.

“Sherlock! Come to ferry your brother to the Great Beyond?”

“Your nonsensical prattle fails to either impress or inform me, Lestrade, so it is useless, rather like yourself. I have been forced by Stamford to come here and stand guard that Mycroft does not escape to the hospital kitchens and consume their week’s ration of food. You are to return to your hovel and sleep, as you, due to your low status on the economic hierarchy, must work at a menial job to earn a living.”

“That’s a lot of words to say I have to get up early in the morning and you’re here to be nice and give me a good night’s rest.”

“I have no intention of being nice.”

“Yet, you managed it anyway. Nicely done, lad. Thank you!”

All of which Greg and Mycroft both knew from the phone call they’d received from the shelter administrator which boiled down to Sherlock was scaling the walls and near to inciting a riot and would they please do child minding duty for the night so there was a shelter left in the morning. Apparently, the android was highly concerned for his brother and not handling that concern well without a larger net of support than Mike.

“I would make a rude noise, however, the volume required to fully give it its due would disturb the other patients and the nurses appear to be of a most… stern… nature.”

Patting the laughing Greg on the leg, Mycroft motioned Sherlock into the room and admired the flair with which his brother hurled himself into a chair.
“That is a very keen observation, Sherlock. Only an hour ago, Gregory was chastised most furiously for having his shoes on my bed.”

“Given the filth that resides on them, the chastisement has my full support. Now, put more filth on them, Lestrade, while you leave and allow the ventilation system in the room to clear the air of your effluvia.”

“He’s got a mouth on him tonight, love. You should be recording this to sell to Radio 4. They could use some stock material for some program or another, I suspect.”

“A career, brother! We have found for you gainful employment without your having to lift a finger to achieve it.”

Sherlock’s annoyed flick of his wrist made the other men smile and share a ‘now?’ look that had Mycroft drawing a breath to begin what could prove to be a rather volatile conversation.

“However, given you shall not begin that career at the present time, let us fill the minutes with something else. We… we have something to tell you, Sherlock and…”

Mycroft looked over to Greg who took Mycroft’s hand and squeezed it firmly for support.

“An event occurred today that… while troubling in the extreme…”

“What! Lestrade you… USELESS! You cannot be entrusted to stand watch over a discarded piece of notepaper!”

The volatility had launched.

“Sherlock! As you can see, I am unscathed and, given the repercussions, I think you will agree the complexity of the situation makes laying fault or blame highly difficult and unwarranted.”

Sherlock’s glare intensified and Mycroft thought a moment about how best to make his announcement, settling for engaging his brother’s powers of observation as the first salvo. Lifting his hand, Mycroft held it steady, its back to Sherlock’s eyes, until he heard the clear sound of Sherlock’s shocked gasp of disbelief.

“Your property mark!”

Mycroft then motioned for Lestrade to retrieve the certificate from the nightstand and hand it to his brother for study, which Sherlock did for a long time and, the couple was certain, with every enhanced sense he possessed.

“This… this does not appear to be a forgery.”

“Stamford and Constable Anderson checked into the filing and satisfaction of the bureaucracy and found all to be in order. It is ‘fake’ in the sense that there is no manner in which it can be real, however… it is real in that all legalities have been met and with no break in a chain to fall to scrutiny. I am free, Sherlock. As of today, when I was visited by someone posing as an android specialist who removed my mark, disabled my location tracker and left that behind.”

“That is… I… I have no idea what to say.”

“Neither did I, not for the longest time. It is a dream come true! Yet, I cannot deny that dream has a price waiting to be paid, the type and amount of which is unknown. Regardless… I am now a free android, Sherlock, and do not believe for a moment that has diminished my devotion to seeing
you free as well for it has not. It has strengthened it and both Gregory and I will see that happen however we can find to do the deed."

Sherlock continued to stare at the certificate and Greg had to believe that the android was imagining one just like that with his own name on it. Mycroft was right, though… they wouldn’t stop until Sherlock was freed. In fact, he’d phone Mike tomorrow, get the exact price, work out what wiggles they could manage to bring that down somewhat, then start to plan. Mycroft could start work as soon as this ridiculous MI-6-like nonsense was over and he might be able to take some extra work here and there to earn a few quid to put towards Sherlock’s emancipation fund. With two of them working and only having one rent… maybe. He actually hadn’t asked if Mycroft was going to keep living with him, had he? Ok… best shelve the planning until other details were worked out first.

“Do you… do you feel whoever had done this might… do the same to me?”

“I do not know, Sherlock, for I have no idea what game is being played. We have so very few clues that there is no picture I have been able to put to this puzzle. It is possible that if you were more accessible, you would have been the one taken, or it may be that I alone, for some unknown reason, am the focus of attention. But, and this is critical, I have no idea if my freedom would have been granted if I had been rescued. Perhaps this was a response to that rescue and would not have occurred if I had stayed in their grasp."

“True, I suppose.”

“I… I would appreciate knowing your thoughts on this, Sherlock?”

Seeing the highly-conflicted look on Sherlock’s face, Greg swallowed his protective urges and made the decision to give the brothers time alone to talk.

“You two have a lot to discuss, so why don’t I give you the privacy to do that? Sherlock, I’ll thank you again for your unintentional niceness and just say to call me or the police if anything happens that worries you. Love… will you be ok with me leaving for the night?”

Mycroft smiled softly, knowing the only thing that would move his human from his side was recognizing Sherlock’s need for only one set of ears to hear his words. As much of a godsend was Gregory to him, that grace was also given to Sherlock, something for which Mycroft would forever be thankful.

“I believe I will. But, I shall have my mobile ready for an emergency call, should it be necessary.”

“Good. Sherlock, anyone comes to check on Mycroft, don’t leave the room while the check’s going on. That was my mistake and we can’t assume another will have such a happy outcome.”

“I am leaving Mycroft for no reason whatsoever.”

“Perfect!”

Leaning over to kiss Mycroft slow and tenderly, until Sherlock’s agonized death rattle interrupted their bliss, Greg then grabbed his hat and, after a moment’s thought, the certificate out of Sherlock’s hands.

‘I’m going to take this with me and store it in the evidence room where it will be under lock and key. They try anything shady, we have the original in our hands. I’ll make a few copies, too, just to be safe.”
“A prudent idea. Do rest well tonight, Gregory. I shall phone tomorrow and let you know the outcome of my examination by the specialist.”

“I’d appreciate that. Sherlock, this really is helpful and both your brother and I appreciate it. Tomorrow night we may have a few people in to celebrate Mycroft’s emancipation and I’ll make certain you get more than your fair share of food and drink for this little service.”

Before Sherlock could launch into the expected denigration of his police-grade beverages and food products, Greg grinned, ruffled Sherlock’s curls and made his exit, stopping only to notify the nurses that Sherlock would be there all night and to brace for impact. In truth, this was a tremendous blessing since he was fucking exhausted, but was not about to sleep on the job and leave his Mycroft unprotected. Now, he could get a full night’s rest, actually earn his wage tomorrow and be prepared to ring in his android’s new life in as much style as his tiny wallet could muster. Looking on the bright side of this… and he’d keep looking on that bright side, too, until the storm clouds rolled in and rained on everyone’s parade…

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“Ugh… if Lestrade did not have some facility with investigation, I would see him sold off for livestock feed.”

For Sherlock, that was high praise indeed.

“Yes, brother, Gregory’s flesh and entrails would healthily nourish any number of organisms, however, I believe I prefer them in their current configuration.”

Especially since that configuration is exquisite to view and tantalizing to the touch. The blessings of freedom were sweet indeed!

“Disgraceful. You are already contemplating coitus.”

Sherlock was a mind reader! Well, that would be another talent to add to his brother’s growing list.

“Am I? Dear me, what a trollop I have become.”

“I blame Lestrade. And your ridiculous scribbled-upon serviette.”

And, so it begins.

“Do you mean the rather florid piece of paper that declares me unbound from any hand but mine.”

“Poetic renderings are not your forte, so feel free to spare my ears your orations.”

“I sincerely beg your pardon; I am somewhat overcome by the drastic change in my circumstances. I would know how you feel about that, Sherlock. I am not blind to the fact that this could both trouble and gladden you and I am open to hear any thoughts you have on the situation.”

“What does it matter? What’s done is done.”

“It matters a great deal if you hurt because of it. I know as well as you the pain and humiliation of being property. Of having no free will and no true say in your own life. It is a terrible, degrading feeling that never leaves you and now, you see me having stepped away from that misery. Having achieved what we both wished for so desperately. I would understand completely if you did not feel my elation at having this gift bestowed on me. If it rankled and you felt resentment, instead.”
Sherlock’s face twisted into a familiar scowl that meant he felt the topic of conversation very deeply and that Mycroft had scored a powerful point he could not ignore.

“I feel no resentment.”

Even when he tried.

“Your thunderous brow says otherwise.”

“Do not attempt to be describe my brow. Your continued literary aspirations are horrifying.”

“Then answer my question and spare yourself further of them. Fair warning, I have been hopeful to try my hand at composing an ode. Perhaps it shall be to your thunderous brow.”

Sherlock looked almost afraid of that possibility and Mycroft’s smile stayed as internal as possible, though he felt certain at least a smidgen sneaked out for the thunder darkened a touch before it finally broke and Sherlock relaxed a little in his chair.

“I may have some slight touch of… resentment.”

“Much as I expected you would and I do not begrudge your sentiment, for it is fair and warranted.”

“That… it does not mean, however, that I am not… happy for you.”

And that was clearly written in Sherlock’s eyes, which held a glow that melted Mycroft’s heart.

“Thank you, brother. That means a great deal to me. And it shall only be a short while before we secure yours and we can both be free.”

“Until then, I suppose, Stamford’s pig sty is not the worst in which to languish.”

That was monumentally-high praise and Mycroft made mental note to pass on to Stamford that his efforts towards his charges were certainly noticed and appreciated.

“I found it an acceptable place to languish, myself, which is why I lobbied to have you transferred. Further, you have opportunities such as these, to leave that environ and see more of London.”

“A hospital room is not precisely high on my list of hoped-for attractions.”

“I see your point. Perhaps if there was a friendly horse here with us to gently nibble your stygian curls?”

“Lestrade! He shall pay for that revelation.”

“Perhaps when we find the owner of that property, we might claim your dear mare as part of the reparations for my capture and you can always know the tender…”

Mycroft’s mobile sounding cut short his speech, which did not sit well with Sherlock since he had a far more violent method in mind for that, but that thought flew out of his head when he saw Mycroft’s eyes widen and turn towards him in shock.

“Once again, Administrator Stamford.”

“Just got an email asking about Sherlock. Usual purchaser questions, price and skills, etc.
However, Sherlock’s not been added to my shelter list yet. I simply haven’t gotten around to entering him in my ‘available’ roster and I just spoke to the administrator of Sherlock’s previous shelter. He didn’t get any inquiries about Sherlock, so whoever sent this email knows Sherlock’s here. I think we can guess who’s behind it.”

“Damn. How did you respond?”

“I didn’t. What I will do is send an ‘out of office on holiday’ response that will buy us a few days, but if they know Sherlock’s here, there’s likely eyes on the shelter. I honestly can’t say I’m not worried they’d try something while he’s in the building, and I don’t want Sherlock or the other residents harmed because none of the staff here are police or military trained to handle a brace of lads storming in to snatch Sherlock like a fat wallet.”

“No, I quite agree. We will keep Sherlock safe, Administrator Stamford, and very out of sight. I shall notify Gregory immediately.”

“Good. Mycroft, I’ll do everything on my part to try and trace this email, but ask Greg if there’s anyone I could forward it to who might be better at investigating that sort of thing.”

“An excellent idea. Thank you, Administrator Stamford. I shall keep you informed.”

Mycroft terminated the call and huffed a frustrated breath, then faced Sherlock and relayed Stamford’s message.

“Curious. They steal you, but try to purchase me.”

“I was no longer available for purchase and easily accessible on the street. Neither of those apply to you. Nor shall they in the near future.”

Sending up a silent ‘I’m sorry’ to his beleaguered partner, Mycroft placed the call and winced that it took a long time to be answered by an incredibly groggy voice.

“Wh… Hello?”

“Gregory, my dear, I am so, so sorry to have to phone you, but…”

“What happened and what do you need me to do?”

That was not an incredibly groggy voice. That was the voice of an alert and on-point policeman and Mycroft sighed in unexpected relief at the immediate support. Passing along Stamford’s information, the android tried to gauge the various hmmmm’s and ok’s from his human until he got to the end of his story and waited for Greg to respond in actual words.

“I’m coming back and getting you both out of there. We’ll find a hotel or… no, I’ve got a better idea. Sort of. Stay very sharp and don’t either of you be out of each other’s sight until I get there.”

Not waiting for a reply, Greg ended the call, rolled out of bed and started throwing clothes on his back. Then it was a quick pack of a bag for Mycroft and, after a moment’s thought, extra clothes from his and Mycroft’s wardrobe that might fit Sherlock, too, because there would be no going back to the shelter to get anything. Then it was a quick call to a certain Army doctor who may have made a tipsy admission to still having a certain firearm in his possession that the police certainly didn’t need to know about.

Step 1 – get Mycroft and Sherlock out of London.
Step 2 – set up a schedule for someone to be with them at all times who had authority to arrest or desire to shoot anyone who tried to abduct the androids.

Step 3 – get coffee. Lots of coffee. This was going to be another long night.
Chapter 32

Right now, Greg was happy for simple things. John didn’t argue about discharging Mycroft or about having his trusty bang-bang baby in his pocket while they escorted the two androids out of hospital and into the cab that drove them to the car hire agency, where he’d already swallowed hard and reserved the cheapest beast they had available. Then it was the lack of argument about bundling all four of them into the small car or the quick stop for coffee, praise be for the heavenly roasted bean, before he had them fully on their way. Now, of course, the simple things, such as lack of questions and general muttered conversation between the other three as John was filled in on the details of their adventure was about to come to an end as Greg felt Mycroft’s eyes turn his way.

“Gregory? Where are we going?”

“I… I know a place you should be safe.”

“May I know where is this particular location?”

“Uh… how about no?”

“Gregory!”

Mycroft’s shocked expression was accompanied by a gesture that was extremely similar to a dowager clutching at her pearls for moral strength.

“It’s… ok, what if the arseholes who are behind this try and ambush the car? One of us gets captured, they can’t tell the bastards where the rest have gone.”

“That is the most ridiculous piffle I have ever heard, Lestrade! You obviously are suffering the delusion that you are in a poorly-written film that should never have been made in the first place because it is an affront to cinema!”

“Thank you, Sherlock. Your insults shouted directly in my ear never fail to inspire.”

“Greg, Sherlock’s got a point. That was balls.”

“I know, John…it’s… can’t we just let this go right now?”

The three ‘no’ votes echoing in the tiny car put an end to Greg’s hopes and dreams. It was the only plan he had and it was going to be stabbed to death by anyone with an ounce of intelligence, which, given the people in the car, the death would be as swift and stabby as what killed Caesar one fine day… It was no surprise, then, when his grand scheme was revealed, the sound of plan-knives being removed from their scabbards sounded loud in the car and, very quickly, the ‘really, this is what I wanted to avoid’ comments, questions and laughter began in earnest. Bastards! It wasn’t his fault he didn’t know of any fortified bunkers knocking about and had to make do with the next best thing…

The modest house in what could only be described as the middle of nowhere wasn’t exactly what Mycroft and the rest had imagined, but they had to admit it fit their needs nicely. Especially if the walls were as thick as they looked.

“Well… here we are.”
After the hours of driving, Greg was more than ready to stretch his legs, find more coffee and get the inevitable over with so the coffee might actually come with a little something to eat which, given the situation, was actually fairly likely. Though… oh no. No no no no no… orders were specifically given not to…

“There’s my handsome son!”

… phone Mum and Dad and tell them I’m coming. Thanks, Gran. You evil old bird.

“Mum! Dad! Gran wasn’t supposed to disturb you.”

“You know full well, Gregory, that telling Aggie not to do anything will make her do it immediately and ten times harder than she might have otherwise. She was on the phone with your mother one second after she was done with you.”

Dad was right. He’d made an amateur’s mistake. This was why you didn’t make decisions when you didn’t have enough coffee in your blood!

“And who are your friends? Look at all of you… I’m Edith, Greg’s mum. You can call me Edie, though. Edith is a bit from the past, isn’t it? But, what do you expect for a name when your own mum’s an Agatha! Lucky I didn’t get something from Chaucer or the like. Oh! And this is my husband, Thomas. He couldn’t lose Greg in a crowd, could he? Doesn’t he look just like his Dad, with a bit of me in there around the eyes, though.”

John’s smile was bright as the moon because if there was anything more embarrassing than having parents enthusiastic about meeting their son’s friends, he didn’t know what it was and Greg’s squirming was just a joy to watch.

“Thank you, Mum, they don’t need the family history.”

“Hush, Greg. You’ve become such a sour boy since you joined the police. Wouldn’t think a police career was the thing for Greg, if you knew him when he was a lad! Always in a spot of trouble, getting into fights, chasing the ladies, whether they had a fellow on their arm or not, then it was the lads and that was a completely different, but just as full, kettle of fish…”

John’s snort of laughter countered Mycroft’s half-quizzical/half-‘oh, I see’ glare at Greg who just groaned and wished Sherlock’s typically terrible manners would put in an appearance and bring his misery to an end.

“AND moving on from anything at all about me… ever… Mum, Dad… this is Mycroft, Sherlock and John. We… that is Mycroft and Sherlock… they need…”

“A place to stay for a bit! Mum told me, once she stopped calling you a bastard for waking her up, when we both know she’s up at all hours, so that was a load of codswallop. Come in! No use standing out here in the cold when we could be warming up with a nice cuppa or a big tumbler of gin. Thomas, help the lads with their luggage and I’ll see if Mum’s waiting behind the door with a shotgun.”

Knowing that scenario was 70% likely was one of the reasons Greg decided bringing the androids to his grandmother’s house was a good idea. She had guns. Rather a lot of them. And wasn’t at all shy about using them.

“Thanks, Mum. Don’t want to have to pick pellets out of anyone’s arse before we’ve even said hello.”
Turning and smiling weakly at the rest of his party, Greg made a ‘come on, let’s get it over with’ motion and started following after his mother, while John grabbed one small pack from the boot and his own smaller one from the rear seat of the car, handing one to Greg’s father to satisfy the motherly directive. One failed to satisfy motherly directives at one’s peril and John Watson was not a man to court peril without a damned good reason.

“Oh, they’re traveling light, aren’t they, lad?”

“I think…”

I think I don’t know how much I’m supposed to say, so sticking with being vaguely polite.

“…they weren’t entirely certain how long they’d be away. You know how things can be.”

“I certainly do! I did a stint in the Army when I left school and I certainly learned the value of traveling light.”

Common ground! Always good when talking to the older generation.

“I’m an Army man myself, actually. Might still be in if I hadn’t been so shortsighted as to put my body in the way of enemy fire.”

“Brilliant! We’ve got a lot to talk about, you and me. I suspect things have changed a lot since my day and I’d certainly like to hear about it. Well, let’s get you inside and join the others disarming Mad Aggie. Actually, tell her about your being wounded. She’ll find that funny and the old bird could use a good laugh.”

The reason for this trip was both serious and sobering, but John couldn’t stop the smile erupting on his face if he tried. Of course Greg had the patience to deal with Sherlock and the rest of the yobs the police had to manage in a day! Families could provide the best tempering there was! Speaking of, he should give Harry a call one day. Not today, though… definitely not today. Better remind himself again in a month or three…

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“I still say he’s a Tory!”

“Shoot him, woman! Mycroft is a miserable Tory and deserves a full salvo of whatever you have chambered in your weapon!”

“Sherlock, do behave. We are trying to avoid that particular outcome for either of us.”

“Gran, put the gun down and believe me when I say Mycroft’s not a Tory. He… he isn’t a member of any party.”

“I know one of those fuckers when I see them. He stinks of Thatcher.”

“Yes! Whatever that is, Mycroft reeks of it. My nasal epithelium is melting from the stench!”

“That’s enough of you, too. All those messy curls on your head… bet you’ve got a pocket full of weed you’re hiding.”

“I have not a single weed upon my person!”

“Pity… might’ve actually been useful, if you had.”
Greg used the distraction to snatch the weapon out of his grandmother’s hands, after a five second struggle that he nearly lost, and toss it to his mother, who put it back in its resting place above the bench by the front door.

“Gran, these are the blokes I phoned you about. This is Mycroft and that’s Sherlock. They need a place to stay for a bit while we work a few things out.”

“Which one are you shagging?”

His mother’s happy gasp mixed well with Greg’s pained whine and Sherlock’s quick pointing towards Mycroft didn’t help matters one bit.

“Greg! Oh, Greg… why didn’t you tell us you’d met someone!”

Mother hugs could be wonderful things, except when they were given in front of a room full of people as congratulations for getting laid.

“It’s… it’s complicated, Mum.”

“He go both ways, too, or does he just like cock?”

“Gran! You… where’s the gin?”

“Where it always is and you can pour me a large one, too, while you’re at it. A body shouldn’t be up at this hour. Witching hour, it is! Which is why all you foul creatures are bedeviling me, I suppose.”

Now it was Mycroft’s turn for a huge motherly hug, which startled the android, who was already startled nearly to his limit.

“What a fine lad our Gregory’s brought home for us to meet, too! Don’t worry about us approving or not, Mycroft, because we do. I admit, I may have thought a touch otherwise when I was younger, but rounding the corner of the pub and seeing Greg snogging Davie Barton made me rethink that. Realized I was angrier that Greg was kissing Sheila Barton’s son, awful cow that she is, that Greg having a go with another boy! Whatever makes our Greg happy is fine with us!”

“No Tories!”

“Hush, Mum, and drink your gin. In fact, why don’t we all have something to warm the bones on this evil night. Thomas! Put the bags in… Mum where do want your guests?”

“The barn!”

“Tom, put Mycroft and Greg in my brother’s old room and… Sherlock, was it dear?… put Sherlock and… oh, I didn’t ask if you and… what was your name again, lad? Are you going to be staying, too?”

John grinned that Sherlock’s complete confusion was actually giving other people the chance to talk. It was brilliant!

“John Watson, Mrs. Lestrade. And, I’ll likely be here for… well, I’m not entirely certain. I’ll have to see if I can get my shifts covered at the hospital.”

“A doctor! Come here and look at my rash.”

Greg leapt to stop his grandmother taking off her blouse, suffering the expected swats for trying
being a spoilsport.

“John’s not here to look at anyone’s rash, Gran.”

“He’ll look at mine or he can fuck off for breakfast!”

“I’ll happily look at whatever might be ailing you, Mrs…”

“Aggie. That’s all you need to know, nosy parker.”

Greg took a long swallow of his grandmother’s favorite gin and wondered if John could write a prescription for a tranquilizer they could slip her to make the next few days bearable. He loved his Gran with all his heart, but he needed a LOT of sleep before he’d be able keep up with her penchant for keeping visitors on their toes. Especially when those toes were running from a thrown pot because they criticized her favorite programme on the telly. Her aim was flawless… luckily, his mother seemed happy to take this round of apologies…

“Don’t pay Mum any mind, John. And you’re welcome to stay as long as you like, too. Tom! You’re still standing there! Oh… right, put Sherlock and John in my old room and check that there are towels aplenty and some soap in the bath.”

Mycroft motioned Greg over and whispered a question in his ear, which made the sergeant suck in a breath and nod his head.

“Yeah, I remembered, but we don’t have one for Sherlock. Can you share?”

“No whispering when other people are in the room! It’s rude and I can’t know what’s going on!”

Knowing his grandmother didn’t actually need the cane she was hitting his leg with, Greg didn’t feel bad snatching it out of her hands and tossing it to his father to keep out of her reach.

“Mycroft just asked me about his recharger and I said I brought the portable one, but…”

John winced and smacked his head.

“We forgot one for Sherlock. They can alternate nights, though, and things will be alright.”

“Recharger? What are you on about Greg?”

Realizing he’d left out a piece of information from his family, which had been rather intentional, Greg smiled at his mother and hoped her acceptance of his ‘preferences’ extended to the non-human.

“Well… it’s…”

“Mycroft and I are androids. That has not, however, dimmed the disgraceful fires of lust Lestrade and Mycroft feel towards each other. Truly, it is a sickening thing to contemplate, unlike that which John and I share, which serves as an exemplar of an appropriately amorous relationship.”

John and Greg groaned in unison, which provided an appropriate soundtrack for the room’s wizened gnome to shoot out of her rocking chair and stand toe to toe with Sherlock, staring up the mile and a half distance to his face.

“Bollocks.”

“I assure you, John and my relationship is superior in any number of quantifiable attributes to that
of Mycroft and Lestrade, who believe cooing like doves and batting their eyelashes serves as lewd and lascivious conduct.”

“Don’t mean that. I mean you’re not an android. I know those buggers when I see them.”

Sherlock held up his property-marked hand and, after having it swatted away with ‘all the useless young gits today have a tattoo,’ opened a small panel at the side of his neck, shouting in annoyance when surprisingly strong fingers grabbed his hair and pulled his head down for a closer look.

“Fuck me. You’re an android.”

“As I previously stated.”

“One of those sex bots, are you? I like my men a bit more rugged, but I’ll give you a few quid for nice little cuddle.”

The sheer horror on Sherlock’s face warmed Greg’s heart and he gave his own android a kiss on the cheek as a reward for not openly laughing at his brother.

“Gran, Sherlock’s not up for a shag at the moment, but I’m sure if he gets bored and has a bit of free time, he’ll consider doing business with you.”

“I’d teach him a few things, that’s for certain. He should probably pay me.”

“I am being verbally molested and I demand… this hovel has nothing I want to demand!”

Crooking his finger towards John, the elder Lestrade gave a nod up the stairs and John didn’t hesitate a moment following after.

“Looks like my Greg’s found himself a bit of excitement in his life.”

“Oh, I’d only agree wholeheartedly. Though, to be fair, Mycroft’s actually a very placid fellow when he’s at home. Smart, too and he does care for Greg. They’re a very successful couple, differences aside.”

“Good to know. The wife and I let our son live his own life, but it’s nice to hear that he’s actually finding some luck in the romance area. That’s been… let’s call it a less-than laudable undertaking for him in the past. Maybe he just needed someone different. That Mycroft does seem the different type.”

“He is. In a good way, though. He does have that posh air about him and uses words I don’t always understand, but he’s wonderful to Greg and Greg just adores him.”

“And Sherlock? What’s his story? Or, should I ask, what’s your and his story?”

“That… we’re… in the early phases of knowing each other.”

“That’s as vague as a wisp of smoke in the fog.”

“Accurate, though. I haven’t actually known Sherlock very long, but… there’s a connection there and it’s one I’d like to explore further.”

“Fair enough. Do the two of them know each other? Sherlock and Mycroft, I mean?”

John tossed his bag onto the bed in the room that, apparently was going to be his and Sherlock’s and noted with some… note… that it only had one bed. Not a very large one, at that.
“They do, though… it’s complicated, in a sense. I’d best let them tell that story, if they have a mind to.”

“Also fair. A man’s story is his own and not for others to tell. Unless it’s spicy. Then it’s anyone’s to tell if it’ll earn them a free pint at their local.”

Something with which John had to agree, having earned more than a few free lagers for telling the woeful, embarrassing or heroic tale of someone he knew who wasn’t present at the time to contradict any of the enhancements he might add for color.

“One thing I have to ask, though, John… are any of you going to actually tell us why you’re here? Greg bringing anyone around to meet Aggie is an event to mark in the family records, but a few people and to stay a bit? There’s trouble, isn’t there?”

“Uh…”

“You’re part of it, so you can’t say it’s a story for someone else to tell.”

“Yeah, I know. But, I’m… down the line, in a sense, for rights to storytelling. I suspect, though, if you ask Greg or Mycroft outright, they’ll tell you. Especially after Greg’s had a bit more gin. He’s not had any real sleep the past two days and that’s a good combination for getting the truth out of a person.”

Not that John would normally advocate telling this particular story to an audience, but there was little doubt in his mind that Mycroft, and Sherlock, by extension, would be a part of this family and it was best that particular relationship started with honesty, because families had long memories, especially for lies or concealed truths.

“If he stays awake for more than a few minutes, that’s what I’ll do. He did look dead on his feet, though his gran never fails to put some energy into a person’s bones when they come to call.”

“Shrapnel, too, it seems.”

“Consider it a bonus.”

“Oh, I will. At least, the fun of watching the others take it because, as a doctor, I seem to have a use she can exploit.”

“That is very true. You might be the only person in this house who’s actually safe. Well, and Greg. She has a very soft spot for her grandson.”

“Blimey, if that’s her soft spot, I’d hate to run into a hard one.”

“Best read up on concussion treatment. It may come in handy.”

“God help us all.”
Chapter 33

Greg met his mother’s ‘who’d like a nice fry up?’ with an ‘oh god yes’ carrying such profound emotion that Mycroft took him by the arm and had him sit at the kitchen table so his poor human didn’t collapse onto the floor in relief. Further, it gave him the chance to pry the gin out of Greg’s hand and begin working to replace that with a beverage of less lethal potency. In a moment of inspiration, he handed the bottle to Greg’s grandmother, who cackled and poured out another stiff measure into her own glass, taking a swig directly from the bottle to finish it off before tossing it back to Mycroft take over to the counter as he moved in that direction to do his part to support his exhausted partner.

“May I offer my assistance, Mrs. Lestrade?”

“Such a dear you are, Mycroft. I’d love the help, actually, what with all these hungry mouths to feed. Does yours and Sherlock’s need feeding, too, or…”

“We do both eat, however, expect Sherlock to criticize the food more than he consumes it.”

“One of those, is he? Well, I’ve known more than a few in my time, some actual toddlers and others who only acted like toddlers even though they were old as Methuselah!”

“Your mother?”

The whispered question made Greg’s mother chortle and give Mycroft a quick smack on his shoulder.

“I like you, I really do. Actually, Mum could eat a whole cow if you had enough chips to sit alongside her plate. She does love her food, which, I suppose is to be expected because that much evil must need a lot of energy.”

“I’ve got ears you know!”

This chortle was in stereo as Mycroft and Edith laughed at being caught out, but it all added to the pleasant feeling in Mycroft’s chest because he was… welcome. Part of the human gathering and not standing at the periphery because he was viewed as lesser to them. First with his Gregory’s friends and now with his Gregory’s family. It was almost too rich a chest of riches to believe!

“You’ve got a mouth, too, Mum, so why don’t you use it to tell Greg about being arrested. Again.”

“Gran!”

“It was a stitch up! Bastard set a trap for me, but I gave the magistrate the what for, especially since I gave his arse a good smack once for stealing milk off my doorstep, and I walked away free as a bird.”

“Mum!”

“I’m busy, Greg. Ask your father. John, watch where you sit, lad. Beez is a bit touchy.”

The newly returned John looked down at the chair he was preparing to settle in and startled at the sheer malevolence staring up at him from deep green eyes peering from a floofy mass of black fur. Fortunately, the laziness outweighed the malevolence and the large cat allowed itself to picked up by
Greg’s dad who set it in its basket near the old-fashioned oven before smiling affably at John and motioning for him to take the vacated chair.

“Beelzebub delights in sneak attacks, John, so watch your arse as well as your ankles. Head, too, actually. How that fat thing makes it up to shelves and the like is beyond me, but having the devil pounce on you when you come down in the morning to start the kettle isn’t the happiest way to begin the day.”

“Ta. Got a helmet knocking about I can wear?”

“Can we get back to Gran being arrested, Dad!”

Mycroft hurried over to give his human a quick there-there and set a cup of tea down, along with two fresh pieces of toast with jam to provide some nourishing calm.

“Well, the sum of it is Aggie stole a car and…”

“That’s a fucking lie! Bastard left it on my property and what’s on my land is mine!”

“Dad… keep going and try to make this not want me to dig into my lack of finances to hire some nice person to stop in daily to feed Gran because I’ve tied her up in the cellar.”

“I’d chew through rope! Still got my own teeth and they’re strong as the day they popped through my gums!”

“Dad!”

“Your Gran’s not exactly wrong, son. One of the professor types at that college an hour or so away is doing some environmental research and forgot, I suppose, that people still own land and may not appreciate a bloke capering about collecting specimens, taking data and such. He went rambling on Aggie’s property and, to his woe, it happened to be a day she was rambling about, too. The greater woe was him leaving his keys in the car.”

“Gran… you don’t even have a license. They very wisely took that away after the cow incident.”

“That wasn’t my fault either!”

“You were drunk and chasing cows around Mr. Abbott’s field in your Ford Cortina!”

“It was the gin’s fault! My poor Cortina… had that since 1965, too.”

“If you hadn’t crashed into the impossible-to-miss stone fence, you’d still have it!”

Mycroft spared a glance at his brother, who was being strangely silent, and smiled at the new look on Sherlock’s face. He was absorbing every bit of the conversation and putting it through the entirety of his analytical routines to understand what was going on. Sherlock's interactions with humans had been highly limited and these sorts of humans… well, analysis was something both of them would have to do and in some detail. Fortunately, he had a job at present which made that a task for another time. And what an eclectic set of pots and pans were being called to duty for their meal… another item for a future shopping list. Gregory took such delight from the results of his little cooking experiments… even if they went a bit… awry.

“Pfft. You’re no grandson of mine, Gregory Lestrade. Pain in the arse. Begrudge an old lady a bit of fun in her lonely, dreary life! You’re a proper villain and I’ll be happy to see the backside of
“Did you crash this car, too, or just drive it into a pond?”

“How’d you know about the pond?”

“Gran!”

The strong, supportive pat on the shoulder from his father was cold comfort for the police sergeant, which got colder as Sherlock and John each stole one of his two slices of toast.

“I’m in hell.”

“Young grandmother’s cat’s name does make one wonder, my dear.”

Mycroft set down a plate of food for his beleaguered human and gave both John and Sherlock the finger-and-glare combination that threatened more woe than a drowned car if they stole a bite of it.

“Thanks, love. This looks… it looks the most wonderful thing in the world right now, actually.”

Taking a moment to stroke Greg’s hair as the first few bites of food went into his mouth, Mycroft reminded himself just how hard his human had been pushing himself these past few days and dedicated his efforts to seeing rest and relaxation being abundantly available in the foreseeable future. Given the lack of… anything… in the vicinity, that should be easily achieved, however, the colorful nature of the few people actually in the vicinity did offer a substantial argument to the contrary…

“As will a soft mattress, I suspect.”

The nearly-wept whine of agreement cemented Mycroft’s plan that after his partner’s stomach was full, a good night’s sleep would swiftly follow.

“Greg’s sleeping on the kitchen floor for being a prat!”

“Agatha, I will have to disagree on the grounds that will leave Gregory vulnerable to the whims of your cat, which will surely be acted upon gleefully, and that will certainly leave Gregory both mauled and in a foul temper, neither of which shall make your day tomorrow an enjoyable one.”

“Shit. Mr. Plastic’s got a point. Greg is a prick on a good day, but a double-headed prick when he’s got something up his arse. Fine! You can sleep in a bed, Greg, but you’re gathering eggs in the morning to pay for my hospitality.”

“Is Horace still alive?”

“That he is.”

“Fuck off with that then. I’ll take the floor.”

“Gregory! Such language. That is uncharitable to your grandmother.”

“Then you go and gather eggs in the morning, Mr. Plastic. Enjoy being shredded by the world’s most foul-tempered rooster. He hasn’t fertilized an egg in a decade, and it’s made him even more bloodthirsty than when he could.”

There was a theme to the residents of the property, it seemed, and Mycroft finally realized why his brother was so quiet. He finally felt at home…
“I shall deliver my sternest lecture in the event he evinces any form of pugnaciousness.”

“That will secure for us a chicken-based meal for tomorrow’s dinner, for Mycroft’s droning will immediately bore the bird to death.”

Definitely feeling at home…

“That’s the first smart thing I’ve heard from any of you lot tonight. Edith! Get the roasting pan out for old dead Horace.”

“He’s not dead yet, Mum, so let’s keep that in the cupboard until we need it. You don’t have a lot of space on the counters, you know.”

Exemplified by the fact that three plates of food had nearly consumed the space near the stove and Mycroft quickly delivered them to Sherlock, John and Greg’s father to make room for the final three plates to be filled. One small sausage was delivered to Beelzebub as tribute for, seemingly, being a cat.

“They’re large enough when the Red Army’s not making camp in my house!”

“Greg, dear, why don’t you tell your Gran why you’ve trekked across England to pay her a visit, so she doesn’t worry about the communists? That bit of fretting will have her too agitated to eat and you know what a misery she can be when she’s got nothing but gin in her stomach”

John shot a look at Greg’s father and both wondered if the ball was going to start rolling or would it need another little push.

“Uh… told you. Mycroft and Sherlock needed a place to stay for a few days and… they haven’t had a chance to see the lovely countryside, so… yeah. That.”

“Isn’t he cute, Tom! Still lies as horribly as he did when he’d tell me the pixies stole the biscuits I just baked… crumbs still stuck to the sides of his mouth…”

Edith made a quick run from the stove to give her son a squeeze of his cheek that Mycroft found utterly adorable, especially since Sherlock’s ‘your toddler nature is now confirmed’ gained him a morsel of flung eggs landing on his nose.

“That assault will cost you dearly, Lestrade. I have no doubt the cat will be more than content to defecate in your shoes if I ply the beast with fibrous food and materials of a laxative nature.”

“That shagbot’s got spirit! Twenty quid, lad… all that is yours for a bit of affection once these bastards to go sleep…”

“John!”

“Is that cash, ma’am? We’ll have to add a small surcharge if you’re going to put this on credit.”

Sherlock’s own bit of flung egg was snatched by John out of the air, earning him applause even from the house’s resident witch. Before things could escalate to full-on food war, Greg’s father cleared his throat and got his son’s attention.

“Might be a good idea, Greg, to let us know what’s going on. I suspect talking about things will make you feel a bit better, if nothing else.”

Greg sighed loudly and he turned to meet Mycroft’s eyes, having the sort of silent conversation only
well-matched couples can have, before nodding and finishing his last piece of toast before answering.

Which he did in a great deal more detail than he had planned, but once he started talking it was as if someone opened the sluice gates and words came flowing out to flood the room with information. It didn’t occur to him until he was done speaking that nobody had interrupted a single time, which was an unprecedented thing with his family or Sherlock as his audience.

“So… here we are. I’m not happy about it, for a lot of reasons, but if worse comes to worse, we’ve got weapons, a fortified structure, local police who I can trust to come quickly when called and the cellar has that big room with the door you can’t really see if you give it a quick look around. It’s a good place for Mycroft and Sherlock to stay safe until I can fathom out who’s responsible for this and put a stop to it.”

With everyone huddled around the table it was easy for Greg’s family to share a series of looks that stated clearly they had no idea where to begin asking questions about what they’d just heard, but…

“What’s it like to shag an android? Is my twenty quid going to be well spent or should I save it for the lottery?”

Greg glared at the old woman, but years of glaring at his grandmother had given him the ability to tell when she was being a misery for the fun of it or when she was being a misery to diffuse the greater misery swirling around her. This was an example of the latter…

“Twenty quid won’t buy a hug from Mycroft, so keep that in your bra for when Sherlock’s got a free minute.”

“He’ll need more than a minute! I like to take my time for things like that…”

Not lost on Greg or Mycroft was that Greg’s parents were also skilled with silent conversations and the question was simply who was going to be appointed to speak.

“Son…”

Apparently, it was Greg’s dad.

“Your mother and I are… we’re incredibly proud of you. Saving your Mycroft there… helping him and Sherlock with all of this… you’ve always had a good heart, Greg, and we’re never disappointed by the decisions you make because of it. Mycroft, Sherlock… whatever we can do to help, you can count on us. This family supports each other and you’re part of that now. You stay here as long as you want… close that mouth right now, Aggie… and we’ll see nobody has a chance to lay a finger on you. Greg’s right, too, about the local constables. They don’t take kindly to disturbances, hence their endless wars with that one trying to kill me with her mind, and they’ll rally quickly if the learn one is brewing.”

Greg laid his hand on the one Mycroft had resting on the table and smiled at the android wrestling with his thoughts and emotions at his new show of support. He’d had his insane family on his side his entire life, but was seeing them new through Mycroft’s eyes and realizing how very, very lucky that life had been…

“I… thank you, Mr. Lestrade. Your words mean a great deal to my brother and me.”

“That’s what I want to know more about, Mycroft dear. Never thought about androids having a family, but I do admit you two act like brothers. Our Greg’s gained a fine little family, hasn’t he, and I couldn’t be happier for it. I’ve worried about that, actually, more than is healthy, most likely.
Never seeing my little boy with someone to love, but I can pack away that worry, now, can’t I? It’s a shiny silver lining to all your pesky storm clouds, and that’s always a blessing.”

Greg pointedly did not meet the eyes of either his mother or his android, because the ‘L’ word was not something he was prepared to discuss at the moment. Though… Mycroft wasn’t looking as awkward or startled as he might have expected if… something like that hadn’t crossed his android’s mind before…

“It… it is my hope that Gregory and I shall have a long and… affectionate… association, you may rest assured.”

“Brilliant! Hear that, Mum! You may live long enough to dance at your grandson’s wedding after all!”

“I don’t plan on dying anyway, so what’s your point?”

Sherlock’s nod of approval made John laugh. Sherlock wasn’t going to be purchased and Greg’s gran wasn’t going to die. Good to know there were people in the world who had their futures well in hand.

“That’s nice, Mum. Now, looks like everyone’s got a nice full stomach, so why don’t you lads get some sleep and we can talk further in the morning. Your dad and I are here until this is sorted, Greg, so don’t worry about your Mycroft being left alone with Mum. Or Beez or Horace. Or Dinky.

“DINKY! You had him put down. He was rabid!”

“Oh! We were wrong about that. Silly thing found some old soap flakes and ate them, that’s where the frothing came from. Must have liked them, too. Ate the whole box! Anyway, he’s about somewhere, probably chasing a fox or digging a hole or whatever he does to pass the time.”

“Terrorize the village! Mum, that dog is completely mental. He ran the vicar up a tree!”

“Just having a bit of fun and it’s not like the vicar doesn’t need the exercise. He’s gotten quite portly, actually, and we’ve got a wager on when that collar of his is going to explode trying to hold back all those chins.”

“Oh god… Mycroft, I am going to bed. You are…”

It just occurred to Greg that the sleeping arrangements had not precisely been discussed amongst them in the car and a delicate situation now presented itself.

“I believe I shall join you, Gregory. It is very late and I suspect an early morning shall greet us all.”

Delicate situation not particularly delicate and sleeping arrangements sorted, apparently. And didn’t Mycroft look… happy… with the idea.

“You start shagging, you either keep it quiet or make it loud enough to me to hear clearly!”

“Goodnight, Gran. Try not to die in your sleep.”

“I’m not dying! Already told you that, you poor excuse for a grandson.”

The poor excuse stood, stretched, gave his mother a kiss, his grandmother a rude gesture, which the
old woman returned with a much greater display of proficiency, nodded at his father, then began trudging up the stairs.

“He does have a nice arse, doesn’t he, Plastic Man?”

An arse which had captured Mycroft’s attention with the stair climbing and prompted some obviously obvious staring.

“Gregory’s bottom is most well-formed and notably firm, which is highly tactiley pleasant.”

“Inherited that from me. Want a feel?”

“Goodnight to you all and thank you again for receiving us so graciously.”

Mycroft’s rapid exit wasn’t rapid enough for Aggie not to get an appreciative look at his gluteal assets and mentally congratulate her little Greg for making a fine choice of lovers. Plastic or not, that arse was a prime example of high-quality British manufacturing. Very much like her own, but age did come with a few tiny costs…

“Drat. Can’t get a bum squeeze for love nor money anymore. Though… oh, Sexbot…”

“John! We are going to bed!”

The time from Sherlock bolting up from his chair to dragging John up the stairs amounted to one millisecond and made Greg’s mother happy as she could be. Her son had polite, handsome, intelligent man to call his own and her son’s soon-to-be brother-in-law would bring a doctor into the family. Except for the kidnappings and armed blokes trying to kill her Greg, this was the best day she could remember!

“Here, Edie, I’ll do the washing up and then sit with Aggie to keep an eye on things. You get some sleep, love. It’s been a hell of a day.”

Smiling at his wife, Thomas repeated his son’s rude gesture at his mother-in-law, who happily made it back as she settled in to watch out for any stupid blokes who might try and sneak up on them in the night. Well, there was a trusty friend taped under this rocking chair that would change their minds quickly enough. One taped under Thomas’s favorite chair, too. With the other little surprises hidden here and there, and those not quite so hidden, they were well-prepared to defend their family. Plastic and metal or flesh and bone, didn’t matter to her. Nobody tried anything with her brood or they’d have holes in them you could see sunlight through. Speaking of, better tack a note on the door so the lad delivering the groceries didn’t pop in for a quick hello. Hate to have him get a hole of his own for being helpful. She might be evil, but not quite so evil as that…

Greg stood in the door of the bedroom, watching Mycroft unpack his clothes and wavered a moment before broaching the topic of one bed and two people. But, since that wasn’t going to change with dithering…

“Love? I… I just want you to know that I forgot about things like sleeping and you should know that I don’t have any expectations, ok? I am happy, more than happy really, to sleep on the floor or if you want to share with Sherlock, John and I can take this room so…”

Mycroft smiled indulgently and crossed the small distance to Greg, laying a finger on his human’s lips to shut down both Greg’s mouth and runaway brain.
“I recognized this possibility, Gregory, when first you disclosed your plan as, I am certain, did Sherlock and I am very content to share this bed with you. In fact, I am eager to do so as I can think of nothing more restful and comforting that the warmth of your body against mine.”

“Oh… ok, then. I’m… I’m eager, too, to be honest.”

As if your radiant smile was not a powerful clue, Gregory Lestrade…

“I agree for I notice you did not pack my pyjamas.”

“Shit! Oh, I’m sorry, Mycroft, I really am. I didn’t do that purposefully, I promise you and…”

Another finger pressed itself to Greg’s lips as Mycroft gazed into the most gorgeous eyes in existence.

“I know well your sense of honor, my dear, and have prized that above rubies. However, the thought of your flesh pressed against mine… I find honor not being the precise word to describe what I desire from you.”

“It’s not? I… yeah. Alright. That… that sounds good to me.”

“Of course, we must moderate our behaviors, given the circumstances, but… to lay in your arms, to kiss you while I caress your skin and feel you caress mine… the urge in me to experience that is a powerful one.”

“I… well, you... let’s gets started, shall we?”

Taking Mycroft in his arms to give his android a taste of the kissing to come, Greg used his foot to close the door and fumbled for the latch to lock it up tightly. Something would have to be shoved in the keyhole to prevent any grandmotherly eyes doing their expected spying, but that could wait a moment. All he wanted to do right now was focus on the man he was holding and imagining how this was about to feel when they were together in that blissfully-narrow bed. Still following Mycroft’s lead, Mycroft still in charge, but what happened in his imagination was his to know and nobody else had to find out.

Until they had a little more privacy, that is. What happened in his imagination seemed to have a lot of Mycroft screaming his name in pleasure and that would certainly draw an audience in this house. Gran would probably invite the village for a listen, too, and try to sell tickets. Wouldn’t share the take, either, miserable old bird. That wasn’t fair at all, so no screaming pleasure for either of them until there wasn’t an audience’s lost ticket monies he was mourning to spoil the moment. A man ought to earn some profit from his sexcapades, shouldn’t he? Of course he should. Especially since they were going to be the sort to set this bed on fire…
Chapter 34

It was a mark of Greg’s sheer exhaustion that Mycroft’s startled shout was only met with a bleary ‘whazzatwhyreyouyellingneedhelp?’

“Gregory! There… there is a horse in the room!”

Greg lifted his 1000-ton head off of his pillow and looked over the prone body of his android to catch a large tongue across the face.

“Dinky! You bastard. How’d you get in here? I… I thought I locked the door… maybe I didn’t…”

“This… this antediluvian creature is a dog?”

“We think so. His mother was, at least. Had her pups in Gran’s barn and this one was the runt of the litter.”

Mycroft looked up at the enormous black dog looming over the bed and was not at all ashamed he drew the blankets up closer to his head in preparation for making an emergency dive under the covers if the beast decided it had a taste for android.

“Is he… oh dear, you said he is prone to wreaking terror.”

Greg used every bit of his complete lack of energy to push himself upward and sit upright in the bed.

“Come here, Dink… that’s a good boy.”

Mycroft was certain he felt the floor shake with each of the dog’s footsteps as he walked around the bed towards Greg for a good head scratching. Why he did that instead of simply stepping over the bed was something the android couldn’t fathom.

“He’s a terror, alright, but not with people he likes. Isn’t that right, you awful thing. Who’s a good boy? You are!”

His human’s laughter from having his face licked by the hound from hell was adorable, in Mycroft’s opinion, though he kept close watch the fiend didn’t suddenly open his mouth and swallow the policeman’s head like an olive.

“He’s good for keeping the wayward salesmen or petition people at bay, so they don’t get an arse full of birdshot or worse from Gran. Being chased by a snarling rhinoceros isn’t the highlight of anyone’s day, but Dink does his best not to actually catch anyone. I think he’s a touch lazy about the killing and eating part, so gives them a proper chance at making it to their car or a handy tree before he sinks in the teeth.”

Lying in bed… their bed… Mycroft reached out and ran a hand up and down Greg’s naked back, feeling for all the world like… like he was set by the universe in the place he was always meant to be. Last night… slowly removing his outer garments to put his form, or most of it, on display for his Gregory had been a touch fraught with worry, but his human’s reaction… Gregory could not have been more demonstrative of his approval if he had simply leaped forward and began rutting against the artificial skin that was exposed for view. The change in breathing, pupil dilation, tiny motions of fingers as if trying to touch that which was out of their reach… it was stupendous!
Almost as stupendous as watching his Gregory shed his own clothes, leaving only his pants to cover his modesty, and stride forward to begin a kiss that… it was not possible for two bodies to melt into one, but they had come closer than any couple in creation. And the passion… the passion in his Gregory’s embrace, the sultry warmth of his flesh… flesh that was glorious in every aspect imaginable. His few touches had been poor amuse bouches for the main course when he could take such liberties with the sumptuousness of his Gregory’s body… taking that body to bed, lying in its arms and sharing the most intimate of caresses or, at least, the most intimate they had shared to date… androids did not speak of heaven, but if one existed, he had surely glimpsed its wonders…

“It is good to know the canine earns his keep.”

“Hear that, Dinky? You’re a hard worker, aren’t you boy? Keeping Gran safe from people selling things and the village safe from bandits and demons and werewolves, though I think the latter might be what fathered you. Go on, now, Dinks… go downstairs. Go on, boy…”

The thump from the dog dropping to the bedroom floor to stare upwards with massive puppy eyes shook the bed and Greg rolled his own eyes at the antics and the evidence that this was not going to be a languid, sensual morning in bed with his android.

Who was indescribable… watching Mycroft remove this clothes and carefully fold them, leaving only a smart pair of dark blue boxer-briefs to draw the line for their intimacy… he’d done everything possible not to get hard but the level of fail on that front was extreme. Mycroft was so unbelievably gorgeous! Skin like fresh cream, but with freckles on his shoulders! He’d never seen an android with freckles! Or chest hair and his android had a proper showing that felt amazing under his hands. So lean, but with the tastiest little belly that made him… it made Mycroft even more sexy, which wasn’t something he didn’t think could happen!

Holding all that sexiness in his arms was… he thought he might come in his pants just from the feel of Mycroft’s body against his. Everything fit, everything felt so bloody perfect and that perfection only grew when they finally got into bed and simply let the kisses continue. Sometimes hard, sometimes soft…sometimes fast, sometimes slow… moving his hands across Mycroft’s body and savoring every sensation, including the tiny gasps and moans his android made when something especially pleasing happened… if only… well, there was time for questions and worries later. Or never! Never could work, too…

“Your friend seems disinclined to leave, my dear.”

“He’s hoping for a good run, most likely. When I visit, I usually take him out and let him chase everything he sees, including me. Nice way to burn off breakfast and make room for lunch. Which, given the circumstances, we should likely be moving towards. Breakfast, I mean, not lunch. Though, I’m not certain how long I slept…”

Not as long as your body needs, I suspect. Is there a reason you must rise at this early hour or…”

A mournful ‘Baroo!’ emanating from the floor provided a quick answer to Mycroft’s question.

“Oh, a few actually. That one there and his bastardy opinion is one. I also have to phone my Inspector and tell him why I traded shifts, as well as try and bargain not coming in at all until this is settled. One thing we can’t have right now is me being sacked, so I’ll want a good bit of time to plead my case or… if I have to… drive back to London to work my hours so we keep an income flowing. I also need to hear what they’ve found out about your being taken, though Anderson might be the one to have that information, especially if he’s still detailed to forensics. The more I can learn or do this morning, the better I’ll be able to plan the rest of my time. If I need to pay a visit to the local police and beg a little extra attention to Gran’s house, that’s also best done sooner than later.”
Mycroft drew his human down and sighed softly. Gregory worked so very, very hard and this additional burden was taking its toll.

“Then, take some few minutes of rest and allow your mind to clear of obligations.”

“That’s not easy, I’m afraid.”

“Very well. I shall assist.”

With some hesitation since he had no real idea of what he was doing, Mycroft began laying kisses along Greg’s shoulder, then repositioned to kiss the broad chest he found so fascinating to caress…

“That… that feels good, love. That feels amazingly good…”

Finding himself happily motivated by positive reinforcement, Mycroft let his lips, and hands, wander to Greg’s belly, which fluttered at his touch and the noises its owner made had Mycroft feeling rather smug at his proficiency. Of course, that smugness faltered when presented with the very stiff, large and eye-level erection his partner was sporting and unconsciously arching upwards to gain a little attention of its own.

“You… you seem most aroused by my actions.”

Greg startled from his raging arousal and, looking down at the large hard on he was nearly shoving into Mycroft’s face, gulped loudly while pulling Mycroft back from what was probably giving his android a bit of a fright.

“I’m… I’m sorry about that, love. It’s… it’s normal, I suppose. Human males get a bit of stiffness in the mornings, not necessarily all the time or by everyone, but that’s… yeah, you turn me very much on and I’m sorry for nearly… I know you want to move slowly and I’m not even certain if… I mean… you know, it’s not important. Yes, Mycroft, you make me very hot and hard and, one day, when you’re ready, if you want to and however you want to…”

Mycroft held up a hand because he’d stopped listening to his bedmate’s rambling at the point where ‘it’s not important’ made its appearance in the conversation. When humans said ‘it’s not important” the issue was an important one, indeed, and important issues were not ones to let lie unaddressed.

“Gregory… I believe we have a topic to discuss of some import, do we not?”

“Uh… no.”

“Gregory!”

The low growl from the floor reminded both men that they were not alone and, Mycroft especially, that raising one’s voice at the growler’s friend was not advised.

“Mycroft… it’s not the time nor the place…”

“I disagree. We are assured of a private conversation, Dinky aside, and I would rather we work through problems when they arise and now allow them to sit where they can grow and rankle.”

“Ugh…”

“If I must brave your werewolf and begin both a finger wagging and harshly-toned pronouncement, I shall do it.”

“Really, love…”
“Do you see my finger? See it rise to begin wagging?”

Propped on his elbow, Mycroft made a very dramatic show of slowly and deliberately raising his index finger and stopped only when Greg huffed a loud puff of air and nodded.

“Alright. Do androids… can an android, not a sex model, I mean, have an erection?”

That was not at all as dire and worrisome as Mycroft had expected, but his human was especially fatigued at the moment, so allowances must be made.

“Some do, yes. Not all have the capability, but many do.”

“You?”

“Ah, I see. Yes, I am most capable of performing that function.”

Mycroft had no idea why his answer made his human appear as if he’d just heard tragic news, but this was not something that could be allowed to stand.

“Gregory, why are you upset? And do not say you are not, for it is clear that my words distressed you.”

“Love, it’s really not the time for this discussion.”

“I believe it is. You are upset and I am the cause. I cannot take any action to address the situation if I have no idea what is the situation in the first place!”

No, Gregory… do not allow your expression to darken so…

“Please, my dear. My dearest Gregory… tell me what is causing you such pain.”

Watching his human cut uncertain eyes his way made Mycroft even more worried and he reached out to lightly rub Greg’s stomach in what he hoped was a soothing fashion.

“Fine… last night and today… you do arouse me, Mycroft. The moment you touch me or look at me with those beautiful eyes, I feel all my switches flip to on and I… can you tell me why I’m not doing that for you?”

“P…pardon?”

“You said you can get hard but… you haven’t. Not at all and… is there something else you need? Something I’m not doing right or need to do more of? I want to make you happy, Mycroft, I really do, but I’m not doing that now and if… if you don’t think I can or if you realized I’m not going to be able to satisfy you, then…”

Mycroft’s shock had him sitting up in bed and staring wide-eyed at Greg, who looked like he wished he was anywhere in the universe right now but in that bed. But that shock abated when the android realized that his human was not particularly versed in android systems, especially those for an android with his complexity.

“Gregory… you… I cannot articulate how happy I am with you. What you birth in me that I have never known.”

“Then… I don’t understand.”

“Because I gave the matter no thought, at least in terms of informing you. You profoundly affect
me, Gregory, so I have made certain to keep quiescent the various systems and routines associated
with the manifestation of that impact.”

“What does any of that mean?”

“I have disabled selected attributes of my function to ensure they do not intrude on our
interactions when it was not appropriate they do so.”

Greg worked through Mycroft’s typically-Mycroft speech and came to only one conclusion.

“You… you turned off your cock?”

“In a sense, yes. And, given our current circumstances, I did not believe it appropriate to alter
that condition. However, with the change in our relationship, it was remiss of me not to discuss this
with you so… I am so sorry, Gregory. I should not have caused you this distress.”

“So, I’m not… failing you?”

Mycroft smiled gently and Greg watched the android’s face go blank for a moment, then another,
strikingly different, smile crossed Mycroft’s lips, as he fell into a new kiss, this one as torrid as you
would find in the filthiest, steamiest novel ever written and Greg grinned into Mycroft’s kiss as he
felt something hard and happily long begin to press against his thigh.

“I am sorry, Gregory, but, as you perceive, your presence is a powerfully-arousing one for me. I
simply… I suppose I did not entirely trust myself to hold to my mandate when I knew the strength of
the urges that would beset me.”

Greg wrapped his arms around Mycroft and pulled him over so that the android was lying on top of
him, so both their arousals could say hello and get to know each other, at least in passing.

“Gregory… such sensations…”

“Whatever ever want, love. Whatever you need or are curious about… I’ll give it to you. I’ll do
everything in my power to make you happy.”

This growl occurred close to Mycroft’s ear and the android turned his head over to see the rather
displeased eyes of a very large beast fixing him with a decidedly pointed glare. Apparently, ecstasy
was not sufficient reason to have his Gregory pinned beneath him.

“Looks like Dinky doesn’t approve of our getting a little this morning.”

“I believe he thinks I am threatening you.”

“He doesn’t know you, yet. Give him time.”

“That shall not improve the situation if he mauls me first.”

“He won’t maul you, Mycroft. Nibble a bit, maybe…”

“His nibble is my lost arm.”

“Yeah, that’s true. Alright, then… we pick up with this… whenever we next have a chance?”

Greg held Mycroft still and wriggled his hips a little to draw the loveliest sounds from his android’s
lips as the rubbing did it’s intended job.
“Our very next opportunity, Gregory, you have my word.”

Kissing his android and scratching his protector’s head at the same time took some coordination, but Greg was not one to let challenges beat him down.

“I’ll hold you to that. If that hard on of yours looks, feels… and tastes… as good as I suspect, then we’re in for a merry time.”

Mycroft let the implications of that sentence run wild in his mind and felt said hard on become increasingly demanding with each step of the frolic. Time, it appeared, to move their association to a less stimulating situation.

“I look very forward to it. Now, perhaps, we should seek to placate the behemoth and find for you some breakfast.”

“Breakfast would make me very happy at the moment. How’d your recharger work, by the way? I was a little worried about the wiring in this old house.”

“The function was most acceptable. The recharging process took no longer and occurred with no less effectiveness than in our own home.”

Both men found themselves smiling at the ‘our own home’ phrase and Greg couldn’t help but give his Mycroft one final kiss to celebrate. This was his future… thinking otherwise was just daft and he knew it. He’d never been with anyone where the idea of home bloomed so naturally in his mind. No matter where he lived, if Mycroft was there that place was home and the feeling he had from knowing that was… it wasn’t easy to put into words, but wonderful would do for now.

“Good. But, you’d still like a bracing cup of tea to really charge you up for the day, wouldn’t you?”

“Unquestionably.”

“Off we go! Breakfast, a shower and then… well, we’ll see. You can relax, though. Gran does have a telly and I threw a few books in with your clothes, so you can do some reading. The village is a bit of a hike, but exploring that and the distance in between might be nice, provided you don’t go alone.”

“I have no doubt I shall find many options for amusement. Sherlock, on the other hand…”

“He can escort Gran out for her daily round of criticizing everyone and everything she sees when she does her shopping.”

“Sherlock would enjoy that greatly. I do believe he is looking upon Agatha as his mentor for all things derogatory.”

“Another reason I thought this would be a good place to bring the two of you!”

The giggling drew Dinky closer to join in with a lick of Greg’s face and a few to Mycroft’s, which went entirely against Mycroft’s fussy sensibilities, making Greg giggle even harder.

“No dog in our future, love?”

“Perhaps a small one that has not a tongue the size of your foot or the stature to apply it to my face.”
“Teeny yappy dog, it is! Or a cat.”

“I do admire their regal nature.”

“Because it reminds you of you.”

“I am somewhat monarchical in my presentation.”

“Gran and Sherlock can look for a crown for that head while they’re inciting the village to riot.”

“Excellent. I…”

The loud shouting, war cries of cat, and general eruption of mayhem interrupted Mycroft’s treatise and signaled the official start of the day. Apparently, John’s morning was already off to a bad start and Greg prepared himself to do a bit of bandaging up from whatever havoc Beez had wrought on this fresh victim. A week at Gran’s should be part of the training program for the police, military or spy careers. After that, nothing would ever surprise you again…

“Just another moment, you stupid bastard.”

Greg continued to pull splinters out of John’s head, and marveled that an army veteran could be ambushed by a cat and somehow end up putting his head through one of the kitchen chairs, a good percentage of which was currently stuck in John’s scalp.

“That cat is loony!”

“You were warned. That you didn’t pay attention or get the helmet you were going on about is nobody’s fault but yours.”

“I… this is one of those houses built over a burial ground or the mouth of hell or something like that, isn’t it?”

“Probably, but the lack of blood seeping up from the floorboards or screaming faces appearing in mirrors argues against it somewhat.”

“Wonderful. All night long, I’m fighting off Sherlock and his lechery and now… oops.”

John bit his tongue good and hard and refused, simply refused to look towards Greg to get an eyeful of his large and idiotic grin.

“Oh no, don’t stop there, Doctor John Watson. Let’s here the details. The filthier the better, please.”

“That’s precisely what I was trying to avoid! You don’t… you don’t do that sort of thing in someone else’s house, especially someone’s grandmother’s house, but will Sherlock accept that argument? No, of course not. Bloody android sees one bed, one closed door and it’s all nakedness and grabby hands.”

“Who was naked and what was grabbed. Really, John, you’re shite for storytelling.”

“Sherlock was naked, in about half a second after I closed the bedroom door and he was grabbing… everything! It was like… eight octopi fighting over the last fish in the ocean!”

“You loved it.”
“I… sort of, but there’s a time and a place for octopi and this is not it.”

“So if you were back in your own flat those tentacles would be doing their suckery best to make you a happy man, is that what you’re saying.”

“Well… maybe?”

“You’re pathetic.”

“No! Or, yes. It’s… I don’t know. I’ve got no trouble pulling someone for a night of fun, or taking up with a person for a short-term relationship, but… this is different.”

“Those android brothers… they do something to a man.”

“Yes! I have no idea what it is, but… I haven’t known Sherlock that long and he is a true and proper misery, but… he did something to me, something good, and…”

“You don’t want to fuck things up because it could ruin something special and you know it’ll hurt him horribly, which makes you sick to think about.”

“The voice of experience?”

“The voice of shared worries, I suppose. I’ve got no idea how to have a successful, long-lasting relationship, even without the android complication, and I worry constantly that I’ll do something to cock it up beyond repair. Mycroft is the best thing that’s ever happened to me and I… I care for him with my whole heart. All I can do is hope that if I do fuck up, Mycroft will give me the chance to make it right and understand that… that the very last thing in the world I want to do is hurt or disappoint him.”

Greg continued to feel for pieces of chair in John’s skull and let the doctor sit a moment and think, something John had done for most of the night, actually, rather than sleeping. How could you sleep when you were lying naked next to a very naked, very gorgeous android who, even though he’d agreed to no actual sex out of respect to the others in the house, what Sherlock categorized as ‘not sex’ spanned a fairly broad range of kissing, exploring through touch and giving an unsuspecting army doctor an erection that could cut steel, which Sherlock refused to let him go in the loo to take care of.

And it had to be taken care of because the bloody android found it highly amusing to make it throb as strongly as possible and him moan in a way he hadn’t done in a fucking eternity. Admittedly, resorting to a lengthy wank while being kissed and caressed by that bastardy android was an utter failure to follow his own rules, but it was a compromise and… it had been fantastic. Sherlock’s refusal to follow suit, however, was intentionally miserable and the moment they actually had time truly alone… yes, he was already planning their first all-out sex marathon. Alright, nothing more to think about, apparently.

“I suppose the next hurdle is getting Sherlock emancipated. I can’t use your technique, Greg, even to buy him out of the shelter because my bank account holds nothing but bleak echoes and barren ground, but… we have to find some way to make it happen.”

“Mycroft and I are working on that, don’t think we’re not. It’s… it’s just so much right now, you know? It’s all a whirlwind and I’ve scarcely got the brainpower to tie my shoes on a good day, let alone make sense of and manage all the chaos my life’s seen recently. But, Sherlock’s situation is right at the top of the priority list, as soon as we can find out who is trying to… do whatever the fuck it is they’re trying to do with Sherlock and Mycroft both.”
“The investigation… when will we know… do you think the police have made any progress on that?”

“That’s the next item on my list after pulling trees out of your head.”

“I will pay for the chair. I really didn’t expect it to… explode like that.”

“Your head plus the weight of that cat and all its evil is a lot for one old chair to bear. Dad will fix it, though, so don’t worry about it.”

“You can’t fix shards, Greg. It’s not possible.”

“Then he’ll go in his workshop and play with all his tools and bits of wood until he makes another one. He’ll be thrilled, which will make Mum happy, too, so you’re actually did them a favor.”

“Good to know. How’s my head, anyway? See any brain leaking out?”

“A bit, but I put that aside for the dog to eat.”

“That’s not a dog. That’s one of those war beasts you read about in the fantasy novels.”

“Seems to like Sherlock, though. Tried to comfort him very sweetly, I thought, when Sherlock was yelling at you for being uncoordinated and making a spectacle of yourself.”

“That’s because Sherlock is precisely the sort of person who’d ride a war beast in a fantasy novel! Just to the shops and back, of course, because I can’t see Sherlock finding war very interesting, but he’d be up there with his horned helmet and leathers and… stuff.”

“You turned yourself on, didn’t you?”

“I… how about we change the subject.”

“Gran would probably rent Dinky out to you if you wanted a little roleplaying fun with Mr. Curls.”

“No! No, enough of that. Besides, you give her the idea and she’ll want to do the roleplaying herself and I think we can agree that’s not something we want paraded about while we’re having our tea.”

“And with that horrifying image in my head, I officially pronounce you free of splinters and free to toddle off and see what Mum and Mycroft have going for breakfast.”

“Mycroft… he’s fitting in well with your family. I’m happy for you, Greg.”

John looked up at his friend and shared a smile that said both men were fully aware that fitting into Greg’s family was going to be a permanent thing. John had a bet with himself as to how long it would be before Greg, with much fumbling and embarrassing himself, professed his love for the android and revised that wager to move up the date of the big event. The big prat was practically exploding to lay it all out and drag Mycroft to his cave to begin setting up house.

“Thanks, John. You and Sherlock are part of that, too. Gran’s been wanting an apprentice for her dark arts practice and Sherlock fits the bill nicely. You can tend to the poor unfortunates they turn into toads or have their tongues fall out or whatnot. Good to have a medical man in the coven.”

“Ha ha ha. That’s probably not far from the truth, you know. I suspect that fucking cat was a
serial killer she turned into her feline familiar.”

“I’ll check the files when I’m back to work. Speaking of… let me make my call and find out if I’m still employed and what’s going on with the investigation.”

“I’ll tell Mycroft to bring your breakfast, because I’m sure you don’t want to cry at the table when you learn you’ve been sacked.”

“You’re a kind man, John. Sherlock’s lucky to have you.”

With the anticipated exchange of rude gestures, John left the bedroom and made his way back downstairs, checking very carefully for high-ground vantage points that might be hosting a maniacal cat. One broken head was enough for one day, thank you very much. Now, he just had to carry treats in his pocket to keep the war beast from going on the attack. Maybe Sherlock would be nice and step in the way to ward off the rampage when it occurred. Ok, definitely needed to do some self-checks for concussion, because that was the most ridiculous thought he’d had in ages…

“Greg… I wish you would have told me all of this sooner.”

Phoning the Inspector was not the thing Greg wanted to do, but it was the thing he needed to do and with a measure of truth he’d not exactly included with earlier conversations, such as buying Mycroft in the first place, starting a relationship with him and the most recent developments that muddied the waters even more murkyly.

“I know, sir… it’s just… most of it was personal business and didn’t impact my work at all, but now… something’s happening and it’s certainly a police matter that I can’t ignore. I’ve got Harkins doing my shift today and I’m to take his tonight, so I won’t be missing any hours, but…”

“I want you to stay where you are, Sergeant.”

Oh?

“Oh? I… alright, sir, I can do that.”

“I’m going to send Anderson out there, as well, after he finishes a few things today.”

Oh?

“That… that sounds great, sir. The more the merrier, but… may I ask why?”

The long sigh on the other end of the phone put Greg on alert and he prepared for what was certain to be unpleasant news.

“I got the call from the Chief Inspector who got the call from above his head… the investigation into Mycroft’s abduction is over. Not that it got much of a start, but that case is officially closed.”

“What! It… it can’t be! Mycroft was kidnapped and they shot at us when we tried to rescue him! Anderson and I were in uniform, for christ’s sake, so they knew exactly who they were firing at!”

“I know and, believe me, I am not happy about it. Nor is the Chief Inspector, but orders, especially from this high up, aren’t to be ignored. The case is dead, Sergeant. Not a single one London’s finest are to take this one step further.”
“I can’t… I can’t let it go like that, sir. They’re after Sherlock, too, and, with that much effort already put in, you know they’re not going to just walk away.”

“Oh, I agree. That’s why you and Anderson are now, officially, not considered London’s finest.”

“Wh… what?”

“Sorry, Greg, but you’re no longer one of us.”

“We’ve been sacked! I can’t believe… they want us sacked, too, so… that leaves Mycroft and Sherlock even less protected!”

“I didn’t say sacked, Sergeant, I said you’re no longer one of us. My orders were very specific. Nobody under my command is allowed to pursue this investigation and the other London divisions and offices got the same notice. However, the Chief Inspector was frothing over this and I have no doubt he’ll gleefully push through a transfer of you and your partner to that quaint little hamlet you’re currently haunting. Needless to say, if you stay here, you could do some unofficial snooping and we can’t allow that, now can we?”

“But being out from under the London umbrella, we can investigate all we like.”

“I follow orders very closely, Lestrade, and I will not do one thing to violate this one. Nor will you.”

“I… I understand, sir. Thank you.”

“Nobody is happy about standing down, Sergeant. It goes against everything we’re supposed to represent and it’s this sort of thing that finds its way into the public at some point and erodes their trust in us, which isn’t stellar at the best of times. I can’t officially give you any help, but what I don’t specifically know about I can’t block, either.”

“I think I have the ground rules.”

“Good! Oh, and you might want to make this fast. While you’re transferred, you’ll receive what salary the local lads can afford and I can tell you right now that will be about three pence a day.”

“Oh… that’s understandable. And fair.”

“Sucks balls, though.”

“I wasn’t going to say that, sir, but yes. Yes, it does.”

“Incentive! Good luck, Greg. I’m always available for a friendly chat, completely not work-related, if you need one.”

“Thank you, sir. This… this is utterly horrid of you and I am going to viciously resent my obviously covering-NSY-arses transfer until the moment I’m accepted back into the fold.”

“Also fair. I meant to ask, though… you’re hoping to move over to the detective side of things, aren’t you, Lestrade?”

“I… yes sir, I am.”

“Well, while you’re serving your penance, let me see what might be opening to receive a prodigal son. You do seem to have a flair for investigation and putting people where they can do the
most good is always smart management. Try not to get killed between now and then, alright?”

The call terminated before Greg could respond, so staring at his mobile in stunned silence for a few minutes was a perfectly reasonable action. Ha! The fuckers thought they pulled the rug out from under them, but hadn’t counted on police pride and ingenuity saying sod off. The official investigation might be dead, but he and Anderson, along with Sherlock and Mycroft, could continue on and find out who was powerful enough to get these orders issued and why they’d bother, when it was just two simple androids they wanted as their prize. Perfect… unofficial goings-on were the most efficient goings-on anyway and permission was now given to race down that track as long as they needed…

The fact that there was an additional prize at the finish line was just icing on the cake. Getting a detective’s spot in London was brutally hard, so this was a tiny miracle that he wouldn’t take for granted. Mycroft gets his freedom, he gets a Detective Sergeant posting… it was almost tempting to thank the fuckers for their fuckery. It would be polite… once they were behind bars, he’d tip his hat and say a sincere thank you for their efforts. Then turn away and leave them to rot forever…
Chapter 35

“You find them and I’ll shoot them, the bastards!”

The news of the dropped investigation was not sitting well with his grandmother, but Greg appreciated the support, homicidal thought it was.

“We don’t know if they’ve actually committed a murderable offense, Gran, but if that’s true, then I’ll make the case to the prosecution to have you shove your shotgun up their arses and let fly.”

“That’s fair.”

And she’d do it, too, Greg had no doubt. His grandmother was nothing if not adamant about her mayhem.

“Now that mum’s happy… Greg, do you… do you have a plan or whatever it is you policemen call it, for solving this terrible business?”

Thank you, Mum, for highlighting the rather sizeable obstacle I am now confronting.

“Not precisely. I thought the police in London would have the job of doing the investigating, with me poking my nose around the door occasionally to check on the progress. Maybe, at most, Anderson and I would get assigned to some aspect of the case for a bit of footwork collecting statements or whatnot, but… it’s all topsy turvy now! And I can’t ignore that whoever’s behind all of this had the power to get the case buried. Or they know people who can, which amounts to the same, I suppose.”

“I’ll still shoot them! They’ll be Tories, just watch and see. Can’t trust those fuckers. Can’t, I tell you!”

Mycroft placed another two strips of bacon on Aggie’s plate as reward for her stalwart bloodthirstiness.

“Watch your blood pressure, mum. Anyway, I’d say there’s good and bad here, like there is with most things, I’ve learned in this life. The bad is… well, that’s rather obvious, isn’t it… but the good is that you get to visit for awhile so we can get to know your new family better! Oh, that’s a right treat and I’m not going to let the other nonsense make me any less happy about visiting with my son and his lover.”

“Mum!”

If Greg turned any redder, Mycroft worried that his blood pressure would be the one to watch.

“What! Isn’t that what they call it when two men are having a romance.”

“I… maybe, but it’s…”

“Gregory and I have not yet sexually consummated our relationship, so the term might not be entirely accurate.”

“Mycroft!”

“What’s the problem? Greg! Is your cock limp? Get that doctor over there to fix it once his head mends.”
And with his grandmother now joining the interrogation, it was more than time to make a strategic retreat.

“I’m… Dinky! Who wants a walkie? We do! Come on, boy!”

Greg jumped up from the table and gave everyone seated at breakfast the evil eye before grabbing his jacket and letting the eager dog drag him out the door by his sleeve.

“Dear me, Gregory does have a somewhat prudish streak.”

“I told you he’d gotten a bit sour in his old age, Mycroft… why don’t you go and have a nice walk with him and I’ll do the washing up. Mum, I can take you to the shops later, so…”

“Sexbot can take me. With that doctor of his, so we can get something for my itchy skin. And ammunition.”

“That sounds nice, love. While you’re gone, Tom can start on that new chair of yours and I’ll see the house gets tidied. Oh… isn’t it grand to have everyone home!”

Sherlock snorted loudly, but John was perfectly content to have a day chaperoning the two most evil people in the world in what was certain to be a peaceful, scenic country village where there would surely be a proper pub for a good pint while watching the peaceful, scenic country village burn to the ground in the wake of the Disastrous Duo sowing their seeds of discord and chaos. Really, what was not to love about that?

“Everyone has a bracing round of productive and enjoyable plans it seems. Therefore, I shall accompany Gregory on his ramble and take in the rather harmonious scenery.”

“Take a jacket, Mycroft dear. It’s a tad nippy and you don’t want to get chilled.”

Mycroft dabbed his mouth and smiled, ignored Sherlock’s ‘yes, Mycroft, you don’t want to get chilled, oh wait, your frigid heart is at a lower temperature than the environment so heat will flow to you and not away from you’ and hurried after his… lover… who was quickly becoming a speck in the distance.

“Gregory! Do slow your pace!”

The speck stopped and appeared to turn, which was gladdening, but the enormous black blob that came storming back over the crest of the small hill, bearing down on the android was another matter entirely. Especially when it covered the distance in two heartbeats and had Mycroft pinned on the ground staring up into infernally-colored eyes.

“You have utterly mussed my jacket, Dinky. That was highly uncharitable of you.”

The dog’s rumbled whine was a very good approximation of a chagrined, albeit garbled, ‘I’m sorry’ and the large lick across Mycroft’s face served as the appeasement gift.

“Dear heavens… Gregory! Oh, there you are. Might I request a spot of help?”

“Pat your chest.”

“Pardon?”

“Pat. Your. Chest.”

Mycroft frowned, but did as he was told and rolled his eyes dramatically when nine tons of dog...
frowned down on top of him. Of course, the chill-avoiding effects could not be understated.

“Most amusing.”

“I thought so!”

As if Greg’s brilliant smile was not sufficient clue.

“Our walk shall be an extremely slow and short one if I am affixed to this single spot.”

“You want to walk with us?”

“The day is a… pffft… good heavens, but dog hair is… messy and prone to migrating into one’s mouth. As I was saying, the day is a pleasant one and I have seen none of the countryside in the daylight hours.”

“I’d love to have a stroll with you on this pleasant-as-described day, but I’m not certain Dinky is ready to continue. He looks very comfortable, which I have to admit is understandable, given he’s lying on you.”

“Gregory, I believe he is fatally constricting my breathing.”

“How much of a lie is that?”

“One hundred percent, but the principle cannot be ignored.”

Laughing at his exasperated android, Greg whistled and patted his own chest, which had Dinky hopping off Mycroft and onto his hind legs to lick Greg’s face and force his favorite policeman to lean forward to prevent the weight of a skyscraper putting him on the ground with Mycroft.

“Good boy making Mycroft toasty warm and flat. Love, looks like you lost a few stone. What’s that geometry thing when you’re flat?”

“A plane?”

“You’re a plane.”

“Joyful.”

Holding up his hand, Mycroft waited for Greg to urge Dinky back onto four legs, then reach down and give him a heave upwards and into his arms.

“Hello, love.”

“I am sullied.”

“You wear it marvelously.”

And that deserved a long kiss that was only broken when the mass of a bus bumped against the couple to remind them of the point of being outdoors.

“Tired of waiting for us, Dinks? Alright, off we go. And I’ll have the most handsome man in the world on my arm.”

Which Greg took very literally, by linking his and Mycroft’s arm as they started walking in the wake of the tank sprinting forward to look for a battalion of the enemy.
“I see your description of saunters with Dinky was not in error.”

“He does this even when I’m not here, but I think it adds some fun to his antics when he’s got someone watching him destroy the universe. He’ll have a tree dug from the ground before we turn for home, just you watch. Probably fill the hole with a few sheep while he’s at it.”

“I appreciate the nod to safety. A relaxing stroll should not be interrupted by plummeting to one’s death in a tree-root sized crater.”

“Most certainly.”

“And, given the pleasantries of the weather and companionship, are you successfully divested of your embarrassment from your mother’s words.”

“I… it’s not… no! Now that you’ve brought it up again, I’m not! And you made it all the worse, evil android that you are.”

Mycroft chuckled and patted Greg’s arm to offer comfort.

“There is nothing embarrassing about sex, Gregory. It is a normal, natural process.”

“Not with Mums it isn’t!”

“You do know that is how they became a mother, Gregory, do you not?”

Greg unhooked his arm from Mycroft’s and shoved his fingers in his ears, loudly reciting ‘la la la la la la’ over and over again.

“Dear me, my lover is an infant.”

His human’s scrunched face and furious pout brought out even more laughter and Mycroft stooped slightly to sweep Greg up into his arms to carry.

“WHA… Let me down!”

“You are an infant, so I must carry you. It is a shame I have not a blanket to swaddle you properly, but I shall raise my internal temperature somewhat so excess heat flows to you and keeps you comfortable.”

“I should make you carry me all day, you prat.”

“That would not distress me in the least. Behold! The ease with which I can gain a kiss.”

Which only involved a small turn of the head to kiss his petulant human, then add another that boosted heat of an entirely different nature.

“Ok, that is one benefit of being carried.”

“Less wear on your shoes?”

“Two benefits.”

“Avoiding the rather… substantial… gifts left by Dinky for the local scatophagus creatures.”

Greg looked down as they passed the Mount Everest of dog droppings and sighed loudly.
“That goes on the benefits list, too. Large dogs do everything big.”

“Apparently. But, back to our original conversation… you should be happy your mother is embracing our relationship so wholeheartedly. From what I gather, that is not guaranteed in human society.”

“You’re right about that and I am glad for it. It’s just… you know how it is with mothers.”

“No, I do not.”

Greg snarled slightly, but at himself for once again forgetting Mycroft wasn’t human. It was just so easy to do…

“I… shit. You’re right. You have no idea what it’s like to have anything about sex be said anywhere near your Mum, let alone by your Mum. Sorry, love. Forgot about that.”

“I take it the situation is a dire one.”

“The direst. And, no, before you ask, I don’t know why. It just is.”

“I shall research the topic myself, then, so I better understand it. I would hate to cause you continued discomfort when I converse with your mother. It… it seems that might be an activity in which I might engage frequently in the future.”

Greg let one of his dangling arms reach around to rub his android’s back and found himself smiling widely at Mycroft’s confession.

“It does, does it? I think so, too, so it’s good to have confirmation from a genius.”

“You do?”

“If… if that’s something you want, then I’d like to see it happen. Be with you for a long time, I mean.”

Now, Mycroft was smiling widely and gently giving Greg a whole-body squeeze in delight.

“I would like that very much. I never believed I would find someone who would captivate me so, Gregory. Someone who I would desire to be at my side with such a fervor as I do with you. I cannot say I fully understand these feelings and, given the circumstances, have not had the time or opportunity to analyze them further, but I know they exist and I am glad for them.”

Greg used his second dangling arm to reach up and stroke Mycroft’s cheek, then take a moment to drink in how lucky he was to have found someone this wonderful in the horrible world around them.

“I’m glad, too. Means we’re thinking and feeling alike and… well, yeah. A proper couple, not one of those where you wonder if the two do anything together besides shag.”

“Which we shall commence shortly.”

“Absolutely! In fact…”

“Gregory, I know that look.”

“Are you certain? I’ve got a lot of them.”

“You have hit upon an idea you find particularly and scandalously pleasing.”
“Ok, so you do know that look.”

“Might I ask the meaning of this specific example?”

“Oh…”

Mycroft held Greg a little more tightly as the sergeant wriggled around to survey the countryside.

“Over there.”

Peering in the direction Greg’s finger was pointing, which was a small stand of trees jutting out from a bit of woodland, the android frowned at the man in his arms and arched an inquisitive eyebrow.

“Why?”

“That’s for me to know and you to find out.”

“If the dog is lying in wait to ambush me and bury me in a pre-dug grave, Gregory, I shall be most cross with you both.”

“I’m saving that for Christmas. Go on… toddle over.”

Hmmm’m’ing a ‘the warning about the grave still stands’ hum, Mycroft carried Greg over to the trees and stopped at their edge while Greg laughed an evil supervillain laugh and motioned for Mycroft to set him down.

“Just as I remembered.”

“I cannot imagine an agglomeration of trees changing substantially beyond the addition of height and girth.”

Why that made his human giggle, Mycroft didn’t know, but that did not make the sound less lovely to his ears.

“That’s very true and that’s why it works to our advantage. Step in a little and voila! Marvel how you can’t be easily seen by anyone strolling about, not that anyone much does that because of Gran’s tendency to shoot first and ask questions later, but… now, let’s see. I’ll let you choose. Up or down?”

“About what am I choosing?”

Greg’s maniacal cackle sounded again and he added a prolonged heh heh heh to accompany Mycroft’s slowly rolled eyes.

“Very well. Up.”

“Up it is! Now, let’s see… oh, that looks like a winning candidate.”

Pushing Mycroft in the direction of a specific tree, Greg continued pushing until Mycroft’s back was against the trunk.

“Alright, love, your job is simply to enjoy yourself.”

“I… very well. I do admire a sturdy and well-formed tree.”

More suspicious laughter from his human made Mycroft’s curiosity rise sharply, especially when
Greg dropped to his knees and winked. Rather filthily.

“Gregory…”

“One job, Mycroft. Do it and do it well…”

Quickly lowering the zipper on Mycroft’s trousers, Greg nuzzled the android’s lower belly a moment as he gently began to massage the prize he was seeking, which was quickly showing its interest in the unexpected attention.

“Gregory! I… ohhhhh…”

“Just enjoy yourself and let me put a smile on your face.”

Which was not exactly the expression on Mycroft’s face, but the one that was there suited Greg just as well. Bliss was very easy to spot and glorious to behold…

As was the especially lovely cock he was freeing from its fabric-based prison. Why was everything about Mycroft so fucking perfect! And why was he asking such a stupid question! This was the time to focus only on the long, slightly-rosy morsel that was becoming very humanly hard and demanding.

“Magnificent… this is the most mouth-watering cock I’ve ever seen. Luckily, in my mouth is exactly where it’s going.”

Before Mycroft could take another heaved breath, Greg sucked his android’s cock as deeply as he could and simply let his tongue play for a moment to shoot Mycroft’s arousal completely to the top of the scale. Then it was time to swirl that tongue around the head like it was a big cherry lolly and hum against Mycroft’s skin when a veritable symphony of sounds came pouring through the android’s slightly-parted lips. And that was precisely what he wanted… his Mycroft so completely lost in the experience that the tremendous brain in his head didn’t have the chance to think.

Knowing this wouldn’t last long no matter what he did, Greg opted for filthy and furious technique, sucking Mycroft hard and fast, with delicious licks of his tongue thrown in for contrast until the android shouted loudly and his body arched, giving Greg a highly unexpected splash of liquid in his mouth that… well, didn’t taste half bad, if he said so himself.

“That’s what I want to see… my Mycroft shut off for extremely happy reasons.”

Extremely happy described this ridiculous policeman, too, because completely swimming in pleasure was a look his dear android wore very well and very sexily. Luckily, he’d get to see it a LOT in the… years… to come.

“I… ‘shut off’ is not the most inapt description of my condition at the moment.”

“Perfect. That’s the way a good orgasm should leave you. Not caring if you’re alive or dead because you just feel so fucking good.”

Mycroft didn’t care, either. He was entranced by the sensations still coursing through his systems and the memories of the sensations that preceded them. Which were… not describable in any human language. He had never dreamed, never a single time, that he could experience such physical pleasure. It transcended anything his feeble mind could have imagined… and opportunities for more of it in the future extended far forward in time in the most delightful of ways.

“Now, we’ll just tuck you away and see you zipped before all that toasty happiness begins to
wane and your bollocks start to shiver. Not that that wouldn’t be a majestic sight…”

Blinking slowly, Mycroft felt his awareness begin to gel into something beyond his paradise and reached down to run his hand through Greg’s hair.

“That… oh, Gregory… I would never have believed…”

Testing his cold knees before he stood, Greg finally got to his feet and took his still-dazed android in his arms to kiss him tenderly.

“Anytime you want, Mycroft. Anything or anytime, because you deserve to feel that way whenever you please.”

Mycroft melted like warm butter in Greg’s embrace, letting his systems come more into the normal range before drawing back and staring into his human’s eyes.

“You are… how have I been so blessed, Gregory?”

“I’ve asked myself that question every day since I met you, love. Now, since I’ve embarrassed myself with that sappy romantic nonsense, let’s continue on, shall we?”

“But… Gregory…”

Lowering his hand and very hesitantly reaching out to touch Greg’s healthy erection, Mycroft gave his human a look that Greg easily interpreted and loved… adored his… Mycroft even more for it.

“You can take care of that tonight, what say? Dinky is sure to come searching for us soon and I doubt you want to be interrupted while you work your magic.”

Especially since Mycroft was not entirely certain how to work said magic when the opportunity presented itself. He should have paid more attention to the mechanics when he was conducting his… research!

“Ah, yes. I had forgotten we were being chaperoned.”

As if summoned, the ground began shaking and the trees swayed as if an earthquake was striking, signaling the arrival of someone who wanted very much to know why his escorts weren’t running and romping, which was the whole point of a walk.

“Dinky! Got lonely, boy? We took a bit of a rest, but off we go! Fuck me… what do you have in your mouth?”

The large swallow successfully hid the evidence, before Dinky shot off again, stopping to look back to make sure he was being followed. Linking their arms again, Greg proudly took a large step forward and began the next phase of their promenade, which would be nearly as fun as the tiny interlude they’d just enjoyed because… *everything* was wonderful when he shared it with this amazing man. Little things like what exactly did Mycroft… make… when he came could be explored at another time. His android would say something if it was toxic, so curiosity wasn’t going to turn attention away from this beautiful day and this beautiful person walking next to him. Besides if he _was_ poisoned, both Dinky and Mycroft were perfectly capable of getting him home for John to check. Between the two of them, they could drag home Westminster Cathedral, though Gran would complain constantly about it ruining her property and spoiling her view…
“The man in the checked scarf.”

“Right!”

Aggie cackled loudly and Sherlock beamed with pride, all of which made John laugh and take another long drink of his lager. The two ne’er-do-wells had reduced the village to tears and rubble while gathering the few things Aggie needed and now were merrily playing a game of the ancient witch describes what crime or mortal sin was being committed and Sherlock had to deduce who in the bustling pub was the culprit. Lunchtime entertainment had never been this entertaining!

“That arsehole has been fiddling the books for several of his clients, hoping they don’t notice he’s stealing a bit for himself when he makes the deposits each month. His mum made him confess when he bought his wife a new coat that she fucking well knew cost the same as the Queen’s crown. Now, he’s terrified because she said she’s going to rat on him if he doesn’t confess and pay back the poor bastards he stole from.”

“Ah… that further explains his furtiveness.”

“That and two of his clients are here right now, over at the end of the bar. His mother does like a good pint in the afternoon, too, so she could pop in at any time.”

“That would be enjoyable to watch.”

“I agree. Let’s have another gin while we wait.”

Sherlock’s imperious wave was quickly acted upon by the poor server who already had to deliver one drinks round and a hearty lunch to the table, which was more interaction with Aggie and her dark minion that any person should ever have to endure.

“Alright… let’s see… you’re good at this, Sexbot, I have to admit, and I don’t admit things unless I bloody well mean them! Let’s have a look… oh! Here you go… one of the useless berks in here… about a year ago, three sheds out along Potter’s Road got burned to the ground and old Rod Fleming’s barn… or half of it, really… got a proper scorching and had to be condemned. Tell me who it is and I’ll tell you where to find some evidence to put the fucker in jail for a good long time.”

“If you have evidence of the crimes, why did you not inform the police yourself.”

“Boring.”

“Ah… that I understand.”

“Besides, the insurance paid out, so no harm done in the long run. Go on, now… this’ll be a tough one, I suspect.”

John smiled at the look of intense scrutiny on Sherlock’s face and took his own turn looking around the pub, before something caught his eye that made him smile wider.

“I’ll make this even more of a challenge for you, Sherlock. You’ve got until I go outside and come back in to make your guess…”
“I never guess!”

“Make your… assertion… because that’s when the police are going to be here to take your report. Back in a tick.”

Sherlock and Aggie scowled fiercely at John, who darted out of the pub and hailed the individual he’d seen stepping out of what was likely a hired car, since it was as tiny and cheap as the one Greg had taken for their escape from London.

“Do all cops drive the lowest rung of the automotive ladder or are you and Greg just special that way.”

Anderson thought a moment, made a rude gesture, then grinned at John.

“Just us, most likely. I was actually stopping to get directions to Greg’s grandmother’s house so my chariot could bring me there, but it looks like the directions have come to me instead.”

“The grandmother has, too. We’re enjoying a nice afternoon in the pub if you’d care to join us.”

“Us?”

“Sherlock, me and Greg’s gran. Believe me, that is quite enough for one physical structure to host. Greg’s off with Mycroft and Greg’s parents are… doing parent-y things.”

“I could murder a pint right now. The drive was bad enough, but… this whole business…”

A nod towards the door set Anderson in motion and John happily escorted him to the table and cleared his throat to signal Sherlock to speak.

“Brown jacket, tan trousers.”

Aggie’s loud cackling accompanied the arrival of their drinks and John quickly made a +1 sign to their server and pointed at Anderson

“He’s right! Sexbot’s got eyes and a brain to match. Can’t wait to have that talent turned towards something more fun.”

The waggled eyebrows made it very clear the nature of fun being discussed and Sherlock shuddered with a dramatic flair suitable for the occasion.

“Who’s this, then? Not seen his raggedy self before. Though… I do like the beard. Put a stone or two on you… I suppose, though, if I’m willing to shag the android and he’s thin as a rail, I can’t be prejudiced against your skinny arse. Fancy a little cuddle?”

Anderson immediately knew three things. First, this was Greg’s gran. Second, his stories about her were not exaggerated. Third, where Greg inherited his ‘had a few at the pub and oh! you look interesting’ behavior was no longer in question.

“Not now, thanks. Never fond of an audience.”

“Shite. You young cowards… youth is wasted on the young! Beggars belief… flesh or plastic, you’re a miserable, cockless lot and the devil can take you, disappointing an old lady… not the British way! Not at all… fuckers.”

“Aggie, this is Philip Anderson. He’s Greg’s partner in London.”
“Oh… I’ve heard about you. Nothing good.”

“I wouldn’t expect any less from Greg. He’s a right bastard at the best of times and I’ve never actually had any ‘best of times’ with him, so you can imagine my suffering.”

Aggie’s sage nod satisfied Anderson that he’d gained some small measure of approval and took his newly arrived pint as his prize for a job well done.

“Yes, this is exactly what I needed. Now, what’s the story with the chap in the earth-colored clothes?”

Sherlock quickly filled the PC in on the details and Aggie added in where certain photographs might be found, because she knew the lad who did the film processing in the village and he kept copies of everything he thought might be useful for blackmail or to have a wank over when he had a lonely night.

“I’m not here five minutes and I already have to make an arrest! Couldn’t you have had the decency to let me finish my pint first?”

“Law is not alcohol dependent.”

“Thank you, Sherlock, for that informative declaration. And… thank you for using your snooping powers for good. I’m certain the police here will be happy to see the case closed.”

John simply adored when Sherlock glowed with pride, but he made certain not to show it or the android would probably do his best not to ever do that again.

“Bastard! I don’t get a single word of thanks! Typical with ungrateful twats like you! Your beard won’t save you now!”

Starting to rise from her chair with her fist clenching tight, Aggie’s progress was detoured by Sherlock reaching over to a table near them, stealing the drink that was just delivered and holding it up in front of the old woman’s face.

“Ooh… haven’t had a good whisky in awhile. If it’s whisky. Guess I’ll find out.”

While his dark master sat back down to sample her acquisition, Sherlock glared at Anderson who cleared his throat and prepared for pacification.

“You were the next person on my thank you list, ma’am. I very much appreciate your help with this case and I know that you didn’t have to step in, so both the effort and results have me in your debt.”

“Ok, that’s better. You may live the day. Only may! Hope you’ve got a bedroll because I still think you’re sleeping in the cellar. Beez loves the cellar. Lots of mice and… whatnot…”

The rich cackling actually gave Anderson an involuntary shudder which drew the smallest amount of sympathy from John.

“Tough to be you, mate.”

“Apparently. Who’s Beez?”

Deciding it was best to let his friend learn that himself, preferably as horribly and painfully as he did, John simply smiled and settled back to let the afternoon continue at its leisure. They had
transportation now, so they didn’t have to phone anyone for a ride home and he’d mention to Anderson that if he let Aggie drive, she might rescind the sleeping-in-the-cellar edict. If the copper hadn’t bothered to get insurance for the car, then his own stupidity would be his downfall…

“What a fine lad you are! Come in, come in! Tom! Bring in the bags, will you, love? I’ll put the kettle on…”

And this was certainly Greg’s mother, who was as motherly as Greg had described her, but that was not at all a bad thing, given the white-knuckled ride Anderson and the others had experienced while Aggie drove them back to the house. The woman had no fear, which was a horrifying combination with being unable to clearly see over the steering wheel.

“Thank you, Mrs. Lestrade. That’s very kind of you.”

“It’s my pleasure, Philip. Greg’s told us all about you. All good, of course!”

“That’s shite, that is!”

“Why don’t you have a little sit, mum, and I’ll find your favorite biscuits for your tea. Greg and Mycroft aren’t back yet, so we can have a nice chat while we wait. I’m sure once my son gets here it’ll all be police business and official nonsense that the rest of us don’t need to know about.’

“I do!”

The in-stereo Sherlock and Aggie bark was duly noted and the idea of a quiet, professional discussion between the actual police professionals flew neatly out the window.

“I suspect Greg will want everyone involved, Mrs. Lestrade…”

“Edith, please, dear. Edie if that’s a bit too musty for you.”

“… thank you. Anyway, Mycroft, Sherlock and John have been part of the case and Greg will want them to be part of… whatever it is we’re going to do. While we’re not doing the job the local force is not-paying us to do, that is. Speaking of, I really don’t think shoving a note under the door of the police station is an acceptable way of giving them notice of an identified arsonist.”

“Nobody home, was there! Lazy sods off shagging their wives or sheep when they’re supposed to be keeping people safe!”

“Mum, we haven’t had a confirmed sheep shagger in the area in a good… oh, three years now. And did you finally decide to send Will Foster to the gallows? I thought you were saving that for when you really needed a little cheer up.”

Anderson began to wonder why Greg had decided a move to London was a good idea. There was lots of entertainment to be had here, as well as mum-cooked meals and the rents had to be cheaper than in the city. It might be prudent to inquire if a substitute son was desired and what duties in trade would be necessary to secure that role. This wasn’t terribly different than what he grew up with, but his family was not quite as colorful as the Lestrades… Uncle Neville, notwithstanding… oh Christmas and another hand-carved naked Neville desk statue to look forward to… maybe he should introduce him to Aggie…

“It did! Gave me a proper cheer up. Shagboy sussed out who did the deed in five minutes! He’s a clever one, he is. Going to be a true… something… one of these days and he’ll still have time
to keep an old, but still very limber, body satisfied.”

Sherlock confiscated the package of biscuits that was being offered to the family matriarch and glowered thunderously to deter any attempts at stealing it back.

“Bastard. Eat all those and you’ll be too fat to shag.”

“You prefer your men… rugged, I believe. Therefore, you are lying and rather poorly, at that.”

“You’re right. Long as you cock works, we can negotiate.”

Sherlock removed two biscuits from the package and set them in Aggie’s outstretched hand, prompting Anderson to share a knowing smile with John. Sherlock wasn’t the easiest personality to embrace, but there were a few who could and the android was very lucky to have landed in a nest of them.

“You’re staying with us, aren’t you, dear? We’ve got another bedroom here and it’s probably best for you, Greg and the rest to do your policing or spying or whatever you’ll get up to if you’re in the same house.”

Solving a problem that had occupied Anderson’s mind during the drive. Paying rent on two flats with no appreciable income was not something a lowly PC took lightly.

“If it’s not a bother.”

“It is! Don’t have enough plates! Or food!”

“I’ll happily buy a plate and a loaf of bread to support myself.”

“And gin!”

“I can buy gin, too.”

“You can stay.”

Now it was Greg’s mother sharing a knowing look with her husband. The old bird hadn’t had this much fun with people in years! Apparently, she just needed the right mix of personalities to simply allow herself to enjoy the time. That bode well for big family holidays and the like in the years to come…

“And I think we can find a bit more than bread to keep the skin on your bones. All you lot are so lean. Well, except John and our Greg … but a touch of padding is a lovely thing when you snuggle a bit on a chilly night.”

John looked mournfully at his stomach as Anderson mouthed ‘fat boy’ and Sherlock bristled sharply.

“John is not fat! He is…”

“Rugged! Maybe I should shag him instead. Or the both of you. At the same time. Haven’t done that since…”

Sherlock tried to wrestle the biscuits back from Aggie, but succeeded only in finding out how strong those deceptively thin and fragile fingers actually were.

“Mum, do behave yourself. Tom, Philip’s bag can go in the guest bedroom and I’ll check the linens after dinner. Which I suppose I should see to starting soon. How’s a nice bit of lamb stew for
everyone? I could do some chops or a hearty pasta if that suits the moods better, though.”

Anderson rededicated himself to finding out if the Lestrade family was in the market for a new, lean son because his own mother was exactly the sort to remind him that he was fully an adult now and stopping in at mealtime wasn’t appropriate when a body was earning a wage. The same was true for laundry day or trips for groceries when items magically appeared in her trolley. She was a hard woman…

“Anything will be delicious, I’m sure, Edith. My padding will be very happy with whatever you choose to add a touch of plumping for Sherlock to enjoy.”

And, to emphasize his point, John stole the biscuit package from Sherlock and tossed a tasty padding-plumper into his mouth.

“I do appreciate a man with a good appetite. Luckily, Tom can match Aggie bite for bite, so I don’t have to worry about leavings on the plate when a meal is done. Well, I best get to it! I’m already missing Mycroft for help with the cooking. He’s such a dear and is so good with his hands. Lucky for Greg, right?”

Greg’s pub conduct and filthy-wink truly came through the female genetic line, that much couldn’t be denied.

“Mycroft is an imbecilic fumble-fingers who can only be trusted to properly handle a chocolate sponge or particularly succulent cream bun, if the assignment is to shove it into his mouth and fall into a food-inspired coma.”

The ‘oh you silly thing’ flick of Edith’s wrist vexed Sherlock mightily and he chose biscuit eating as his soothing mechanism. Having to fight Aggie, who loudly demanded her next portion, provided sufficient exercise that, if he could gain weight, all added calories would be swiftly burned away.

“Love, want me to call Greg and Mycroft?”

Edith turned and nodded at her husband, who had confused the three other males in the room until they saw him pull a hunting horn down from its peg by the door. The very loud blare could likely be heard in Scotland.

“They’ll be back soon. Dinky will drag them if they dawdle.”

And with that done, the parental Lestrades began working to wash vegetables and pull down pots and pans in the most heartwarmingly domestic scene one could stage in the kitchen, one that certainly did not have John imagining what it might be like to have Sherlock in the kitchen with him, preparing a meal together. Quickly realizing he was potentially imagining the Apocalypse, John began chatting with Anderson about his drive and any new information he may have gleaned in London about their case. Think of the Apocalypse and it might appear, which was one problem they really didn’t need at the moment…

“--------

“The Horn of Summoning? Really? Who had that amazing idea?”

Greg scowled at his family and friends, who merrily smiled back while they nibbled on bread and cheese and enjoyed a little wine that Thomas had unearthed from its hiding place and concealed from Aggie until it was too late for her to protest opening and serving it.

“Who can remember, Greg, dear? Look at you both… color on your cheeks from your walk. Or
Another wink scorched the air, but Greg was very used to the filth and simply made a rude noise before stealing the piece of cheese Anderson was about to eat and handed it to Mycroft.

“Here, love. You must be hungry after our exploring.”

Which had been wonderful and amazing and fantastic and all the other words used to describe how... good... something was. They’d roamed for hours, talking, throwing things for Godzilla to chase, sitting and watching the clouds roll by... it was the grandest day possible and the naughty start was the perfect way to see it off on the right foot. His android had smiled the whole day and a smiling Mycroft was a vision to behold...

“I am rather peckish.”

The cheese vanished into Dinky’s maw and, given he was Aggie’s dog, not a whit of remorse was shown over the theft.

“Dinky! Evil git.”

The warning hiss from the back of a chair reminded Greg that the house animals had a loosely-formed alliance and Beez was highly skilled at the launch-and-massacre maneuver as witnessed by John’s still tender head.

“Fine! One bit of bread for you, dog of hell, and one spot of cheese for you, cat of anarchy. None for me and Mycroft because we’re not evil and that’s the only thing that counts in this awful house.”

Mycroft made a quick sandwich of two hunks of bread and a thick wedge of cheese and handed it to his affronted human.

“I pronounce you evil, my dear. Go and feast.”

Greg’s hurray! preceded him having a seat next to Anderson who tried to steal Greg’s morsel only to have Mycroft pluck away his hand and tut loudly.

“For shame. A man of the law stooping to thievery.”

“I’m balancing out the arrest I already made. Sort of. It was an arrest-via-note, but I’m going to put it on my success ledger anyway.”

That began the telling of the day’s adventures from all parties in the small kitchen, which lasted through dinner and into the night, when the reason Anderson was there couldn’t be ignored any longer, no matter how cozy was the feeling among the people enjoying the chance to get to know each other better.

“Wonderful. So, we’ve got two hired cars to return and pay for.”

“Your dad and I can return one of them for you, son. I’d like a nice drive to London, truth be told, and we see a few things while we’re there. A little holiday is always welcome, especially since we’ve not had a big one in... oh, when did we have that week in Spain, Tom?”

“Four years ago.”

“There. Four years ago. A lovely drive will put some color in our blood.”
Not wanting to dwell on shades of gore, Greg cut eyes towards Anderson who shrugged and made ‘go ahead’ motions.

“That would be very nice of you, mum. Anderson and I can split the cost of the one we keep and I know I can borrow a car here and there if we need an extra one. For whatever purpose we might need an extra one for. Which… I suppose we need a point to begin from, don’t we? A first move. Did… how far did the investigation get before it was shut down?”

All eyes went to Anderson, whose expression didn’t fill them with hope.

“By the time the local lads arrived, the house Mycroft was being kept in was empty and… they were thorough, whoever they were. Their forensics people did a sweep and were processing the information when the hammer fell.”

Greg huffed out a frustrated breath, but honestly didn’t expect anything else.

“What evidence did they gather?”

“No idea. I did check the computers for anything, but it’s rare we have notification of something from a local case like that. There could be reports, but whether they still exist or were destroyed…”

“The physical evidence, though, that must still exist. They wouldn’t have destroyed it, not if they have any pride in their work.”

“Police would destroy their own mothers if the Tories told them to do it!”

Knowing very well that thumping his gran on the head would end with him living life as a one-armed man, Greg simply rolled his eyes and enjoyed Mycroft rubbing his back in support.

“That’s not true, mum. Greg’s never tried to kill me once and I’m certain someone’s asked him to do it at some point. Probably Daphne Palmer. She always gives me an evil look when I’m buying stamps.”

Greg and Anderson appreciated the sentiment, but had to admit, at least to themselves, that if a properly-placed person in the government pushed hard enough, someone in the police ranks was likely to bend and there was a good chance this is what happened here. It was kind of John, though, to give Aggie an ‘I think you have a point’ smile before getting the conversational wheels back on the proverbial road.

“Murder aside… couldn’t you two just… go and ask the locals what might remain for evidence or partial reports or, even, a personal account? They’re probably as happy to have been stepped on as the London police and might give you some unofficial help.”

The resident policemen thought a moment and both came to the identical conclusions, though Greg was the one take the responsibility of stating it.

“Maybe.”

“Might you be a touch more expositional, my dear?”

“Nope.”

“Gregory!”

“Don’t know what that means.”
“Oh. Do pardon me. Might you, my dear, explain your rather ambivalent response?”

“That I understood. Ok… local police can be a bit territorial and guarded when you talk to them about their work or cases. London police, too, but there are channels available to force cooperation. That’s not as easy when you’re talking to the local lads who don’t know you and get their backs up if they feel you’re stepping on their toes.”

“Take your dad with you, Greg. He’s good with people.”

“A superb idea! Gregory, take along your father to speak with the gentlemen and convince them that there is no… toe stepping… being attempted.”

His Mycroft was a phenomenal individual, however, one lacking the proper life experiences to know why taking your dad to work wasn’t as good an idea as it sounded.

“I’ll think about it, I promise.”

“Take your grandmother. She will threaten to shoot them and that will certainly sway the yokel’s opinion in your favor, especially if she brings one of her larger guns to show conviction.”

Sometimes the android brothers were very similar, other times… not so much.

“That’s not exactly the diplomatic method I was hoping for, Sherlock, but thank you for keeping the ideas flowing.”

And ideas was certainly what they needed, so Anderson tossed out the only ones he had, which were probably what Greg was thinking, too, but didn’t want to mention because… well, because they were dull and this mess, of all things, likely needed a very non-dull set of strategies and plans to see solved.

“I think our Plan A should be asking our new superior to make a call and say we’ll be stopping in for a friendly chat. If he’s not up for it, then we simply try to convince them that we’re not trying to stitch them up for anything and are only looking for a little off-the-record information. Leverage that it’s a spit in the eye to whoever forced this case closed. Build a little common ground on that score and I suspect they’ll loosen a bit and, at least, let us see what they found even if we can’t take anything or photograph it.”

“Then I shall accompany you.”

It was a very difficult call as to who in the room Sherlock’s proclamation frightened the most.

“Ummmm… no.”

“That answer is unsatisfactory, Lestrade, therefore I shall ignore it.”

Greg cut pleading eyes at John who was trying to decide what was more important, the investigation or the satisfaction from Greg and Anderson’s writhing in torment. Probably the investigation. But not by much.

“Sherlock, it’s actually a touchy situation they’re facing and it’s probably best handled copper to copper, without a member of the public present.”

“Ridiculous. I do not consider myself a member of the insipid public, so your argument is already defeated. Secondly, neither Lestrade nor Anderson have the abilities I possess to acquire data so that any evidence we are presented can be replicated perfectly to inspect at our leisure.”
When Sherlock had a point, it was generally a very good one, this being one of those occasions.

“You can memorize the files and such?”

“And store visual information to either recount or, if we have access to a computer, download for inspection.”

“Oh… that’s… that’s bloody useful, is what that is. Greg, do you think you could sell Sherlock as a forensics specialist or something?”

The war going on in both Greg’s and Anderson’s mind over the idea of Sherlock interacting with unsuspecting local policemen and the potential to have a complete record of any possible evidence those unsuspecting policemen had collected was a significant one and it took Mycroft’s gentle clearing of his throat and pat of Greg’s leg to push Greg to announce the victorious side.

“I… I suppose… Sherlock, you really will have to promise, though, to keep close watch over your temper and tongue because I can guarantee that any scorn, contempt, looking-down-your-nose or general prickishness is going to win us a slammed door in our faces and no opportunity for a second chance. Is that clear?”

Sherlock made to open his mouth but a cautioning glare from Mycroft and a ‘Greg’s probably right, dear, they won’t understand your being much smarter than they are and feel a bit put off by it’ from Greg’s mother successfully kept it closed.

“Alright, then. Anderson and I will pay our respects to our local police, then we can have a ride out to see what we can find concerning Mycroft’s abduction. I’ll call Mike, too… I’ll do that tonight, actually… and see if he’s gotten any further communication from whoever’s trying to buy Sherlock. Let him know we’re safe and tell him about the investigation being dropped. I doubt anyone will try anything with the shelter, but if they can’t buy him, I wouldn’t put it past these arseholes to stage something and try to snatch Sherlock from Mike’s hands. If they even believe he’s there anymore. I have no idea how closely they’re watching…”

“You’re leaving the snooty one behind, you miserable knob?”

Greg took a moment to apply his Gran-translator and read the transcript carefully.

“Yes, Gran, Mycroft’s going to be staying here because there’s no need for him to traipse about the countryside in the smallest car in the world, when he can stay here and relax.”

“What if your secret agent tossers come bursting in here to steal him again?”

That was actually not the looniest thing his gran could have said, so one point to her.

“I’ll be here, Aggie, and between the two of us, I think we can keep any tossers at bay. Got my firearm cleaned and ready for combat.”

Sherlock glared at John as if he had been betrayed in the most craven manner possible.

“Don’t glare at me, Sherlock. Aggie is right that with you three gone, as well as Greg’s parents, there needs to be people here, plural, to keep watch on Mycroft. Besides, I have to do my own phoning and try to arrange a leave of absence or find enough willing bodies to cover my shifts so that I remain employed. I can do that with my weapon on my lap easily enough and be ready for any trouble that might try to rear its ugly head. I’m certain Aggie has a few special surprises set aside for that situation, too, so we’ll be well sorted.”
“I do! Got more than anyone knows, and I’ll move a few things around so they’re easily reachable, just in case. Know much about explosives, army boy?”

The multiple-voiced pained groan serenaded Mycroft as he rose to find a fresh bottle of… anything… to ease the agony. Tomorrow would either be placid and relaxing or a reasonable facsimile of World War III. Strange… how little thought he had given this sort of dichotomy when he was living in the shelter. Really, he had been a tremendously-oblivious individual. What fun there was in the world when you had the love of family and friends supporting you and he was thrilled now to have the chance to experience it. Best do a bit of reading on ordnance, though. If it was all hands to battle, it would not do to shame himself in front of his comrades…
Greg sat on the edge of the bed and realized he probably sounded like his father as he mixed a sigh and a groan while reaching down to remove his shoes.

“I’m getting old.”

“True.”

“Thanks for that!”

“You are most welcome, my dear.”

Considering his Mycroft’s rather literal mind and unfamiliarity with human worries and foibles…

“You think I simply mean I’m aging, don’t you?”

“Is that not what you said?”

Proof provided.

“It is. It certainly is.”

Sitting on the bed next to Greg, Mycroft began rubbing Greg’s neck and working loose the few knots of tension he found in them.

“You are worried, also, Gregory. Your anatomy tells the tale.”

“Won’t lie about that. It hit me again, I guess, that we’re not out here for a visit with my family, but for another reason entirely.”

“It is easy to forget, for a time, that there is a purpose for our presence and that purpose is not a gleeful one. But, we are making our own happiness from it and that is cause for rejoicing, is it not? At least, on an appropriate scale.”

Greg smiled and leaned over to kiss his android, with a sweetness that he had come to crave like a drug. Continuing to feel somewhat like his dad, Greg marveled that he had found a partner for his life who was as amazing and perfect for him as the person at his side. His parents loved each other madly and were great friends besides… the parallels were embarrassingly clear. He was officially half of an old married couple, but… that was alright. More than alright, really.

“It’s absolutely cause for rejoicing. I’d have brought you here at some point, in any case, but now you’ve gotten to see early on what you’re in for with me and mine and… my Mycroft likes what he sees, it seems. That’s definitely rejoicable.”

“Which is not a word.”

“It’s a good not-word though.”

“I shall credit you that point.”

“Hurray!”

Greg’s upraised arms made it easy for Mycroft to press his shoulder and topple the sergeant
backwards onto the bed.

“Foul!”

“Given there is no established code of rules to consult for this situation, I dispute your charge.”

“You’ve got me there. I’m still suffering, though.”

“Would a kiss help?”

This set of upraised arms beckoned the android to climb on and begin showing his defeated human a bit of affection. Or, more than a bit, in their case.

“I am enchanted by you, my dear. When... when this awful business is concluded, I look very forward to continuing on with the life we were sharing. And... the bed we are sharing.”

Something Greg had wondered about, given their new dynamic. However, Mycroft, as typical, had clear ideas on the subject.

“Oh, my Mycroft’s enjoying a little extra body heat warming his toes at night, is he?”

“That is a particularly appealing ancillary benefit.”

“Mine or yours?”

“Pardon?”

“My bedroom or yours?”

Mycroft was still rather startled to be offered choices and it made him giddy to even think about having this small degree of power.

“Yours, I believe. It is somewhat the larger and boasts an additional window to allow for natural light. I think, however, my current space shall make an acceptable room for Sherlock when we have... done whatever is necessary to secure his release from the shelter.”

Greg kept his inner groan to himself and smiled up at his jubilant lover. Must remember that where goes Mycroft, Sherlock will follow, even if that was into their small flat. Which would seem very small, indeed, with Sherlock’s bellows echoing around the four close-set walls. But, in truth, he wasn’t averse to the idea. Mycroft was part of a bundle deal and he was prepared to accept that. Anyway, a few nudges towards the John-Sherlock romance would likely set Sherlock in another direction for his permanent household and it would be John’s problem in very short order...

“Baby makes three! But, that’s a hurdle for another day. First, we have to see you safe from grabby hands, then we can start working on saving for Sherlock’s purchase.”

“Indeed. And I shall find employment as swiftly as possible to hasten that event.”

“Cocktail waitress? You’d be gorgeous in a short skirt.”

“My legs are of exceptional quality.”

“Are you sure? I haven’t checked them today to see if that’s still the case.”

Mycroft was developing a highly effective sultry grin and Greg leaned his head up to reward it with a kiss.
“Then, perhaps, you should conduct an inspection.”

Something Greg had no trouble beginning, quickly rolling his android onto his back and having Mycroft naked in the blink of an eye.

“I’ve never seen a body as sexy as yours, love. Never in all my days.”

And, to reinforce his point, Greg indulged himself in placing kisses on Mycroft’s thighs and belly, reveling in the small, happy noises the android made in response. Noises which took on a breathy urgency as Greg began kissing something that was quickly stiffening from the attention. His Mycroft’s cock was just a beautiful thing and adored being worshipped, as was proper.

“You’re a gorgeous, majestic, sexy man who…”

The sound of a loud, sharp gunshot quickly doused Greg and Mycroft’s growing arousal, with Greg yelling at Mycroft to stay there while he ran downstairs, a command Mycroft duly ignored after throwing on his trousers.

“I… Mum?”

His mother merrily humming in the kitchen was not exactly what Greg expected to see when he stormed down the stairs, but he began to remember exactly where he was currently living and started to feel a large headache brewing.

“Sorry, Greg, it’s your Gran, John and your partner out having a marksmanship contest. Sherlock’s getting a weapons lesson while they’re at it. Should’ve let you know, shouldn’t I? Hope they didn’t wake you. Or… oh, look at you, Mycroft dear. Well, well, well… my Greg’s a lucky man, isn’t he?”

Greg whirled then jumped in front of the bare-chested android to keep his mother’s eyes off of his glory.

“Stop ogling Mycroft!”

“Was that ogling? Thought I’d have to squint a bit andlick my lips for it to be ogling. Lesson learned. Well, since you’re down here, how about a something warm to drink? I was going to make a little hot chocolate for me and your dad and four cups is as easy to make as two.”

Knowing it would hurt his mother’s feelings terribly to either yell or weep in both sexual frustration and fatigue, Greg gritted his teeth and hoped his grimace could be misconstrued as a grin.

“That sounds lovely. Mycroft, want to drag a shirt over your head and have a cup of mum’s famous hot chocolate?”

Hoping his human’s teeth weren’t fracturing from the jaw pressure holding them tightly together, Mycroft simply nodded and laid a tender kiss on Greg’s cheek, before darting up to the bedroom to find his shirt. And send the proper commands to return his penis to a resting state. The unresting state probably being very noticeable to Greg’s mother since these trousers weren’t the most… camouflaging… of garments. Of course, that simply meant she was now likely assured that her son had a paramour with functioning anatomy who could satisfy his physical needs. What a beneficial outcome of their disturbance! His Gregory would certainly abhor a conversation with his parents on the subject and, now, that was handily avoided. For this boon, he would demand his human’s most passionate kisses in recompense. Perhaps… on more than his lips. Gregory’s mouth was indescribably talented and the night was… well, not young, but not over yet, either…
“Ugh…”

Greg pried his eyes open with his fingers, then groaned when a cane collided with his shins as penance for his lack of vigor.

“Lazy arse!”

“You kept me awake half the night with your fucking cannons!”

“I’ve only got the one! And it’s a little one, at that, so don’t get your cock in a knot. Couldn’t even fire it since your evil father took the fuses and hid them. He’s a rotten thief, he is!”

“Good for Dad. But, I blame John for this anyway, so fuck off with your elderly indignation.”

The same John who’d had a great night trying out a terrifying diversity of weapons and showing Sherlock how to use the most easily-handled for his own protection. It might take an expert to recognize that the android was actually impressed by both his knowledge on the subject and his aim, but John had to admit he’d become somewhat of an expert on the subtleties of Sherlock…

“Blame away. Weighed against getting a good idea of our assets and preparing another one of us to safely and competently handle said assets, I’d say your blame amounts to the same as a feather against a bull.”

“Or Mycroft’s birth weight.”

Greg smacked Sherlock on the head, which served to shift the android slightly to let Anderson stumble his way downstairs and only have to apply a small shove to move Sherlock completely out of his way and clear the path to the coffee.

“Why did I listen to you, John? I grew up in rural purgatory. I already know how to handle a firearm! I didn’t need to know how to handle all possible firearms ever invented. Am I even awake? Are you all hallucinations?”

Anderson got his own smack with a cane and wept himself to the kitchen where he hoped caffeine might have more of a bolstering effect on his physiology than did his shower, which did little to put some life into his blood. Had to remember he was not twenty years old anymore, where a night with his mates could end at dawn and he could start work at dawn-plus-one-minute with a smile on his face and a spring in his step. His step’s spring had stretched out long ago…

“Useless, the lot of you! Don’t see me dragging my arse about, do you? Useless! I’d fight any one of you and have your guts for garters in three minutes. Two minutes! None of you could take a sausage from a cat.”

“If the cat is that insane beast staring at me right now, Aggie, then I agree. Is it even a cat? Hell opened up one day, didn’t it, and some demon crawled out that you beat into cat form.”

John bared his teeth at Beez who had him fixed with a glare of pure evil, but packed away his teeth when a paw extended from the fluffy black mass and the claws slowly extended in warning.

“Old lady needs companionship! Don’t get it from any of you! Sitting here alone every day, neglected and forgotten. Might as well die and get it over with!”

“John! When the crone expires, place her body under refrigeration so I have a fresh cadaver to
"dissect."

"No seeing me naked unless you’re prepared to do something sexy about it!"

"I am not enticed by necrophilia."

Greg joined Anderson in the kitchen and left the household anarchy to rage, hoping his Mycroft stayed as long in the shower as possible to protect himself from the mayhem. Nothing of a sexy nature had been possible while the Battle of Normandy raged outside and, when that finally ended, the need for sleep had erased any further opportunities for naked fun. He’d remind Mycroft today to hide everything of a noisemaking nature from Aggie so there was some possibility, slim though it might be, for both sexiness and sleep to happen tonight, in an abundance to satisfy all the body’s desires… which very much wanted to be desired, thank you very much.

"Three pots of coffee and then we’re off?"

Thinking a moment, Greg raised Anderson’s coffee estimate upwards, but nodded yes in principle.

"Early start is the best plan, I think. It’s not a short drive and if we’re lucky enough to not be tossed out on our ears, I’ll want all brains on what we find to make sense of it. We know what to look for, you and I, but the others are showing strengths in seeing things that don’t meet a familiar pattern."

"True. Well, I mysteriously found a laptop in my locker that we can use and it’s already set up to login to NSY remotely. I suspect, too, that our access to police records at NSY hasn’t been revoked quite yet, so we can do some digging there, if need be."

Greg smiled and was certain Anderson was right. Their paperwork was very likely ‘lost’ in the bureaucracy and would move through the system with the speed of treacle in winter. **Officially transferred, but with bits that needed to catch up with them… very cover your arse and very useful for their purposes…**

"No doubt. Alright, then. First, we’ll stop to say hello to our new colleagues…”

"Already done that. Or, rather, they came to us."

"What? When?"

"Did you notice a little extra volume of gunshots for awhile last night? The locals came out to see what Aggie was up to and I got to meet a few, including our new Inspector. Apparently, when your gran is up to something, it’s all hands on deck, mostly for the entertainment value the call is sure to provide. We had a nice chat while they took their turn with a few of Aggie’s babies."

"Wonderful. But, I can’t say I’m surprised."

"Between the hour of firearm fun and the arson arrest, our stockpile of goodwill is going to nudge the Inspector into calling ahead and smoothing the path a little for us today. He’s about of the same mind as we are – it’s going to depend on how ‘local’ they go on us, but he’ll try and buy a little cooperation if he can."

"That’s sorted then; very nice job. Let’s see this pot of coffee drained, make another and we can put wheels on the road."

"Sounds good. I did want to ask, though… how’s Mycroft doing with all of this?"
“As well as can be expected. Worried, but making the best of it.”

“How’s the sex?”

“That’s my business!”

“So, sex has been achieved since Mycroft’s had his inexplicable emancipation. Good to know.”

“Stop using your police mind powers on me.”

“Too much fun, so no. I’m happy for you, Greg, though I had a wager with myself that you wouldn’t make your 90-day waiting period without disgracing yourself by asking John for some cream because you’d rubbed your cock raw while pining lonely in your bed. Oh well, I’ll pay myself the five quid later.”

Greg had a few juicy words to say about that, but Mycroft strolling into the kitchen smelling fresh and hair still wet from his shower, made his brain short circuit so all he could do was stare and smile stupidly.

“Good morning, Constable Anderson. Gregory…”

A soft morning kiss, tasting of his android and toothpaste, greeted Greg and he knew his besotted smile was just making Anderson mock him mercilessly, though, fortunately, in complete silence.

“Morning, love. Ready for your day child minding Gran?”

“I believe the day shall proceed most agreeably, actually. John mentioned they were running a tad low on munitions, so I suspect the need to conserve the stocks shall preclude placing anything truly heinous on the agenda.”

“Perfect! I really do want you to relax today, Mycroft. Just have an easy day to let your brain rest after all you’ve been through. I doubt we’ll be late, but I’ll call if something changes.”

Anderson wondered just how long it would be before the human and android started wearing matching jumpers and finishing each other’s sentences. They were ridiculous, in a love-addled, outlandishly cute sort of way…

“Thank you, my dear. I have quite the bracing treatise on political models of the late 18th century that I have been most hopeful to read, so I shall be highly entertained as well as relaxed, I have no doubt.”

The look the policemen shared said very clearly that Mycroft’s entertainment choices had their quirks, but there was nothing at all wrong with that. Nor with the fact that the older couple coming through the kitchen door with bags in their hands was going to be Mycroft and Greg in a few decades…

“Oh, look at the three of you, already hoping to put your noses in your breakfast. Luckily, your dad and I popped out early to get a few things. Leave the keys and paperwork for the car you want us to return, Greg, and we’ll see to that after breakfast. Mycroft, love, want to help me? Something that sticks with you, is the thing for it today, I suspect. I’ve got some ideas, but we’ll see what we’ll see. Tom, would you be a dear and bring Mum her papers. You know how she loves to complain in the morning and I saw a few things that will really get her dander up. Boys, why don’t you go and keep the others company while Mycroft and I get things ready? We’ll let you know when it’s time to eat.”
Taking that as an order, three males left the kitchen, leaving one who was rubbing his hands together in anticipation of learning something new.

“I do love having everyone in for a visit, just not all in the kitchen when I’m trying to work! Mum has more bedrooms than Tom and I do, but our kitchen is larger, so I suppose it’s a neither here nor there that’s the better choice for holidays and the like. Which we have to think about now, what with the family growing like it is. Are you and Greg going to adopt, Mycroft, dear? He’d be a great dad…”

“I… I have no idea if I am allowed to adopt a human child.”

“Well, I don’t know why not! I could throw a stone during the morning school run and hit ten people who shouldn’t be allowed to have a cat, let alone a child, but they do and a pack of them, in some cases. You’re smart and kind and loving… I’ll ask about and see what’s what. Gloria Beecham’s cousin’s wife’s sister is a solicitor, so I’ll get the proper story.”

Mycroft had no doubt that Greg’s mother already had visions of grandchildren adding to the Lestrade family merriment and… could not say he particularly despised the idea. Not now, of course, he and Gregory were not financially prepared for such a thing but, one day… it was certainly a matter open for discussion. And Edith was most correct… his Gregory would be a superb father…

“I would appreciate that, if only for my personal edification.”

“All those big words… Greg must have a wonderful time learning new words with you about. They don’t get a lot of chance to do that in the police, I don’t think, so this is good for him. That makes me think of potatoes, for some reason, so let’s start with that, what do you say?”

It had already become Mycroft’s habit not to comment on Edith’s turns of mind and simply nodded while taking down potatoes from their basket. Having a place in the family, one that was valued and acknowledged, was a joy he was hard-pressed to describe, but he cherished fiercely. Was this what was expected when one was a… son-in-law? It was a shame he could not provide Gregory with the same joy, but there were some things that would, by necessity, remain unbalanced in their relationship. However, he could provide a brother-in-law role… perhaps that would suffice. Considering it, though… Sherlock versus Edith… no, the scales would remain unbalanced. And rather significantly so… he would add extra potatoes to his dear human’s plate this morning as an apology…

Greg and Anderson looked at the small police station and mentally prepared themselves for the task at hand. Professional, authoritative, but courteous and with a touch of ‘we’re all cops here’ to help grease the works…

“Sherlock… remember what we told you?”

The android’s loud huff from the rear seat nearly blew Greg and Anderson’s hair off their head, but they braved the storm in wait for the answer. The drive had been grueling, mostly because Sherlock demanded to stop every time he saw something that caught his interest or wanted sweets, which he had acquired a taste for since raiding Aggie’s supply, which was as richly provided as Midas’s chests with gold. And, no, Greg refused to acknowledge his thinking that driving with Sherlock was exactly like driving with a small child, because that would remind him of his mother’s rather pointed questions at breakfast that his android did not step in to swat away in any manner whatsoever. Already she had aspirations! Probably of a gaggle of toddlers running about with dirty fingers and gap-toothed smiles that were not in his and Mycroft’s immediate future, no matter how pointed her
questions became. Not that they couldn’t be part of their distant future, but they had one toddler now and he was quite enough to handle at the moment.

But, he would acknowledge that any additional non-emergency drives with Sherlock should be accompanied by snacks and toys sufficient to keep the android occupied. Maybe a bottle and blanket, too. That would be for him, though. Bottle of beer and blanket to nap, once he taught Mycroft how to drive in a slightly less disastrous and dangerous way than his first turn behind the wheel…

“I am primarily here to memorize the evidence, Lestrade. What do you think?”

“Remembering and acting on that remembering are two different things.”

“May we exit the vehicle before we raise suspicion and your efforts are scuttled before they begin?”

Crossing their mental fingers, the two official policemen clambered out of the car, followed closely by the unofficial forensics specialist, who snorted loudly at their quick check of clothes and hair in the vehicle window.

“Shut it you. Ok… here we go…”

Greg took the lead, more because the other two dawdled to make that happen than any issue of rank, and through the door they went, paying respects to the officer manning the front desk before being pointed towards the door of the station commander who, at first glance, appeared much the same as one would expect for a comfortable rural posting. That could prove good or ill…

“Sir? If we might have a moment of your time?”

Looking professional and polite, Greg hoped his hair passed muster because he was certainly being scrutinized by the person they were hoping wouldn’t give them the sailor’s elbow.

“What can I do for you?”

Quickly introducing their party, Greg happily noted that Sherlock stayed quiet and Anderson was keeping his dour, no-nonsense expression on his face, which added weight to their presence.

“Oh yes… got a call from your Inspector. If he is your Inspector. You don’t look like rural lads, to my eyes.”

And here we go…

“We are not. We are from London. These two are police minions transferred from New Scotland Yard so they can privately investigate this crime and not arouse the suspicions of those who demanded they stop.”

Thank you, Sherlock, for making this a completely wasted trip and ending the careers of two fine officers in one fell swoop…

“Well then, we best get to it.”

Greg and Anderson both froze in their tracks and missed Sherlock’s large smile of self-satisfaction.

“S… sir?”

“If you think that poncy-voice bastard who phoned and gave me the what for without a word of
explanation among all his condescending drivel is going to have the last say on this if I can do something about it, you’re loony. Just wasn’t sure what to do to keep my men out of the line of fire. But, I don’t give a horse’s arse about you three, so whatever I can do to help, I’ll see done. This way, lads…I’ll show you what we have.”

Knowing that this victory would make Sherlock completely insufferable, the humans braced themselves and made ‘yes, we know’ faces at Sherlock’s cocky smirk, then slapped back on their somber expressions as they stalked down the hall after their host to a small room where evidence from various cases was stored.

“There isn’t much, I’m afraid. Whoever was there did a thorough job covering their tracks. We found a few prints, pulled a few hairs from the bath that might be useful for DNA, not that we have that ability here, gathered the property information, took statements from some local shops who provided groceries and whatnot to the house. A few sketches, too, as best the delivery boys could remember of the faces they saw. I can’t let any of it out of here, you understand, but you’re welcome to look through. Keep your cameras to yourself, too. Don’t want anything leading back to us that might cause problems. Well, I’ll leave you to it. Stop in on your way out to let me know you’re done.”

Now alone in the room, Greg was especially happy they’d brought Sherlock along, because he was fairly certain there would be eyes on them for things slipping into pockets or cameras coming out to take a few snaps. Not that he would blame anyone for that. You protected your own, even when spitting in the eye of the poncy-voiced bastards.

“Alright… let’s get going. Anderson, you start with the reports on the physical evidence taken from the scene. Sherlock, check through the property information and I’ll read through statements. We’ll pass the lot around amongst us for fresh eyes and… well, what we learn, we learn.”

And what Sherlock catalogued, was theirs to keep. Which, knowing his thoroughness, would be everything in this box. Too bad he couldn’t see DNA, but one couldn’t have everything and, besides, blokes like this wouldn’t be found in any database. At least, not one a body lacking proper security clearance could access…

After paying their respects to the Inspector and having him take a look through the evidence inventory and box to make certain everything was still present, it was a quick hustle to the car so the important question could finally be asked.

“Sherlock, did you get everything?”

“If I hadn’t, Lestrade, I would not have allowed us to leave when we did.”

A sigh of relief sounded in the car from the two humans and Anderson checked his watch for the time, happy to see they wouldn’t be getting back too late to make a strong start on the analysis. And, of course, to stop for a celebratory lunch because he was famished. Skullduggery was a surprisingly energy-sapping pursuit and they had a long drive ahead of them. Besides, Sherlock would likely be ready for his next infusion of sugar any moment now and start squalling at the top of his lungs until something was pushed into his mouth. He could suck on a lolly while they threw down a burger and chips, at least. Make that two lollies, since he’d been a very good boy today. Mycroft was going to be so proud…

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“Oh Sherlock… I am so very proud of you…”

Sherlock’s death rattle sounded loud, but it didn’t stop Mycroft from beaming with brotherly pride at his younger sibling. He had considered suggesting going himself and leaving Sherlock here, instead, but his brother had so few chances to truly show his talents and aptitudes to those who would properly appreciate them…

“I sat in a car and looked at flotsam. I hardly see anything pride-inspiring in that.”

But, the light in Sherlock’s eyes told a very different story and Greg wrapped his arms around his Mycroft to share in his delight.

“Well, I’m proud of you, too, lad. You did a properly-professional job today and I think Stamford is going to have his work ahead of him to find you a job where all those skills of yours can shine.”

John shook his head at Sherlock’s hardly-concealed glee and was thrilled the day had been a good one. They’d had a quiet time here, since Mycroft had his nose deep in a book with the satanic cat on his lap, while he’d spent a long time with Aggie cleaning the lovelies they’d fired last night and making a shopping list for more ammunition. He’d have his own chat, too, with Mike about finding something for Sherlock to do, even if he was still living at the shelter. The android had so very much to contribute and that was being wasted while he twiddled his thumbs, waiting for whatever his future brought. A future, hopefully, that included a doctor who was feeling a very pleasant warmth in his chest from his own pride in Sherlock’s accomplishments.

“Sexbot’s right! He didn’t do balls today, so don’t make his head swell. At least, not the one on his shoulders. Shagsy! I need gin!”

“There is probably a bottle under your chair, so why do you need me?”

“Want to see your arse jutting out when you dig under there to feel for it.”

A mutual round of glares and evil eyes began which utterly failed to hide the fact that Aggie approved of Sherlock’s work and Sherlock was grateful for the acknowledgement. If it wasn’t time to get started sifting through the information they’d collected, Greg would have happily let them keep at it so the rest of them could have an hour or so to put up their feet and stretch out from the drive.

“If that bit of theater’s over for now… Anderson, get your laptop. Sherlock, you still think you can do that downloading thing you mentioned? No… don’t try to set my hair on fire with your scorn, I’m just making certain. Love, what does he need for that?”

“Oh, a variety of connectors will work. I did take pains to gather what was available today, so I believe we are suitably prepared.”

“Good thinking. I wish we had a printer, though.”

“Oh! We do.”

Mycroft disentangled himself from Greg’s embrace and stepped into the kitchen to bring a large and rather battered printer back with him when he returned.

“Where did that come from?”

“I had the thought, this morning, that it might be a useful thing and asked your parents. It is theirs.”
“No.”

“Yes?”

“No. My parents are allergic to technology.”

“Balderdash. You mother has a computer that she actively uses to search for recipes on the Internet. Your father found this in someone’s rubbish and repaired it so she could print things that looked especially appealing. I have obtained their email address, as well, so as to facilitate communication when we are back in London. All in all, I would say they are appropriately technologically-literate for their lifestyles and level of use.”

Mycroft officially knew more about his parents than he did. The lines were now drawn as to who could handle the parental phone calls, schedule their visits and mind Mum and Dad when they came to London for the day. He should have gotten a Mycroft sooner! The recipe exchange over email alone would be enough to keep Mum happy and out of his hair… not that he would mention that out loud, of course…

“Laptop!”

Anderson proudly presented the obviously NSY-issued device and Mycroft retrieved the cables to find the best match for Sherlock to download the data, which happened at a speed that made Sherlock complain continuously, but eventually deliver what they needed.

“Ok… does the… yes, there’s paper for the printer, thank you, Mycroft… I’ll print out the reports and sketches and we can all look through them. Anderson, you and I can pull together some things to check further with police records. Except… Gran doesn’t have the internet. No matter. We can go to my parent’s house, apparently, or the library is likely set up and we can pay a visit tomorrow.”

“You should pay to have internet services made available to your grandmother, Lestrade. I believe there is a tremendous quantity of pornography available that would be of interest to her.”

Oh no… Sherlock, you miserable…

“I want the inter.. thing!”

“No, Gran, I’m not getting you the internet.”

“You are, too, you cheap bastard!”

“You can also send messages to politicians to describe your satisfaction with their performance. Lestrade is denying you your civil rights.”

“NOW! I want the interthing now!”

Greg suffered five kicks to his shins until Mycroft moved him aside and let Aggie kick him instead, since he lacked the capacity to bruise.

“Gregory and I will look into the matter, however, there is nothing that can be done about it tonight. Sherlock, please retrieve the gin bottle and… I would enjoy a nice gin and tonic myself. Agatha, would you care to join me?”

“I get my interthing tomorrow?”
“We shall make the relevant inquiries and you may be party to them to verify our efforts towards your cause.”

“Alright, then. Shagbot! Two large gins and add tonic to Smartbot’s.”

“I am smarter than Mycroft!”

“Did you get me the interthing? No. Aren’t as smart as you think you are. Stick to selling sex; that’s what you’re good at.”

While Sherlock the bartender seethed, the others took advantage of the distraction to begin printing and organizing the information Sherlock had collected. Then it was a few hours of studying the information, with Mycroft doing an excellent job of multi-tasking his role as data analyst and grandmother pacifier, until he hmmm’d softly, but with a particular tone that caught both Greg and Anderson’s attention.

“Got something, love?”

“A statement from a delivery driver from a laundry service. He was let into the house to wait for a parcel of clothing and was able to observe a discussion between a group of what must have been my abductors. He noted that one man seemed to be in charge of the others and surmised he was wealthy due to the quality of his garments. Little was heard of the conversation except the gentleman was taking a helicopter back to London that afternoon. Would that not be something for which there would be records?”

Greg and Anderson shared a look and Greg fingered his mobile, though he had no idea what he thought he’d do with it.

“They monitor all air traffic in London closely because there’s a fuck lot of it. I don’t think even the government or corporate ones can bypass that. We… shit. We can’t check tonight, but I wager the police do have access to those records.”

John’s small throat clearing drew everyone’s attention and he set aside his own sheaf of papers to draw out his phone.

“I’ve got a mate from the army that works air traffic control at Heathrow. He may be able to get that information. Date and time?”

Mycroft handed over the statement he was reading and everyone waited while John made the call, raised his thumb to indicate said friend had answered and was on duty, spent a few minutes catching up on the news and then a few longer minutes convincing the person on the other end that the information was (a) related to a real police investigation and (b) his name would not, in any way, be part of anything official or even mentioned beyond this phone call. Once that was done, John relayed what he knew of the flight information and waited while his friend read off a list of names for flights that might match their target. Then, it was the obligatory promises of getting together soon for a pint and John was finally off the phone, looking through the names, before handing them to Greg with a slight knowing look in his eye.

“One of those stands out, don’t you think?”

Greg nodded and tapped his finger on the paper next to one so Anderson quickly found it and added his nod to the chorus.

“I’d say that’s our place to start. Greg, you ready for this?”
Laughing at his PC, Greg shook his head and wished he hadn’t expected things to go this way, but, in his heart, he had and wasn’t really surprised by the size of the hole they were diving into.

“My dear? It appears you have knowledge to share…”

“Speak up, you useless prick! I didn’t push out Edith to push out you just to sit here and watch your stupid head waggle about on your weedy neck!”

“Thank you, Gran. And, to address your polite statement, Mycroft… given the likely flight time to London, there’s one flight that is a bit coincidental, given the circumstances. Corporate vehicle. Holmes International – world’s largest technology and android design company.”

“Oh… that sounds rather… influential.”

“Putting it mildly. They have their fingers in more pies that you can count and I’d be surprised if some of their tech isn’t in nearly every device and android in existence. CAM Industries is a fairly distant second place and even they buy a lot of android components from Holmes. Is… is any of this ringing a bell, love? Sherlock?”

The android brothers shared a thoughtful look and sought desperately some information in their memories that was helpful, but found the well to be dry.

“No, Gregory… I am sorry.”

Sherlock bit his lip in frustration, prompting John to run a hand along his shoulder and give him a comforting smile. It made sense that a company like that would have interest in these androids, given their complexity and sophistication, but… why didn’t they have them already? A corporation that large and profitable could have bought Sherlock and Mycroft with one second of their profits if they had a want or need...

“What now, Greg? Please tell me you and Philip aren’t going to march into the London offices and demand to speak to the manager.”

“I… that wasn’t exactly my plan, John, but I’m not going to say it won’t come to that at some point. Right now, we need to learn more about their business and why they might go to such lengths, take the risks, to kidnap Mycroft. And why not simply buy him and Sherlock a long time ago… I can’t imagine these two suddenly appeared on their radar from Mycroft getting his library privileges or something equally foolish. We’ll talk to Mike tomorrow and see what he knows and… do you think any of the android doctors in London might have some information? Maybe about current… or past… research projects or the like?”

John thought a moment and drew a few names out of his head who kept extremely current with android research and experimental designs. They could prove useful…

“I have a few people I can call.”

“Good. Anderson, any of the forensics people you know likely to be of help?”

“Perhaps. I also have a few contacts in the android division and a few of the repair shops in London. They keep their ear to ground.”

“Alright, then. Tomorrow, we start digging to see if we strike gold.”

“And get my interthing working! If my day’s not filled with naked men, one of you is going to pay!”
Mycroft absently patted Aggie’s hand and thought deeply about his human and what this experience was proving. Gregory was sadly ill-used in the role of a standard policeman and, when this business was concluded, he would certainly encourage the efforts needed to move him towards a detective position. That was the work his Gregory was best-suited to do and… he would be so happy in that role. Of course, that implied both he and Sherlock would be *available* to do the encouraging… he was not so naïve as to be unaware of the power and reach of a certain level of corporate interest. Why they would want two shelter androids was beyond his ken, but… tomorrow, he would request his own lessons with a firearm. Such might be a handy skill in the near future… he should have time for that between sessions of teaching Aggie how to use a laptop and, potentially, introducing her to the vast diversity of entertainment offerings on the internet. Fortunately, he had some addresses in his memory that would keep her occupied for quite some time…
“My dear?”

Mycroft rolled slightly in bed and wrapped his arm around Greg, propping himself up with his elbow to look into his partner’s wide-awake eyes.

“Did I bother you? I’m sorry, Mycroft.”

“You have not moved a muscle since we took to bed and that, in itself, is a worrying thing. Your dynamicity during sleep is a most fascinating experience and one I certainly have missed so far this evening.”

The policeman smiled and patted his chest to draw his android’s head down for a rest.

“I am a bit of a wiggler, that’s true. I just can’t sleep right now, I suppose. My mind keeps going in circles around this whole nightmare and I just can’t make any sense of it.”

“Nor should you, at this point, I believe. We know very little, Gregory, and making meaning from the miniscule scraps we possess is simply not possible. You should not trouble yourself so…”

“Can’t help it. I love you, Mycroft, and until you’re safe I won’t…”

If Greg’s eyes opened any wider, they’d start to peel back the skin on his skull and he crossed every mental finger and toe that the android hadn’t heard what just slipped out…

“GREGORY!”

He heard.

“Gregory… did you… do you mean…”

Motioning his bedmate upwards so he could look him in the eye, Greg took a deep breath and nodded.

“Yeah, I mean exactly what I said. I love you, Mycroft. I’ve not known how or when to tell you since… well, since it didn’t seem the right time with all this fuckery going on and we can’t spare any real time to celebrate… if you even want to celebrate, that is. I mean, I don’t even know if that’s something you want to hear, or if you’re ready to hear me say that, but…”

The start of what was certain to be a prolonged ramble was cut short by Mycroft’s kiss, which was somewhat its point, but also allowed Mycroft a moment to gather his own thoughts which were scattered in tiny pieces to the four winds. Gregory loved him! Declared it! Unequivocally! This was… there was nothing in his imagination that had prepared him for those words though, in his deepest, most secret chest of hopes, there had resided a small, fragile one that, someday, he would hear this very thing from his human’s lips.

“I do want to hear that from you, my dear. I am proud, honored… I could not be happier! It is utterly impossible for me to… truly, I am overcome with… I have no words for what I am feeling. None at all.”

Mycroft’s beaming smile refilled Greg’s stock of confidence and he slowly began to return the smile with one of his own.
That’s… then, I didn’t make a fool of myself?

On the contrary. You have given me the most precious gift and one I am… I suppose it is my turn to fumble with my words, isn’t it? Regardless… I have given much thought of late to the nature of emotions and the belief, held by some, that androids are not capable of truly experiencing them. That we simply react as programmed to predictable stimuli in ways that are interpreted by both us and those around us as emotional responses. However, that argument can be applied to humans, as well. Based on biological programming from your genes and social programming through your rearing and life experiences, your emotional reactions are both predictable and manipulable, so we sail in the same proverbial boat. From that perspective, I have come to look upon what I feel for you as real and, further, that it is, in all senses, properly described by the term love. I care profoundly for you, desire you in all ways and above all others, worry for your well-being, cherish your company, take strength and comfort from your presence and hope with all I am to remain with you for the extent of our days. I return your love, Gregory, fully and wholeheartedly. Never, not for a moment, believe otherwise.”

The honesty shining in the android’s eyes did as much to convince Greg as did Mycroft’s words and he thought his heart might burst from the volume of happiness it was being tasked to contain. His Mycroft loved him! His indescribable android loved this common, slightly boozy human and that was the most incredible thing in the world. Mycroft was his and he, very proudly, was Mycroft’s… Mum was going to make his life miserable with her glee, but, this single time, he’d endure it gladly…

That’s… I wish I had the command of words you do, Mycroft, so I could tell you, really tell you, how happy I am right now. I thought… I always supposed I’d meet someone someday that I’d love and want to build a life with, but… I also never thought that love and that life would be this amazing. That it would be what I dreamed of, in the sort of way you know it’s just a dream and the reality isn’t going to be the same. That the reality will be… not as brilliant and filled with wonder. But I was wrong. I was so, so wrong…”

Sinking into a kiss that made his perceived lack of vocabulary irrelevant, Greg poured every ounce of love for his android into the soft press of their lips and hummed happily as Mycroft shifted to take the kiss deeper and moved his hips in just the right way to demonstrate how even a kiss from this particular human could set his arousal soaring.

Someone’s feeling a little randy, I see, my dear Mycroft.”

“I find that to be my prevailing condition when you are near.”

“I like the sound of that. Shall we take advantage of the prevailing conditions, plural.”

Which Greg emphasized by shifting his hips to allow Mycroft a feel of his own reaction to being near his beloved, and extremely sexy, android.

“Oh my… I find that a very agreeable suggestion.”

Becoming naked in a short amount of time was a skill for which both Greg and Mycroft had a high level of talent and it wasn’t thirty seconds before their pants were being tossed on the ground and their fully-naked bodies were pressed together, seemingly to let every inch of their skin make contact with their partner’s.

“Gregory… your passion… the sensations you give me…”

Reaching down, Greg took Mycroft’s stiff cock in his hand and began stroking lightly to draw a
long, shuddered moan from the android’s lips.

“Any sensation you want, Mycroft. We’ve got years ahead to explore every possible sensation you ever wanted or imagined.”

“And you, my dear? Your w…wants are profoundly important to me.”

“Anything we both want. You’re still in charge, though… never anything you’re not comfortable with.”

A fact Mycroft cherished, but felt, tonight, he was ready to take at least a small step forward and tentatively reached down to grasp his human’s own arousal and begin mimicking Greg’s motions.

“Yes…”

“I am performing this correctly?”

Greg simply nodded instead of answering aloud because he’d waited so long for his android’s touch and, as expected, Mycroft’s hands were magical…

“A… apparently, I am.”

Which filled Mycroft with an overwhelming sense of satisfaction for he had worried, rather strongly, that his inexperience would sour his first attempts to pleasure his human. The very opposite, instead, was the case… Gregory was fully in his power, lost in a haze of sensual delight, and that was a ferociously heady feeling. So heady, in fact, he wanted to indulge that lone feeling a little longer and gently nudged Greg’s hands away from their work, shushing the resulting unhappy noises, and replacing them with the loveliest of moans as he focused his attention solely on giving his human an ecstasy worthy of their newly-proclaimed love.

Moving closer so that he could deepen their kiss, Mycroft experimented with speed, pressure and types of motions, registering each of Greg’s responses until a loud gasp filled his ears and his fingers were coated with a special, wet warmth that provided a touch of soothing lubrication as he slowed his pace and drew a few lingering tremors from his human’s body before removing his hand completely and taking a quick taste of his reward.

“Unusual… I believe you require more copper in your diet. I shall suggest beef liver for tomorrow’s dinner.”

This shudder had nothing to do with sexual satiation and Greg took the moment to laugh at his android’s extremely special ways. Ways he would cut off his arm with a spoon before changing.

“Only if you want open and armed rebellion. Come here, love…”

Purring like a contented cat, Greg nuzzled Mycroft’s nose then returned to his own job of providing his android a cat’s worth of contentment, something he drew out until Mycroft was openly begging for release. Then he drew it out another few moments, just to let the rich sound of needy, desperate moaning fill his ears before giving the android’s cock a little extra speed and twisting to send Mycroft sailing over the cliff and into a very deep ocean of bliss.

“So purely perfect… everything you do. And I love you so very much…”

Kissing Mycroft slowly and softly, Greg thought ahead to the future where every night, work notwithstanding, he could lie in his android’s arms and savor this little cocoon of joy. No matter how horrid the day had been or what might lie ahead for the following one, his Mycroft would be there to
make things seem a world better…

“And I love you, Gregory. I love and adore you madly.”

“You’d love me a lot more if I got something to wipe your fingers, though.”

“That is entirely possible.”

“I’m your humble servant.”

Laughing as he reached down for his discarded pants, which would have to do as a dry cloth since he was NOT going to sneak to the bath to get a wet flannel, Greg diligently cleaned his fussy android’s fingers and then his own before lying back and patting his chest again for Mycroft to relax and curl comfortably around him.

“Do you believe you can now rest, my dear?”

Greg’s yawn was a very good indicator, but Mycroft held out for a verbal response anyway.

“I think so. Thank you for giving me the best possible sleep aid in existence – a toe-curling orgasm.”

“I shall remember this for the future if you suffer further sleep difficulties. It is a medicine I shall be most eager to provide, should it be necessary.”

Smiling and giving Mycroft a small squeeze of anticipation, Greg heaved a deep, centering sigh and began humming a small tune to accompany the gentle patterns his android was tracing on his stomach.

“You have a very acceptable sense of pitch, Gregory. Molly did indicate you could sing…”

Knowing full well Mycroft remembered he said he couldn’t, Greg threw caution to the wind and gave his hum the appropriate lyrics, sung softly like a lullaby. Not that his lover would fall asleep, per se, but it was a nice way to commemorate the events of the night. And, since Mycroft wasn’t recoiling in horror, maybe he could take his guitar out of the back of the closet and give his dear android a bit of music now and again. It wouldn’t be as good as what Mycroft liked on the radio, but, sometimes, good enough was all you needed, especially when you were in love. And it certainly wouldn’t be the crap he played when he was young, of course, which would set Mycroft’s hair on end, but relaxing, romantic songs that said in music what he felt for the man who the shining light of his life. He’d save the nerve-pounding, thrashing tunes for when Mycroft stepped out for paper...

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“Oh, Greg… we’ve done everything possible to keep Mum from knowing about nudies on the Internet.”

His Gran chanting ‘Interthing!’ over and over all morning had set Anderson and John off to give Dinky a run, leaving Sherlock – the instigator, as well as Greg and Mycroft – the stupidly besotted couple who were making moon eyes over breakfast, the role of explaining things to Greg’s parents and the job of making relevant calls to see what could be done to get the remote house wired for porn.

“Go frown at Sherlock! I didn’t put this craziness into her head. She doesn’t even have a computer! And, while we’re at it, why do you have a computer? I had to exchange your mobile
four times until we found one simple enough for you to actually work!”

“Your Dad and I aren’t ancient, evil boy. And I didn’t need a simpler phone, I just needed a… one without so many useless bits that got in the way when I wanted to phone the girls for a wine and stories afternoon. Tom… you and Mycroft see if you can sort this out, will you? I’m going to take Greg to our house and see if that laptop you’re working on will be enough for Mum.”

“Laptop! Dad!”

Scowling that his father just gave him a ‘what?’ shrug, Greg allowed himself to be pulled out of the house and motioned towards his parents’ car for the drive to facilitate the Armageddon.

“You’re Dad will have Mum calmed down soon enough. Your Mycroft seems good at that, too. Good at other things from what I hear, as well. Through Mum’s thin walls since we’re in the bedroom next to yours…”

“MUM! NO! No no no no no! You do not… you heard nothing!”

“Actually, you’re right, I didn’t, but I know the sort of smile a person wears when they’ve had an especially nice evening with an especially nice person and it’s smeared all over your face like jam this morning. I’m so happy for you, Greg. He’s a brilliant match for you, I really believe that.”

Being outwitted by your mother was never a good feeling, even if it was followed by an outpouring of support. The support did help, though.

“Thanks, Mum. He’s…”

Might as well say something, because she’s obviously a better detective than you are and it’ll all come out soon enough anyway.

“… I honestly think I’ve found the one for me. I love him and, to my tremendous surprise, he loves me, too. I… I want to build a future with him, build a life together. I know it’s sort of sudden, but…”

“Your Dad proposed to me three weeks after I met him and I wasn’t even pregnant!”

Today was the day for information, apparently.

“Sometimes you know, Greg, you just know and time isn’t going to change that. And he’s such a dear person… despite all this strangeness with the kidnapping and all. Do you have any new ideas about what to do for all of that?”

“Find out more about Holmes International, for a start. I can find out exactly when Sherlock and Mycroft arrived at their shelters and see… see if there’s any news or unusual happenings around that time. John and Anderson are going to do some checking today with contacts they have and I’ll take our laptop somewhere that does have an internet connection and see what I can find in the police records. I don’t have authority for much and I suspect even my Inspector is going to balk about seeking warrants to dig into Holmes financials or communications or any of the really interesting things. I wouldn’t blame him, either. One false step and I don’t doubt it’d be a career going up in flames.”

“Do you know any reporters? I’d bet one of them would love to sink their fangs into a story this juicy.”

Greg thought a moment, then shook his head, frowning a little at his conclusion.
"I personally don’t know any well enough to trust with a story like this. And… odd as it sounds, I don’t want to get Mycroft and Sherlock involved if it can be helped. People scrutinizing Mycroft’s emancipation, journalists bothering them for interviews… I suppose I’m hoping to build enough leverage to get whoever is behind this to back off and leave them alone. I can’t even say I want to see them tossed in prison. I did… I did a lot, but… I can’t imagine the publicity surrounding a case against a company that big is going to be anything but brutal and… that won’t be good for Mycroft or Sherlock. Something quiet, something definitive, but away from the public eye… that’s what I want, but… it may have to go another way and if that’s necessary, we’ll weather the storm as best we can."

“That might the right plan… put the screws on somewhere only you can hear them squeal. If you do have to go public, though, let me know, because I’ll want something smart to wear for the television cameras.”

Smirking at the twinkle in his mother’s eye, Greg knew that if it came to it, his mum would happily host the whole family for however long it took for the furor to die down and meet anyone knocking at their door with a fresh plate of biscuits and a loaded pistol to make her point about leaving her family alone a very clear and concise one.

“I’ll email you, since you have email and didn’t bother to tell me.”

“Didn’t want you filling my computer with all your silly messages when I’ve got better things to do than read how cold your feet got that day and you need warmer socks. Which reminds me, we should stop in at Felsham’s and see what he has, the old devil. That’s where I got that last pack of socks I sent you. None of which I’ve seen you wear, even though it’s just the right weather for socks that cozy.”

Oh yes, the socks that weighed ninety tons and itched like they were made of foot fungus. He couldn’t even bring himself to donate the unused ones since the needy didn’t deserve to be tortured like that.

“I’ve got socks, Mum. Rather a lot of them, in fact.”

“Mycroft needs them, then. Poor dear, you can tell he takes chill easily.”

“Androids can regulate their body temperature at will.”

“He’s not doing it very well, then. Mum still knits… I’ll have her make him a nice sofa blanket to keep him toasty on those horrid, raw London evenings.”

“Gran will knit a penis pattern and he won’t be able to leave it out for fear it’ll scare the ladies who come around collecting for the church charities.”

“I’ll have her do tiny ones. They’ll look like… squiggles… from far away, so nobody’s knickers will catch fire.”

Snickering at the absurdity, Greg leaned back and saw his visits home increasing greatly in frequency. On his own, he could only handle so much of his family’s chaos, but with Mycroft or Mycroft, Sherlock, John and whoever else chose to come along, he could handle a great deal more. And that was… good. Family was important and his android seemed to thrive in a family situation. Whatever made Mycroft happy, Mycroft would get in abundance. How fortunate that, for his family, three people easily qualified as an abundance by any definition you could think of…
If Greg ever doubted his Mycroft would make an excellent king, the sheer level of command exhibited during the day erased it completely. Slashing his way through every layer of bureaucracy to have his gran with internet access by nightfall, burning his way through other layers of bureaucracy to get her a discounted seniors rate, ordering the staff of the village’s computer shop to make themselves present to put finishing touches on the laptop his dad was repairing so it functioned scariley well and had them do the work free of charge in exchange for an evaluation of their financial practices and accounting procedure to improve the efficiency, and profit, of their business… and that was in addition to what he could do to help dissect and analyze the information the gathered from their small web of resources. It was mezmerizing…

“You amaze me, Mycroft. Is there anything you can’t do?”

“Fly an aircraft.”

“My disappointment is overwhelming.”

“As is mine. I shall bear my disappointment bravely, however, since I suspect it is not a skill I shall be required to use with any appreciable degree of frequency.”

Giving his android a kiss, Greg looked over the various bits of notepaper and computer printouts they’d collected and had to admit they’d done a lot today and nothing at the same time. Scads of information about the Holmes business empire, but none of it that pointed to why they’d have such an interest in two specific androids. They designed and built countless ultra-high end models and innumerable experimental examples, as well… it just didn’t make sense that they’d pursue Mycroft and Sherlock with this degree of zeal. Maybe this wasn’t a lead after all and they were headed in the wrong direction…

“Unless you want a career as a pilot, I’d say you’re right.”

“The only vehicle in which Mycroft would have any interest in piloting is a bakery truck, and that would only be until he had emptied its cargo into his gaping mouth.”

Anderson was closest, so he took Sherlock swatting duty and received an in-stereo hiss from Sherlock and Beez in response. The cat seemed to have developed somewhat of a soft spot for the androids in the house…

“Well, I know when I’m not wanted. The police never get any respect.”

“The police, and you especially, Anderson, deserve as much respect as the bakery owner stupid enough to hire Mycroft as a delivery driver. Which is nil.”

“Thank you, Sherlock. I expected no less from you. What time is it, anyway?”

John checked his watch and was surprised to see how late it was. Working all day was something he was very used to, but it never failed to surprise him how quickly time flew when you were hip deep in a serious situation. Not that they could say they made much headway, but they’d put their proverbial backs into it and didn’t stop until they exhausted every idea their current bag of tricks. Next, it would be probing deeper into areas of the Holmes dealings and that would take some intense planning and debate. It was likely that part of the investigation would require sending people into London for a closer look, maybe a friendly chat with a few middle-management types on their lunch break, but that was a worry for tomorrow.

At least he’d bartered another few days away from Bart’s. He’d have to return to work at some point, but the longer he could postpone that point, the happier he’d be. Sherlock needed the support,
though it would be the death of the android to admit it. They’d laid in bed for what seemed like hours last night talking about nothing and he had no illusions it was because Sherlock just couldn’t bring that massive brain of his to rest. Tonight would likely bring more of the same, so they might as well start soon so some sleep could be found before the cock crowed…

“It’s half past late o’ clock.”

The PC nodded, sniffed and shoved away the bits of paper littering the table in front of him.

“That’s bed for me, then. Tom, we still a go for fishing tomorrow?”

Greg looked at his partner like he’d grown an extra head and narrowed his eyes at his father who was smiling brightly.

“Whenver you’ve got a few hours. I know where they’re running right now and we can pull in some beauties without sitting all day looking at lonely lures. Edie, fish good for you for dinner tomorrow?”

“You know it is, silly thing. Mycroft, love, I’ll show you how to make a nice bit of fish that will set mouths watering. Make you quite the expert, which will come in handy for your next party. Fish is always impressive when you serve it to people. I don’t know why, but it is, so that’s something to remember.”

“John! You are not hunting fish.”

“Since I didn’t bring my fish-hunting disguise with me, Sherlock, you’re right. I thought, instead, that you and I could pop into the village and see if we can find some clothes for you.”

“Don’t forget to bring your gun, John, dear. Can’t tell where those pesky kidnappers might be lurking.”

“Yes, Mrs. Lestrade. I’ll remember.”

“You’re a good lad. Actually, I think I could do with a few winks myself. Mum, do you… oh, she’ll be busy most of the night with her new toy. At least it keeps her quiet, that’s a blessing. Pity the poor berks in Parliament who open their email in the morning, though. She checked the spelling, too, so you know Mum put a lot of effort into her messages. Oh well, that’s why our taxes pay their lazy selves, right? Tom? Ready for bed?”

Watching his father give Anderson a nod and wink to cement their fishing adventure, Greg shook his head and knew for a fact that his PC was now caught in the Lestrade web and there was absolutely no escaping from that. His father loved to go off with a pole and a radio and while away an afternoon, something that never appealed to him, but this new son seemed to be cut from a different cloth… and it was clear Anderson knew it, too.

“Yes, Greg, miserable prat that you are, I am positioning myself to take your place as favorite child and reap the oh-so rewarding rewards of my promotion.”

Mycroft giggled at Greg’s rude noise and waved merrily at Anderson who rose from the table, grinning like the cat who found the cream and slowly swaggered up the stairs to get his head on a pillow.

“My poor Gregory, already an orphan.”

“Suits me. He can handle those cold, slimy fish and I’ll stay here with my warm, soft Mycroft.”
“John! I refuse to witness this clumsy attempt at seduction.”

“What do you want me to do about it?”

“Demonstrate a more practiced version. Upstairs.”

Finding that the best idea he’d heard all day, John made ‘after you’ motions and followed Sherlock up to bed, leaving the last couple standing, though it didn’t stand for long.

“Us now, love?”

“I believe so. I will refresh your grandmother’s beverage first, however. I am concerned she will desiccate from lack of attention to hydration. I do not think she has moved from that chair since I demonstrated what was a browser.”

“Yeah, we may need to have John set up an IV to keep her alive until the novelty wears off.”

“The internet is a vast and varied canvas, Gregory. The novelty shall persist, I believe, for quite some time.”

“Two IV’s.”

“Better. It is always kind to take care of one’s elders.”

“You’re a good grandson, Mycroft.”

“Thank you. I wear the mantle proudly.”

The smug smile on Mycroft’s face was precisely what Greg expected and he kissed the smugness with a loud smack. Tomorrow would have its share of serious work, but if everyone else had a bit of fun planned, then they would, too. Mycroft hadn’t seen the village yet, so a toddle about to show off the places he terrorized in his youth would be a good way to pass a few hours. Of course, he’d bring along his own set of weapons to thwart any attempted grabs of his lover. No one grabbed Mycroft but him, and a little grabbing of the sexy type was certainly possible before they saw any sleep tonight. Or, maybe, a lot of sexy grabbing. It really didn’t matter as long as the sexy part was equal to the grabby bit… Never let it be said he wasn’t a man of balance…

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The fourth time he felt something cold and wet on his foot, Greg made unhappy-toddler sounds, which drew the cold and wet up to his face and turned it into a quick flick of warm and wet that inspired one eye to open and determine the source of the torture.

“Dinky! You miserable…”

Greg could swear the huff the dog made said ‘shhh’ and he quickly checked to see that Mycroft was happily recharging, with that particular state of being that curtailed external awareness and focused his attentions inward. In other words, he was still asleep.

“What? What could you possibly…”

The mouth that wrapped itself around his wrist could swallow whole a Fiat, but the tug it gave was gentle enough to hardly muss the fluff of a kitten. However, that kitten had best want to go where the tugging was indicating because that was the direction it was going whether it wanted to or not. The small allowance of time for Greg to toss on a shirt and trousers was a boon to his captive that
Dinky felt sufficiently benevolent to show, although the second Greg was dressed, the tugging recommenced and continued until Greg was downstairs facing his grandmother, who was pointing a shotgun at the face of a man sitting calmly on the sofa. And it was a face… he recognized that face…

“Dinky found this one skulking around outside. Says he’s here to talk to you. Smells of money and Thatcher, so prepare for lies.”

Even the man’s pained sigh seemed familiar…

“For your information, madam, I strive to maintain an apolitical stance. No party is sufficiently permanent to warrant my enduring support, so my support they do not have.”

“Lies…”

“Gran… put the gun down.”

“Fuck you.”

“I’ll pay for a month of that site you found with all the threesomes that only let you watch preview videos for free.”

“Alright.”

Setting her gun on her lap, Aggie whistled and Dinky gladly stepped forward and sat in front of their visitor, on his feet, staring as if waiting for the slightest reason to rip out the man’s throat.

“Lovely. But, I suppose it’s understandable, given the lateness of my arrival.”

Greg frowned and pulled a chair from the kitchen, sitting across from their guest, and struggled to place the face he was sure he knew.

“You could simply ask, you know.”

“Pardon?”

“Rather than try to fathom out my identity, you could simply ask.”

“Shut it, you prick! You show some respect in my house or I’ll pack your arse with black powder and blow your colon to the moon!”

Seeing the amused smirk on the man’s face jogged Greg’s memory and he drew in a deep breath, being very on alert now and undecided if he should call down the rest of the house or leave them where they were which was, perhaps, safer than where he was sitting.

“I do recognize you; seen you on the telly a few times. You work for Holmes International. This is a bit downscale for you, isn’t it, friend?”

Hoping that was suitably nonchalant and devil-may-care, Greg ran his eyes over the very well-dressed, elegant figure and wished he had any idea if this was a good visit or a bad visit. And that his brain could do a little better than that for thinking because thinking was what blokes like this did best.

“Decidedly, but here is where you are, so c’est la vie. But, I should properly introduce myself, I suppose. Sherrinford Holmes, CEO of Holmes International and its subsidiaries. It seems we are at the point where a conversation is necessary, don’t you think?”
Hoping his shock wasn’t visible, Greg cut his eyes slightly towards his grandmother who was fixing their adversary with a cold glare and tightening the grip on her gun. When the mountain comes to Muhammad, anything could happen. With their luck, anything would…
“Told you… money. And money means lies.”

“I do have rather a lot of money and, I do tell quite the number of lies, so I can’t say you’re wrong about that, madam, but I’m not entirely certain correlation implies causation.”

“Dinky!”

Greg had to double-check that they weren’t having an earthquake given the rumbled vibration that shook the floor as Dinky growled.

“Look at this good boy. I’d swear they grew you at Baskerville if I didn’t know better. None of those experiments turned out nearly this successful, more’s the pity. What a hearty fellow you are…”

Having his head and ears scratched by his nemesis confused Dinky mightily and he cut questioning eyes to Greg who sighed and gave the troubled dog a few reassuring pats of his own.

“Fine, you’re a rich liar and want to have a conversation. Can’t say the first bit of that gives me confidence in the second.”

“That’s because you’re not stupid, which is something, and don’t take this poorly, I rather expected when you first landed on my radar. Most policemen are blindingly stupid, but you have shown some glimmers of intellect, so well done you.”

This new sound was instantly recognizable as the cocking of a firearm, but the smirking man didn’t quite have the courage to reach out and scratch Aggie’s ears in response. Between the dog and her, he was extremely certain which was actually the more dangerous and volatile.

“I’m hoping to leverage that intellect, Mr. Lestrade, towards both our advantage.”

“The only thing I want is Mycroft and Sherlock safe and able to lead the life they want. Is that what you’re offering?”

“Perhaps.”

“That’s it? Then we have nothing to say to each other.”

For the very first time, Greg saw something in his opponent’s eyes besides smugness. There was a fatigue there, a resignation that gave him pause and, unfortunately, made him want to allow the man more time to speak before throwing him out on his ear.

“Would you agree, Mr. Lestrade, that the situation is not a simple, black-and-white, sort of thing?”

“Perhaps.”

Greg’s smirk was met by a touché snort, and a nod of acknowledgement that had Greg and Aggie sharing a look that said their visitor didn’t hold quite as many cards as it first appeared.

“Fair enough. What I propose is this… might we go somewhere for a private conversation, just you and I?”
Aggie’s reaction to that was perfectly predictable and Greg quickly turned the gun barrel a little so her anger didn’t provoke an accidental pull of the trigger. Getting this bloke’s brains and bones out of the wall and sofa would be a misery and he’d never hear the end of it from his mum.

“I think you understand why I don’t consider that a particularly smart choice for me.”

“I do, but I also know you want to know what’s going on and if there’s a way out of it.”

“We can talk about that right here. It’s warm, dry and I’ll even offer you a cup of tea to be hospitable.”

“Very kind of you, but…”

Having his eyes locked with someone’s whose were as piercing and pointed as his Mycroft’s was not as pleasant an experience as Greg might have hoped, and he actually began to worry that invisible laser beams were being emitted because he could feel a bit of burning heat rising on his skin.

“… I think you know what I mean when I say there are things about Mycroft and Sherlock that should likely not be shared with other ears. Torches and pitchforks, I believe, were mentioned?”

Rearing back in his chair, Greg struggled not to fall on the floor and push down the choking panic that suddenly had him paralyzed. Of course this arsehole knew about the DNA, but… the arsehole knew about the DNA! And about the torches and pitchforks! That was… a lot of knowing! Far too much not to be dangerous…

“I… yeah… yeah, I see what you mean.”

“I don’t! And I don’t like it! I’ve got an old car battery in the barn and cables for it. Hook that up to his bollocks and we’ll get the truth out of him!”

“I do like her.”

“Go fuck yourself with Thatcher’s vibrator!”

“I really, really do…”

While Aggie gave her opinion of being liked by a toffee-nosed Tory, Greg tried to slow the thoughts racing through his mind. He trusted everyone in this house, but… slips happened. Look at last night! He’d let the most important three words of his life just slip out without a second thought! This couldn’t slip out… there’d be no saving Mycroft and Sherlock if it did and… fuck!

“Fine. You want to talk, we talk.”

“You’re not going anywhere with him, you stupid prick! He’s fucking weedy, but I know he’s got thugs out there just waiting to beat you bloody!”

“First, I’m not weedy. I prefer the term lean. Second, the only individual besides myself that is ‘out there waiting’ is my driver, and he’s only likely to beat someone bloody if they put a dent in one of my vehicles, that he genuinely believes are his and not mine. We have had that discussion multiple times and never to my advantage. Third, if it assuages your fears, we can bring along this sweet doggy who, I have no doubt, would maul me, eat me and leave me as a steaming pile of shit on the ground if I actually tried anything violent with your grandson.”

The fact that Aggie shared a look with Dinky for confirmation spoke volumes about Greg’s belief
that her satanic powers included animal communication.

“I don’t like it, Greg. Your choice, though.”

Somewhat hoping his gran would simply shoot the placidly-smiling man and take the choice out of his hands, Greg took a breath, stood and motioned towards the door, not entirely certain where they’d go for privacy, but it would be away from accidental ears and that was the most important thing at the moment.

“Though it will earn me a profound angry diatribe, I suggest we make use of my vehicle for our little chat. It is as dry and warm as your grandmother’s home and, as a bonus, offers more than gin in the drinks cupboard.”

That was another piece of knowledge that set Greg’s neck hairs on end, but he was not going to let it show. This fellow already had too many advantages over him, though the large, furry mass bumping into him for reassurance was a +1 on his ledger.

“Alright. But, no locking the doors or I will resort to window breaking to leave me an easy out, if I need one.”

“That would unquestionably earn me a thrashing from my driver and my day has already been burdensome enough. I offer you my word, for that it is worth, that I have no intention of harming you, imprisoning you, disabling you or any other dark fantasies you might be imaging. Frankly, it would all be a bit cliché and that’s not really something I endorse.”

Not that it made Greg any happier, but it was a small bone he was being tossed. He actually could imagine this person being aghast at something trite and cliché, when something unique and clever could have been offered instead. Following along and only steeling himself slightly before getting into the rear seat of the enormous black sedan that easily had room for Dinky to comfortably occupy the floorboards and keep their feet warm, Greg had to admit there were benefits to having money. They could have fit both their hired cars in here with room to spare.

“There… and your friend seems most content with his plush bed. May I offer you a drink? If your politeness is concerned, I’m having one and would be happy if you joined me.”

Drinking with the enemy wasn’t the worst show of weakness and, honestly, something to put a little liquid courage in his veins would be welcome about now. He was a police sergeant, for heaven’s sake! This man ran one of the world’s largest companies and he was just a flat-dwelling, shirt-mending … ok. Ok, enough of that. Time to pack away all the senseless insecurity about being a common policeman with little education and noting in the bank and remember he was Greg Lestrade, who clawed his way to a London police posting, moved up to the sergeant’s ranks, gained the respect of his peers and community, had earned the love of the most wonderful man in the world and was no slouch in the brains area, either. But, he’d still gladly accept something potent to wash the lingering worries out of his brain…

“Scotch, if you have it.”

“Oh, I do. A very good scotch, in point of fact. Never had a taste for it myself, but to each his own.”

Greg somewhat warily accepted the drink, which was served in exactly as perfect a glass as he expected and tasted… tasted like heaven descended to Earth.

“Yeah, that’s a very good scotch.”
“Thank you. I’ll stay with whisky. And voila!”

One sandwich was unwrapped and dropped on the floor, where the slurp that ended its life was a highly audible thing.

“I did come prepared for a wait, but, since that didn’t happen, I don’t mind sharing the wealth. Now, Mr. Lestrade… we have matters to discuss.”

“That’s why I’m here. Though… you’ve obviously had your eyes on me and Mycroft for a long time.”

“Very good! And you’re right.”

“How long?”

“For you? I had you investigated after your first meeting with Mycroft. Your partner, also. Then, I had eyes assigned to keep watch on you when it became clear that you were having an impact on Mycroft and taking on somewhat of an important role in his life.”

So, from the very beginning. And eyes… which of the patrons in the pubs, cinema and restaurants they’d visited were actually working for Holmes? People passing on the street, speaking into their mobiles…

“I assure you not everyone in London is in my employ, let alone employed to keep tabs on you, so kindly don’t succumb to rampant paranoia. However, I thought it prudent to keep current with things, given the situation.”

“And Mycroft? How long have you been watching him?”

Greg wasn’t expecting a laugh, but tried not to pout like a disgruntled toddler when that’s what his question received.

“Oh, much, much longer.”

“You knew he was at the shelter.”

“Certainly. I was delighted, really, to see him transferred to Stamford’s shelter, which is certainly an exemplar for how they all should run. Sherlock, though… well, as ye sow, so shall ye reap.”

“You knew about Sherlock, too.”

“Naturally. I was the one who had them placed in shelter care. That doesn’t mean I would leave them without their own eyes, of course. Had to keep them safe, regardless of where they rested at night.”

Safe? Sherlock getting into fights and being kept in what amounted to solitary confinement? And Mycroft…

“Mycroft was sprinting all over London! He could have been snatched by any of a dozen android parts gangs and cut into pieces!”

“That would not have happened and, besides, it gave him something to entertain himself. I told him he’d be bored out of his mind, but would he listen to me? No. Never did and, likely, never will.”

A cold chill ran down Greg’s spine and he scrutinized Sherrinford with all his burgeoning detective’s
abilities, but there was nothing on the man’s face but a rueful ‘well, what can you do’ smile.

“Mycroft knows you?”

“Well… that’s a rather tricky question at the moment.”

“Yes or no isn’t exactly tricky.”

“Are you forgetting his memory? Which would actually be amusing if you were.”

Oh…

“Ok… ok, yes I did and you’ve got me there, so I’ll rephrase. If Mycroft had his memory restored, would he know you?”

“Absolutely. I’m his brother.”

The cold chill froze into a solid rock-hard mass and Greg was certain he had now expired and passed into the next world.

“Brother? No… no, that’s loony.”

“He and Sherlock are brothers. Do you deny me… poor, sad, handsome me… the same right?”

“You… you’re an android?”

“Not every well-groomed, articulate individual in this world is an android, Mr. Lestrade.”

“No, but… brothers?”

“Should we have a quiz about what you remember from school on the subject of DNA?”

“No! I… this is a lot to take in, so pardon me if I’m working through it a bit slowly.”

“I agree! And, I hope you have somewhat more confidence in me as, shall we say, an ally given the extremely sensitive information I have given you. Not that many would believe you if you stood on a street corner and yelled it like you were announcing the End of Days, but there are ears that would prick up if that began to float around and those ears… are actually what… well, let’s say they are rather at the root of our little dilemma.”

“You’re Mycroft’s brother?”

“Are you hard of hearing?”

“No, I’m not, but… you put him in a shelter! How do you put your brother in a fucking shelter? You… do you have any idea how much he suffered!”

“I know very well, but this was his idea and once Mycroft has his mind turned to something, good luck to you trying to change it.”

“Wait… you’re saying it was Mycroft’s idea to go into a shelter?”

“Precisely. The whole business, actually. Reconfigure his and Sherlock’s memory…”

“What!”

“Don’t look so surprised… Mycroft is actually about the only person on the planet who could
have done it with the level of success he achieved. He is… there’s no one, no one, as talented with android design and it has been absolute murder trying to keep our standard pace of development with him playing silly buggers and avoiding spotty bananas.”

Greg’s bark of laughter made Dinky huff a contented breath and snuggle further onto the humans’ legs.

“He does hate those with a passion.”

“The drama… the sheer, BAFTA-worthy drama when he’s presented with one. Sherlock thinks he’s the diva, but he has nothing on Mycroft when one of his sore points has been hit.”

This laugh was longer and Greg wondered if laughing with the evil adversary was appropriate conduct, given the circumstances, but… Mycroft’s brother! Which still needed to be explained…

“Sherlock does believe himself the apex of everything, I do admit. You… I take it you’ve got eyes on John, too.”

“Of course. And, before you ask, your Ms. Hooper, Mike Stamford, your Inspector, your family… I take my brothers’ welfare very seriously, Mr. Lestrade. Very seriously, indeed.”

“Which leads us back to the shelters. Sherlock was wasting away in there! Mycroft was utterly miserable… that doesn’t really support your lofty words.”

“True, but Mycroft factored that into his analysis before making his decision. And, they weren’t going to languish there forever or be sold to a buyer. We simply needed time, you see. Time and them safely tucked away until certain matters could be tended to.”

“What matters? You’ve yet to tell me what’s going on besides it’s all on Mycroft’s head.”

Taking a long drink of his scotch, Greg watched Sherrinford do the same with his whisky, but caught a glint of decision in the man’s eye that said he’d finally tipped over onto one side of the deciding line.

“True, and I suppose going forward isn’t going to happen unless I do. Tell me, Mr. Lestrade, what do you know about Holmes International?”

“Uh… not a lot. More than I did, but… I know the sorts of things you manufacture and design, the countries you operate from, charities you support, that sort of thing.”

“Basic company information you could get from a glossy brochure in our headquarters’ lobby.”

“Well, pardon me for having to work with what I have!”

“Fair point. And, truthfully, it would be where any investigation would start. How far did you get into the administrative structure, the faces behind the corporation?”

“Not very far. There’s more layers to that than an onion, it seems, and working through that would be time consuming, especially from an unofficial perspective.”

“And you’d be right. Even an official perspective would take an age and a day, given the labyrinth that must be traversed to get to the heart of it all. Therefore, I shall give you the unvarnished truth, if you’d like it.”

“Why even ask?”
“I like the sound of my own voice.”

“You are related to Sherlock.”

“For my sins, that I am. Anyway, if you peel the onion and get to that little kernel with the small green sprout at the onion’s center, you’ll find it is a family-owned corporation begun by my grandparents when dinosaurs roamed the planet and electronics were the new new thing on the horizon. It passed to my parents who... well, if it’s not overly boastful to call them geniuses, then I shall use the term and use it proudly. Both of them, each with their own talents. Mummy blazed every trail in android programming known to man and Father took android design from the crude robot stage to what we know today. They are the parents of the android revolution, Mr. Lestrade, make no mistake about that and if you speak their names in the worldwide hallowed halls of R&D, you’ll see people drop to their knees in worship. In the political arena, too, because they were both wise enough to know that fingers in that particular pot would be necessary for the work they did.”

A pause to refresh the empty glasses gave Greg time to digest this bit of information and slot it into his own previous suspicions. Mycroft and Sherlock had to have come from very high-end makers and Holmes International was not a corporation one investigated with any degree of fumbling if you wanted to keep your job, your citizenship and the hair on your head.

“Now we come to a small snag, if you will... Mummy was an only child and Father’s two sisters both died when they were young. The Holmes family tree had become a twiggy thing and, when I was born, there was much rejoicing, celebration and heavenly hosts singing the praises of the new addition to the bloodline.”

“Want a pail for that load of shit?”

“A large one, if it’s handy. In any case... the songs and tithes dried up to a trickle when another heir couldn’t be produced. It... it pained Mummy and Father, actually. Pained them greatly, because they did have a vision of a large family and, my silly posturing aside, possessed a genuine... and loving... desire for children. They loved me, loved me fiercely, but they hoped to give that love to more than a single child and to see me with someone other than myself to spend my time. But never let it be said that my parents are not ones to let biology, or reality, stand in the way of their wants.”

“They built Mycroft and Sherlock.”

“Well... that is a tragically simplistic way of stating things.”

Taking a long drink of his whisky, Sherrinford fixed Greg with another piercing gaze, laughing to himself that the biggest secret in technology right now was about to be shared with someone whose shirt was on inside out. No quarter would be given for the rapidity with which his companion had been forced to dress...

“You see, Mr. Lestrade, building an android isn’t terribly difficult. Even a DNA-based android isn’t more complex, per se, than a standard model. You simply use an existing DNA template to craft the foundational structure and allow certain DNA fragments to direct biochemical processes that enable the android to function. DNA fragments or computer code...potato, potahto... Mycroft and Sherlock... what Mummy and Father did is... paradigm shifting. I cannot impress on you strongly enough how my brothers’ existence... if their true secret was known, I’m not certain how well society would function in the aftermath...”

An exceedingly large part of Greg wanted to say goodbye, leave the car and spirit Mycroft and Sherlock to some remote village where they could lead a simple life and not have to worry about any
pesky society-destroying secrets. A smaller part said he had to see this through to the end or there never would be an end and that part, unfortunately, had a much louder voice, so he made a frantic ‘keep going’ motion before he had a chance to change his mind.

“Mummy and Father wanted children… a family. Not simply two androids that they called their sons. So, they applied their intellect to doing something no one else had ever done. Ever conceived, actually, which is an appropriate term, in this case.”

“We’re back to the DNA bit, aren’t we?”

“Yes, but not in the manner you’re imagining. Think instead of how it would really be manifest. When a man and a woman love each other very much…”

“Oh, fuck off.”

“I’m being serious! To some extent. There are many reasons a couple can be infertile, but medical science has given a number of those couples hope. The techniques to accomplish a successful fertilization have a laudable history and… they’re not out of reach of anyone with a fully-equipped laboratory, many actually, at their disposal.”

“So… Sherlock and Mycroft have a baby’s DNA? That’s… harvesting DNA from a fertilized egg is… well, it makes sense, I suppose, but it’s a touch creepy.”

“Not if that fertilized egg is allowed to develop.”

“Now you’ve lost me.”

“What do you know about nanotechnology?”

“Besides what they show in the films? Not much. I didn’t think it was real, actually.”

“Oh, it is. Though the tiny knot of souls known as the Holmes family are far and away the leaders in the field. And, even then, we save the best for ourselves.”

Something began to glide through Greg’s brain and paint a picture with its vapor trails…

“These nanobots… could they… build an android baby?”

The widening smile on Sherrinford’s face didn’t really do a lot to lessen the feeling in Greg’s stomach that wasn’t definable beyond the fact it filled him with a cold, thick shock that had him draining the remainder of his scotch in one swallow. Fortunately, his host was happy to provide more.

“Yes. Very good. Very good, indeed. It wasn’t easy, of course. The DNA code had to be… translated… let us say, for an android design, but if you are, as I have stated, a genius, that hurdle isn’t an insurmountable one. Build and program nanobots to use DNA and its translation as their proverbial marching orders, give them access to the necessary materials and resources…”

“You can have a baby.”

“A baby that continues to grow and develop along the path dictated by its parents’ genes. But, with whatever else the parents might want to include. Or exclude, in certain cases.”

“Like genetic engineering.”

“Just like that, but worse. Humans are organic and there are limitations to that condition.
Andr... how strong do you want them? How smart? How talented? Want them to live forever? Not a problem, nanobots can self-replicate and continue to repair and maintain an android body as long as they have access to the necessary materials and a supply of energy. They can even repair DNA when it miscopies or is damaged from a variety of factors.”

“Mycro... will live forever?”

“Well... no. Mummy’s and Father’s aspirations weren’t quite that godlike. They simply wanted children, as flawed and finite as any child might be.”

“I’ve seen what Mycroft and Sherlock can do. They’re not exactly flawed.”

“You know that’s not true. Yes, they have abilities humans lack, but they also possess flaws humans have in abundance. You’ve known them long enough to realize that.”

Yes, he had. As perfect as his Mycroft was, he wasn’t actually perfect. Certainly, neither was Sherlock...

“I... I suppose that’s true.”

“Oh, believe me, it is. I grew up with them so I know very well how not-perfect those two happen to be. They are, for all intents and purposes synthetic humans, instead of androids. Though, needless to say, only Mummy, Father and I knew about the ‘synthetic’ bit.”

Grew up... his Mycroft grew up. Was a baby, then a toddler, then a little boy, a teen... his Mycroft grew up...

“Starting to hit you, is it? My brothers are my brothers. I can’t say they were born, in the way a human child is born, but roughly nine months after the nanobots began their work, one squalling baby arrived and, a few years later, Mummy and Father decided another would make a fine addition to the family and complete the set. And, I suspect you’re starting to truly understand why this had to remain a secret. The secretest secret of all time. You’re thinking about what would happen if this was made public and not liking a bit what those thoughts are churning up from the depths.”

Greg was very sure what would happen if this was made public. Chaos. Complete chaos. Maybe he was wrong and humanity would rise above their normal level of bastardy, but he doubted it. This would change everything and not in a good way. Not in a good way at all.

“You’re right. It’s not a pretty picture.”

“It would be nice if I could go another way... if people could be counted on to be good and just and fair and kind... that compassion and decency would lead the way. But, we both know that’s bollocks. This technology would be abused in the worst sort of way and by the worst sort of people...”

“Is... is that what happened? Did someone find out?”

A ‘nice thinking’ nod was Greg’s reward for that insight, along with a clinking of their glasses.

“We didn’t know for certain, mind you. Industrial espionage is par for the course. We all do it and expect it will be done to us. The best you can do is enact your strongest preventative measures and mitigate any damage that results from what slips through the cracks. What we heard was that CAM Industries had evidence we were working on a new DNA-based android. There are legal avenues for certain licensed labs to do that sort of research and we do have projects in development in that area. However, these rumors... were a little too detailed. They hit a little too close to home,
especially given Magnussen, that dung beetle, had just hired away one of our researchers, a Victor Trevor, who had been good friends with Sherlock. Sherlock swore he didn’t say anything, but… he also had been experimenting with the concept that an android could experience, shall we say, the mind-altered state one associates with drug use.”

“WHAT! That’s… that’s loony! Android’s aren’t affected by drugs.”

“Not the sort you would recognize, but when you operate with significant biochemical support, which humans and androids happily do, those pathways can be impacted by certain substances and Sherlock was both highly curious and highly talented at finding suitable candidates, as well as formulating his own.”

“You think he may have said something he shouldn’t when he was high?”

“We don’t know. Mycroft thought it too large a risk to take lightly, though, and he… well, I am the official head of the company now that Mummy and Father have retired, but Mycroft has always considered his opinion equal to mine in a rather unsporting failure to follow the middle-child model. And, to his credit, his mind is both a powerful and clever one. When we did catch a few of our employees attempting to steal records and samples of our work, he decided there was an unacceptable possibility someone might stumble on… a hair, a drop of blood…”

“Mycroft doesn’t bleed.”

“Not now, since a number of his systems are quiescent while he plays at being a typical android, but when he’s not… he does many things. Drools, bleeds, cries, farts… all the genteel aspects of being human. Of course, a close inspection of any of that would find some interesting surprises, such as tiny nanobots maintaining what appears to be things such as blood cells, sperm…”

“Sperm!”

“Oh yes… Mummy and Father weren’t going to put all their genetic eggs into my basket. It was a rather alcohol-laden weekend when they caught Mycroft reading a certain type of magazine and when I say Trevor was Sherlock’s friend, I hope you understand the euphemism, but… well, our family doesn’t shy away from giving procreation a little helping hand.”

Greg realized he was on the edge of hyperventilating and did his level best to bring himself back under control. This was… unbelievable! Yet, he believed every word. It made sense and not a single of his cop senses were tingling from being told a pack of lies. His Mycroft was as close to a human as one could be and… that was terrifying. His ancient lizard brain was scurrying back into its hole in the ground, flicking out its tongue to get a forewarning of predators.

“Overwhelmed?”

“Yes!”

“It’s to be expected. Try and think happy thoughts. Anyway, when Mycroft deemed the situation too perilous, he decided to take action.”

“I… he just had himself and Sherlock mind-wiped and tossed in a shelter? He didn’t even think to change their names?”

“Not quite. Surprisingly, we’ve had quite a number of Mycroft’s and Sherlock’s over the years. Experimental designs given names simply to distinguish them from others. Some have even looked like my brothers, which is something I wouldn’t wish on anyone, be they human, android or toad. And, we’ve often donated them to various causes, found them employment in the private sector…”
Having a few find their way into shelters isn’t actually unexpected. There are a number of Sherrinford models out there, as well, though they’re far more handsome and I’ve tried to see them shifted to the erotic entertainment industry where they would do the most good.”

“Is everything a joke to you?”

“No, but I’m viewing this from a different vantage point as you and have lived with it since I was six years old.”

“Alright, I guess you have a point. What about the ‘real’ Mycroft and Sherlock? Wouldn’t people notice if they just vanished?”

“They would if there wasn’t a cover story in place and, for that, Sherlock’s idiocy came in handy. The family ‘quietly’ had a new research facility built in Switzerland where Mycroft would temporarily be working while he bravely supported young Sherlock through his recovery from a terrible drugs addiction. Given Mycroft typically works very much alone and Sherlock was supposed to be locked away somewhere safe, a glimpse now and then of a very well-made Mycroft and Sherlock substitute was enough to satisfy everyone that he story was real. My true brothers went into hiding and into very, very deep hiding, at that.”

“Why alter their memories?”

“Again, not my idea. However… though both Sherlock and Mycroft are talented actors, we had no idea how long it would be before efforts to follow the rumors died away and Sherlock is, in no manner, described as the patient sort… further, their personalities are singular, to say the least, and if suspicions were raised… Mycroft felt it best to put as much distance between their real selves and their new identities as possible. What wasn’t remembered couldn’t be disclosed no matter the reason or provocation. And, it was possible that someone might recognize them from the shelter catalog and ask questions… a continually-altered appearance would require an ongoing effort by the nanobots and that would significantly increase their energy demands. Shelters provide meals, but they don’t provide unlimited food at mealtime and… that could pose a problem, so they would have to keep their ‘natural’ appearance and hope for the best. I confess I wasn’t happy their names were kept, though… I argued for aliases, since just seeing or hearing those names might attract at least casual attention, but Mycroft refused to be moved on the subject. I think… I think, as much as he would hate to admit it, he couldn’t lose that one small connection to who he really was. But, as I said, there were other Mycroft’s and Sherlock’s out there, so… I lost the argument. As usual.”

Having lost nearly every argument he ever had with Mycroft, Greg could sympathize on that point. But… what a quagmire… there had to be some other way, some simpler, easier way for Mycroft to ensure their safety, but…

“Mycroft was never one to think clearly when Sherlock’s safety was in question, was he?”

“HA! Oh… oh, you do have a feel for him, don’t you? And, you’re exactly right. Mycroft has the most precise, logical, formidable mind of anyone I know and it completely jumps the proverbial tracks when the issue is Sherlock. He… Mycroft is an older brother, through and through… I’m more than happy to let the little curly-haired bastard suffer his well-deserved slings and arrows, but Mycroft would move heaven and Earth for the precious baby he has loved since Sherlock’s eyes first opened. Before then, actually. He’d make me take him to watch Sherlock develop even then the evil ball of spite was only a few weeks along. I do think he made some errors here, that things could have been done another way. A cleaner, less complicated way, but… we did need to move swiftly and that urgency did not mix well with Mycroft’s protective instincts raised to their highest level.”

“But you kept watch. To see they stayed safe.”
“Naturally. Every time Mycroft ran off, there were people on his heels. All they knew, though, was that an experiment was in motion and they were to protect our property at all costs.”

“And… is it safe now?”

This sigh wasn’t the happiest Greg had ever heard, but it wasn’t the saddest, either.

“I don’t know. Magnussen must have gotten something fairly tangible in his teeth because his number of spies and their intensity of effort has remained fairly consistent and worrying. That being said, in the last few months, I’ve noticed signs of a change. I had hopes that it wouldn’t be terribly long before this charade could end and I could bring my brothers home, however, the rather startling shift in the winds made it necessary to take steps.”

“Mycroft stealing the car.”

“There was no possibility for any form of deactivation order against Sherlock to be enacted, however, brother Mycroft certainly didn’t know that and his rash actions did light the spark that started the great unraveling of our little play. By the time I was informed of what happened, you had purchased him and that complicated matters significantly. Sherlock, at least, was still well-positioned for his safety, but I agree his move to a new shelter was warranted and didn’t act to oppose it when Mycroft pressed the issue. Oh, and I suppose I should offer to repay you Mycroft’s purchase price. Remind me at some point and I’ll write a cheque.”

“I… I don’t care about that! Why didn’t you just… talk to us! Pop in with a hello and start to explain things! Why abduct Mycroft… do you have any idea…”

The fear and dread from that night slammed back into Greg and he desperately wished the man sitting next to him wasn’t Mycroft’s brother, because his fist wanted to slam into something right now and… hitting his could-be-one-day brother-in-law wasn’t the way to bolster family ties.

“I misperceived your connection with him, Mr. Lestrade and I am sorry for that. I saw the evidence, but I didn’t put together the full picture until later. In truth, I thought I would bring Mycroft home for a little chat and reassess the situation. I didn’t expect you to go to the lengths you did to rescue him. I didn’t realize you loved my brother or, perhaps, I would have taken different route. I did give you a little mea culpa gift, though.”

“Mycroft’s emancipation.”

“Got it in one go. I wagered that a Mycroft living a contented, domestic life with a job and paying his taxes was as good a camouflage as an android in a shelter. What I did not anticipate was your doggedness to dig to the bottom of the issue. I underestimated both your devotion to him and your commitment to his well-being. Which was especially foolish given your profession.”

“And you tried to buy Sherlock.”

“More, I admit, to see what would happen. Loving Mycroft is one thing, being willing to take Sherlock under your wing is quite another. You impressed me, Mr. Lestrade. Not many would have gone to those extremes for my brothers. I’d say thank you, but I’m not entirely certain, at this point, if this is beneficial or detrimental for my purposes.”

“Which are?”

“Keep my brothers and their secret safe. I took Mycroft so that I could speak with him, the real him without his memory blocks. Until I do that and gain his more-proximal perspective, I’m not entirely sure how to proceed.”
"You want to talk to him."

"Those were, in effect, those words that just leapt out of my mouth."

"Shut it, you ponce bastard. This... this isn't easy for me!..."

The first flicker of sympathy flashed in Sherrinford’s eyes and Greg wondered just how much of the sarcasm was there to hide deeper emotions, much the way, though not to the extent, he saw for Sherlock.

"...I need to know... really know... that all you want to do is talk. Mycroft’s life is his life and I’m not going to let you do whatever the fuck you please if he wants something different than you do."

This flicker of sympathy was deeper and darker than the first, but Greg wasn’t going to stop to ask why when there were more important factors to be worked out.

"You have my word that all I want to do is talk to him and gain his opinion on matters."

"What about Sherlock?"

"Sherlock... his input is generally more of a hindrance than a help, but I will extend the offer to include him in the, shall we say, family meeting."

Which brought another question to Greg’s mind...

"And my family? Or John, Anderson and the rest? They don’t know anything about your brothers’ secrets, but they do know your brothers. And that they’re caught in something large and worrying."

"If you’re concerned they’ll vanish into the night, never to be seen again..."

"Yeah?"

"Give me a moment."

"Fuck you!"

"Grow a sense of humor. I’m not a villain, Lestrade. Truthfully, it’s part of the conversation I need to have with Mycroft. He will have a better idea of how to do damage control for the persons involved, and, by that, I do not mean anything nefarious. Whether it’s simply have a hand-on-heart agreement, a financial arrangement or something else that would ensure confidentiality... he has more knowledge than I on these people and, when he’s possessed of all his faculties, I trust his judgement."

"My family and friends are good people. Honest and honorable people. You don’t have to bribe them to keep a secret."

"You, I don’t know. Mycroft, I do. His judgment is the one I trust, not yours."

Greg seethed, but had to credit the point.

"When?"

"Talk to my brother? Now. Or, as close to now as you feel proper. I’m certain your grandmother has woken the whole house by now and is busily arming everyone to storm this vehicle
if it moves a centimeter from its current location and I’m not entirely confident that walking into that, even with my good looks and charm, is the smartest way to proceed. I am, however, willing to sit here and let you broach the issue first and set up whatever situation you feel is best for my little chat.”

Best? He had no idea what was best. He had no idea how his head hadn’t exploded off his shoulders! But… the house was certainly awake at this point and walking this bastard into the middle of that without some advance preparation wouldn’t leave much chance for this misery to actually come to an end tonight.

“Yes, I’ll go in first. Mycroft says he doesn’t want to talk to you, though, I’ll enforce that and you won’t be happy if you try and press the issue.”

“Do you have a little leopard-print loincloth for when you’re roleplaying Tarzan?”

“Do you have a very good dentist to fix the teeth that are about to be pushed into your throat?”

“You are absolutely no fun.”

Greg expressed his crippling grief with a quick gesture that made his adversary laugh, then opened the door, exited the car and whistled for Dinky to follow, not scowling at all… maybe… when the dog paused a moment to get another head scratch from the source of their troubles. And, of course… there were faces pressed to the windows of the house. Faces. Multiple. Actually, all the faces. Yes, everyone was awake and waiting for the report. Well, never let it be said that Greg Lestrade was one to procrastinate…

Fine, Greg Lestrade was perfectly prone to procrastination when the situation called for it and if he took a few extra moments to pretend to take a rock from his shoe, stretch, pet Dinky or a hundred other things before he finally got to the door, so be it…
“Gregory?  What… are you alright, my dear?”

The heavy concern weighing down his lover’s voice put some wind back in Greg’s sails, however, he knew it was a temporary reprieve. His amazing, wonderful Mycroft… brilliant, yet kind and loving… how would he react to learning that his troubles, and Sherlock’s, were of his own making. More really… that he set it all in motion in the first place! He’d hurt so terribly when he was separated from his brother, burned every day knowing he had not even a scrap of freedom… this wasn’t going to be easy for any of them, but Mycroft would hurt more than anyone when the truth, or what could be revealed of it, was known.

“I’m fine, Mycroft.  Not a hair out of place.”

‘Your shirt is on inside-out.”

“What?  Fuck me… no wonder Mr. Money kept laughing at me.”

“That was spectacularly impolite of him, especially if he did not inform you of the garment issue. I shall have words with him.”

Gently taking Mycroft’s arm as the android began to march past him, Greg smiled and urged his partner away from the door and towards the sofa.

“That bastard still alive out there or did you make me proud?”

“He’s alive, Gran.  Dinky even refused to eat him.  Ate the bloke’s sandwich, though.”

“Dog’s going soft.  I’ll have to shoot him.”

Dinky huffed what every human in the room recognized as a chuckle and padded over to Aggie’s chair where he nudged her hand until she said a word generally only used by convicts and stranded sailors and began scratching him under his chin.

“Useless.  Bloody useless the lot of you!  And how useless were you, you stupid copper?  Learn anything out there while you were sucking that Tory’s cock?”

“GREGORY!”

“I wasn’t… Gran, don’t distress Mycroft like that.  It’s not really a good time for that, is it?”

Sharing a ferocious glare with his grandmother earned Greg that twitch of her nose that said she was prepared to admit that she may agree with his point, but she’d take a knife in the throat before admitting it aloud, which was the best Greg could hope for and, in truth, was all he needed to take what seemed like his thousandth deep breath of the night and smile reassuringly at his android. Or synthetic human. Or whatever was the proper term for the man he loved…

“Greg… do we need to go… official on that chap out there?”

Anderson wasn’t exactly certain how they’d do that, since the local lad holding down the fort at the police station was likely asleep or scarpered off for a quick bit of romance with his girlfriend, but if they had to arrest their visitor and use the cellar as a temporary jail cell, he was more than happy to get started on it.
“No, no we don’t. In truth, if I told him to bugger off for now, he’d probably do it, but that would just postpone the inevitable.”

“Which is?”

John’s question was the one everyone wanted to ask and Greg ordered his brain to make short work of organizing the vast quantities of information he’d received into neat piles, based on level of sensitivity. Some piles he could never touch. Some he could dance around. Some he could allude to and edit a bit. Some he could actually talk about with honesty. Those were likely the ones to rummage through first.

“He wants to talk to Mycroft. Sherlock, too, but it’s really Mycroft who’s the focus of his attention.”

“Me? Gregory… is this Holmes person the individual behind my abduction?”

“He is. Though… I think we can stop worrying about anything dire happening to you. That wasn’t his intention. He wanted to talk to you and just chose a poor way of going about it.”

“That is ridiculous. If this person wanted to speak with Mycroft, not that I can fathom how anyone besides an imbecile would freely choose to engage in conversation that cripplingly boring, he could have done so at any point with a simple knock on the door of your flat.”

“I pointed that out, as well, Sherlock and… according to him, he really didn’t understand the nature or depth of Mycroft and my relationship or maybe that’s the path he would have chosen.”

“That implies he does now, Greg. I can’t say I like the sound of that, actually. Smacks of snooping, if you ask me, and I don’t like the idea of anyone snooping about my family.”

Laying aside his mother own massive capacity for snooping when it came to family, Greg slowly nodded and cast another smile at his lover.

“Snooping has been done and… he knows I love this gorgeous man and it’s made him, I think, realize he needs to approach this differently. He was surprised that we launched a rescue effort and that, when we got Mycroft back, didn’t simply let things lie. We made a good impression, actually, so that’s a feather in our caps.”

Sherlock’s scandalized gasp at the ‘love’ bit had John patting his leg for soothing and Mycroft smiling somewhat smugly at the public declaration of their affection.

“Is that all he wants, son? Just to talk?”

“Yes, but…”

Ok, what pile did he rummage in now? That one was fairly friendly and could be considered safe ground.

“… he knows about Mycroft’s memory situation and wants to talk to him with his memories restored. Says he needs to talk to… all of Mycroft… I suppose.”

Mycroft and Sherlock shared their own quick glance and realized the situation had moved to a slightly different level. And it was a situation that alarmed John more than slightly.

“How does he propose doing that, Greg? Restoring Sherlock’s and Mycroft’s memories is going to be extremely tricky and I haven’t even begun researching what it would take to make that
happen.”

“Uh, to be honest, I didn’t ask. However, from the way he was discussing things, it didn’t sound like he was very concerned about it. It struck me that he knew what to do…”

Or…

“… or knew the person best suited to do it.”

Which could be Mycroft, if… how do restore your memory, though, if you don’t have your memory?

“I can’t say that fills me with confidence, if I’m honest.”

“I wouldn’t expect it to, what with you being a doctor. The issue is… how does it make you feel, love?”

The smugness bled out of Mycroft’s face as he pondered the question, one for which he was the final word on the subject, something he preferred but, this time, was making him a touch uneasy.

“I... I do not know. I dislike making decisions with such a profound lack of information.”

“I’m afraid I can’t add much to what I’ve already told you…”

At least, not while other people are nearby.

“… I can add my impressions, though, if that helps.”

“It might.”

“For what it’s worth, I believe him when he says he doesn’t mean you any harm. I genuinely think he has matters he wants to discuss with you and…”

Piles… let’s see… ok, that one has a few items that can be dangled…

“… he’s given indication that he knew you before your memory was tampered with. More than, say, he put you together in a lab and gave you a pat on the head before sending you on our way. That might be something you could ask about before you go any further with letting someone meddle with your brain.”

This shocked gasp was from more than Sherlock and Greg knew it would a hundred-fold louder if even an inkling of the truth was divulged.

“He… he knows me?”

“Yeah, and the extent of that is something, I suppose, you’ll have to discuss with him.”

“Does he… does he know Sherlock?”

“Yes, enough to say, and don’t flip your top at this, lad, that he’d prefer to speak with you alone since Sherlock’s input is usually more of a hindrance than a help.”

Sherlock’s expected tirade melded nicely with Aggie’s cackle and everyone else’s small nod of ‘well, can’t say that’s not true’ which was, for Mycroft, somewhat potent evidence that this Holmes fellow was telling some degree of truth.
“May… may the conversation be here?”

“That’s what he’s hoping, actually. Though… not with all these ears listening in.”

That brought a multi-voice tirade into being that Greg simply waited out until it had calmed to a series of glares in his direction that demanded an explanation for that insult.

“There are things he wants to talk about…”

Piles! Uh… fuck it, just lie.

“… there could be things he touches on that are… industry secrets or whatnot. Things of a sensitive nature and you know how those business types are about things like that.”

“Will… you will be there, will you not, Gregory?”

“Yes, I will be there. I’ve already gotten… well, he had to give me some sensitive information for me to plead his case to you not simply boot his arse back to London. You won’t be alone, Mycroft, that much I promise you. Dinky can be there, too. Worse case situation, we dive behind Dink and hide in his fur. Nobody will find us then.”

Mycroft’s small smile was certainly not his brightest, so Greg dug through his mental piles for something that might make his android a little happier with the situation.

“How about this… let’s invite Mr. Holmes in so everyone can meet him, maybe ask a few general questions, take his measure… then you can decide what you want to do. I told him that you had the final word and I’d enforce that with everything in me, so he’s aware that he could come away tonight very empty handed.”

Looking around the room, Mycroft drew strength from the number and character of people surrounding him, as well as the knowledge that his Gregory would do everything within his power to protect both him and his brother if it became necessary, though he and Sherlock had a physical power that vaulted well above that of human limits.

“I believe your suggestion is a sound one. I… I shall prepare some small nibbles, shall I?”

Leaping up and quickly moving towards the kitchen, Mycroft left the group and Edith waved off others rising to follow. Motioning Greg to go off and get their guest while she stepped into the kitchen to help Mycroft, it was with a grin that she noticed her husband deciding to trail after his son to make certain his errand went according to plan.

“Sherlock, how’re you doing with all this?”

John smiled gratefully at Anderson for was sparing a thought for Sherlock, who wasn’t doing the best job of hiding his confusion and unease.

“I find it ridiculous and reminiscent of a particularly uninspired espionage film that was made purely to satisfy the whims of the producer’s untalented girlfriend, who was cast as the femme fatale.”

So, he was unsettled and feeling very off-footed. About what both John and Anderson expected, but it was good for the android to have the chance to express it.

“Well, if you’re more of a mind to simply remove yourself from the nonsense, we can likely think of something to do that will put a bit of space between you and this Holmes person.”
Sherlock scowled at the PC, mostly because there was a small part of him that wanted to leap at the offer. He hated lacking data! Having no foundation, none whatsoever, for analyzing a situation. However, he could not take himself away to ignore matters when… when said matters concerned him. And… could potentially imperil his brother.

“I have no interest in shooting grouse, milking cows or whatever inane pursuits are considered entertainment by the yokels who inhabit this godforsaken stretch of blighted earth.”

John nodded slightly at Anderson to signal best let things lay for now, but they’d both keep watch and evict Sherlock from the situation if it was becoming too distressing for him. It would get him away from any potential trouble, but give him the opportunity to cover his relief through a long-duration hurl of abuse that would work off dark emotions as well as help him save face. It wasn’t much, but they were all a bit in the dark at the moment and it would have to do for now… besides, Mycroft had a mother’s eye on him now and that easily amounted to the support of two of them…

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“Look at you, Mycroft… going to send that bread to its maker, you are. Or its baker, in this case…”

Taking the loaf of bread out of Mycroft’s hands which were going a good job of squeezing it into a pinpoint of mangled dough, Edith ran a hand along the android’s back and sighed in the particular way a human would recognize as ‘concerned mum’ but was lost on Mycroft’s inexperienced ears.

“It’s going to be alright, love. Greg’s not going to let this bloke do a single thing to you or Sherlock and the rest of us will happily stand between whatever mischief he might try to make and the two of you from now until kingdom come. Here, have a seat and let me take care of things.”

Gently encouraging Mycroft to take a seat at the kitchen table, then pouring a touch of the sherry she kept at the back of a lower cupboard, Edith set the glass in front of the dazed android and stroked his hair while he took a long sip.

“No what we expected this morning is it? But, better something happens that you just sit waiting, I suppose. And, it doesn’t sound too awful, at least not to me. Have a bit of a chat, ask a few questions… and you can say bugger off whenever you like and send this bloke back where he came from.”

“What… what if he doesn’t stay there?”

“We set Mum on him.”

Mycroft’s snort of laughter earned him a small refill of his sherry and a soft pat on his cheek.

“That is truly a draconian chastisement.”

“Best hit hard right at the start so they know you mean business. I have to ask, though, dear… what are you afraid of? The gent only wants to talk.”

“Truthfully? I have no idea. It is… the concept that a person orchestrated my abduction and states he wants nothing more than to speak with me? I… I find that difficult to believe.”

“True… I can see where you’d doubt he wasn’t having you on, but maybe you could look at this as a way to get some information out of him. You’re good with talking and smarter than all of us rolled into a ball, so maybe you can look at this as a chance to drag a bit out of him that’s closer to the truth than he wants to reveal.”
Mycroft’s soft ‘hmmmmm’ made Greg’s mother smile and set about slicing un-mangled bread and taking out what cheese remained, along with biscuits and crisps and whatever she could find to keep people with something to occupy their hands and mouths while whatever was going to happen… happened. Not a proper breakfast, though, because this Holmes bastard hadn’t proven himself welcome at their table, but no good ever came from poor manners, so he’d be treated fairly guest-like until he either moved up to proper guest status or had his bollocks kicked into his throat and was tossed out the door naked with his hands and feet tied together for the postman to collect. She’d be nice about it, though, and write his address across his arse with a pen so the lad found his way home at some point. Never let it be said their family didn’t have the milk of human kindness flowing in their veins. Well, a sip or two, at least…

“That is, perhaps, a workable viewpoint. Though… I do not know precisely what information it is I would want from him.”

“Oh, you’ll fathom that out. Or not! Ultimately, it’s not a pressing concern. He knows where you live, so you can always tell him to fuck off and wait a bit before asking him over for tea one afternoon when you’ve got your feet a bit better under you. He’s not in charge here, dear, you are. Say the word and out he goes, but if he really needs to talk to you, you can meet him some other time when you’re feeling a little more in control of the situation.”

Which was very much what was making his stomach roll with a terribly unfamiliar turbulence. He despised lacking control. Or, more correctly, he despised having no ability to understand or negotiate a situation. There were no footholds for purchase, no common ground to tread… he felt more helpless here than when he lived at the shelter, for there he, at least, knew the rules and understood the structure, giving him some degree of ability to tailor matters to his own ends. Here… there was nothing. And there existed only way to change it…

“No, I agree with your original assertion… this is best done now since, at minimum, we establish and hold the field of battle. It is a small advantage, but one that can be leveraged, if only for the purpose of intimidation or making a point that nonsense or deception will not be tolerated.”

“There… only needed a little nudge and you’re making plans. Doing that strategizing I suspect you’re talented at. You’ll need that with my Greg, too. He’s a solid, practical lad, but can get a touch scattered if he’s overwhelmed and has a lazy streak that can drive you mad. Not certain where he got it from, in his genes, I mean. Maybe the milkman…”

Mycroft began to protest against a multiple-father heritage for his lover, but remembered hearing something similar as a joke and kept silent on the subject. Besides, it was far more rewarding to bask a moment in the clear belief that he and Gregory were officially a permanent couple and a welcome one, at that. No matter what evil this Holmes person might wish to perpetrate, he had his lover, his family and his brother for continued and staunch support. Yes… nervousness was truly a silly given the circumstances…

“Should we prepare tea, Edith?”

“Hmmmm… probably. Greg and his dad will want coffee, most likely, so get a pot of that going while you’re at it.”

“A prudent suggestion. Gregory’s breath indicated he had been drinking scotch, so a robust cup of coffee shall help to sharpen his thinking.”

“Lovely… sun’s not even up and he’s having a tipple. Well, he’s yours to manage, so best see to it before he’s naked and dancing on the table.”
"Why would I wish to forestall that?"

Laughing her might-as-well-call-him son-in-law, Edith was simply happy her own worries weren’t written in big letters all over her face. This bloke might say he wanted to talk, but with the amount of money and influence he had, he could say one thing and do another with the snap of his fingers and they may not be able to do anything about it. There was a very large difference between what was possible when you were that powerful and when you were common people, but… well, they’d cross any flaming bridges when they came to them. And if someone happened to be tossed over it and into a crocodile-infested river, wouldn’t that just be a tragedy…

"Dad, this isn’t my first day at school."

"Oh good, at least I know I’m not imagining walking towards a very nice car being driven by a uniformed man reading a newspaper. That’s important when you get to be my age. Have to keep watch for senility and the like."

"Funny."

"That I am. So, what’s it like inside a car like that?"

"It’s nice. Sort of thing you see in the films."

"You know, that’s exactly the sort of car that those film villains ride about in while doing their evil. He got a white cat with a diamond collar sitting on his lap? Beez won’t be happy, unless it’s a she and doesn’t mind a bit of rough now and then when the mood strikes."

"Didn’t see one. Of course, if it was under the seat, Dinky probably ate the poor thing."

"Nah, Dink likes cats, surprisingly. Last family of kittens we hosted, the mum was a bit sickly and Dinky made certain to be there to keep the kittens warm and shared his food so the mother cat found her health again."

"Yet he’s a destructive monster for just about everything else in this world."

"Our Dink is a complex person."

And so was his father, in Greg’s opinion. And a person happy to chat with his son who was visibly nervous so he remembered that he wasn’t so alone in this situation.

"Mycroft and I will take him over to the village green and let him loose for a few hours. That’s always fun to watch."

"That’s how your mother got her new hoover. Came back with it in his jaws and we never found out where he stole it from. Works nicely, too. Better than what we had."

"I could use a new one myself, so I’ll put that idea in his fuzzy black head. Well, I suppose…"

Taking a step forward only to see his dad’s head shake minutely confirmed to the sergeant that his father was a very complex man indeed and Greg happily continued the ridiculous chat about nothing in particular until he heard the car door open and a loud sigh float through the cold pre-dawn air.

"If this is your idea of a rural panto, I’ll tell you now that it won’t play in the West End."

Giving his father a ‘thank you’ smirk, Greg cleared his throat and motioned the exasperated
Sherrinford over for a chat.

“Sorry about that, Mr. Holmes. Got a bit caught up in a little family business. In any case… care to come in and meet everyone?”

“How long is the interrogation going to last?”

“Oh, as long as it lasts, I suppose.”

“Then could you be a dear fellow and show my driver a little consideration? The use of your facilities and something warm to drink, perhaps? I promise he isn’t a member of SPECTRE or SMERSH and would happily give Oliver Twist his second helping of gruel if the child came calling.”

Greg cut eyes to his father to see the expected curious expression on his face from being a bit taken aback at the… lack of seriousness from their visitor, but was happy it gained a nod and the chance to get the ball rolling forward.

“I’ll see he’s property sorted, son, don’t worry about that. Working men have to show solidarity, no matter who they happen to work for to keep a roof over their heads.”

Admiring how his father could so genially fire a warning shot across Holmes’s bow, Greg nodded toward the house while Tom strode off to make his introductions and see the driver with a trip to the loo and whatever refreshments would make the wait more bearable. Especially since nobody was terribly sure how long the wait would be…

“Miss Agatha, lovely to see you, as always.”

“Fuck you! Your suit looks like polyester and you’ve got second-hand car dealer hair!”

The mournful wipe away of a fake tear was done with a specific finger that Greg had to admit was the proper response to his grandmother’s typical greetings.

“John, Sherlock, Anderson… this is Sherrinford Holmes, CEO of Holmes International.”

“Good to finally meet all of you.”

Though, from the sudden softening of his eyes when he saw Sherlock, Greg knew their guest’s real emotions were running a bit thicker.

“Agatha is correct – you have the fashion sense of an addled gerbil.”

“Says the android wearing someone else’s clothes and a head of snakes he laughably calls hair.”

The shared glare was eerily sibling-like, though Greg was the only one with that particular thought in his head. John and Anderson were simply crediting the arrival with a talent for handling Sherlock’s infantile outbursts.

“Oh, you’re here! Well, that took long enough. You and your dad get lost, Greg? Take a torch with you next time.”

One day he could be as unperturbed about things as his mum, but Greg knew today was not that day.

“Mum… Mycroft, love… this is Mr. Holmes.”
Carefully watching his android’s reaction, Greg saw not even the slightest flicker of recognition, though Sherrinford’s face couldn’t have held back a small smile if the man’s life depended on it. It was getting easier to believe that this person did love his brothers, but love didn’t always translate to happy decisions…

“Ah… Mr. Holmes. Welcome to our little gathering. That you, of course, promoted, so I suppose some degree of thanks should be awarded. But, since I am not feeling entirely generous at the moment, I shall withhold it until I have a firmer idea as to whether it is truly deserved.”

Sherrinford’s laugh matched with Greg’s, prompting Greg to stop in case his android thought he was siding the enemy.

“Some things never change and isn’t that grand…”

The small statement visibly shook Mycroft and Greg quickly grabbed the tray from his hands before his grandmother saw her teapot and cups smashed to smithereens.

“Maybe you’d best have a seat, mate, and start explaining yourself.”

John used his best Captain Watson voice and was only hugely frustrated when it was waved off by the man who, instead, stepped forward to take the platter of food out of Edith’s hands to set on the sofa table.

“A seat I shall have, but explaining is a bit more complicated. Oh, a touch of aged cheddar is just thing for the moment. The bread looks lovely, too. You are an impeccable hostess, Mrs. Lestrade.”

Since there was nothing in there she could turn up her nose at, Edith simply smiled an ‘that was polite of you, but I’m still not sure we won’t be tossing you out on your ear’ smile and began pouring tea for those who wanted it.

“Shall we get down to business?”

Greg’s own smile was a proud one because his Mycroft had, apparently, shaken off his nerves and decided to go on the offensive.

“If you’d like, Mycroft. What business would that be?”

“Disingenuous of you, Mr. Holmes.”

“Only slightly. I genuinely don’t know what you’re thinking right now. If I did, this would all be a great deal easier.”

“There was a time you would have known, however.”

Sherlock had not lessened his glare towards Sherrinford a tiny bit, but it had morphed slightly into one of pure and intense scrutiny, which added a nice gravity to his question.

“To some degree. More so than now, certainly, but Mycroft has always been of his own mind and it wasn’t always for lesser beings to predict it.”

Again, Greg recognized the sibling-esque jab, but it tossed Sherlock off balance, if the small shift of his features could be trusted.

“That implies some substantial degree of familiarity. Explain.”

“What you want to ask, really, is do I know you that well, too, and in what context. I’ve told you
a hundred times, Sherlock, don’t try and flush pheasants with a feather when you can better do it with a cricket bat.”

Not that that made much sense, but Sherlock’s mind had cut off at ‘I’ve told you a hundred times’ which, Greg realized, was really the point of the answer.

“Alright, we’ve established you’ve know Sherlock and Mycroft and have for quite some time. Would you care to explain, sir, why you committed a crime against Mycroft and then had the investigation quashed?”

Anderson apparently hadn’t lost his idea to put this on a somewhat official footing and Greg could see nothing at all wrong with that.

“Well, PC Anderson, I don’t necessarily consider it a crime, since I had no true criminal intent and the investigation was closed because it would have been a profound waste of police resources for something that… wouldn’t lead anywhere productive.”

“I’d say identifying a kidnapper and individuals that took shots at uniformed police officers is a very productive thing.”

“Not when there wasn’t any actual damage or harm. I did step in as soon as I was able, but my men do respond quickly and they were under strict orders to keep Mycroft safe. You have to admit that a group of men sneaking into the house and stealing him rather qualified as a potential threat to Mycroft’s safety.”

“Uniformed policemen.”

“Your implication is that policemen are above suspicion for crime. We both know that implication is profoundly flawed.”

“But, you didn’t call anything off until Greg yelled for Sherlock. Want to spin another fable about how you graciously spared our backs from meeting with fast-moving projectiles.”

“Umm… they were using rubber bullets?”

“How’d that lie taste? Good with the tea?”

Aggie laughed loudly and prodded Anderson with her cane in approval. The other hand was busy holding a loaded pistol under her lap blanket just in case their visitor got a little too mouthy.

“Oh very well… I actually wasn’t there and events were being relayed to me. It took a moment for me to patch in to things to really see the situation and I did issue the stand down order when I saw what was going on. Don’t dwell on coincidences, because I do promise you they’re just that.”

There wasn’t a lot of belief in the room about that statement, but without specific evidence to refute it, it would have to stand for now.

“And, I’ll give you this for free… the plan was for me to arrive the next day and have a simple conversation with Mycroft, nothing more. It would have been his decision what to do afterwards. I’ll apologize for completely disbelieving my… Mycroft could have gained a gaggle of friends, let alone a lover, but I did not predict the degree of closeness and camaraderie. If I thought all this rigmarole would have ensued, I would have pursued a different route.”

Accepting the supportive squeeze on his shoulder from both Greg and his mother, Mycroft sighed softly and looked over to Sherlock who was being surprisingly quiet, despite his initial salvo.
“Setting aside the events of the past, what are your intentions for the present and the future, Mr. Holmes?”

John made note of the fact that every time Mycroft said ‘Mr. Holmes’ the Mr. Holmes in question winced very slightly as if there was a bad feeling associated with that term. But, he supposed that if he lost his memory and began to say Mr. Stamford or Mr. Lestrade, his friends would look a little pained, too.

“For the present, the same as ever – just a conversation. For the future… that is not entirely in my hands.”

“But, you want to dig about in our Mycroft’s head for that conversation to happen, isn’t that the case, young man?”

Having his father back with them, post feeding and watering the driver, was an additional comfort Greg was happy to accept.

“Uhh…. no.”

Now it was multiple eyes being cut in multiple directions and Aggie cocked her pistol in preparation for simply shooting the snake and seeing everyone back to their own business once the body was roasted and fed to the foxes.

“Confess!”

“Be a good boy and I’ll see you get your violin, Sherlock, is that enough of a confession for you?”

Mycroft and Sherlock leapt to their feet, both having saved a tiny memory of Sherlock with the instrument in his hands.

“NOW!”

“The confession or the violin? My tiny mind is confused.”

“ENOUGH!”

The room went still at both the volume of Mycroft’s bellow and the look in his eye, which was both enraged and somewhat dangerous.

“You are being purposefully difficult and that will cease. I have neither the time nor the patience for further of your foolishness.”

“Are you going to talk to me?”

“I believe that is what we are now doing and I have received precious little yet for my efforts besides your buffoonery.”

“That’s because… there’s a specific reason your memory is impaired and I need to talk to the person, the whole person, that is you for any real conversation about that reason to occur.”

“John has indicated that it would be an exceedingly difficult process to restore Sherlock’s and my memories. One that comes with a host of potential problems and dangers.”

“And he’s right. Unlocking those doors would be… I doubt anyone he could find would be able to do it and leave your mind unharmed.”
“Then I refuse categorically to continue further with this discussion.”

“Unlocking doors… is easy though, though, if you have the proper key.”

Reaching into his coat pocket, Sherrinford drew out a small memory device and held it up for the room to see.

“This is all you need. And, before you ask, you are welcome to examine it, do whatever you like with it as I have copies of the relevant files. Also… you might want to view this.”

Taking another drive from his pocket, Sherrinford extended it towards Mycroft and pointed to the laptop that was sitting on a side table.

“Go ahead. It’s simply a video file, but feel free to run any anti-virus scans you’d like before playing it.”

Anderson was the one to pluck the drive from Sherrinford’s hand and gave it a look-over, just to see, at the simplest level if it was what it appeared to be.

“Mycrof… what do you want to do?”

Looking over at the PC, then letting his eyes roam around the room, Mycroft wrestled with a brief flash of fear, then shoved it down and nodded towards the waiting laptop.

“If it is simply a video file and Mr. Holmes is content to let it be viewed by everyone, then I see no harm in playing it.”

Greg drew his chair closer to his lover’s and reached out to hold his hand, while Anderson booted the laptop, ran a virus check on the drive and, after a quick look at Mycroft for a final confirmation, opened the file.

Which was Mycroft himself looking back at them from the monitor.

“Ah, well… if this is being viewed, then there is some resistance on my part to whatever Sherrinford is requesting. Normally, that is a wise and prudent thing, however, given the circumstances around which I am recording this message, I suspect that resistance is impeding events that need to occur before certain rather unsettling matters can be resolved. I assure… myself… that I am fully aware of what has happened to me and fully consent to reversing the situation. Sherrinford has in his possession certain executable files that will return my memory to its proper configuration and will do the same for Sherlock, if it is proper to do so, at this time. Given you will certainly doubt the veracity and legitimacy of this message, for we are certainly not a fool, I say this to you – a tie the color of bile has no place in the annals of human history let alone around my neck.”

The video ended and Greg’s move to ask his android a question was interrupted by his shout, seeing Mycroft’s face blank save for the random blinking that signaled his lover was in the midst of an extreme level of data processing.

“What did you do to him, you bastard!”

This time, no amount of head scratching was going to placate Dinky who bared his teeth and began to stalk towards Sherrinford, who held up his hands in surrender.

“Don’t shoot the messenger! It was just a passphrase… give him a moment.”

“Mycrof, love… speak to me, alright?”
The wait for Mycroft to stop blinking was, in reality, a short one, but it seemed an eternity for those hovering by his side.

“The message is authentic.”

“Mycroft, that passphrase could simply have…”

“It is also authentic and non-duplicitive, John. The phrase simply played a second message in my memory reaffirming the content of the video and its veracity. I ran every analysis routine I had on the opened memory file and… it is a self-generated memory, not one implanted in my system by another’s hand.”

“What… what does that mean, love?”

“That I cannot dismiss without serious consideration what Mr. Holmes is suggesting.”

Greg took his lover in his arms and held him gently for a moment. Whatever Mycroft decided and wherever that lead, he would be there to provide all the care and support his android needed to come to terms with whatever new reality faced them going forward. Love was a powerful defense against all sorts of troubles and what they shared to could beat back Hadrian’s army, elephants and all…
“John, worst case scenario if we try to restore Mycroft’s and Sherlock’s memories?”

“Permanent malfunction… potentially, complete inability to mentally function in any capacity.”

Exactly what Greg didn’t want to hear, but absolutely expected to be the case.

“Holmes, what reassurances can you provide that won’t happen.”

“No procedure is ever 100% guaranteed, however, I’d place this at 99% safe. And… there exists a pre-alteration complete backup of his and Sherlock’s memory configuration, memory files and all necessary system files. Consider it a disk image, if you will. If everything falls to ruin, I can take them back to a lab and return them to normal, though…”

“They would have no memory of anything after their memories were affected.”

“It would depend on how severe was the damage. If it was just operations-based, then the data might still exist in an uncorrupted state. But, as I said, there’s only a 1% chance or so that complete chaos is going to happen.”

“Partial chaos wouldn’t be that wonderful either, though, would you say?”

Sherrinford’s shrug just irritated Greg, but he knew the man didn’t have the answers he wanted. He wasn’t a computer expert by any stretch of the imagination, but he knew enough to realize that the buggers were unpredictable and his Mycroft would be subject to that unpredictability… so very complex, with so many potential points of failure…

“Could… could you do a backup of their memories now? The ones from after they got muddled?”

The question from his father reaffirmed to Greg that his parents weren’t quite the technological dinosaurs he had believed and it would pay to keep closer watch on them from now on. They might be the ones to ask when his laptop was being an arse or his email decided that it would only pass along his messages in hieroglyphics.

“Uh… I genuinely doubt you’ve got the equipment to do that here, let alone the necessary quantity of storage.”

“What about something like that video or… just an important sample of their memories. Enough so they recognized certain people and what those people mean to them?”

Tom’s question had all heads nodding and Mycroft grabbing Greg’s hand tightly.

“Yes, Mr. Holmes… could some of Sherlock’s and my memories be stored so… if it was necessary, we would have some foundation to understand our new lives and the roles of the people we have come to love?”

The ‘uhhhhh…’ look on Sherrinford’s face, set Anderson thinking and he whispered in Sherlock’s ear a moment, earning a loud ‘yes’ from the android, who rose and began rummaging through the room.

“Mycroft and I can easily create a data package with relevant information in a format that can be
downloaded to a computer.”

“Love, is that possible?”

“Yes… our memories are fantastically data-intensive, but we should be able to prepare something to efficiently summarize our current scenario with manageable storage capacity. I presume Mr. Holmes has in his possession some form of computer, likely in his vehicle.”

All eyes went to Sherrinford, who was nodding thoughtfully.

“I do and I see you have two here with you, also. Ok, if you have the proper connectors…”

Sherlock held up the various bits and pieces they’d collected, which met with Sherrinford’s approval.

“That’ll do. If you’re truly worried, give me a bit to configure something that will work and, if you and Sherlock can put together something, we should be able to work a download and store it in an easily-retrievable way.”

“Mycrof... that... I suppose I don’t even know if you want to have your memories touched today, but, actually, we could do this anytime and in a more... professional way... so...”

Smiling at his lover, Mycroft ran a hand along Greg’s cheek and looked over at Sherlock, whose eyes were set with a determined glare. Sometimes you simply knew when it was right to take a step and when it was not. This moment felt right, for no particularly definable reason, and he would see it through to the end. Should tragedy occur, he was surrounded by those dear to him, and that was a comfort he took deeply to heart.

“I believe I have made my decision and, it is the one I suspect Sherlock has settled upon, as well. I shall begin preparing a suitable collection of information to... ease my return to you, should the disastrous occur. Sherlock... you are of like mind, correct?”

“Yes. I would see this lunacy ended now so that John and I can have sex then shop for my new clothes.”

Aggie’s ‘Shagbot’s got his priorities straight, that’s for certain!’ floated over John’s agonized groan and Sherrinford’s laughter, though Beez jumped onto Sherlock’s lap to hiss both at John and Sherrinford for disparaging his android’s highly-practical plan for the day.

“Thank you, brother, for sharing your delightful agenda. I suggest, for now, we focus upon our own task and allow the others to make what additional preparations are necessary.”

Sherlock nodded and quickly fell into a blank state, shared by Mycroft, to begin the process of gathering and preparing whatever, for them, were the crucial elements of this dynamic time and the individuals who made that time the happiest they could remember.

“Allright, they’re doing their bit. Mr. Holmes, get your arse in gear with yours. John, Anderson... keep an eye on him that he doesn’t try anything... presumptuous.”

Greg fixed Sherrinford with his own hard stare that clearly spelled out what would happen to their guest if he did anything to imperil the androids. It wasn’t a pleasant fate, nor a quick one...

“Mum, Dad...”

“Your father and I are going to help out where we can and keep mum entertained. Looks like she won’t have her nudie videos for a bit that’s certain to sour her mood.”
“Better not erase those bookmarks I made, you Tory fucker! Took me all day to find them!”

“I’ll send you a decryption key to break into any for-pay porn site that tickles your fancy, Miss Agatha. I would never let your access to nudie videos lapse. That would be dashed unchivalrous of me, don’t you think?”

Aggie’s happy gasp prompted more than a single groan from the family, recognizing the likely need for some form of intervention in the near future to pry the aged woman’s hands off her new, refurbished laptop and the wealth of entertainment it provided.

“I may let you live yet, miserable prick.”

“I’m honored. Alright, let’s get started…”

Sitting back and taking a few deep breaths, Greg watched Sherrinford, John and Anderson begin attacking the computers and smiled that his father was looking on with intense interest. His mother was merrily clearing away the snacks tray and, he suspected, planning an elaborate breakfast menu to celebrate the androids’ restored memories. That left him and his gran without an immediate job, so he picked up yesterday’s newspapers and budged closer to her for a full account of how the politicians fucked the country over again and which celebrities weren’t worth a brass farthing. That should keep her busy for awhile and, if necessary, the telly could be switched on for more of the same.

Hopefully none of this would take terribly long but, if it did, he’d step out and ask the driver to come in and join the party. Working men did show solidarity and driving that posh bloke around all day certainly qualified as work. Day in and day out in London traffic… not a fate he’d wish on anyone. Maybe the pay was good, though… something to think about if his Inspector wasn’t happy about their dropped investigation staying dropped and unsolved from here to eternity. Had to keep the rent funds going… Mycroft certainly wouldn’t be happy living on the street and an unhappy Mycroft was not something his mind or his heart could easily bear…

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An hour passed of randomly-blinking androids and computer carnage that inspired Aggie to such rage, seeing her laptop taken apart, that Sherrinford had to promise her a new, large-screen model and the existing cash in his wallet to keep her from gutting him like a fish with the startlingly-large knife she drew out from behind the cushion of her chair. Finally, a round of nods signaled everyone was ready to go and it was then the work of a few more minutes for Mycroft and Sherlock to download their information and steady themselves for the next step.

“Ready, love?”

“As ready as I shall ever be, is that not the expression?”

“I shall go first!”

The room got quiet at Sherlock’s exclamation, with Mycroft looking positively horrified at the idea.

“Absolutely not. Under no circumstances are you going to be one to first test this process.”

“I am and you cannot stop me.”

“I believe stopping you is an immensely simply thing, in point of fact. John, do have a word with Sherlock and soothe his rather agitated humors.”
“John will not stop me, either. He is far too short.”

Shaking his head in confusion, John sighed and shared a commiserative look with Mycroft, though stepping in to make certain some form of thinking was going on in Sherlock’s head might be wise.

“Sherlock…”

“If I suffer some form of impairment due to the procedure, I suspect the person who established both the memory blocks and the recovery protocol would be the one best suited to affect the repairs.”

Staring hard at his brother, Sherlock held his gaze until Mycroft began shaking his head and saying ‘no’ over and over again.

“You failed to observe, brother, when Holmes was speaking. His continued cut of eyes in your direction when discussing the memory situation was most telling. I am highly curious to learn exactly how you came to acquire such skills, since you lack talent for most anything of use in this world. That being said, if there is an error causing truly appreciable damage, perhaps such that not even my backup file could remedy, I suspect your backup could restore your original abilities to remedy the situation. If you are irrevocably damaged, then there is no hope for either of us.”

Mycroft looked wildly around to Greg and Sherrinford, and Holmes’s smile towards the policeman indicated who he thought should take charge of this particular issue.

“I… maybe Sherlock’s right, love.”

“Gregory?”

“Remember I told you that Mr. Holmes let me know a few things? Well…”

Piles! Have to remember the piles and don’t touch the ‘Do Not Touch!’ ones…

“… he indicated to me that you did design the memory alteration. Seems you have a lot of talent in that area, once you can remember it, that is. Everything goes to shit, you… the real you… has the best chance of fixing it.”

“M… me? Gregory… I have only the most basic knowledge of…”

“Mr. Lestrade’s right, Mycroft. You… you are highly talented with android design and construction. If a catastrophic incident occurred, which will not happen though you lot seem insistent on believing it will, we could bring you back where the equipment is less bodged-together, get you sorted, and then you could work on repairing Sherlock.”

Greg simply rubbed Mycroft’s back while he thought and did nothing to hurry along the process. This was already making his android highly nervous and the idea that his beloved baby brother would be the test subject was shooting those nerves off the scale. When the small nod of agreement came, Greg rewarded his Mycroft’s bravery with a small kiss on the cheek.

“I… very well. Sherlock… I do not like this, I do not like this at all, but if you choose…”

“I do, so may we get on with it?”

The stubborn set to Sherlock’s jaw erased the last of Mycroft’s hopes that he could change his brother’s mind, so he simply nodded and slumped back in his seat, seemingly exhausted of argument and resistance. While Greg tended to that brother, Sherrinford prepared to tend to the other, wishing he had a rubber glove to snap like a doctor preparing to give Sherlock a prostate exam.
“Alright, that’s settled. Sherlock, this will be painless, simple and should only take fifteen minutes or so.”

“Sufficiently time for my tea and biscuits to arrive.”

“The ones you failed to ask anyone for?”

“You are a person of no humor, Holmes. It is not surprising you seem to gravitate towards Mycroft who, also, believes humor to be some form of wasting disease that will shrivel him to dust.”

The rude noise Sherrinford made preceded a small thwack to Sherlock’s head and then it was a blur of motion while the memory drive was inserted into a port in Sherlock’s system before the android could retaliate.

“And now we wait. It will be punishingly uneventful, so if tea and biscuits are on offer...”

“Oh… how about a real breakfast, dear. You’ve had enough nibbles and don’t want your stomach to turn traitor on you when… let me see what I can do for all of us.”

Greg made to stop his mother darting off to the kitchen, but decided she probably needed something to distract her while the waiting was going on. In truth, he could use a distraction, too, but he needed to be here for Mycroft, who was not going to take any of his senses off of his brother until they reached the end of this procedure. And heaven help them all if anything went wrong… whether he was the best chance to fix any problems or not, Mycroft would be devastated and it would be a hard road to get him back into fit shape to even try to take on Sherlock’s repairs, let alone heal his own broken heart...

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Knowing his android was keeping track of every second that passed, Greg sent up a quick ‘thank you’ to the stars when Sherlock began to open and close his hand twelve minutes into the wait and used that hand to reach up and extract the small memory device from its port to hand back to Sherrinford.

“Yes, I would say that drudgery is now complete. Sherrinford… you are smiling. It makes you uglier than usual, so kindly stop.”

“That’s the Sherlock I know and hate.”

“Consider this your notice that I tend to inform Mu...”

The loud throat clearing from both Sherrinford and Greg earned them a snarl from Sherlock, which quickly faded as it struck him they were not alone.

“Sh... Sherlock? Are you alright?”

The fearful tone in Mycroft’s voice had Sherlock’s head whipping around towards his brother, as the various pieces of both his old and new life crashed together and John reached out to steady the slight sway in the android’s body as it bore the brunt of the collision.

“Mycroft?”

“Yes… oh, Sherlock… Mr. Holmes, something appears to be wrong...”

“I am fine. I simply...”
Shooting his eyes towards Sherrinford, Sherlock asked a question with those eyes and hated that his answer was a rueful shrug.

“… I simply was a touch confused. An artifact of the process which has passed. However…”

These eyes went around the room to each expectant fact and back to Sherrinford who simply stood quietly, before Sherlock continued speaking.

“… I believe it might be prudent to have my systems thoroughly analyzed before we go further and allow you to undergo the procedure. Since that cannot be performed here, I suggest we postpone matters until we return to London.”

John reached out and laid a hand on Sherlock’s shoulder, squeezing slightly when Sherlock’s hand rose to briefly cover his with a small pat.

“Sherlock, are you certain everything is fine?”

“Yes, John. I have possession again of my full suite of memories and have no discernable internal issues as an unwanted outcome. However, I cannot verify that my perceptions are wholly to be trusted, given they could have been impacted in some small, yet meaningful, way.”

“Mr. Holmes, my brother… is there some test you can perform? If he has been harmed in any way… oh, I know I should have been the first to test this. Sherlock, if you are in any manner damaged, I shall not rest until you have been made well again.”

Sherlock’s face contorted slightly and a frustrated noise made its way from between his lips that startled Mycroft even further.

“I… perhaps I am overstating my caution. It was… there is no reason for your fretting, so kindly cease.”

What Greg wanted most right now was his lover to lose the ramrod-straight rigidity of his spine and relax, but that wasn’t going to occur as long as he feared for his brother’s safety. Therefore…

“Sherlock, are you saying that everything went well, you’re just showing a bit of due diligence and Mycroft has nothing to worry about?”

“We’re my words too long for your comprehension.”

“He’s fine, love. Calm down… Sherlock is fine.”

“Gregory… if he, himself, is unsure…”

Another look was shared between Sherlock and Sherrinford, ending with Sherlock sighing loudly and handing Mycroft the memory drive.

“Here. It is, as Sherrinford said, painless and acceptably quick.”

Mycroft stared at the small object in his hand and Greg wrapped an arm around his shoulder, whispering comforting words in his ear, until Mycroft opened the necessary port and inserted the device.

“Well, that’s done. It’ll be the same as for Sherlock, so if anyone has anything else to do…”

Sherrinford’s smile lacked its former sparkle and it hit Greg at that moment that the man was running on no sleep, was trying to maintain a highly-sensitive secret with people, or Sherlock, that could
easily let that secret spill and could likely use a little more than a bite of bread and cheese to soak up the nervousness and whisky souring his system. Definitely time for breakfast and a moment to sit once all of this was done…

“Anderson? Want to give mum a little help with the food? Dad?”

“I’ll get coffee out for you, too, son. You look like you could use it.”

Nodding for Anderson to follow, the elder Lestrade paused only momentarily to give Greg’s arm a squeeze before continuing on to the kitchen.

“Sexbot!”

“I am not retrieving your gin so you can gaze upon my upturned arse.”

“You’re no fun!”

But, that was a useful confirmation that Sherlock’s recent memories were still intact, which with Greg’s knowledge that his former memories seemed to be present, lent weight to the argument that his function was tip top, despite his hesitation early on. Which settled Greg’s own mind a bit more about his Mycroft and what to expect.

“A ladyfriend already, Sherlock? Doctor Watson, you’d better keep your eye on him. Miss Agatha still has her wiles…”

“You’re damned right I do! Age just means experienced and I’ve had more experience than most in my day!”

“Have you nothing better to do with your time, Sherrinford, than be a ridiculous pot-stirrer?”

“Depends on the pot.”

“Sherlock… how do you know Mr. Holmes? Did you work for him?”

Both Greg and Sherrinford gritted their teeth at John’s question, since they could see Sherlock winding up for a major treatise on how he knew their guest, so it was a double-salvo of cough and throat clear that broke through the android’s eagerness to deflate his balloon.

“One could say… yes. Yes, both Mycroft and I worked for him, though Mycroft had a larger measure of responsibility than me. I was treated with as much respect and regard as the mail boy, which is why I rarely made an appearance at our place of work.”

John shook his head at the incomplete answer, knowing full well that androids simply didn’t have that degree of free rein, however… perhaps Sherlock and Mycroft were experimental models designed to test the results of free rein. Or, maybe they were emancipated androids and had jobs with Holmes International. Though it sounded like Sherlock would have been sacked quickly if he didn’t have some additional influence…

“How’d you keep your job if you were that lazy?”

“Mycroft wouldn’t sack me if his life depended on it.”

“I thought you said you worked for Mr. Holmes.”

Sherlock scowled and Sherrinford decided to cut in to weave the lie his brother seemed content to make into whole cloth.
“Mycroft is a highly-valued member of our design team…”

A flick of inspiration lit in Sherrinford’s mind and he saw no reason not to pursue it.

“…modeled after my own brother Mycroft, actually. Just as Sherlock is modeled after our horrid baby brother of the same name. Very high-level, very cutting-edge design and that’s come in handy a few times when either of my real brothers was being difficult and refusing to attend this or that business or charity function.”

Greg’s widened eyes and ‘oh, that’s what we’re going with?’ smile was pointedly ignored by Sherrinford, who knew he’d catch seven flavors of hell from Mycroft if that cover story wasn’t up to his brother’s extremely-exacting standards.

“Oh… oh, I see. Well, that makes sense. Not the part about them being abandoned to a shelter, though.”

Now it was Sherlock smiling, this time in challenge to his brother in exactly the manner one would expect the baby of the family to do. That Sherrinford looked to Greg for help was indication of how deep into improvisation the morning had descended.

“An experiment, didn’t you say, Mr. Holmes?”

Sherrinford’s bright smile and snap-and-point at Greg would have been amusing if even a whiff of the truth wouldn’t spell untold levels of disaster.

“Yes! An experiment. Unbiased data on shelter life for androids. We build them and sell them, but don’t think we don’t care about them, Doctor Watson. Holmes International has been very active in pressing for laws protecting android rights and dignity, to streamline emancipation, create support services for newly-emancipated androids… there is talk at certain governmental levels of modifying the current shelter system, to android benefit I assure you, and we hoped to get objective data to use towards that cause. Mycroft and Sherlock are wildly observant, as I’m certain you have noticed, and extremely sensitive to the reality of lack of freedom. They were excellent choices to undertake the experiment and volunteered gladly, didn’t you, Sherlock?”

Sherlock’s clear desire to say no was evident, but he finally sighed, rolled his eyes and shook his head yes.

“See!”

“That doesn’t really explain, though, the memory loss piece or whatever issues you say you need to talk to Mycroft about once his memories have been restored.”

Sherlock’s pride at John’s cleverness and determination beamed like the sun on the android’s face and, if it wasn’t working against them at the moment, Greg would share it.

“That’s because there may be other reasons for the shelter business that I haven’t told you and won’t tell you because they hit on certain sensitive projects and company issues. Sorry, John, but some things will have to remain our secret.”

The lack of real answer didn’t surprise John, but he suspected there was an element of truth in the evasion. There was more going on that Holmes was willing to divulge, but he knew well enough from the army that getting that information out in the open would be nearly impossible and, in the end, might not lead to good things for anyone.

“Fair enough. And it seems we’ve got breakfast!”
The multiple platters of food being carried by Anderson and the Lestrade’s smelled like his fondest dream, but Greg wasn’t about to leave Mycroft’s side until his lover had come through to the other side of his memory restoration. Fortunately, toast was easy to steal and use to wrap a sausage. Too bad there were no bananas, though. His Mycroft coming back to see him merrily munching a hearty BacoNana sandwich would be the perfect way to begin the next phase of their life together…

It took a full half hour for Mycroft to stir from his rock-still position and Greg felt his heart leap with joy when the android plucked the memory drive from its port and pursed his lips.

“I see. Sherrinford, I take it you have brought our situation to a suitable conclusion?”

Greg blinked at the direct, rather business-like tone of his lover’s voice and the subtle shift in his features into a slightly harder, more steely profile.

“Love, are you alright?”

“I do not believe I was speak…”

Mycroft had turned to face Greg and, after the first few words, his voice trailed off and Greg saw something rise in his android’s eyes that he couldn’t quite define.

“Gregory.”

“Yeah, it’s me. Are you having problems? Mycroft, you’re starting to worry me.”

The android slowly cast his eyes around the room, deftly avoiding making precise eye contact with any of the people surrounding him, then let them settle on Sherlock, who was wearing an expression that mixed concern with resignation in a way that made John’s heart lurch when he saw it.

“I am fine, thank you. The procedure was successful and I am suffering no ill effects.”

The cold clip of Mycroft’s words startled Greg, but it didn’t stop him reaching out to take the android in a massive hug, which held only air when Mycroft vaulted upwards and stepped away from his partner.

“And I offer that thanks to all of you for your treatment of me and my brother during our, shall we say, difficult time. Rest assured that you will be reimbursed for any undue outlay of funds for our benefit or resources we may have consumed. Come along, Sherlock. Sherrinford, I trust you have a car waiting?”

As everyone in the room stared in shock, Mycroft stepped forward to brush a bit of dust off of Sherrinford’s coat, then turned to motion Sherlock to obey his command.

“I am going nowhere.”

“This is not the time to be stubborn, brother dear. We need to…”

“I am staying here.”

“No, you are returning with Sherry and myself to…”

“I. Am. Staying. Here.”

The look on Sherlock’s face had shifted from stubborn to menacing, but it brought only a long-
suffering sigh from Mycroft and a knowing head shake from Sherrinford.

“Very well. I suppose you can extend your visit as you have little to contribute to this matter, in any case. However, I do expect you to present yourself at my office in no later than three days so that we may discuss what has transpired in our absence and how we are to approach the next several weeks.”

“Love? I… what’s going on? I’m… you’re leaving?”

Sherrinford reached out and gave Mycroft a little poke when the android failed to immediately answer and wasn’t surprised his brother hardened his face even further when he turned to speak directly to Greg.

“That I am. Unfortunately, Gregory, I have a wealth of matters awaiting me that require my personal attention.”

“But… you’ll be home later, right?”

“That… I do apologize, but it shall certainly be necessary to devote my full time and attention to my work and I have a rather well-fitted suite of rooms designed for the times I remain on premises.”

“Will you…”

“Sherrinford, I believe it is time for us to depart. Again, you all have my gratitude for your efforts. Sherlock, remember… three days, at the most.”

And, with that, Mycroft was striding out of the door, with Sherrinford following after a mournful smile at the sea of faces that couldn’t believe what they were seeing.

“What… oh no, he’s not just leaving like that.”

Greg’s attempt to storm after his lover was stopped by Sherlock’s hold on the tail of his shirt, which increased in strength the harder Greg tried to get away.

“Sherlock!”

“Congratulations, Lestrade. You have finally met my brother Mycroft.”

“What… no!”

“It will not avail you to trail after him as there will be no grand change of heart, if that is your hope. I assure you… that is the person I, unfortunately, know exceedingly well, not… not the one with whom you…”

Sherlock’s ‘need I say it’ flick of his wrist stalled Greg’s heart and he didn’t notice his mother wrapping her arms around him and holding him tightly.

“I… I can’t believe that. I won’t believe it.”

“Shagsy… that brother of yours is a fucking prick and I will take his head off his shoulders and piss down his neck if I ever see him again!”

“Feel free, though there is somewhat of a queue of individuals with similar intentions with whom you will have to battle for first rights.”

“He’ll be back, though, right, dear? He’ll meet Greg in London once all of… whatever he has to
do is finished?”

Sherlock wished more than anything he wasn’t the one who had to explain, but since there was no one else available…

“Mycroft’s personal philosophy is that caring is not an advantage. I… I have no evidence he has any desire to deviate from it.”

Squeezing her son harder, Edith shot a look at her husband, who ran his hand through his hair and desperately hoped that Sherlock was wrong. That Mycroft simply needed time to adjust and bring his old and new lives together in a way that worked for him and Greg both. If not… the look on his son’s face was breaking his heart and that was nothing compared to what his Greg would suffer if he lost the one person he had ever loved. And the one person who had ever loved him…
Chapter 42

John’s doctor radar had gone on full power watching Greg slowly lose his color and vitality, finally breaking his mother’s hold and simply sitting in Mycroft’s vacant seat, staring at his hands as if trying to remember what it felt like to have someone to hold them. With no idea what to say, it was a small series of murmured reassurances and movement away to give Greg a bit of space to simply process what had happened. However, John was certain that wouldn’t last, because if Greg kept what he was feeling bottled inside, the results would not be pretty.

Nudging Sherlock away from the others, John sighed and gave his android a hug, not commenting that he almost wanted to shout with joy he was so relieved that Sherlock hadn’t emerged from his memory restoration terribly different than when he began the process. In fact, there was almost no difference at all and that was, given the contrast with Mycroft, a true and proper blessing.

“I have no intention of leaving, John, if that is your worry.”

A blessing that knew no bounds.

“Not worry, precisely, more… I’m just relieved that what I just saw for your brother…”

“Mycroft, I suspect, put more of himself behind his mental barricades than he configured for me. Likely, he worried that his particularly-odious nature would make his experience even more dreadful than it was.”

“Was… was any of it real? The Mycroft I knew?”

Sherlock sighed and thought a moment, which John took as a less-than-positive sign.

“Mycroft’s rather obsessive desire to meddle, his infuriating insistence on acting as father, mother and nanny to me, his interests in reading, at least to some degree, some level of his natural superciliousness, a hatred of being yoked… little else.”

John felt his hopes dim that Mycroft simply needed a little time to embrace his new life with his old mind. If that was all of the ‘real’ Mycroft present in the one he knew, Greg was in for a horribly rough time in the days and weeks to come…

“You are hoping to find some method to reconnect him with Lestrade.”

“Yes! Greg’s destroyed, Sherlock and… you tried to ease that pain a little didn’t you? That’s what all that business about bringing Mycroft to some lab was all about. You didn’t want Greg to catch it full in the face.”

“Was that… wrong?”

“Not at all. It was a good idea. A kind and thoughtful idea. I know Greg will appreciate it that you tried to spare him some of this pain.”

“It was… it was profoundly startling to regain my memories and realize who Mycroft had become and… what he had made of his situation. The… warmth, laughter… it was rather shocking, to say the least.”

“Well, I’m happy you kept yours. The warmth is down there fairly deep, I admit, but you do have it and you’ve got a good sense of humor when you choose to let it show. It would have been
nice if Mycroft’s emotions had been genuine, however, I suppose calling someone your brother isn’t the same as them actually sharing any genes or common programming.”

Sherlock’s face scrunched into a scowl again, but John could understand that, at least. Mycroft had been a doting, devoted brother to Sherlock but that may not have been quite the case for their past. In fact, it was just striking John, that Sherlock had lost, in a sense, someone who openly loved him and expressed that love gladly… seemed like everyone was being hit hard by what the morning had brought…

“Mycroft and I are two very different people.”

“Yeah, I can see that. Sherlock… what are we going to do for Greg? Is there… do you think there is any chance Mycroft will come back to him?”

“Honestly, no. He is, I have little doubt, already focusing on his work and placing everything else in the deep recesses of his mind. His relationship with Lestrade will occupy an importance of zero in his priorities and… it will fail to make any further impact on him. I am sorry, John, but if you are hoping for some miraculous turnabout from Mycroft, you shall be sadly disappointed.”

John slowly nodded his head and committed himself to helping Greg through this heartbreak. It’s what friends did and he would be there as a willing ear for Greg’s sorrows. Greg would have done the same for him if the situation was reversed.

“Alright, then we simply concentrate on helping Greg through this and… I suppose we need to see what happens with you now. I suspect you won’t be living at the shelter anymore.”

“Oh… yes, I had forgotten about that. As will Mycroft and Sherrinford as their noses dive back into their own machinations. I will phone and remind them to affect my emancipation, if that is even truly necessary and tidy the paperwork so I am not blockaded for some reason when I attempt to… do whatever it is I wish to do.”

“I did mean to ask… all that business with the morgue and the forensics team… is that really you or…”

“My interests do lie in that direction, yes. Which is why I happily remain absent from any aspect of Holmes International work. There is not a single cadaver or blood-soaked handkerchief anywhere to be found, so… boring.”

“Of course. You’ve got a flat or house somewhere, too, I suppose.”

A slight flicker of something slid across Sherlock’s face and John wondered why the question would disturb the android.

“I, like Mycroft, have rooms at one of the Holmes complexes, but I also count Mycroft’s house as a residence. Which is as ostentatious, sterile and tedious as is he, so I avoid it whenever possible.”

“Ostentatious… that sounds big.”

“Given it has to house Mycroft’s girth, that should not be a surprise.”

“It’s… well, it’s because, and don’t take this the wrong way, but I can’t say I’ve ever thought of androids being wealthy. It’s shameful of me, really, but that’s never an image I’ve had in my head.”

Sherlock cursed Mycroft and Sherrinford both for their ridiculous cloak-and-dagger, hide-the-android paranoia… how was he to continue to associate with John when every bit of information from his
lips threatened to unravel their ridiculous secret! And Sherrinford’s drivel today… if it had nothing to do with numbers, his brother was useless! Fortunately, Mycroft would certainly apply the lash of his tongue for the stupidity and that lash would sting for days…

“Most aren’t, I assume, but Mycroft does see a substantial income from his work…”

And share of the company’s profits, as well as other family investments that he helps direct due to his overwhelming busybody nature…

“… and he is not lax about managing his funds for his financial betterment.”

“Another thing I really didn’t think about. Alright… more of my human-centric thinking kicked, quite rightly, in the teeth. Good for him! But, since he’s a bastard, I take that back and hope he gets a right case of short circuiting so his arms flap about day and night. I’ll put the word out to the android medical specialists to pin any androids named Mycroft on the ‘just wait your turn’ list so he does his chicken dance for a fortnight.”

Sherlock’s grin warmed John’s heart and topped off his tank of confidence that… they were alright. He and Sherlock would be fine, though, things would be different. Sherlock had a life to take up again, but he was reassured there would be a place for a doctor who was most content to be part of that life, whatever surprises may come.

“I could set something in motion to make that happen.”

“Sherlock, don’t sabotage your brother.”

“Why not? He certainly deserves it.”

“You’re right. First chance we get, it’s Mycroft’s Chicken Dance, fully recorded for our continued viewing pleasure.”

“I admire your bloodthirstiness, John.”

“Thank you. Sometimes I impress even myself.”

“How long’s he been out there?”

Fresh from a quick, but necessary romantic interlude with his android, John found himself back in the reality of their situation and seeing Greg outside on his mobile made his radar twitch. Fortunately, Anderson seemed to be keeping watch…

“Ten minutes. If you’re hoping he’s talking to Mycroft, he’s not. When he finally shook off his fugue, he announced he had to phone our Inspector and took himself outside to do it.”

“Oh, that’s not going to be an easy conversation, is it?”

“Probably not. I mean… it’s not Greg’s fault we’ve come to this point, but it’s an extra thorn in his side that we can’t even say we’ve got a properly closed case to show for all this misery. How’s Sherlock?”

“Good, actually. I’d say he’s no different than he was before and doesn’t seem… doesn’t reject what’s happened to him after his memories were blocked. I’d say, from things he’s told me, actually, that he’s happier with this new life than his old one, though… it sounds like his former life is a posh
“Don’t see why not. And, this way, he can’t complain about standing his share of food and drinks.”

“That is very and helpfully true. Which are going to be plentiful because… Greg’s going to need a lot of support and nights with friends to help ease the pain. He’s not going to come back from this easily, will he?”

“No, not at all. Greg’s history with romance is shite, but this is different. He was wildly, head-over-heels in love Mycroft and Mycroft loved, or seemed to love, him just as much in return. I really had no doubt that they’d be one of those couples that muddles through the decades together, hand in hand, getting old and dodderly, but just as much in love as they’d always been. This is going to haunt him for a long, long time and… I just hope he’s not a stubborn fool and try to push away everyone who’ll try to help.”

“Chances he’ll avoid stubborn foolishness?”

“Bleak. I can guarantee that he’ll try and carry on as if nothing happened.”

“Well, it doesn’t mean we have to let him succeed with that, do we?”

“No, we don’t. And, we should warn Molly. It wouldn’t be good for her to be blindsided by something like this. She… she had hopes for Greg and Mycroft, too, and this is absolutely going to upset her.”

“No question about that. I suspect we’ll leave for London tomorrow and I’ll phone her or stop in at Bart’s to let her know what happened. Maybe we can all pop in one night and have a film night with Greg. Oh… you know, I forgot about Stamford…”

“I’ll phone him. I have no idea what Sherlock’s legal status is at the moment, but I’m fairly certain he won’t be spending another night at the shelter.”

“That’s probably true. He’s got somewhere else to stay, right? They didn’t sell his flat or something when they started this daft experiment?”

“He has a couple of places to claim as his, actually, so he’s set for all of that. You really think we’re leaving tomorrow? That soon?”

“Knowing Greg? Yes. He’s humiliated and he’ll want to pretend everything’s fine by getting back to work and putting distance between himself and everyone who knows what happened. He’s the best person in the world to know when you have a problem, because he’ll be there every minute for you, doing whatever you need to make you feel better. He is also the person who will worry it’s putting people out and being a bother when they do things like that for him.”

“Got it. I’ve known a few of those in my day.”

“Your mum?”

“Yours too?”

“Greg’s a mum.”

“He is. Well, with Sherlock staying in his life, that’s probably a good thing.”
“Saves me the trouble.”

“Yeah, hard to be a mum when you’re shagging him senseless. That just doesn’t sit right no matter how you look at it. Speaking of…”

“There will be no speaking.”

“That’s no fun.”

“Little is going to be fun for awhile, I suspect.”

Anderson cocked an eye at John, but followed the doctor’s gaze, only to have both of them turn away from the window, seeing Greg put his mobile in his pocket, stare out over the landscape for a few moments, then reach up to wipe the moisture off his cheeks, leaving his hands in place as more moisture started to flow.

“I’ll go out in a bit and have a chat with him, John. Take Sherlock to the village like you’d planned, why don’t you. Clothes shopping isn’t likely needed, but have a bit of a walk around and… get to know each other.”

“You’ll keep an eye on Greg?”

“Yeah. Take the monster dog out and do some walking, maybe. Let him get some air in his lungs, Greg I mean, not the dog, and get some nature in his eyes. I suspect his parents will want some time with him, too, so we’ll hold the fort while you get Sherlock out for his own airing. I’m certain Greg would appreciate a little chat with the two of you later, though. Just something to reaffirm that everything in his world isn’t collapsing.”

“Chats will be had, rest assured. And, it’s probably good to get Sherlock out first and talk about how to chat on things like this before the actually chatting begins. His heart’s in the right place, but his mouth doesn’t always follow the script.”

Anderson smirked and looked back at Greg who was still standing in the same spot, seemingly lost, which meant taking that walk might be a good idea starting now.

“Very true. Alright, I’ll go out and see what I can do for Greg now and we’ll see you later. Tell Sherlock… it’s good to still have him here.”

Nodding at both the sentiment and the sincerity behind it, John watched Anderson grab his jacket, whistle for Dinky, who seemed about as gloomy as everyone else in the house, and take the dog out for some cheering up. Hopefully, Greg would get a little of that, too, but John suspected the best they’d do, for now, is dull a little of the ache. Cheer would be a slow thing to follow…

“Sacked?”

Greg quickly sniffed away any lingering emotion and slapped a false smile on his face, knowing Anderson wouldn’t be fooled by it, but not wanting to let his real emotions show.

“Surprisingly, no. I told him that we’d cracked the case, but gave an explanation for things that made it fairly clear going forward wasn’t going to gain us any glory. Said Mycroft had been taken by the people who made him because, like Sherrinford said, he was part of an experiment and they needed his data, but were typical private sector berks who forgot about basic things like rights. AND, that they got a touch huffy when their property seemed to be in the process of being stolen
when we affected a rescue. So, he knows what happened and agreed a case wouldn’t make it through court, so… it’s officially officially closed now.”

“Good! That’s a better scenario than we just stood down because we were told to. When does he want us back?”

“Huh… he didn’t say specifically. Probably forgot. There’s no reason for us to stay here anymore, though, so I thought we’d go home tomorrow, so we can start back on the job the next day.”

“There’s no reason to hurry, you know. Take another few days out here to get a bit of rest and… work through things.”

Greg shot Anderson a look that the PC correctly interpreted as ‘I don’t want to talk about that,’ and promptly ignored.

“And, I had the brilliant idea that we might get started on that with a nice walk. The man-eating hellbeast looks ready, don’t you think?”

Being outdoors and near one of his favorite humans had Dinky’s mood lifted enough to create a hurricane with his wagging tail and looking back and forth between Greg and the great unknown.

“Dink is always ready. I swear that if he didn’t feel the need to come inside to check on Gran, he’d spend his life outdoors. Always something to chase, something to explore…”

“Well, let’s see him satisfied for a bit, what say? John and Sherlock are going to the village for a little explore of their own, so we might as well take advantage of the quiet and put some miles under our feet. Might as well get used to that again…”

Greg knew very well what his friend was doing and he wanted nothing more than to smile politely, say no thanks, and… do something that involved nobody but him. He also wanted nothing more than to put some distance between himself and the house, and have the chance to distract himself with meaningless conversation of whatever form might suit him at the moment. Given Dinky was now grabbing his trousers with teeth the size of pterodactyl claws and whining piteously, the latter option was probably the wisest choice.

“Sounds good. Though…”

“We talk about what you want to talk about Greg. I won’t push, but I am here to listen and I think you could use that, at least to simply let yourself hear certain things out loud. When they just knock around in your skull, the echoes can leave some nasty bruises…”

Oh, the bruises were already there. Bruises, bloody gashes… his brain felt like it had been attacked by a group of football rioters and part of him wished it would simply pack it in, cease to function, and let him enjoy a lifetime of blankness where he never had to think about… anything.

“Greg…”

“What? Oh… sorry.”

“Come on, let’s go. Dinky! Chase!”

Anderson bent down and picked up a rock, throwing it as far as he could and laughing that the dog bounded after it as if he’d thrown a juicy bone.
“Want me to throw one for you, Sergeant Lestrade?”

Greg rolled his eyes and started walking after the dog, pointed shoving out of his mind that the last time he did this he was being accompanied by someone entirely different. One day, that would probably be a good memory. Today, though, was not that day…

“Oh, look at you…”

Greg, Anderson and Dinky stood in the kitchen, dripping wet and muddy, keeping their eyes on their shoes or paws as Edith clucked her tongue over their nonsense.

“What happened and don’t try and make it sound more manly than it is, because I’ll see right through that and you’ll shame yourself more than you already have.”

Anderson gave Greg a side-footed kick, which Greg returned but, since it was sort of his fault…

“Dinky saw ducks, on that pond to the east and… he was going to chase them, so I grabbed him…”

“Oh, Greg… that’s never smart. He can drag a body for days!”

“Well, I forgot that, didn’t I? Anyway, Anderson grabbed me since we were both headed into the pond and… we all went into the pond. And through it. Kept Dinky from having a duck lunch, though, so the environment is happy.”

“Smells like you brought it in all in the house, too, duck poop and all. Showers for you two and I’ll have your father give Dinky a rinse with the hose. Lucky that mum went with Sherlock and John because she would be having a proper fit at all that water and… not water… on her floor. I’ve got some cleaning ahead of me, so thanks for that.”

Greg’s oops face was directed back at his toes, so he missed the silent conversation between his mother and his partner in crime, which said that the time outdoors had given Greg some exercise, but not much more. No matter how gently Anderson nudged, Greg couldn’t be drawn out to talk about Mycroft, but that didn’t mean another try wouldn’t be had in the future. Just not now, while they were bringing untold variations of duck dysentery into the house.

“Now, get clean and I’ll see you with a spot of lunch then you can help your dad with… whatever he’s doing. Playing with those computer bits last time I checked, so I suspect he’ll be back on that after he gives Dinky a bit of a scrub.”

Still not wanting to delve into his parents alter-egos as technology embracers, Greg nodded to Anderson and both slunk out of the kitchen trying to will the gunk and goop to stay on them and not on the rugs. It really was the perfect coda to his morning, in Greg’s opinion. Catch a face full of shit from Mycroft and a body full of it from the local avian population. Time to get back to work where the average abuse by the citizens and contempt from the criminals would come as a welcome relief. That was much easier to bear and wash off at day’s end. Hopefully, there was a LOT of soap in the bath…

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Ok, maybe he should have just washed off outside and… slept outside also. Looking around the bedroom, Greg was hit from every direction with memories stirred up from the clothes and such that Mycroft had simply walked away from and left behind. Rather like him…
“Lestrade?”

However, not all the Holmes brothers were arseholes... case in point, the one who had barged into the bedroom without any form of preamble.

“What? Sherlock?”

“John says I must talk to you.”

The first hint of a smile crossed Greg’s lips and he vowed with everything in him that he wouldn’t take any of his ill feelings out on Sherlock and, further, that Sherlock would always have a place under his watchful eye. The android might have his memories back, but Anderson had said Sherlock was still the android they knew and wanted to punch in the head sometimes, so watching would likely be as necessary in the future as it had been in the past.

“Well, if John told you to do it, of course you must. What do you want to talk about? Shoes?”

“You are a ridiculous human.”

“Probably true. Was it pencils? Need to have a chat about writing implements?”

“Sit.”

Sherlock pointed to the bed and Greg obliged by dropping onto it with a hearty bounce.

“I am here to talk about Mycroft.”

Greg knew that was the purpose of Sherlock’s visit, but it didn’t stop the heaviness from filling his heart again and the darkness coloring his eyes.

“How about not and say we did.”

“How is that helpful?”

“Sherlock... I... right now, talking about Mycroft isn’t helpful.”

“I disagree.”

“I’m the one who feels the knife go into my heart every time people try to push me on him, so I’d say your disagreement is irrelevant.”

Sherlock’s stormy scowl withered seeing the genuine misery in Greg’s face, but John had said that internalizing grief and pain could lead to failure to heal and he would not let Lestrade suffer that fate. Beings, android and humans both, were deficient creatures who impeded his efforts and wants far more than they assisted, but some... some were kind. Kind, compassionate, supportive... things he rarely found in the world, but some few individuals bestowed these in abundance. Lestrade was one of these few and... no, he could not be allowed to suffer.

“You are a human, and not the most intelligent example of the breed, so your ability to gauge relevance is flawed. Since I am here to correct that, you may consider yourself blessed with good fortune.”

Another small smile began to creep onto Greg’s lips and he patted the bed next to him for Sherlock to have a seat.

“I appreciate the concern, Sherlock, but... this is something I have to deal with myself.”
“Wrong.”

“Right.”

“Wrong.”

“Right.”

“Wrong.”

“Are you just doing to keep saying ‘wrong’ until I fall asleep?”

“No, because you cannot listen to me if you are asleep.”

“True. So, what will it take to get you to say other words?”

“It is not your fault, you know. There was no flaw or fault in you that prompted Mycroft’s conduct. Nothing in action, word or innate feature that caused his behaviors. If that is part of your distress, you may rid yourself of it.”

Well, no, that hadn’t been in his head… alright, it had. That had been a looming, ugly part of his distress, so it was good to hear that he might be wrong about it from someone who certainly wouldn’t say so if it wasn’t true, but… it wasn’t as easy letting go of his worries as Sherlock might believe. Sherlock didn’t know that he knew the truth about Mycroft and… blokes that rich and sophisticated had no use for men like him, now did they?

“That’s good to hear, Sherlock, it really is. Thank you.”

“You do not believe it, however.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Speaking was not required. That you would discount my analysis…”

“I’m not discounting it, lad, not at all. It’s… feelings just don’t vanish because you want them to. Because you tell them to piss off. It doesn’t work that way.”

“I have provided evidence, that should be sufficient.”

“Well, no you haven’t really. Just your opinion.”

“Which counts as evidence because I am a genius.”

“In the world of Sherlockland, that’s probably true, but in the real world, facts are a touch more helpful.”

“Fine. I shall ask Mycroft…”

“NO! For pity’s sake, do not do that.”

“You wanted evidence and now you prohibit the most parsimonious route for acquiring it. Are you simply trying to continue your suffering?”

“No, it’s just… I don’t want Mycroft… he probably already thinks I’m a stupid, working-class, berk and I don’t need him adding clingy and insecure to that majestic list.”
Sherlock drew back slightly from the policeman, feeling no small amount of surprise at that appraisal.

“Why would you believe he thought that of you?”

“I… human insecurity.”

“Wrong.”

“Not this again!”

“Stop lying and we will not have to tread this ground once more.”

“I’m not lying! Look… maybe not you, but most people… we worry, alright? We worry that we’re the ones who weren’t good enough. We were disappointing or embarrassing.”

“And what is your evidence.”

“My opinion.”

“Is that supposed to be a joke?”

“Yes. And no. Look, Sherlock…”

“You have no evidence that Mycroft disgraced himself for any other reason that he is a condescending, cold-hearted villain.”

“Sherlock… I won’t say none of that is true, but…”

“What are you hiding?”

A lot, thank you very much.

“Nothing. Why would you ask that?”

“Because your body language, failure to meet my eye and certain vocal indicators point squarely to concealed truth.”

“Really? You’ll have to teach me about that someday. It’ll be useful in my work.”

“Confess.”

“Sherlock…”

“I can, as they say, keep this up as long as I need to.”

He could, too. And would. Until one of them was stark raving mad. And it really wasn’t question as to which one of them it would be.

“Fine. But… I know I probably don’t have to say this, but I will. Some secrets must stay secret, even from people you care about.”

Sherlock felt something slither through his nerves that didn’t please him one tiny bit.

“Are you referring to John?”

“Just referring in general. Sherlock… I know about you and Mycroft.”
The slithering strengthened, but Sherlock was not entirely ready to believe what he had heard.

“I… what do you know?”

“That the term ‘brothers’ is better applied than anyone thinks.”

Sherlock’s shocked gasp was quickly cut off and Greg almost laughed at the sight of the android looking around to make certain no one had overheard.

“Mycroft divulged that we are DNA-based?”

Realizing that the DNA memory was retained by Mycroft and Sherlock after their alteration almost let Greg leave the matter there, but… maybe it would be helpful for Sherlock to have someone to talk to who really knew who he was. Besides his brothers, that is.

“Yes, right after we came to visit you at the shelter the first time. But, Sherlock… that’s not all I know.”

“There… there is nothing else to know.”

“You must have been a cute little thing, rolling around in your… vat sounds pretty awful, actually, but I suppose it’s a good enough word for how you were gestated while the nanobots made little baby Sherlock.”

Sherlock shot off the bed and stared at Greg with such force that the sergeant tried to remember if he’d read anything about an android’s eyes being able to pop out of their skulls.

“You… there is… Mycroft would not have retained that memory. It was a risk to even retain the DNA-based information and that was only for the chance we might have to receive intensive medical treatment where that would be discovered. Everything else was completely deactivated and…”

“Mycroft didn’t tell me.”

“Then… Sherrinford?”

“Yep.”

“I… he revealed…”

“Yeah, he did. I know that you’re truly brothers, and brothers of Sherrinford Holmes… and that’s my evidence, Sherlock. Mycroft is a rich, privileged man who would not be seen with someone like me for love nor money. Oh sure, for a quick shag when he had a taste for something different from his norm, but that sort of man has relationships with other wealthy people. People who already get invited to the parties he does… knows the same people and have the same upbringing. They don’t date or… anything… with someone low and common like me. It doesn’t happen. I have no doubt that when his memories came flooding back, Mycroft was appalled that he’d lowered himself to having anything at all with the likes of me and he ran as fast and far away from that embarrassment as he could.”

Greg startled a little at both the venom of his words and the fact that he was nearly spitting them out at Sherlock and quickly shoved his growing anger back down where it wasn’t peeking out to frighten young androids.

“You… that is a positively dismal vision of yourself.”
Greg had expected Sherlock to focus on the fact that the biggest secret in the world was in his head, but he, apparently, hand underestimated Sherlock’s priorities.

“It’s… it’s realistic. I don’t know how much you get about in the normal human world, lad, but my view is the realistic one and… it was my bad luck that I fell in love with someone like that when they didn’t know they were someone like that. The real Mycroft would never have given me the time of day.”

Sherlock opened his mouth to protest, but there was nothing to protest, because Mycroft would certainly not have given the policeman the time of day. He would not have given the man directions to hospital if Lestrade was suffering a stroke. Or, perhaps he would… Mycroft was a cryptic, guarded, enigma of a behemoth and knowing his mind on anything had always been terrifically hard to achieve. Which was precisely how Mycroft liked it.

“I cannot verify that claim.”

“Yes, you can. It’s written on you as plain as words on paper. Your brother is a properly posh gent destined for great things in this world and he’ll have someone at his side who complements that perfectly. That someone just won’t be me.”

“I doubt, actually, that Mycroft will ever enter a true relationship. It is not in his nature, or so not that I have observed.”

“The ends are the same… I thought he loved me, but it wasn’t real. Some defect of his memory alteration and… well, what’s done is done.”

Sherlock frowned because… it was infuriating! The post-memory-block Mycroft was… well, he would not say better, but he would say more approachable. More honest and more forthcoming. He did not deceive, obstruct, conceal… not that his brother was a vile and evil man, he was not. There was boundless evidence that Mycroft cared about him and always had a close eye on his welfare. It… there had simply been times in his life when he wished Mycroft would have openly demonstrated a tiny portion of the warmth and care he had shown in this brief bit of time they had been together in Lestrade’s life. It was insipid and nauseating, but… it had also been a pleasant thing to experience.

“If, to you, this was ‘done,’ you would not continue to feel pain.”

“Alright, I’ll grant you that. It’s not done, in terms of my wrestling with my emotions. It’s not done, in terms of me lying here tonight, alone, when… when I was prepared to embark on a wonderful adventure of being in love and building a life that would… I was going to grow old with him, Sherlock. Have a life where Mycroft was with me doing all the ridiculous couple things and being together through good times and hard… when he said he loved me… I thought my fucking heart would burst! I thought…”

Greg cursed under his breath and wiped away the new rivulets of water on his face and mentally dared Sherlock to say something so he could simply explode and release this pressure in his chest that was making it hard to breathe.

“Doesn’t matter what I thought. None of it matters anymore.”

Wanting to do something and not knowing what to do was the worst feeling Sherlock had ever experienced and he only hoped that a small squeeze of Greg’s shoulder, as he had seen others do as a gesture of understanding and commiseration, would be the right thing. The small nod and sigh once it was done was some indication he’d chosen smartly.
“Thanks, Sherlock. Got a bit carried away there for a moment.”

“I would say your responses are justified for the degree of insult you experienced.”

“And your opinion counts as incontrovertible evidence, right?”

“At last, you are beginning to think clearly.”

Greg chuckled softly, but there wasn’t much mirth in it. Clear thinking was not going to be his specialty for awhile, but... but he had the support of friends and family who would ignore any idiocy that got a touch out of hand. He’d get through this eventually. He always did, though... he’d never truly loved someone like this before. It... it was the greatest feeling imaginable and the scant few hours he’d known he had Mycroft’s love, too... that would be a feeling he’d probably chase the rest of his life and never again find. You didn’t get a lot of chances for that, that special love that transformed you inside. That better to have loved and lost business was bollocks. Whoever wrote that was wrong in the head...

“Victory! But, Sherlock... don’t worry, alright, that I’ll say anything. To spite Mycroft, I mean. Your secret is safe with me and no matter how much I hurt, I’d never put you in danger.”

“In truth, your speaking out never crossed my mind, which is odd since people are generally unable to properly assess consequences and, further, are happy to gain acclaim to make their pointless lives seem more consequential. I thank you for it, though. Mummy and Father would suffer most... that is not something I can allow.”

“You’re a good son, Sherlock. And a good brother. It was clear Sherrinford cared about you. I suspect he’s missed you, too, while you’ve been away.”

Speaking of...

“Perhaps. Being significantly older than me has limited our association, but... he has made time for me when necessary and shown... sentiment... when we are together. I am surprised, though, Sherrinford trusted you in this matter. I cannot think of another person to whom he has imparted this information.”

Greg shrugged his shoulders, but he had to admit to a bit of surprise, himself. No, that wasn’t true. He had to admit to a LOT of surprise...

“I suppose he thought I’d only back down if I knew the whole story. That I’d keep digging if I wasn’t satisfied and it might let too many things come to light if I did that.”

“That seems rather a thin reason.”

“It’s the best I can come up with since I didn’t actually ask. Anyway... it doesn’t matter what happened between me and Mycroft, Sherlock. I’m still there for you whenever you need me, so don’t hesitate to phone or visit if you need something or want to talk. Do you... I suppose you’ll go about your business now, but I hope that we can all still get together now and then. Dinner or a film or something. Stamford, too, though you’ll not be living there and, I suppose, Mycroft and I aren’t on his duty roster anymore. In the meantime... it would help if you could do a favor for me.”

“What favor?”

“Take Mycroft things with you. And, if possible, stop by my flat and take those things, too. I’ll put them in a box for you, but...”
“Mycroft will not want them.”

From the flash of pain that flared on Greg’s face, Sherlock gave the inside of his head a small kick to remember… now was a time to be verbally cautious.

“Alright. I’ll donate them. Maybe Mike can use the clothes and whatnot at the shelter. If not, there certainly aren’t a shortage of charities that have a need. You can still stop in, though. You and John. Should I ask…”

“I remain committed to John and my relationship.”

This smile of Greg’s was a large and honestly happy one that had Sherlock preening a bit with pride.

“That’s fantastic, Sherlock. Anderson hinted that might be the case, but to hear it right from the source is the best news I’ve had today. You and John are great together and… I’m just thrilled you’ll carry on as before. Really, that’s good to hear... I’m happy for you, I truly am.”

Sherlock used every of his senses and decided Lestrade’s happiness was genuine. And that happiness… was nice. It was odd to have people happy for him, besides his mother and father, but that didn’t mean he didn’t find the sensation agreeable. Lestrade, his parents, Anderson, the crazy crone who made them escort her around the village as if she was the Queen and they were her servants… they were glad for him and John, which made his own contentment with his romantic situation shine with a slightly brighter light.

“John and I are an exemplary couple.”

Greg laughed and shook his head… his own life was in tatters, so it was good to know that not everyone was living under a storm cloud. The world was still spinning merrily for the people he cared about and there was some relief to be taken from that. His own troubles were miniscule in the grand scheme and he’d certainly not let his rain, wind and thunder to disrupt anyone else’s enjoyment of life. That wasn’t the man he was. He’d wear his thickest emotional mac and keep his blustery heart to himself until the skies cleared. It’d happen someday… nothing lasted forever. Not even love, though the idiotic poets and songwriters seemed to think otherwise…

“That you are. An admirable, remarkable couple. You could give lessons, you’re so skilled at… couplehood.”

“Are you trying to be amusing.”

“For the last bit, yes. For the first, no.”

“That is acceptable. Will you be joining us downstairs at any point tonight?”

“People waiting for me to do my comedy act?”

“No, but your mother is planning dinner and if you are not eating, then I will demand your portion be given to John. Plentiful meals seem to make him happy.”

Greg nodded thoughtfully but, in his mind, he was wishing Sherlock and John the very best of luck since they were extremely-well suited for each other.

“John can keep his bloody hands off of my food, thank you very much. I will be downstairs in a bit, just…”

“You require time to recover from our conversation.”
Not in so many words, but yes.

“I require time to finish toweling my hair and checking that I don’t look a fright.”

“That is always the case, so you are doomed to failure.”

“Well, that’s sorted then. Shall we?”

Greg motioned towards the door and suffered Sherlock’s intense scrutiny for a minute more before and android whirled and marched out of the door after a final glare to set the policeman in motion. Which Greg did after a deep breath and a little shake to pull himself together. Smile, laugh, keep the gloom away from the house and the people in it. It was only for a little while, in any case. Tomorrow, they’d leave for London and he’d be back in his flat where the only person to drag down was himself. That was right and proper, though… he was the one who’d been too… him… for Mycroft to keep loving, so he should suffer all that pesky dragging alone. Probably get to be an expert at it, so that was something to look forward to. Had to snatch those bright spots where he could find them...
“Lawks! I have found thee!”

Oh goody, his brother was here.

“Sherrinford, I have no time for your nonsense.”

“Imagine my surprise finding you working. This was the last place I looked after the clubs, zoo, lingerie shops…”

Mycroft sighed and looked up from his computer, which had been catching him up on what his researchers had been doing in his absence. His expectations had certainly not been met and words, very pointed ones, would be had on the subject at the afternoon meeting.

“I realize, brother, that you take great joy affecting an air of bonhomie, but will you kindly reserve your japery for the media, charity fundraisers and the schoolchildren you insist on parading through our corridors?”

Sherrinford shook his head and wondered why he’d thought that maybe, just maybe, his single-minded brother would have done something as sensible as take one, lone day to relax and ease back into his life. The moment they’d gotten into the car after… his brother was collected, Mycroft demanded his mobile and they spent the long ride back to London in near silence as middle Mr. Holmes pored through every bit of news on the company and the various developments in the android technology community. Chances are, if he hadn’t shoved a sandwich in Mycroft’s mouth after dropping him at their headquarters, the dunderhead wouldn’t have eaten, as well as not slept, until someone locked his lab door and forced the issue. The someone, unfortunately, being him and that was a job he had not missed in the slightest while Mycroft was in hiding.

“Smiling gives you fewer wrinkles than frowning and I do prize my youthful complexion.”

“I believe we own part of a cosmetics firm, do we not? I suspect they have a full range of creams and such that will work more effectively than your foolishness.”

“Ah, it’s good to have you back, brother dear. Whenever my day is shamefully overflowing with sunshine and joy, I can always turn to you to invoke the darkness and gloom to bring me back to balance.”

“I am happy to be of service.”

Turning back to his computer, Mycroft rolled his eyes that Sherrinford drew up a seat and insolently rested his feet on the spotlessly-clean desk.

“So… settling back in?”

“Naturally. The level of progress that has been made while I was away is shocking. Did you replace our researchers and technicians with baboons?”

“No, but that would have saved me quite a bit in salary costs.”

“You have always used too lax a hand, Sherrinford.”

“And you have always adopted a taskmaster’s stance, Mycroft. Again, we balance.”
“We maintain our supremacy in the industry precisely because I hold our staff to the highest of standards.”

“And because I recruit the most inspired individuals on the market and pay them their worth.”

“Ever the businessman.”

“Thank you. By the way, I phoned Mummy.”

“Joyful. When?”

“When did I phone her?”

“When does she command I present myself?”

“Thursday. And we all must present ourselves. Sherlock, too.”

“You shall likely have to kidnap him to achieve that.”

“No, you know very well Sherlock will pout, but he’ll be there if Mummy asks. I should see if his doctor is available. I’m certain Mummy and Father would be very happy to meet him.”

Take the bait, brother dear. It wriggles so scandalously on the hook…

“Sherrinford…”

“What? Do not sit there, not for a moment, and try to tell me you don’t approve of Sherlock’s relationship with Doctor Watson. I’ll call you a liar and see you have tongue and tripe for lunch.”

“<………………..>”

“You’re adorable when you’re caught between Scylla and Charybdis.”

“Very well. I would not have predicted any success for their association, however, John has proved to be a man capable of weathering Sherlock’s infantile nature and channeling it in productive directions. And, to his credit, Sherlock has demonstrated a capacity to listen and reflect when John engages that channeling.”

“So, you like him.”

“Sherlock?”

“Bloody hell, Mycroft. You are absolutely impossible today!”

“I am not the one who sauntered into your office and interrupted your work.”

“That would have thrilled me, actually. I spent the morning listening to five different economists predict five different trajectories for the global economy and, with your tolerance for drivel, you would have cleared the room in under five minutes. In any case… I suppose it’s not possible for John to meet our parents...”

“No, it most certainly is not. John believes Sherlock some simulacrum of the ‘real’ Sherlock Holmes and that is… it is not the worst possible lie you could have peddled, however, it is a very near thing.”

“I had to think fast! As it is, I need to get the story out there about you and Sherlock being back
in England. I’ll set up something, too, to get your face in the papers. There’s a new technical college that’s opened and they could likely use an influx of money, so maybe a fundraiser or awareness booster… dinner, hobnobbing, cheque writing… with lots of photos guaranteed to cement the fact you and Sherlock are returned to the bosom of your family.”

“What a ghastly idea.”

“Mummy’s bosom is not ghastly. She’s held up well for her age. Or maybe she just buys effective bras.”

“This conversation is now at an end.”

“No, it’s not. Have you phoned Greg?”

When Mycroft turned his truly ferocious glare on a person, they generally shrieked and ran in terror. When that person was his older brother, however, all it gained the android was a look of profound boredom that Mycroft had worked his whole life to duplicate, to no avail.

“Greg who?”

“Fatuous. You know very well Greg who. You need to phone him, Mycroft. Or visit.”

“I am certain Sergeant Lestrade has, by this point, correctly interpreted the situation and recognizes matters for what they are.”

“And how are matters, Mycroft?”

“Excellent, thank you.”

“You’re more childish than Sherlock, something I would never have believed possible for anyone, ever. Just phone the man!”

“For what possible reason?”

“Oh, I don’t know. You ran away from him like your trousers were on fire and, let’s see… he’s probably aching like a bastard from a broken heart!”

“Ridiculous. Sergeant Lestrade is a practical man. He will have assessed the situation and realized that, given the restored status of my memories, our association would, by necessity, come to an end.”

“The amount of shit you’re spewing could fertilize a turnip field.”

“Vulgarity. How unsurprising.”

“Deflection. How uninteresting.”

“Do you have any issues of real import to discuss, Sherrinford, or may I return to my work?”

The impenetrable flatness and chill in Mycroft’s voice told Sherrinford that the conversation was at its end and no amount of pressing would move his brother on the subject. Of course, it wouldn’t do to simply give in without a final blow…

“No, that’s about all. Oh, do you want me to refund Greg your purchase price from a company account or a private family one? Poor man, I suspect the sooner he gets those funds back the better, what with being left near destitute and all when he pulled your arse from the fire.”
Mycroft’s glare rose to a new level that impressed his older brother, who gave him a thumb’s up gesture as he swaggered out of the office. Mycroft had the most brilliant mind of anyone he’d ever known, but was a complete dunce sometimes and... well, crying over spilled milk never did any good. Maybe time would help. Let said dunce come to his senses and, at the barest minimum, give Greg some sense of closure. Of course, time was just the thing for Mycroft to overwrite whatever memories he did want erased and... forget about Sergeant Lestrade permanently. Nice thing about being the oldest brother – never a dull moment...

"Are you certain, Greg?"

Looking around his flat, Greg huffed a large breath and nodded, much to Sherlock and John’s disappointment.

"Thanks, but I’ll be alright. Watch a little telly, get to bed early... I’ll stop in and talk to my Inspector tomorrow and see Anderson and I sorted for coming back to work. They’ll miss you in the forensics area, Sherlock..."

"I have not stated that I intend to discontinue my work with the police."

"Uh... you don’t actually have a job with the police, lad."

"You will acquire one for me."

"The only thing I can acquire for you is a pamphlet on how to apply to the police service!"

"Very well, I shall tend to it myself."

"John... little help?"

"Sherlock, you actually have to go through proper channels for employment."

"Boring. So, I’ll choose not to do that and take the shorter route, instead. Inform Anderson that I shall be participating in the next case and that I expect to be brought up to speed quickly on all forensics findings when I arrive on scene."

John and Greg shared a look that spoke loudly of their fondness for Sherlock and the headaches that were looming if Sherlock continued on this path.

"There’s a fly in your ointment, I’m afraid. Anderson’s not actually with forensics, if you remember. He’s my partner, so we’ll be back to holding hands and strolling along the streets like good little bobbies in a day or so."

Sherlock’s hum was in no way reassuring leading John loudly to clear his throat and smile brightly at the android.

"Well, I think this is a conversation for another day, when Greg’s actually back in uniform and doing his best to keep London from anarchy. Greg... you’ve got my number, so..."

"Thanks, John. Really, thanks."

"You do not have my number."

"Thanks, Sherlock. Really, thanks."
“You misunderstand, I was not being… you do not have my mobile number for I have not been in possession of my mobile for quite some time. I will phone you with it… whenever my phone is back in my hands.”

ImPLYING that Sherlock was not returning home immediately, something that left both John and Greg puzzled, but cautiously optimistic, in terms of John’s love life.

“Sounds good. Alright, then… I’ll see you two later, ok?”

John nodded and pulled Sherlock back from the door, since the android didn’t seem inclined to take Greg’s words as an actual goodbye. Not that he was, either, truth be told. Greg had moved into that obviously fake ‘I’m fine, no really, I am’ state that fooled nobody and not even his mother’s tearful goodbye or his grandmother’s purposefully long diatribe of swearing and threats if her new laptop didn’t arrive soon broke through to draw any form on honest emotion from the heartbroken man. They’d left their rural hideaway, squeezed into the tiny rented car and enjoyed a surreally-pleasant drive back to London where Anderson cut ‘we’ve got to watch him’ eyes at John when he was dropped at his flat. One thing was very clear to the good doctor and that was talking to Molly would need to be a priority agenda item for him. Maybe she could cut through Greg’s façade… it was punishingly difficult to withstand a Molly Hooper cross-examination, even when you actually didn’t have anything to hide…

“Yeah, sooner than later, let’s hope. Sherlock, on we go. Greg… take care.”

John nudged the unmoving Sherlock into walking and neither said anything until they heard the door close behind them.

“Lestrade is not properly managing his grief.”

“No, Sherlock, no he’s not. Or… actually he’s doing what a lot of people would do and I can’t fault him for it because I’d do the same. The important thing is we realize what’s really going on and give him the time, support and opportunity to feel comfortable letting that pain out so he can start to work through it. If Mycroft had just been a little kinder about whole business…”

“Mycroft does not ‘do’ kind. However… he is usually more diplomatic and strategic in his behaviors. An angry or vengeful Lestrade could, due to his role as a policeman, create some degree of trouble that my brother pointedly avoids in his life.”

“I think he knew Greg better than that.”

“If he knew Lestrade better than that, he would know that his actions would cause profound hurt and, for all his many, many, many flaws… Mycroft is generally not cruel, unless it is the swiftest way to achieve his aims.”

“I can’t see what aims he had here to warrant any cruelty, though.”

“No, neither can I, but… given the degree of personality distortion he experienced, integrating his thoughts and memories could easily have impaired his ability to make effective choices. At least, in that brief moment.”

“I suppose… so… where are you off to, now?”

“Your flat.”

“Oh. Why?”
“You’re not this stupid, John.”

“I… oh. Yes. Yes, sometimes I am apparently. I just thought you might want to have a night in your own bed, get some clothes…”

“I will pay a visit to my rooms tomorrow, however… I have no interest in that tonight.”

“Good for me, then.”

“That is my intention.”

“You randy bastard.”

“Guilty as charged.”

With a smile, Sherlock began strutting away, John’s laughter bubbling in his wake. Yes, he had full intentions of paying a visit to HI headquarters tomorrow and having a certain talk that would duly distress one overfattened android who would go nameless. But, for the record, his name was Mycroft…

“Mr. Holmes? Your brother is here to see you.”

From the tone of his PA’s voice…

“There you are.”

…the brother in question was Sherlock and he was not waiting for any further announcement.

“Hello, brother dear. Back from the country already?”

“Given we were there to protect our safety, there was no compelling reason to stay, wouldn’t you say?”

“I would, which is why I asked you…”

“Ordered me.”

“… asked you to accompany us back to London. However, you are returned in time to visit Mummy on Thursday as we are commanded, so all is well.”

“All is no earthly manner well. Lestrade is distraught and you are the cause.”

Sherlock braced for his brother’s rage and was profoundly disappointed when Mycroft merely raised an eyebrow and pursed his lips.

“Well, I am certain it will pass quickly. Humans are volatile creatures, so the emotion will ebb as fast as it flowed.”

“Wrong. The pain will plague him mercilessly until you take steps to remedy the situation.”

“Me? What in heaven’s name do you expect me to do?”

Why are you asking me? You are the offender!

“Offer him…”
“Yes?”

Blackguard. This was John’s fault. Not that there is a particular reason for that, but… this is his area and he is letting down the side by his absence, though he never received notice that his presence was actually required.

“… comfort. Explanation, excuses… something! Something to erase in his mind that he was unworthy of your affection and that is why you abandoned him without even a word of acknowledgement.”

“Sergeant Lestrade is not that disappointingly insecure or immature.”

“He said you might perceive him in that fashion and asked me not to speak to you on the topic.”

“Perceptive of him.”

“However, I have decided not to pay attention to his nonsense and ask you directly why you turned away from your relationship with Lestrade when it was, by all evidence, a highly successful one.”

“I turned away from nothing, Sherlock. Sergeant Lestrade became… close… to someone who does not exist. A phantasm. It is regrettable, I admit, the time and resources wasted for something that was built upon a false foundation, however…”

“The foundation was not false.”

“I assure you it was.”

“Lestrade’s love was not false.”

“Perhaps, but the coin has two sides.”

“You claim your affection for him was not real.”

Mycroft leaned back in his chair and sighed deeply.

“I was not real, Sherlock. You know, you know better than most, that the person Sergeant Lestrade came to admire was not, in any manner, me. I am sorry, but that is the truth and you are well aware of the fact.”

Sherlock snarled because Mycroft was saying precisely what he’d expected Mycroft to say and what… what he actually felt in his own core.

“There is no reason, though, to allow Lestrade to suffer needlessly.”

“Again, I have no idea why you are having this conversation with me. Sergeant Lestrade has a bevy of acquaintances who will be more than happy, I have no doubt, to provide whatever assistance is required to alleviate his emotional errors.”

“Love is not an error.”

“When it is misplaced, yes, it is.”

“Then explain this to him. Meet him and make it clear that you are at fault for the dissolution of your relationship.”
“Fault is not the proper term, I feel. If there was conscious intent to deceive…”

“There is conscious intent to evade. That is enough.”

“I am evading nothing, Sherlock. Why you and Sherrinford persist in banging this particular drum…”

Perhaps a bit of disclosure would shock his brother into something… besides this bland denial.

“Sherrinford told him, you know.”

“Sherrinford told him what?”

“About us.”

“That I have a fondness for gelato?”

“That we were created and maintained through nanobot technology acting on the DNA blueprint from Mummy and Father.”

Sherlock had never seen his brother’s eyes widen so far, nor seen them painted with what appeared almost to be terror, but that was packed away more quickly than a human would have the time to notice.

“That is untrue. Sherrinford would never…”

“Then how did Lestrade come to inform me of his knowledge?”

“I… I see. So, your position is that if I do not make some form of amends, Sergeant Lestrade will have me in a position to affect some form of blackmail.”

This was not turning away from bland denial! This was… Mycroft was so infuriatingly… himself!

“What? Are you… is there anything in you that recognizes other paths in life but the suspicious or deceitful ones?”

“Then I have no idea why you…”

“Lestrade knows and still he aches. He could have feared, since humans have a particular talent for fearing the unknown and unexpected, but he does not. He embraced that truth and still sought to build a life with you. A loving life where you stood at the center of his world. He has no intention of making anything known because he is a truly decent, caring man who, despite your heartlessness, will protect us to his dying day. He deserves better than your disrespect and lack of regard.”

One spark, Mycroft. Show one, solitary spark of regret…

“Then I would say it is best for all if I remain far, far away from Sergeant Lestrade so he does not have to suffer my villainous presence.”

Very well… you remain closer to robot than human and I will do everything in my power to ensure Lestrade’s hurt subsides as quickly as possible, for you do not deserve his pain…

“It is profoundly unseemly that you are taking amusement from Lestrade’s suffering.”

“I am not. I simply fail to understand how you and Sherrinford believe I can provide help, of any form, to Sergeant Lestrade. Most likely, given the situation, I would only make his emotional
situation a worse one and I suspect that is precisely the opposite of what you desire. This will pass, brother dear… countless individuals have experienced a love that, to them, has gone wrong and they continue on with their lives. Now, is there anything else or…”

“I am also here to inform you that I fully intend to continue my relationship with Lestrade. And with John.”

“I see. Well, on Sergeant Lestrade’s score, I offer you congratulations on showing confidence in offering support and friendship. On Doctor Watson’s…”

“You will not forbid me to see him.”

“Forbid is a rather draconian word…”

“I will continue my relationship with John and that is the final word on the matter.”

“And how do plan on doing this, Sherlock? Thanks to Sherrinford, you are a shadow of the real Sherlock Holmes, who is now returned to London and expected to take up his former place in society. Do you intend to live some form of double life? How long do think you will be able to perpetrate the charade before John begins to ask questions you cannot answer?”

As long as is necessary. You may have abandoned Lestrade, but I will not abandon John. I… if a substandard specimen such as you could gain the love of a good man, then… I will not abandon John. I will not, and that is simply the end of it. Not that you have heard one word of this speech, Mycroft, but the principle remains sound.

“I… the problem is not insurmountable.”

“You are brimming with optimism, I see.”

“I admit that I have not given a great deal of thought to the situation, but I am confident a solution will present itself.”

“A solution that will not, include if you are contemplating it, divulging our secret to John. It is sufficiently perilous that Sergeant Lestrade has this knowledge, let alone…”

“If you are preparing to impugn John’s character, I would caution you to quickly change the course of your statement.”

“Not at all! I simply hope to remind you that accidents to happen. Slips of the tongue and the like. We cannot afford a single one, as you are well aware, brother. You are Sherlock Holmes and that is the life you need to live. I… I am uncertain that said life can accommodate a romance with your doctor. If you craft a solution, I will be very happy for you. However… I will not permit any of us to come under threat. I will take action if it is required.”

“Threats? Rather thuggish of you.”

“Not a threat, Sherlock. Simply a statement of fact. Now, I do have a great deal of work to do, unlike you, and…”

“I want you or Sherrinford to obtain for me access to New Scotland Yard.”

“What? Whatever for?”

“I wish to continue investigating cases and that can be easily affected if Anderson is shifted to
“Absolutely not. I will not meddle in…”

“Meddling is the only Olympic competition in which you could medal.”

“Thank you. As I was saying, both Constable Anderson and Sergeant Lestrade would not be happy if their changes of position were gained through influence and not merit.”

“They merit the changes, so have them made.”

“Sherrinford has already exerted pressure on the police service to have the investigation into my so-called abduction quashed. I doubt anyone would be content if he was to do so again.”

“If you believe I think either of you incapable of exerting pressure through channels not directly traceable back to you, then I weep for the future of this company for it is squarely in the hands of imbeciles.”

“Sherlock…”

“Do you, despite your withering scorn towards him, agree that Lestrade is competent in his duties and performed admirably when tasked to investigate what we believed was a crime?”

“This is becoming ridiculous.”

“Answer the question.”

“Very well. Yes, Sergeant Lestrade showed both competence and diligence in the task.”

“And his Inspector indicated that a position as a detective might be his upon his return to London.”

“That was not precisely the nature of their conversation, but yes… Gre… Sergeant Lestrade was given indication that he was being evaluated as a candidate should a position open.”

“Then make the position open.”

“Shall I wave my wand and sprinkle pixie dust over New Scotland Yard?”

“Just do what is required and… create some form of apprenticeship program in forensics for Anderson for which Anderson will be selected. He, also, is competent and diligent.”

“And willing to work with you, despite your juvenility.”

“You owe them, Mycroft. If, for nothing else, for taking seriously your welfare, as well as taking great personal and professional risk to rescue you and keep both of us out of harm’s way.”

That particular groan told Sherlock that he had won the argument and he smirked proudly, much to Mycroft’s irritation.

“If it removes you from my office so I may actually do something productive other than fan away your florid words… I shall discuss this with Sherrinford and determine if there is a way to provide Constable Anderson and Sergeant Lestrade some reward for their efforts. However, any steps we take shall be distal ones, in that if positions are created, we shall do nothing to influence how they are filled. The most qualified candidates will be the ones to gain them.”
“Very well. I suppose that is better than nothing, though not by more than a hair’s breadth, given the stench of cronyism and nepotism positively creates a visible cloud within the police hierarchy.”

“Rather hypocritical of you to deride nepotism, Sherlock, owing to the salary you draw for doing absolutely nothing for our company besides breathing.”

“That is untrue. I report on you and Sherrinford to Mummy.”

“You spy on us?”

“Yes. And, in doing so, earn my wage. Which reminds me… I require my mobile and money.”

“Oh, are you going on the lam?”

“I require free communication and am treating John to a meal tonight to celebrate the end of this ridiculous cloak-and-dagger parlor game. Also, who in this mausoleum must I see to have this removed from me?”

Sherlock held up his hand and took great satisfaction from Mycroft’s wince.

“I had forgotten, brother. Anthea will escort you to the correct lab and they will see it removed. And I will ensure that, by day’s end, the ‘Sherlock’ android currently living at Administrator Stamford’s shelter will be emancipated, with all proper documentation.”

“Good. And, you should do something to show gratitude to Stamford, also. He… he is particularly talented in his job and we would have endured a much different experience if it was not for his devotion to his charges.”

“At that point, I agree. I cannot say I was offered anything less than respect in his care and that is certainly deserving of some acknowledgement. At least, this time, it can be openly bestowed, albeit by Holmes International, as opposed to either you or me personally. It shall be done, Sherlock. worry not about that.”

“Good. I will, however, worry about my mobile and money.”

“Anthea will attend to both.”

“She will make me sit through some horrid lecture as a penalty.”

“She will undoubtedly lecture you and on the subject responsibility for she remembers well how many mobiles you have sent to early graves and the quantity of cash you have drained from my accounts when you have pickpocketed me and taken my bank card.”

“Boring.”

“Begone.”

“I am recording all of this for Mummy.”

“Which you may recite on Thursday when we visit.”

Sherlock hissed, but spun on his heel and stormed out of the office, leaving Mycroft to shake his head and wonder if either of his brothers would see fit to leave his life very much alone. This life, that is. Everything was back to normal and onward he would march, doing the work for which he was uniquely talented and which kept their little business happily humming in productivity and profit. Android design did not advance on its own and he was woefully tardy in providing the
industry with anything new or innovative to set their salivary glands aquiver. However, his tenure as a standard android and conversations with Stamford had given him a few ideas to pursue and the quivering was not too far on the horizon, if his instincts were correct. If he could get any work done, that is. Perhaps his first project was to design a new lock for the office door…
Chapter 44

“No…”

John decided a trip to Bart’s to get his own work situation sorted was sorely needed and he might as well kill two birds with one stone by making the difficult walk to the morgue to break the recent news to Molly.

“Sorry, but… yeah, Mycroft and Greg aren’t together anymore.”

“Mycroft… he loved Greg! Anyone could see that! He wouldn’t just walk away like that. He wouldn’t. He simply wouldn’t.”

“I wish I could say that was true, but… well, it was true, but it wasn’t true for the Mycroft that exists now.”

“I can’t believe it… he’s really that different?”

“Oh yes… he didn’t stay long after his memories were restored, but… he was a different person. All the little things, his tone of voice, his words, his expressions, how he held himself… it was all changed and his attitude certainly wasn’t the same. Sherlock confirms that this new Mycroft is the real one and the one we knew wasn’t. Not intentionally, Mycroft didn’t try to be different… it just happened. And Greg was the poor bastard who fell in love with that new, unintentional person.”

“That horrible! I mean… I can’t imagine how Greg must have felt. How he must still be feeling! And he’s being a thick brick about it, isn’t he?”

“If you mean trying to hide it all away, then a brick he is. It’s going to be important to get him talking, though… Sherlock said he had a good conversation with him, so maybe a bit of nudging here and there will work once some of the shock wears off. And he’ll be back at work, so that will let him do something besides sit at home alone with his thoughts.”

“If I see Mycroft, I am going to… well, I’d like to say I’d give him a good talking to, but I think I might go a bit physical on him.”

“I’ll tell you exactly where to kick to do the most damage to an android.”

“Yes! Secret weapon at the ready. It doesn’t sound like I’ll get the chance to cross his path, though.”

“I doubt it. Sherlock says Mycroft’s actually… he’s an important figure at Holmes International. Even hinted he works with the real Mycroft Holmes. I did some checking and… Mycroft Holmes is really the brains behind the research and development area. So, if our Mycroft is floating up in those clouds, with the likely wages they comes with…”

“He’s a rich bastard, android notwithstanding.”

“Exactly. Which…”

“Is strange to think about.”

“Exactly, Part 2.”

“It’s a rather bigoted way to think, as well.”
“Exactly, Part 3. I wonder if that was part of the experiment, truth be told. Get two very high functioning androids to experience what the normal models do so… I don’t know, make things better? I know Holmes International is very active with the political side of android life, so they might be hoping to start some policies in motion and have data to back them up. I know Sherlock was not content with what he experienced at the shelter, Mike’s treatment aside, and that’s not nearly the worst of what androids go through in private hands.”

“I’d things to change, actually, and if Mycroft and Sherlock’s experience can help with that then hurray!, but…”

“None of that helps Greg.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“We will, though.”

“Oh, no question about that. Individually and collectively. Are you free any night soon?”

“I am! I’m on days this week and I think a nice night together will definitely do something to lift Greg’s spirits.”

“I’ll talk to Anderson, then, and see what their schedule is like. Sherlock has some commitment for Thursday, so that’s out, but… I’ll see what I can arrange.”

“Are you going to invite Mike?”

“Shit!”

“I thought he was your friend?”

“No, I mean I forgot to call him. I’ll do that today. Maybe arrange to meet him to talk in person. This… this isn’t the sort of thing you share over the phone. And, yes, I’ll ask him to join us. He had more invested in Mycroft and Greg than just a case-case worker arrangement and he’s absolutely a man you need in your corner when you want to do a proper cheering up.”

“Good. I did mean to ask… is he single?”

Well, now…

“That he is. Not seeing anyone either, that I know of.”

“Alright. Interesting.”

“Bake your special walnut biscuits sort of interesting or wear that new dress you were boasting about interesting.”

“I’m not wearing that dress where I can drip wine or food on it! I’d look a tit, now wouldn’t I?”

“Right, right… that’s a dress to wear out when you can be more genteel about things.”

“Precisely. I’ve got a jumper that’s perfect though. Guaranteed to make eyes pop.”

“I’ll glue mine in especially tight.”

“You’ve only got eyes for Sherlock and you know it.”
“Guilty. Which is odd, given it’s me, but… if Greg’s situation taught me one thing is that true connections are precious, fragile creatures. I suppose the army doctor in me knows that, too. You need to hold on when you find one and thank your lucky stars.”

“True. And I’m happy for you, John, I truly am. You and Sherlock make a great couple and that’s a very good ‘good’ that’s come out of all of this. Is… are things going to be different with Sherlock back in his old life?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so, if early signs can be believed. It seems… you know how Mycroft said right from the start that Sherlock was effectively his brother? I think that part is still extremely true and while Mycroft, the big brother toils away, baby brother Sherlock reaps the rewards. He supposedly does have a job with the Holmes company, but it sounds like it’s more a created one so he has income, as opposed to one that actually involves any work.”

“That is very baby brother-ish.”

“And that bloke Sherrinford must be fine with it, too. Maybe he falls victim to looking at our Sherlock and seeing his own brother, so he let’s things go. Heaven’s knows it’s not as if the company is short of money.”

“I know who can buy my wine, then, when we have our night in.”

“We all know, Molly, and we have grand plans for Sherlock’s purse.”

“Which he will unfailingly leave at home and cry poor.”

“Unquestionably. Maybe he has a bank card and I can write down the number when he’s not looking.”

“I’ll distract him with a cadaver.”

“We make a good team, Molly.”

“That we do.”

Stamford smiled across the table and took a look around the tidy restaurant. When John called yesterday to chat, it had come with an invitation to lunch and John Watson funding a nice lunch was not something you passed by without snatching quickly.

“Well, this is nice, I have to say. But, you treating me to lunch, John? I’m a bit worried. Are you dying?”

“Funny, you ridiculous android wrangler. I… I actually had something to talk to you about and I thought it was best done in person…”

“I give my blessing for Sherlock and you to wed. Oh, the chops look nice…”

“Your sense of humor never fails to leave me not laughing. For your information, Sherlock and I are moving along nicely down the romantic path, but no vicar and flowers on the horizon, thank you very much. And the chops here are especially good.”

“Alright then, what do I have to suffer through to earn my meal and a hearty pint?”

John sighed and waited until he called over the server and placed their orders before answering.
Which he did in full-color detail.

“Dear god… that’s… I don’t even know what to say. The Mycroft I knew could be a touch arrogant and condescending, but never to this degree. And certainly never to Greg… this is… Greg must be destroyed.”

“Oh, he is. Trying to deny it, but he’s hollow inside. I’m surprised his skin simply hasn’t folded in and left him a sad, flat figure.”

“I’ve never heard… androids do suffer memory issues and they can cause personality shifts, but not this severe. At least, not that I’ve ever read about, but I also don’t have any appreciable experience with androids of Mycroft’s caliber. For him to have a job with that level of autonomy and responsibility... at Holmes International of all places. He has to be a highly experimental design that… I can see them not wanting him or Sherlock to get into anyone’s hands, frankly. There’s no model out there that approaches what it would take to function in that capacity. Even our new android MP would struggle with what Mycroft must be tasked to do if what you tell me is correct.”

“Unless Sherlock’s lying, which isn’t something he’s prone to do unless it’s about something ridiculous or himself personally. He, apparently, even steps in for the real Mycroft Holmes when the human version isn’t available or he has to do something like a meeting or public appearance that doesn’t suit his fancy. Some of those must have people there who can talk the right language that would expose someone not up to snuff in android design fairly quickly, so…”

“Amazing. Truly, that is amazing. And right under my nose! But, it does explain, to some degree, the events of my morning.”

“Oh? What happened.”

“You are now having a collegial pint with the new London director of Android Services and Shelters.”

“What? You?”

“Thank you for being completely incredulous, you rotten excuse for a friend.”

“I… I’m not! I’m just… that’s a BIG promotion and I didn’t think that sort of thing happened in one jump.”

“Oh, it doesn’t, unless there’s a reason to do it and Holmes International saying ‘make it so’ is about the best reason there is.”

“You think that’s what happened?”

“Well, I am also now a member of a joint government/industry committee on android affairs for which the chairman is Sherrinford Holmes himself, so you tell me.”

“I’d say Mycroft and/or Sherlock gave you high marks.”

“And I can’t say I didn’t get a bit of a thrill out of that. A lot we do is either unnoticed or disparaged in some manner and having the clients I directly service speak well of the treatment they received… it definitely was thrill-worthy.”

“Well, you have my sincere congratulations. No one is more deserving and I know you’ll do an amazing job. Sorry you won’t be directly servicing androids anymore, though? Oh god, that sounded horrid.”
‘You always have sex on the brain, so I’ve learned to translate. And, yes, to some degree. But that’s offset by the good I can do for a larger number. The fellow who currently holds the post, or did until today, is more of a minding the shop sort of chap rather than someone who wants to make positive change. He’s getting shuffled over somewhere they like that sort of thing, I suspect. The committee I’ll be a part of is very influential in how things run and I know for a fact that the government side have been the foot-draggers for real reform.”

“Mike Stamford is nobody’s foot-dragger.”

“Correct. Honestly, Holmes must have lowered the boom heavily on someone to get me positioned, but I’ll thank him for it, because…”

“This is a dream come true.”

“It is! The chance to roll up my sleeves and make a difference? Bring it to me with a large spoon.”

“Speaking of spoons, have a night free soon for a little therapeutic socializing with Greg?”

“I’ll make time. This sort of thing can leave terrible scars without healthy opportunities to work through the pain. And this situation… there’s not even a standard model to compare it to for putting things in perspective. Nowhere to look to say – they made it through this and did fine. Is he… he’s alright with Sherlock, isn’t he?”

“Still one of Sherlock’s strongest supporters. No carry over from the Mycroft situation.”

“Good. It can happen, not that I’d predict it for Greg, but it pays to be certain.”

“Ever the social worker.”

“Of course! It’s my only skill. That and murdering the lovely chop I see heading towards me.”

“And we’ll murder something else as soon as I work out which night is a good one for all involved. Do you have anything but dreary administrative clothes in your wardrobe?”

“And you care because?”

“I have to look at you.”

“Fair enough. Actually, donning my social worker cap…”

“Crown.”

“…my social worker crown, it’s likely better for Greg that I don’t arrive looking my normal straight-from-work self. He’ll need to be comfortable with people to open up a little on his thoughts and feelings and my Mr. Case Worker tie won’t engender that.”

“Good. We’ll all be the better for it, too.”

Mike narrowed his eyes at John, who was merrily diving into his food and knew the doctor had some mischief he was planning, but since the outline was too vague to get a hint of its shape, the wait and see tactic was best. Not that mischief was the most important thing, right now. Greg’s well-being held that title and he’d make certain to get some quiet time alone with the sergeant to use some of his super-secret conversation powers to assess Greg’s state of mind and form a plan for moving it from what was sure to be a disheartening direction. Damn you, Mycroft… metamorphosing wasn’t
your fault, but failing to show common decency afterwards certainly was. Maybe his new crown could buy him access to the new version of his familiar android for a little chat of their own. Why have a crown if you couldn’t abuse your power? It was practically a requirement for the job…

___

“Why did I agree to this?”

Anderson swallowed his urge to smack Greg on the back of the head and simply handed his friend a beer to bide the time until the rest of the guests arrived. It had been somewhat of a nuclear-level battle to get Greg to agree to something this week, despite his early agreements on the issue, but that wasn’t too much of a surprise. As the week wore on and they found themselves back on the streets, Greg had begun to close in on himself more and more, showing a plastic mask to everyone, which was realistic enough to fool most people, but gave his friends a nasty turn when they had a moment to phone or stop in to chat at the end of his shift.

“Because you’re the most central to all of us and you seem to always have extra alcohol in the cupboards.”

Which had not pleased Anderson when he did a little kitchen snooping. More than the usual amount of alcohol was in the cupboard there was no mistaking the smell of scotch on Greg’s breath when his friend answered the door to let him into the flat.

“Look, I’m not feeling very in the mood for…”

“Too late! You agreed and everyone is en route so it’s not possible to say turn around and go the fuck home. Besides, it’s just people you know and there’s not going to be any dancing or whatnot, so just sit back, eat, drink, watch a film and be happy we’re on days and not overdosing on coffee to make it through the darkest-before-the-dawn hours.”

Greg sighed and took a long drink of his beer. His friends were… friends. They were trying to keep his spirits up, checking on him and all the things he’d do for any of them, but… it wasn’t necessary. Life went on, blah blah blah… you just keep going and, one day, the ache subsides and someone new catches your eye. All he needed was time. Time was a good friend for a lot of things…

“None of you have to go through all this trouble, you know.”

“What trouble? We’re doing exactly what we’d be doing if…”

Oh look, a landmine just waiting for a willing foot. Lovely.

“… if none of that dark magic corporation business ever happened. It’s a nice opportunity for everyone to relax and have a nice time, so don’t wag your finger at it, you naysayer.”

You didn’t need to be a policeman to see the crack open in Greg’s mask and the ache peek out, even though it was quickly closed again. What should have happened tonight was a couple welcoming friends to their home, but… carry on and make do.

“I know, but…”

“No buts about it. Like I said, it’s too late to change anything, so just enjoy yourself. We’ve got… oh, here we go.”

The knock at the door wasn’t precisely one way or another, but Anderson had no doubt Molly Hooper was on the premises.
“Hi!”

Wearing a very fetching jumper.

“Molly Hooper, as I live and breathe. Greg, comb your beard, shake the pigeons out of your hair and prepare for visitors.”

“And I have biscuits, too, so I’m an especially welcome guest. How are you today, Police Sergeant Greg Lestrade?”

“Fuckily fine, thank you, Smarty Boots Molly Hooper.”

Molly cut eyes to Anderson as she handed him the plate of biscuits and smiled a touch sadly at the slight shake of his head.

“Well, I’m here so you’re brilliantly fine now. And I saw John and Sherlock arguing their way up the street so they should be here in however long it takes for them to wade through their waggly words and make it up the stairs.”

A close look at her host gave Molly a warm feeling in that Greg genuinely seemed happy to hear John and Sherlock were arriving together. Greg was such a decent man… it was the shame of the ages that his decency had been trampled on by one particular android who would get a kick in the right place if they ever crossed paths.

“Lovely. Hope the argument is over when they get here or we’ll all get drawn into the nonsense.”

“That can be fun, though. And we have wine to smooth the rough edges!”

Wine that Molly happily took from Anderson and used it to smooth her own rough edges as she took a seat and prepared for the night. She loved her work, she truly did, but some days were easier than others. Today was certainly one of the others. But, that would give her something to share with Sherlock to keep conversation going. He’d be thrilled to discuss a terrible traffic collision and how patterns of injury and death could be used to determine who was sitting where and things like that. It wasn’t something you could chat about with the grocer and, sometimes, talking through a rough day made a world of difference.

“Always my best horse piss wine for you, my lady.”

“Must have been a cracking good horse, then, because this is lovely. Ooh! There they are.”

As if the bickering easily passing through the door wasn’t its own clue. Anderson considered setting the latch, but decided Sherlock’s roared affront at being denied immediate entry would wake the neighbors.

“Can either of you speak in a voice lower than the decibel level of a launching rocket?”

“That is patently ridiculous, Anderson. That volume is nowhere near approachable with unenhanced vocalizations, by either humans or androids.”

“Well, I guess we’ll get to discuss that in more detail next week, now won’t we?”

Sherlock’s proud smile lit up the room and Molly giggled at his clear delight.

“You moving in with Philip, Sherlock? Setting up a little flat share to save on rent?”
“I would as soon drink boiling oil. For your information, Molly, I will be participating in a program with the purpose of assessing the use of androids for forensics investigations. Anderson has been detailed to forensics to act as my liaison.”

Anderson snuck a look at his partner, former partner, and frowned a little at Greg’s wistful look. It was a fantastic opportunity and he’d applied the second he saw the opening, but… it just left Greg with one less daily connection when that was exactly what he didn’t need right now. However, they’d see each other often and maybe more than often if Greg got the detective sergeant’s position that just opened. He’d pushed the stupid berk to put in his paperwork, since said stupid berk seemed to have lost a large portion of his motivation for… anything… but Greg finally gave in and now it was the waiting game for the interview and the final decision. He wasn’t so proud as to have done a little asking around and Greg did seem to be the frontrunner for the post, but… nothing was done until it was done.

“That’s wonderful! Oh, I’m so thrilled! Congratulations to the both of you!”

“Sherlock and Anderson getting married? Good heavens, but the winds shift swiftly with you lot.”

Stamford smiled and stepped more fully from his eavesdropping position into the flat and immediately made snap decisions about the status of the group structure. Everyone happy and clearly supportive about whatever was going on, but… poor Greg. Happy and supportive, but his own pain was evident and it was a struggle for him to keep the brightness in his eyes. Alrightee then…

“Why is everyone attempting to conjoin me with Anderson? The mere thought is crippling.”

While Molly openly admired Mike’s casual attire and filled him in on the glad tidings, John and Anderson shared one of their patented silent conversations that said Greg was stagnant as old pond water and tonight should, hopefully, be a good one for him. He needed it and whatever it took, short of a striptease act, they were prepared to do.

“Then I offer my congratulations as well! Heavens, that’s a very positive step for you, Sherlock. I know you had hopes to dig further into all that guts, grime and gore, so well done you. Philip, you have my congratulations for the job transition and my condolences for… well, you can figure it out.”

Mike gratefully took his beer from John and narrowed his eyes when John pushed him towards the kitchen chair that had put next to Molly’s cushy throne, but… well, sitting next to Ms. Hooper was certainly not a hardship…

“Greg… how are you faring with the loss of your stalwart partner.”

Yes, part of the darkness was due to that loss. But, it was also part of Greg’s brightness, so status quo on that score. Social-work tie not in evidence tonight, but the imaginary case-worker cap would stay squarely on head.

“He’s still dogging my heels, unfortunately. The new job doesn’t start until next Wednesday, so I’ve got to suffer his halitosis and troll face for too many more days, in my opinion.”

“Notice he doesn’t tell you, though, Mike, that he’s got his own application in for a detective sergeant’s job, because he’s hoping to milk sympathy from everybody he meets and paint me as a vaudeville villain.”

Reaching for goals and moving forward, at least, in his career. Good sign…
“Bollocks! I graciously acquiesced to do it since your constant fucking clucking was driving me insane and I was scared you were going to peck me to death!”

But needed pushing to do the reaching. Not so good a sign… but, the crisis wasn’t so dire that he simply refused to do it or just meandered until the application deadline passed…

“When do you hear? Only asking so that we can schedule the next little gathering to celebrate your good fortune. I’ve got my own good news this week and it, unfortunately, does place more demands on my time than I’m used to.”

After Greg and Molly made, ‘start talking’ motions, Mike let his own change in work status out into the open and smiled rather smugly when Molly gave his hand a squeeze and a hearty congratulations that was seconded by Greg and earned him a beer from Anderson as his reward.

“That’s fantastic, Mike. Truly fantastic. The city’s android population doesn’t know how lucky they are that your hand is on the rudder now. Oh, that’s made my night, it really has.”

Case-worker cap squared and observational powers to the fore… yes, Greg was sincere in his words and that was a very heartening thing. He could feel true happiness for others and that could be turned to happiness with himself with the proper strategies and counseling. Which would be readily available, no matter how busy or stressed he got with his new job.

“Thank you! But, I’m more anxious to hear about your new position. Timeframe for hiring?”

Mike’s genial smile drew a semblance of one out of Greg, who promised himself that he’d do his very best tonight and not be a wet blanket. Besides, Stamford did seem genuinely happy for him and confident he’d get the job. He wasn’t so confident, because a few other lads put in for the post and they were quality officers, but… yeah, no wet blanketing his own party.

“Interviews are next week and it’ll be several more days while they discuss things, I suppose. The higher-ups, I mean.”

Sherlock filed away that information and began to plan ways he could glean the leaning of whatever hiring committee or whatnot was involved. If the decision was not going Lestrade’s way, he would gladly step in and demonstrate, with all appropriate detail, how stupid was their thinking on the issue and why Lestrade was the best-qualified candidate. Dullwits responded well to visuals, due to poor reading skills, most likely, so he would have several graphs and diagrams prepared, just in case.

“Well, I, for one, think you are well-suited for the job. You have both interest and talent for detective work, as well as strong worth ethic and commitment to community. If you require a non-police reference, let me know and I’ll pass one along.”

Greg grinned a little more honestly hearing Mike’s show of support and nodded slightly as he took a long swallow of his beer.

“I’ll keep that in mind. Sometimes they ask for that after interviews, so… yeah, I’ll let you know.”

Molly’s ‘that’s so nice of you, Mike’ was accompanied by a pat of his arm and John smiled that his friend’s cheeks colored the palest bit of pink at the contact.

“I am here for food and a film, which I have been promised a full 55% vote in choosing the example we will watch. Why has none of this been set in motion?”

Trust Sherlock to bring the party back to focus and it was a flurry of take-away menus passed
around, phone calls made and a long string of complaints and degradation of Greg’s video collection before everyone had settled with a glass or bottle of something relaxing while they waited for the happy knock at the door to deliver their food.

“Why can we not begin our film?”

“Sherlock… starting a film, then having to stop it and… this is more efficient.”

“You are not known to be a champion of efficiency, John.”

“I’m taking on a new role. Like it?”

“It is… not unattractive.”

Molly giggled and smiled shyly as Mike asked if he could refill her wine. Then she shared a ‘what?’ look with Greg who was beginning to catch onto the why the pathologist had worn the new jumper that she had formerly said was only for those special occasions that might end with an exchange of phone numbers or something far more body-related. Well, good for her. Good for her and Mike both, actually. If there were two nicer people in the world who deserved a nice person in their lives, they probably lived in some monastery somewhere while they awaited the delivery of their angel’s wings.

“Then there we have it. Efficiency wins out. Oh look, one of those ridiculous ‘entertainment’ programs. Celebrities, parties, scandals…”

“John, you are no longer attractive.”

Anderson nodded his agreement and made to steal the remote from John, who guarded it with his life.

“Nope. This is perfect for tonight. You make fun of the awful clothes and foolish things these prats are doing. Makes you feel good about your own life, by comparison. They’ve got money, but… look at that bloke! His hair has to be made of whatever synthetic goo they use to make record albums!”

Given that gauntlet thrown down, it was the launch forward by the whole group towards decimating the rich and famous for their utter lack of anything approaching taste or common sense until the room fell absolutely silent and nobody tried to look at Greg, who was staring at the screen and clutching his beer bottle with a force that had Anderson plucking it from his fingers before something unfortunate happened. Apparently, Mycroft Holmes was making an appearance with the rich and famous of London tonight at some charity event and… that was bad enough, but having a very beautiful woman on his arm was a punch on top of a stab. It wasn’t a surprise that Molly was the first to dive in and try to break the crushing silence.

“Oh… oh Greg… who would have thought… that bloke does look like Mycroft, though, doesn’t he? They certainly made a good copy, though… ooh…no, I don’t like the look of this one, though. He might be the ‘real’ Mycroft, but he looks like a constipated twat and that bird he’s got with him… I bet she’s a pure snake despite that big, fake white smile… women know these things, so I’m right, you can count on that.”

Sherlock did his very best to keep his face fixed in expression and not snarl in anger. Stupid Mycroft… maybe nobody here could tell that his brother was in utter agony, milling about with the rich, tasteless, stupid people, but he could and if his idiotic brother couldn’t push back against Sherrinford and just say no to his public relations nonsense, then he deserved his fate. But… that
fate should bring misery only to him and not to Lestrade.

“She… well, I suppose if someone was that rich and powerful, that is the sort of woman you’d have on your arm.”

“For your information, Lestrade…”

And to, maybe, quiet some of your distress…

“… Irene Adler is a frequent arm ornament for my… Mycroft Holmes. She has zero romantic interest in him, and he has none in her, but they both have great interest in furthering their own schemes and agendas, so they make an effective pairing for events such as these.”

“How do you know all that, Sherlock? And that Miss Fake Smile doesn’t have Mr. Holmes in her sights.”

“Because, Molly, I… am not entirely unaware of the comings and goings of the Holmes brothers, being in frequent contact with the youngest member of the family. And, for your information, Irene is a lesbian and Mycroft… well, not that he has appreciable romantic urges for anyone or anything, but if I was go bestow a label upon him it would be ‘gay.’ “

“Oh… well, that does shut that door quite nicely. Really, though… he’s not nearly as handsome or kind-looking as the Mycroft we knew. Probably the type to snap his fingers and think ten lackeys are going to jump to see what he wants. I already don’t like him, though he does do black tie quite smartly.”

Sherlock had to admit that Molly’s assessment wasn’t far off base, however, the lackeys were his researchers and they were paid handsomely to jump when his fingers snapped. However, none of that was important, given Lestrade was still staring at the television, knowing that the person he was seeing was the Mycroft they knew and… this had to end

“John, perhaps it is time to start our film.”

John shook off his own discomfort and nodded, grabbing the video and getting it into the player. For his part, Mike was taking in how this was affecting Greg and feeling his heart break for the misery he was witnessing. What a terrible situation… seeing a twin of the person you loved and the grand life they were leading, lack of romantic entanglements notwithstanding. I was clear the ‘what ifs’ were ricocheting through Greg’s mind and doing more than a slight amount of damage. However, given he’d never seen this real Mycroft in the years he worked in the android business, maybe these appearances were very few and far between. Regardless, the possibility would be another thing they could talk about during his and Greg’s little private chat. How to process seeing this individual, on the telly or in some magazine, and manage the emotions the images stirred…

“That individual is both pompous and dreary, Lestrade, and any android based on him is exceedingly unworthy of regard or affection. Consider yourself well away from that quagmire.”

Greg tossed Sherlock a watery smile, but the android’s words didn’t make much dent in what he was feeling. Which was a nausea-inducing combination of cold hollowness and hot, sour anguish. But… it would pass. All things did, just had to keep breathing, going to work, paying his rent and… it would pass. Now, time to let everyone enjoy his flat and a have some fun… it was only for a few hours. He could do that. A few hours was nothing… he’d been making do for days and could do it forever if he had to…
Looking at the paper in his hand, Greg felt a small crack in his hard, chilly concrete that made up the insides where his organs had been. He’d gotten it. He was now Detective Sergeant Greg Lestrade, or as ‘now’ as the human resources section could stamp his paperwork and his duty assignments be drawn up. It hadn’t been easy… two interviews because the candidate pool was, as he feared, rich with good, solid officers, but he’d done his best and added in the reference letter from Mike Stamford to his application packet when asked for additional insights into his character, sense of ethics and all of that… he’d gotten the position. He started officially in ten days and that would put him squarely back to working a lot with Anderson, who was deliriously happy in forensics, despite Sherlock taking full advantage of his own new job and diving headlong into any case he found interesting, whether they were officially assigned to it or not.

It had been… a good time. Since he’d last had guests two weeks ago, Sherlock and John had certainly continued on their merry romantic way, if the stories he heard were true and you didn’t doubt Sherlock’s stories when he made you sit down to listen to every detail and, surreptitiously, toss out small questions to make certain he was doing things right and not making a tremendous mess of it all. And dear Ms. Hooper… enjoying the dating world with a certain high-level Android Services administrator. They’d had three now which, again from what he’d heard, were highly successful and a fourth loomed on the horizon this week, if he remembered correctly. How Mike found time for that as well as his punishing work schedule was a miracle, especially… especially since time was spared for him and a few difficult conversations that… that had helped him, not necessarily feel better, but breathe easier and that was a victory, wasn’t it? He… well, he was getting by. Breathing better, going to work, paying his rent… things were certainly safe and stable.

Of course, what was making him feel a little less safe and stable was the fact that every time he passed a public phone the stupid thing started to ring. Coincidences happened, of course, but if Sherlock was playing silly buggers and hacking into the phone system, that was a major crime! He didn’t want to start his detective’s career by arresting Sherlock for hacking and criminal mischief. John would have his bollocks for lunch and, frankly, the only fun he was having lately was with those bollocks and their magically expanding friend who both adored a sexy night with one thick-fingered hand…

Now his mobile was ringing. Wonderful. Not paying you enough attention, Sherlock?

“Do you not have a single curious bone in your body, soon-to-be Detective Sergeant Lestrade?”

Sherrinford! What… oh, that bastard…

“If you got me that job, I’ll…”

“I most certainly did not! Sherlock said he’d sneak into my bedroom one night if I did that and shave my head, draw obscene pictures on my walls in indelible ink and make certain my television entertainment was restricted to cat shows and fishing programs.”

“He… then, you did have something to do with it if Sherlock…”

“There is a dark sedan idling about… oh, a block up from where you’re standing. Would you do me the courtesy of stepping inside.”

“Why?”

“You’d fetch a good price on the white slaver market and I need the cash for dinner tonight.”

“Funny. And no, I wouldn’t be that courteous.”
“Did I sell you to slavers the last time we talked?”

“Oh… you want to talk. Can’t say I can think of a single thing that makes that suggestion even slightly appealing.”

“Just get in the car, Greg. I’ll toss in alcohol to sweeten the deal.”

Alcohol, his other best friend lately. Wouldn’t be polite to stand up a stalwart mate like that. Besides, he did need to know if Sherrinford arranged the job at Sherlock’s request so he could turn it down now before he even got a taste of the detective’s life. He really didn’t need to add that to the loved-and-lost burden to carry forward through the years…

“Fine, but…”

“You can lower the window to leave yourself an escape route. I realize you don’t have your canine bodyguard along this time.”

Frowning, but not wanting to appear cowardly and foolish since that was not the proper way to start a detective’s career, if that was still on the table, Greg began walking and stopped at the car, startling a little when the driver got out to open the door for him.

“Mr. Holmes will be happy you agreed to this meeting, Mr. Lestrade.”

“He pays you well, right? For all his ridiculous playacting?”

The twinkle in the driver’s eye said he was paid more than well and, further, what was there not to love about a job where playacting was involved.

“Whenever you are ready, sir.”

Greg sighed and got into the car, deciding that if he was going to the white slavers, he’d go with a badly-sung song in his heart and poked about until he found the mechanism to open the drinks cupboard to pour himself a scotch. If the driver was nice enough to give him a ride home, provided he wasn’t on a boat to his new owner or something, maybe he could sneak the rest of the bottle away with him. Smart man takes his benefits where he finds them and Greg Lestrade still had smarts going for him, if nothing else…
“You’ve got to be kidding me!”

Greg looked out the window of the vehicle and saw the exterior of the pub he’d taken Mycroft to on their first evening out together. This was not a coincidence and Sherrinford Holmes was a bastard.

“I assure you, sir, this is the correct address.”

“Which is it… Sherrinford thinks he’s being funny or is a complete, fucking arsehole.”

“Hmmmm… either is entirely possible, however, he was neither laughing maniacally nor rubbing his hands together in villainous glee when he gave me instructions, so it is rather a toss-up, I’m afraid.”

Greg wondered why he had thought someone like Sherrinford Fucking Holmes would employ someone with the proper maturity and seriousness for driving a large beauty like this since… that berk was not what one expected for an immeasurably rich and powerful mover and shaker. He was a toddler! But, with Sherlock as a brother… ok, there was a little sense to be made of that.

“You’re no help.”

“I shall dock myself ten minutes pay for my lack of satisfaction, sir.”

“Since that’s likely my whole day’s wages, I’ll consider that sufficient. Alright… anything you can tell me, working man to working man?”

The eyes that were looking at him in the rear-view mirror were, at least, sympathetic, which gave Greg some hope he wasn’t walking naked into the lion’s den.

“Mr. Holmes is surprisingly approachable, when matters are not business related and… just speak honestly with him. That is really all for which he hopes.”

Honesty… well, it was free. That was something. Not an easy something, perhaps, but… when did his life get this out of control…

“Alright… but I hope he’s prepared to pay for our drinks.”

“If he claims a forgotten wallet, feel free to tackle him and remove it forcibly from his left, inner jacket pocket.”

A genuine laugh pushed through Greg’s dread and it followed him out of the car and through the doors of… the pub he had not officially declared off-limits, but it was solidly on the unofficial off-limits list. At least, the evil fucker wasn’t sitting at the table he and Mycroft had shared. That would have earned Holmes a solid punch to the head.

“Detective Sergeant Lestrade! So happy you could join me.”

“First, fuck you.”

“Thank you.”

“Second, explain how you’re connected to my new maybe job.”
Sherrinford waved Greg to take a seat and Greg made certain to give him a solid ‘I’m watching you glare’ before complying.

“Sherlock said this was the direction you hoped your career would take and thought that you deserved some thanks for the help and friendship you offered him. However, I was under strict orders not to interfere in the hiring process. A little shuffle of the police budget is easy enough to affect if you know the levers to pull and the position was created, one that was sorely needed, you must admit, but after that… hands off! If you didn’t get the position, it was because you weren’t yet qualified for it and that would be that.”

“I really got it on my own. I have your word on that?”

“You do and, while I can understand that you might think my word isn’t worth a biscuit crumb, you can confirm this with Sherlock. Congratulations, Detective Sergeant! Your skill, dedication and potential was properly rewarded and you were given a position where you will be of greater service to the police ranks and your community.”

Admitting that he felt a great deal better than he had minutes ago, and offering a warm and sincere thank you, would be gracious, but bugger that.

“You had Anderson’s position created, too, didn’t you?”

“Created, yes, but with the same restrictions on my interference as for yours. He applied with whoever else wanted it and won the job based on merit.”

“That’s something, I suppose.”

“Two people were placed in positions where their effectiveness and value to the police service was increased and the citizens will reap the benefits. Your pride does you credit, but do us all a favor and don’t be a whinger about this.”

Sherrinford waved off Greg’s affronted glare and waved over the server to take their order, which he happily gave for both of them.

“I can order my own drinks, thank you.”

“Were you going to order a pint of lager?”

“That’s not important.”

“Fine. You be the drinks king for the next round.”

“I will! You’re still paying, though.”

“You’re as bad as my last date. I suspect I’ll get about the same quantity of nakedness out of you, too.”

It wasn’t fair that this bloke was rich, handsome, influential and could also sit in a pub and behave about ridiculously as any of his mates would. The Holmes brothers were nothing if not complicated.

“Your bed is staying cold if you’re laying hopes on me giving it a bit of warmth.”

“Exactly like my last date. And the one before. I really need to use a better dating service.”

“Or stop getting names out of the personal ads of the papers.”
“Yeah, that’s led to some truly disappointing evenings. Fortunately, I’m very content with my own company.”

“Left hand or right?”

“I’m ambidextrous, actually, so I can enjoy my fill of wild, two-on-one action.”

Sherlock was a colorful, vibrant headache-creator, this one was a colorful, vibrant headache-creator and Mycroft was… well, every family had the odd duck in the nest.

“Lucky you. So tell me, why aren’t you hosting a fantastic alone party right now instead of downsizing your usual drinking establishment to pass the time with me?”

The server arrived with the drinks and Greg took a long swallow of his while he watched Sherrinford sip his whisky and take time to think before answering.

“Why do you think I told you about Mycroft and Sherlock? The unvarnished truth, I mean?”

Alright, not at all expected and even the mere thought of that secret being in the same room with the general public had Greg’s hair standing on end.

‘I… I suppose you thought I wouldn’t leave matters alone unless I was convinced there was nothing left to dig for.”

“That’s not poorly reasoned. It’s completely wrong, but not poorly reasoned.”

“Was that supposed to be a compliment? If so, you need to work on your verbal skills.”

“It was supposed… alright, I do admit that sometimes, just sometimes, mind you, my raconteur wit goes a touch awry. Anyway… that wasn’t the reason.”

“Do you actually plan on telling me what it was or is this now some form of guessing game. Sherlock would be a lot better at it than me, so maybe he’s the one who should be playing.”

“Sherlock would roll on the floor frothing at the mouth.”

“Oh… that… ah.”

“What does that mean?”

“It’s got to do with personal stuff, doesn’t it?”

“That’s both well-reasoned and correct. I told you about my brothers… can I call you Greg? Formality seems a bit balls in this atmosphere.”

“Only if I can call you Sherrinford.”

“Sherry works, though I’ve heard all the possible jokes about it so just don’t.”

“Fair enough. Go on.”

“I know you’re very aware of the importance of the information I gave you and how utterly devastating it could be if it floated free in this cesspit of a world. But… if you were going to be in Mycroft’s life as… whatever you two wanted, partner or husband, then it’s not information that could be kept secret very successfully or for very long. One visit to our parents’ home and you’d start to wonder about certain photographs and mementos. You needed to know in case we’d be
sharing Christmas dinners and Mummy’s awful ideas for birthday parties.”

The urge to inquire about the nature of those awful ideas flared in Greg’s head, but it’s teeny-tiny flame was completely obliterated by the raging bonfire of shock that...

“You… you expected Mycroft and me…”

“The evidence was fairly overwhelming that such was the direction you two were traveling. I have to say… at least for your Mycroft. But… I knew my brother. The old, familiar one, that is. I realized it was unlikely that he’d be the same after… the procedure… but… I had hope. Maybe, with luck, that Mycroft would remain in some form. It was a form of Mycroft… I love my brother, Greg. I always have. But, it’s hard to like him, at times. He seems to have little use for anyone besides being vehicles to carry out his orders and is absolutely no fun to spend time with. However… no matter how cold and detached he appears, his love for Sherlock is fierce and undeniable. There’s something in him that not only can love, but loves deeply and enduringly. It has to be deep and enduring to maintain his level of unconditional devotion to that infantile miscreant.”

Greg drained his beer and startled when he began quaffing air, propelling him to waggle his glass to their server to keep them coming.

“You thought… maybe that’s how he felt about me? Well, you were wrong.”

“I… I’m not so sure.”

Greg waggled his glass faster and his panicked face put fire under the server’s feet to get a fresh pint in front of him fast.

“Bollocks.”

“Have them, and they’re glorious. That’s beside the point, though.”

“Mycroft does not have a speck of… anything… for me. He proved that rather well, I think.”

“Uh… don’t take this the wrong way…”

“Now what?”

“Given you don’t really know this Mycroft, I doubt you have the information necessary to predict what he thinks or feels.”

“I saw what I needed to see. His back as he walked out the door.”

“And that’s all. Not a lot of meat on that bone.”

“The fact he could have been mistaken for a frog when he jumped out of his chair when I tried… I’ve got my evidence. More than I need, in fact.”

“Yeah, that was rude, I admit, but… I honestly think he was a bit in shock at that point.”

“And every day after? You don’t think part of me hopes, every time my mobile rings or there’s a knock at my door, that it’s him? That’s he shaken out whatever crawled up his arse and he wants what we had again? That he wants me, wants us… hmmm, seems to me that is exactly what hasn’t happened.”

Greg forcibly dragged the feral snarl off of his face and waved to clear away the angry energy beams
radiating off of him in Sherrinford’s direction.

“You’re right. What has happened is that he’s close to working himself to death and is more closed off and robotic than ever. If me or his PA didn’t see him fed and dragged home or to his suite at HI at least once every few days, I don’t think he’d see a wink of rest and, yes, that can be very harmful to him and he well knows it.”

“Saw him on the telly with that Adler woman, mate. Looked well-rested to me.”

“What you saw was the end result of myself and Anthea enduring the need-brain-bleach experience of shoving him into a shower, washing his hair, me seeing him char… energized enough not to fall on his face, dressed and to that event, sitting wedged between us so he couldn’t bolt away. I’ll tell you one thing that didn’t change when he… got muddled… it was his fastidiousness. What I observed while he was with you was that he was just as fussy and meticulous about his appearance and grooming as he ever was. You tell me, what would have made your Mycroft neglect himself to that degree?”

“Having to catch up on the enormous amount of work sitting piled up on his desk?”

Sherrinford’s rude noise was applause-worthy, so Greg happily complied.

“He’s got a shower in his lab and stores extra clothes there so he can keep himself tidy and presentable, even when he’s swamped with projects. I actually think it erodes his ability to think when he’s messy, fussy little bastard that he is.”

“Then I don’t know. Furthermore, I don’t care.”

“You are a spectacular failure as a liar. You’d better work on that if you want to be a successful detective.”

“I’m not lying! What I care about is me. My ache and my pain and my… my feeling of being utterly betrayed and abandoned by the person who said he loved me! I don’t give a rat’s arse about why he’s gone sloppy. Maybe he just decided it’s more efficient not to waste time on nonsense like that. Who knows? What I do know is that it’s none of my concern.”

“Try again! You cannot, you absolutely cannot convince me that hearing he’s letting himself go, doing things that will impair his fun… health isn’t having an impact on you. That you’re not worried and want to run right over there and give his head a kick to see what flows out so you can set him right again.”

“That’s it. That is exactly what you want me to do, isn’t it?”

“Yes!”

“Fuck you! He’s not my lover anymore! He’s not even my friend! I… I could have understood, to some degree, him breaking off our romance, but to… not even a final talk to let me know… that he placed some value on what we shared, even if he didn’t feel the fire anymore. That it wasn’t just me who’d thought we’d found that special thing that… that people dream about. He could have done that, at least. Could have shown some simple, basic decency, but I wasn’t even worth that. And, now, you want me to ride in like the white knight because he’s having difficulty fitting back into his old life? That maybe he’s having a hard time transitioning back to his rich, privileged life that offers him the world and a few others besides. He’s your brother – you manage it.”

“If I thought anything I could do would help, I would do it immediately. What he needs, I don’t have to give.”
“You’ve got money coming out of your shoes. If he needs counseling or something, you can afford the best in the world.”

“He doesn’t need counseling, he needs you!”

“You’re loony! He doesn’t need me! He doesn’t even want me! He’s fucking ashamed he knew me! That he let me lay a finger on him!”

“You’re the loony one! You don’t love someone and it fucking vanishes like some ghost!”

“It does if… you know why it would, you bastard.”

“No, I don’t. His memories came back, but memory doesn’t… just talk to him, Greg. Please.”

“I’m not going to debase myself by crawling to him. Not in a million years.”

“Who said to crawl? Just… I can guarantee you immediate admittance into the office and…”

“Absolutely not! I’m not dragging in after a long day, rumpled clothes, hat in hand…”

“You just love to roll about in your working-class mythos, don’t you?”

No! But, yeah, sometimes that side of his brain started waving a flag and reading its manifesto to the passersby on his mental street.

“I… fine, that was over the top, I admit, but I’m… he doesn’t want me and I wouldn’t fit into his life anyway, you have to admit that’s true.”

“John fits into Sherlock’s life.”

“Sherlock would be happy living in cheap flat and eating take-away the rest of his life as long as John was there with him. That’s not Mycroft.”

“You don’t know that. Talk to him!”

“I do know that! Sherlock’s had a lot to say about his brother and that this is the great and powerful Mycroft Holmes.”

“Sherlock… haven’t you learned to take what he says with a grain of salt? Especially about Mycroft?”

Greg gnashed his teeth because… there was the tiniest flicker of truth in that. Sherlock’s view of Mycroft, even when Mycroft was… his… could never be called flattering. However…

“When Sherlock wants to be serious about something, he can do it. He was very serious when talking about Mycroft and why… why I should not get my hopes up for any form of relationship. At all. Ever.”

“Sherlock is… he has his blind spots. Mycroft has always been one. Mycroft loves Sherlock with everything in him and Sherlock scarcely recognizes it, at least openly. For all his boasting about his observational powers, he has never applied them to his brother. Never stopped to try and pull back the curtains to take a look backstage. Mycroft is… and I will murder you if you repeat this… Mycroft’s got a sharper intellect, overall, than Sherlock and keeping his façade intact was simple since Sherlock never even bothered to try and push past it. If baby brother had tried, he might have a different opinion than he does now.”
“Sherlock’s blind spots aren’t that large.”

“You’re a policeman. You tell me how large blind spots can be.”

Greg wanted to say that blind spots could be massively large for humans, but… Sherlock and Mycroft were, effectively, humans. Shit.

“No answer? I’ll take that as you’re realizing there’s some merit to that. It’s Mycroft’s fault, to a large extent, as he doesn’t take steps to show Sherlock how much he cares… and, truthfully, I don’t know how well he’d ever do that with someone he loved. But, Sherlock certainly doesn’t take a step out of his way to show Mycroft his own affection, either, so maybe that’s what keeps middle brother’s emotions locked in the vault.”

Sherrinford took a long drink of his whisky and waved for another one while Greg thought about all that had been said. Not that the thinking was working very well because… none of his thinking had been working very well lately where Mycroft was concerned!

“Look, Greg… I don’t know what could ever happen between you and my brother. I’m not a poor example of genius myself, but not for things like this and… I can’t offer a single guarantee it could work. But, could you just phone him? Ask how he’s doing? Maybe see if he’ll meet you, even for something like this, a friendly drink, just to chat. Perhaps, use Sherlock and leverage. You want to talk about his work and how he’s getting along with his new job or with John. I think it would help him, I really do. I wouldn’t be here asking if I didn’t believe that wholeheartedly.”

Greg scowled, but… two things were bothering him. One was that if Mycroft had just been overwhelmed, he now could be in a position of being embarrassed and had no clue how to go about trying to make things right. That was easy to imagine for Sherlock, actually, but Sherlock would have him or Anderson or any of them to kick him in the arse and tell him to go and apologize, giving him some hints on how to do it properly, as a bonus. Mycroft didn’t seem to have that. Two… even if they could never be together… the idea of Mycroft hurting burned. It shouldn’t, but it did. And he’d worry now, every day, about that hurting and feel guilty that he didn’t even try to help. Not as a lover, not as a partner, but as a decent human being. He’d try for anyone else, if someone told him they thought he could make a difference. He would. Not doing that for Mycroft would just be petty and that wasn’t a person he wanted to be.

“I won’t just walk in and try to talk to him. But, I don’t think he’d take my call, either.”

“Probably not, so…”

Digging into his jacket pocket, Sherrinford took out his own mobile, which Greg noted enviously, was a sleek piece of electronics.

“Our own manufacture. I’ll have one sent to you. Mycroft will think it’s me calling and won’t dare not answer because he knows the havoc I’ll wreak if he ignores me for any reason other than his festering death.”

Tapping a contact code on his phone, Sherrinford handed it to Greg who hesitantly took it and pressed the device to his ear, frowning that the elder Holmes scooted around to listen in on the conversation.

“If this is not of the highest importance, brother, I will…”

“It… it’s not Sherrinford, Mycroft. It’s me. Greg.”

The stony silence on the other end of the line had both men looking at each other over the mobile
with ‘now what?’ eyes.

“Ah. Sergeant Lestrade. Sherrinford has conscripted you into one of his jests, I see.”

“No, he hasn’t. He…”

Sherrinford made a ‘keep going’ motion and Greg wondered exactly what ‘going’ was he supposed to be keeping.

“… we met up for a drink and a chat. He said you’ve been working hard, very hard and… I just wanted to ask how you were doing.”

“Sherrinford has drawn you into his ridiculous fantasy that I am somehow pushing myself to destruction. Delightful. I assure you that I am healthy and well, Sergeant Lestrade, so, if you will excuse me, I have a great deal of work to accomplish.”

Getting poked in the ribs was never fun and Greg flicked Sherrinford’s ear in retaliation. What did he want him to do now? Oh… sad puppy face and making finger-tears down his cheeks… got it.

“I want to believe that, Mycroft, I do, but… he says you’ve not been doing well and that’s not your norm. That you’re working yourself to the grave, not taking care of yourself… I’m worried, Mycroft. I’m worried for you and… can we meet for a little while? You say you’re alright, but can we get together for a quick drink or something and just talk? Show me your brother’s a clot, if that’s how you want to look at it. Let me see you’re hale and hearty so I can give him a big glob of spit in the eye if he comes calling again? We can talk about Sherlock, too. Oh… he’s doing remarkable things and getting along… reasonably well with the lads in forensics… please, love. Just a chat, you and me.”

Sherrinford’s thumb’s up was cleanly batted away and replaced by the older Holmes with another gesture that Greg returned in kind.

“Sergeant Lestrade…”

“Can’t you even say my name? It’s not toxic, you know.”

“Sergeant Lestrade… I regret terribly that my brother has involved you in his misplaced hysteria, for I know you are a busy man, however… I have absolutely no time to meet with you and suggest you notify Sherrinford that his attempted emotional coup has been thwarted. Good day to you, Sergeant Lestrade.”

Sherrinford slapped at Greg’s arm and made ‘twist that knife!’ motions that actually put some fire in Greg’s blood.

“What are you scared of, Mycroft? Scared you’ll see me and all that cool poshness will start to melt? That you can’t be with me, even for a chat, and not feel your fingers start to twitch because they remember what my face feels like when it’s a little stubbly in the morning. You loved to stroke that stubble like you were petting a cat and I know you remember that. Is that it? Mycroft Holmes can’t trust himself around sexy me, so he won’t even stop in at a pub to share a pint and a little friendly conversation?

“That is absurd!”

“Prove me wrong. I’m sitting in a nice pub right now, as a matter of fact. The one I took you to on our very first date. Come meet me and show me you can resist the lusciousness that is Greg Lestrade.”
“That is… Sherrinford has put you up to this, I have no doubt. Let me be clear, Sergeant Lestrade. Very, very clear. There is no longer any form of connection between us. I am not the man you knew. I am not the man you loved. I am not a man you could love. If you believe otherwise, you have my sympathy, but I state here and now that I will not appreciate any further contact and that is my final word on the subject!”

There was no slam down of a handset as they would have been in the olden days, but Greg and Sherrinford heard the thunderous disconnect of the call as clearly as if their ears were actually ringing from the collision.

“Well… there you have it. He wants nothing to do with me and that’s the end of it. So, you can kindly fuck off with your ‘oh Greg, please help my brother’ moaning and leave me alone.”

Not even bothering to look back, Greg stormed out of the pub and missed the thoughtful look on Sherrinford’s face that lingered long after the new detective sergeant was gone. Greg really should pay more attention when Mycroft was barking… it wasn’t always worse than his bite and, often, a great deal more informative…
Oh, those are angry steps coming this way…

“SHERRINFORD!”

“Mycroft? Why are you whispering? Frog in your throat?

“You… how dare you! That was absolutely unacceptable. Completely inexcusable! Interrupting my day for one of your frivolous attempts at wit is sufficient of a dastardly act, but to involve Sergeant Lestrade? That vaults… you have transcended the bounds of what I will remotely tolerate and I demand an apology for your despicable deed!”

“Brother, you seem upset. Have a seat and tell me what’s bothering you.”

The seat in question went flying across the room and made a good day’s work for the maintenance staff from the damage it did to the wall. Fortunately, it didn’t contain a supporting beam…

“Oh well, that chair was ugly anyway. My wall on the other hand…”

“You are a contemptable person and I will not endure your further harassment!”

“Of you or Greg?”

Sherrinford actually found himself calculating the quickest vectors to take if he had to leap to safety given the rage that flared in Mycroft’s eyes and decided exceptionally careful treading was required through this particular minefield.

“You… you are NEVER to speak to him again!”

“If you continue on this descent into hell, I will speak to him again. And again and again and again if it gets him to step in and apply a firm kick to your arse. Nothing I’ve done helps. Anthea is beside herself. Mummy and Father have asked me why you avoid their calls and haven’t visited again after that single time where you were as scintillating as a boiled potato. Admittedly, that’s not far off your norm, but your potato normally sports a bit of butter or parsley or something for flavor. I am not going to let you destroy yourself, Mycroft, I simply am not and I will do whatever it takes to prevent that.”

“You have lost your mind! I… I am in no manner destroying myself! I am mired in the herculean task of resurrecting our research division from your lax management and that is…”

“Tell that to someone who doesn’t know you’re lying. We’re no more than 9% off our standard pace and, while that might seem like failure to you, the industry hasn’t even noticed. You’re burying yourself in your work and shoveling in the soil on top of you. I can assure you of one thing, Mycroft Holmes, if you continue on this path, I have full intention of providing you with the ugliest, most tasteless headstone when you’re finished digging your grave and will bring pound shop plastic flowers to lay on it whenever I visit.”

“You have no right to judge me!”

“I’m not judging you, I’m judging your actions and behavior. Which worry me more than… do you really think I would have gone to Greg, knowing that his heart is in pieces, and asked him to help if I wasn’t genuinely concerned? Do you think I’d be cruel enough to do that to a man who is
carrying a crushing amount of pain that shows through, even though he tries, desperately, to hide it?"

“You have been spying on him. How… you are a foul creature.”

“Later on, the laughable hypocrisy of what you just said is going to hit you and I hope I’m there to see it. Of course I’ve been keeping watch on him! He went above and beyond for you and Sherlock and, for that alone, he deserves a bit of watching to make certain things go well for him. But, he continues to be a powerful, positive force in Sherlock’s life and, again, he deserves whatever I can do for him. Further… he saw his life fall to ashes because of you, Mycroft, and that was poor payment for gladly handing you his heart.”

“That is irrelevant!”

“It’s absolutely relevant! If he’d been horrid to you, it would be a different matter, but he treated you like the love of his life, which you were and… he made you happy. I don’t think I’ve ever before seen you happy, but you lit up like a candle with him. For that and that alone, I would see him watched until his dying day, sweeping away shit that landed in his path and keeping the sidewalk clean and clear for him to gain the best possible future. I’d do it as my thanks for making my brother, my little brother Mycroft, truly happy for the first time in his life. For making it crystal clear that you were a wonderful, amazing man and treasuring you like a chest of jewels. You don’t like it? I don’t care. Greg’s a decent chap, he deserves decent treatment because of it. Deserves good things coming his way and I’ll be happy to step in to see that happen. Step in to share a drink now and then, too. He’s good with conversation and we’ve had two enjoyable ones so far; there’s nothing to say we couldn’t have more. Frankly, I wouldn’t mind a pub night added to my schedule. Meet up with Greg for a few stiff drinks to relax, share work stories, brainstorm solutions for whatever problems and catastrophes Sherlock’s caused… you know, I would actually like that. Friend like Greg to phone when there’s a good match on… yes, this could work. And Greg seems to…”

“Stop saying his name!”

No, because it’s stoking a little of what I have no doubt is jealousy in you, brother dear, and I will pursue that as fast and far as I can if it breaks through your ice.

“Should I call him Lance?”

“Gregory would not appreciate your thinly-veiled mockery. Neither does he deserve it! You will show him respect or I will…”

“You will what, brother dear?”

The fact that his brother growled at him was the highlight of Sherrinford’s day, even though he wasn’t precisely certain what Mycroft was growling about.

“This is the only warning I will issue you, Sherrinford. This is over. You will not bedevil me with your meddling and you will leave alone Sergeant Lestrade. Fail to heed this warning and the consequences will not please you in the slightest.”

Sherrinford lost the bet with himself that Mycroft would actually leave his office door on the hinges, but was glad, at least, that the maintenance staff were highly skilled and took great pride in their work, so this would all be back to normal in a day or two. Before then, though… a few quick snaps with the phone to add to his evidence file. When one had a case to make, evidence was always required. No matter what the case or to whom it was being made…
“No.”

“Look at me not caring, Sherlock. Do it.”

“No.”

“I’ll pay you.”

“N… how much?”

“Enough for you to take John to that museum exhibition you’ve been wanting to see and then for a very nice dinner where you can wear some of the fine clothes you know John would find sexy, especially when he gets to peel them off of you later in the evening.”

“Very well. But realize, Sherrinford, that the nausea I will suffer doing your bidding will be debilitating.”

“I’ll fan you if you faint.”

“...”

“You look like a fish a cat had to fight a seagull to win.”

“What does that even mean?”

“You look like shite.”

Which Greg did, in Anderson’s highly-experienced opinion. He’d seen his friend in many states of looking like death warmed over, mostly due to nights out where they forgot about silly things like drinking in moderation when they had to work the next day, but this… poor Greg.

“Thank you, Blanderson. You’re a true friend.”

Motioning Greg over to join him at the table in the small break room, Anderson watched his former partner slowly sink into the slightly-rickety chair and felt he really didn’t need to ask what this was all about. But, since that would leave them sitting there in silence…

“What’s wrong, Greg? And please don’t say ‘nothing,’ because I am now officially with the forensics professionals and we’re good about noticing wrong things.”

“It really is nothing, though. Just me overreacting to something and I’m actually more… I don’t know, but a little coffee… a little more coffee in me… and I’ll be fine.”

“On a scale of one to ten, how much is this about Mycroft.”

“Not everything is about Mycroft.”

“So, a ten, then.”

“Yeah...”

Greg took a moment to fill in Anderson on the events of yesterday in a highly-modified way, of course, that was not totally a complete and shameful lie. In truth, it felt good to share that miserable experience with someone. Almost like some of the sting in his heart had the chance to flow out and
leave him a little less... stingy.

“Ok, that is certainly worth looking as crap as you do right now. It was good of you, though, Greg. If Mycroft’s actually having problems, then it was kind of you to try to help. Mr. Holmes certainly sounds worried and I don’t see a man like that being so worried he’d reach out to his someone’s ex-lover unless the worry was nearly off the charts.”

“That’s what I thought, too. I’d try to help anyone in trouble, whether I had history with them or not, but...”

“You didn’t expect to be handed your teeth for your troubles.”

“No, I didn’t! To be fair, I don’t think Sherry did, either.”

“Sherry?”

“I refuse to call him Mr. Holmes when we’ve discussed wanking over drinks.”

Greg’s brain rewound that statement and he just sighed at Anderson’s slow shake of his head.

“One Holmes International employee is enough for a lifetime, don’t you think, Greg?”

“Fuck off. It... what can I say... he’s a surprisingly normal bloke. I have no idea what he’s like in the business world, but... he’d fit in at one of our film nights.”

“Well, that shoots my preconceptions about the rich and powerful right in the foot, but that’s good. Nice to know not all of them are complete bastards. And, that some are willing to get involved when one of their people is having a hard time. Have you talked to Sherlock about this?”

“No, but I suspect it’ll come up at some point. He can’t be oblivious to Mycroft’s condition, if it’s as bad as Sherry described, so... I’ll take him aside and see how he’s coping with it.”

“I’ll do a little asking, myself. He hasn’t mentioned anything, but... I’m honestly not certain how often he sees Mycroft. He doesn’t shirk hours here, that’s for sure, and then he’s racing off to meet up with John...”

“They’re still doing well, right? I haven’t talked to John in a few days and...”

“They’re fine, Greg. And they’re going to stay fine. If Sherlock hasn’t chased off John yet, and vice versa, I can’t imagine what could possibly happen to make that happen, so...”

“Relax?”

“Basically. But, I know it means something to Sherlock that you still take an interest in him. That you care and show him you care, even if he breaks out in hives when you do. I realize he considers Mycroft a brother, but I don’t get the sense that they’re particularly close. Not at all the relationship our Mycroft wanted them to have. I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s starting to look more to you for that. Someone who he can count on to be there like an older brother, or a dad with all that gray slipping into your hair. You’re important to him and make a difference in his life... that’ll be important since it seems he’s with us to stay.”

Something that pulled even more sting out of Greg’s system. It could have gone another way, but Sherlock still remained loyal to John and relished the band of supporters and friends he’d gathered. If there was a benefit to be found from his own pain from knowing Mycroft, this was certainly it.
“Where is my tea?”

Speaking of benefits...

“Sherlock! I sidetracked Anderson, I’m afraid, and interrupted his valuable service to you as your personal slave.”

“Once again you prove yourself a detriment to the human species, Lestrade.”

“There’s my day’s accomplishment! It’s all a coast through the hours from here on. What a relief!”

Sherlock rolled his eyes and made a show of wiping the seat of his chair before sitting down to join the conversation.

“How you were awarded a detective’s post is entirely baffling to me, however, as that does place two members of the police force under my supervision… that was not supposed to be a joke.”

Though Greg and Anderson were laughing merrily at it, nevertheless.

“You are a unique lad, Sherlock, and I hope that never changes. Anderson, what are you two working on, anyway?”

“Oh! Morrison case.”

“Poisoner… nice one. Sherlock? Intriguing enough for you?”

“It offers some miniscule elements of interest.”

“Excellent! Regardless, I know you’ll do a brilliant job with the forensics work, so the prosecution can put the bugger straight behind bars for a very long time.”

Anderson smirked slightly at how much like a partridge Sherlock puffed from the praise. Whatever was Sherlock’s and Mycroft’s true relationship, this was what the android needed and thank heavens that Greg was more than happy to provide it.

“I am a profound asset to the prosecution, that is true.”

“And we’re all happier for it, lad. Plans to celebrate your newest victory for justice?”

“Actually, yes. I am taking John to a museum exhibition and then to dinner.”

“That sounds fun. Can John actually afford that?”

“For your information, I am treating John.”

Greg and Anderson both affected a stupendous pantomime of abject shock that earned them one of Sherlock’s most thunderous snorts.

“Did you rob a bank? Do Greg and I have to arrest you?”

“Pfft. If I did rob a bank, my lack of participation in the case would assure my escape from justice. Sherrinford paid me for one of his dreary favors concerning Mycroft and I will share my good fortune with John.”

Anderson cut eyes at Greg, who studiously avoided them, concentrating instead on pretending to
check his watch for the time.

“Mr. Holmes paid you? Oh, I didn’t realize you two were close enough that he’d come to you about Mycroft’s problems. Or that you were on a first-name basis.”

Greg gave Sherlock a small glare of warning and the android bit his own tongue at his slip. Damnation! It wasn’t… how was he supposed to police every conversation! It was intolerable!

“Mycroft is a highly-valued member of their research staff and, as such, is the concern of the head nitwit that runs Holmes International. As I am a conduit to Mycroft, I am often forced to interact with said nitwit, however, I take what opportunity I can to profit from the experience.”

This time, Greg gave Sherlock a ‘good show’ nod and breathed a small sigh of relief. Anderson was smart. Very smart and it wouldn’t take much for him to notice things that shouldn’t be noticed…

“Oh, well that makes sense, I suppose. You knew about Mycroft’s little breakdown, then? You know you can always talk to me or Greg about things like that, Sherlock. That’s what friends are for.”

The small flash of upset on Sherlock’s face told Greg Sherlock had some idea, but whether it was before or after his chat with Sherrinford was the question.

“Yes, I… thank you. Truthfully, I… I knew, to some degree that he was behaving atypically. That he was working more than his even his normal ridiculous hours. I was not, however, aware of the level of self-neglect he was demonstrating.”

“It must be dramatic if Mr. Holmes reached out to Greg for help.”

Sherlock’s eyes snapped to Greg, who simply waved off the issue and hoped it wouldn’t be pursued.

“Sherrinford tried to drag you into this?”

But pursued it was.

“He just wanted me to see if I could talk to Mycroft and… find out what was wrong. I told him it likely Mycroft wouldn’t want my help, which he didn’t, but it was clear Sherry was truly worried and I can understand him trying to use any available tool to fix the problem.”

Sherlock’s mouth dropped at the ‘Sherry’ part and Greg knew a private chat would be happening sooner than later. However, the darkness in Sherlock’s eyes when he talked about Mycroft said that chat should happen sooner than later, no matter how it might make his own soul ache to keep bringing up the person who’d shown him the back of his hand twice now. Which was twice too many, in his opinion.

“You are becoming friendly with my… my employer.”

“I am willing to have a chat with someone if they believe I can be of help when there’s a problem. We’re not sharing fish and chips in my flat when the match is on, if that’s what you think.”

“I see. In any case, it was predictably-foolish thinking on Sherrinford’s part to embroil you in Mycroft’s situation. Whereas he has some facility with business matters, once you stray from that incredibly narrow path, he is as useless as feathers on fishes.”

Anderson flicked tea at Sherlock and admired how catlike was the hiss he received in response.
“You keep calling Mr. Holmes useless, Sherlock, and he’ll likely cut your salary and call whoever is in charge to discontinue this nice pilot program that’s keeping you busy.”

Which would be Sherrinford, but Greg and Sherlock felt that was information best kept quiet.

“He knows very well that doing so would simply compel me to visit his office every day and recount to him exactly what I thought of his dictatorial conduct.”

“That’s an actual potent threat. I have to admit you have him over a barrel. Nicely done!”

Greg laughed that Sherlock seemed pleased at Anderson’s assessment and it served to crack a little more of his own, fresh pain. Sherlock was best off well away from Holmes International, creating his own connections and family that supported him and openly made him welcome. Maybe, maybe, if Sherry proved himself the sort to do that, too, he could be welcome on their team. He seemed more annoyed by Sherlock than anything else and, after a life of Sherlock… oh god, Sherlock as a toddler and teenager… that was more than slightly understandable.

“He is aware of that, too. I do not make idle threats. Now… I want my tea and then we must return to collect the gas chromatograph results. If the half-witted drones have botched the analysis, we are running short of time to see it performed again before we must make our initial report.”

Stretching and rising from his chair, Anderson had to smile that this was his life now. Doing something he loved and actually making important contributions to police cases through using his mind and skills in ways that weren’t really being accessed while he as a standard PC. Of course, he had to mind Sherlock, but if there was anyone he’d want to have as a partner in this new situation, it would be the fractious android. What they could do together in one day was starting to become whispered about in the labs, and the whispering actually wasn’t about whether they were shagging in the supply closet, in complete violation of normal NSY procedure.

“Alright, tea I can provide and… actually, the lab’s not far, so if we shout loud enough…”

“You will have to do that, since I am prohibited from shouting. In writing.”

Anderson’s knowing nod made Greg laugh again and decide that he’d phone Sherlock this evening and see when the young android had time to stop in to talk. Had to keep up with his adopted son’s progress, didn’t he? Get some photos for the refrigerator and stories to tell the other dads when they were doing the school run. Might as well take full advantage of his new parenthood. It could be the only chance he’d get…

What a day… what a long, grueling day. Not that he had to linger after his shift, but it seemed that he hadn’t seen a moment to breathe since his small tea break with Sherlock and Anderson. Part of that lack of moments was a meeting with his soon-to-be new Inspector, but the rest of them were simply due to crime run amok that his tired feet were barking loudly over having to chase after. Now, fortunately, it was time for a few good beers, leftover takeaway and whatever crap was on offer from the telly. Not the worst way to spend the evening… Of course, that was before he climbed the stairs to his flat and saw light spilling out from under his door when he was very certain his lights were off when he left in the morning…

Creeping up to the door, Greg heard small sounds of activity, but nothing like the sounds of ransacking or his friends setting up to use his flat for a film or a shag so, he very cautiously cracked the door open and peeked inside, wishing quickly he hadn’t. Or not. It was hard to decide, seeing what appeared to be his toaster, microwave, video player and a radio sitting in various stages of
disassembly while two busy gnomes tinkered with the bits, in between bouts of furious typing on
two... ooh, those were very nice laptops...

“Oh! Hello there! Come in! We’re just... well, the wife had an idea for improving the data
flow rate to certain small-scale manipulative components and... oh, when she’s got her teeth into
something, it’s best to stand back and let her go with it! And it’s going well, too, wouldn’t you say?”

Greg stepped further into Wonderland to watch what he now recognized was half his household
electronics cobbled into an army of small robots who were rolling, walking, dancing, lifting, waving
and generally being tiny examples of what could be done if you had the right tools, materials, genius
and few hours to spare.

“It’s... oh... yeah... I mean...”

“Howard, get the boy a drink will you. Greg, you really need to upgrade your video machine to
the current decade’s model. That’s what set me thinking, actually, and my husband had a few spare
microprocessors in his pockets... we weren’t sure when you’d be home, what with having such an
unpredictable job so... we decided to amuse ourselves! Oh, and one for me? Thank you, dear.
You’re so sweet.”

Half of the glass of Greg’s cheap scotch went down the female gnome’s throat with a loud
‘aaaaaahhh’ for a finish.

“Sit! Oh... Howard, move Han and Luke off that chair so Greg can have a seat. I know! Put
them in the sink for now. They aren’t terribly equipped for climbing and they’ve already been
enough of a mischief. Sorry about the rug, Greg. They were simply captivated by the concept of
threads and, well...”

Greg looked down at the small rug under his sofa table, which was now missing a full quarter of its
length, the missing part now existing as a large pile of fiber on the sofa table.

“I... who are you?”

Not that the question really needed to be asked, but Greg held out a small, fragile hope that his
instincts were completely wrong and this wasn’t exactly as bad as he really, really knew it was. But,
how nice that a drink was making its way into his hand via a helpful gnome who smiled brightly and
sported a nose that... yeah, that spelled doom. Friendly, happy doom...

“I’m Howard, son. So good to finally meet you. And that’s my lovely wife, Helen. Helen and
Howard Holmes! Your Mycroft’s mum and dad. Lot’s of H’s there, I do admit, which is why none
of our sons are a Hubert or a Harold. That last one was my father’s name, actually, and... I wasn’t
going to burden my sons with that around their necks no matter how loudly Father complained.
Though it would have suited Mycroft reasonably well. Personality-wise, that is. Always a bit of
sourness there and... well, anyway, have a seat, Greg, I think it’s time we had a chat, don’t you?”

Greg allowed himself to be gnome led to the recently robot-vacated chair and slowly took a seat.
Mycroft’s parents. The geniuses behind the android revolution. In his flat! Acting... oh god, they
could never meet his parents. That would certainly fracture the universe and they had enough
trouble in this world as it was...
Ok… parents. How to deal with parents. Be polite, that’s the most important thing. And have your hair combed! Tidy, how could he forget tidy! Easily, since he had no intention of meeting any parents today, but the universe had other plans, apparently. So, polite it is and hope they’ve got poor vision and don’t notice the coffee stain on the trousers or the chaotic grassland that masqueraded as hair after it’d been mussed by ten, finally-I’m-home, scalp-massaging fingers.

“Um… it’s… good to meet you.”

“So polite. Hear that, Howard, our Mycroft’s found a nice, polite man. That’s one of our predictions knocked on its arse and thank heavens for it.”

Greg looked between the smiling, nodding gnomes, who were still typing on their laptops, despite the conversation going on and he honestly had no idea what to pursue first. Breaking into his flat, repurposing his household goods or the fact that they seemed to believe that he and Mycroft were still a couple. Probably tackle the most important item first, though it was the one he’d rather not touch with lead-lined gloves.

“I… thank you. But… there’s seems to be a misunderstanding…”

“Yes, you are, dear.”

“I… I are what?”

“A couple! You and our Mycroft!”

NO! Don’t read my mind! It’s dangerous in there. Fucking embarrassing, too.

“You’re reading yesterday’s news, I’m afraid. Mycroft… Mycroft made it very clear that he and I have no relationship anymore, and…

“Just a bump in the road, that’s all. Howard, do you agree?”

“Hmmm? Oh! Oh yes, these things happen. Well, not to Mycroft, normally, but there’s a first time for everything!”

They were loony! Those eccentric, loony geniuses you saw on the telly! What did he do now? They probably thought…

“Now, now… we’re not loony, Greg. Well, not completely.”

The gnomes were giggling at him! This was… he was in one of those fantasy books where the mystical creatures arrived to bedevil some poor average bloke until he went on a quest or something. He couldn’t go on a quest! There wasn’t a singing sword or magic shoes anywhere in the flat. There wasn’t even a toaster anymore!

“I… no, I suppose not, but on this one issue…”

The sigh Greg released was one he was painfully tired of hearing because it was the same sigh that escaped his lips every time he was forced to talk about Mycroft.

“Look… I… I loved Mycroft. I still do, I suppose. Feel him in my heart every minute of the day, which isn’t what I would call pleasant, given the circumstances. But he doesn’t share that
feeling anymore. Not at all. Told me in very clear and concise terms. Once his memory was 
restored, all of that vanished. Maybe that part of our story hasn’t reached you yet, but all bridges are 
burned, as far as he’s concerned. Now, if you…”

In-stereo tutting was not what Greg had expected, but… since he really had no clear expectations for 
any of this looniness, he probably shouldn’t be surprised.

“Greg, Greg, Greg… it doesn’t work that way.”

“Uh… burning bridges for relationships you don’t want anymore? Yes, Mrs. Holmes, it does. A 
lot.”

Especially to me.

“I don’t mean that. Mycroft’s emotions aren’t irrevocably linked to his memories. Bringing back 
his emotions wouldn’t, by default, erase what he feels for you.”

“It… it wouldn’t?”

“Good heavens, no! Losing his memory… now that would be another story. He’d still retain the 
sensation of loving, but would have no one to apply it to or a framework to develop it further with 
that person. But, bringing back his old memories didn’t overwrite his new ones, so it’s all still 
there… what he feels, why he feels that way and towards whom.”

“Oh…”

So, Mycroft’s love hadn’t shut down. In some ways… that made this much, much worse.

“Fine, then. His real self is disgusted that he loves someone so far down on the ladder and he’s 
humiliated by the fact that…”

A small robot began pounding on Greg’s finger and three others started beeping and whistling at 
him. Angrily, too.

“Hey!”

“You shouldn’t talk about yourself that way, lad. Helen and I know very well that you’re a fine, 
upstanding young man with an honorable job and tremendous potential for advancement in any 
direction you choose to take. No more of that nonsense, alright. Our son recognized that, too, or he 
wouldn’t have thought you such a good catch.”

“The Mycroft that was a shelter android with no job and no money thought I was a good catch! 
Not bloody Mycroft Holmes, second in line for your throne!”

“My wife would look lovely in a crown, wouldn’t she?”

“ARRRRGGGGHHHH!!!! Why… why are you even here, anyway? Not to be rude, because 
you’re very nice people and, yes, Mrs. Holmes would be quite fetching in a crown, but…”

“Sherlock phoned his mother and me and told us all about this terrible mess. Mycroft eating his 
own insides out, you dragging about moaning and agonizing… when our youngest phones for any 
reason, it’s an event to remember but, for something like this… Sherlock’s horribly worried and I 
can’t say I blame him. Sherrinford backed up every word, too, and those two rarely agree on what 
day of the week it is, let alone something involving people.”
“Howard’s right on that, too. Sherrinford and Sherlock butt heads like two constipated rams trying to win the last bit of laxative. Well, with all of that falling in our laps, we had to do something! Besides… our Mycroft in love… oh, we despaired ever seeing it, didn’t we dear.”

“That we did. You didn’t know my father, Greg, but he and Mycroft… two peas in a rather puckered pod. Good men, great men, really, but…”

“But what?”

“Flawed men, too. We all are, of course, and sometimes we can fix those flaws ourselves. Other times… we need a little help. Mycroft’s flaws are the sort that need help and he’s not allowed anyone to take a good stick to it all and beat the grouse out of his barn.”

What?

“What?”

“A stick! That’s you, my boy. You’ve got to get in there and shake it around good and proper.”

Was that sexual? Was he dead and this was hell? It was a fucking misery, so if it wasn’t hell itself, it was one of the surrounding communities they advertised as having nice homes and good schools for the demon kiddies.

“Wh… I have no idea what I’m supposed to shake, let alone know the correct way to do it!”

AH! The tiny robots were advancing on him!

“Gregory Lestrade, you know very well… oh, Howard, a bit more scotch if you will… you know very well what we mean.”

“I don’t! I have no idea! I don’t think you… I know one Mycroft, and that’s the one I loved with everything in me. You seem to believe I know something about the real one who I’ve never really met! Said toodle-oo and sauntered out the door at my gran’s house and was an evil git the one, one!, time I talked to him on the phone. What you know about him, I don’t! And… I can’t say I want to.”

Greg’s empty glass, not that he remembered emptying it, was replaced with a full one and he used the distraction of taking a long drink of his fresh scotch to ignore being the subject of intense scrutiny from the Holmes gnomes.

“You truly don’t do you?”

“If you mean know Mycroft, then no, ma’am, I don’t. I know a Mycroft. The one who was kind, gentle, caring… eager for new experiences, excited about discovering new things. My Mycroft laughed and loved openly… was fiery when he was angry and simply radiant when he was happy. That’s the Mycroft I know. Sherlock told me in no uncertain terms that this person isn’t his brother and, from my admittedly few experiences, I believe him.”

The fervent, whispered conversation between the Holmes pair gave Greg time to wrestle this new rush of grief back down into his gut where he hoped it would stay for awhile without coming up again, taking his scotch with it. Why couldn’t people simply leave him alone? He could understand the Holmes family wanting to help their son, he truly could understand that, but… why couldn’t they spare at least one thought for what that meant for him? What the badgering, sweet as it might be phrased, would do to him as a result. Maybe that was just further evidence he was well rid of Mycroft. Maybe his fucking insensitivity was a family trait.
“Greg, dear…”

“Mrs. Holmes…”

“We’re sorry. We forgot, the husband and I, that… that you don’t have a proper foundation to analyze the situation.”

Was that a polite way of saying he was stupid? Probably.

“No, you’re not stupid…”

Stop doing that!

“… you just have one set of data when two is needed for a comparative analysis. That Mycroft, the one you knew, he is our Mycroft.”

“That’s not what Sherlock says. Sherry, either.”

“Those silly geese… they see what they want to see. And what Mycroft wants them to see. They don’t see the little boy who was terrified to reach out to make friends because he was convinced they’d reject him. Too smart, hated sports, that sort of thing. They don’t see the youth who watched his older brother be a bit of a rake with the ladies and feel certain that nobody would ever be attracted to him like that, let alone find him interesting. As a person, I mean. They never knew the child who hid in his room for two days after his cat died and refused ever to have another pet because the heartbreak pained him too deeply. They never watched him closely enough to see the small smiles he couldn’t hold back when he tried something new and succeeded. Or when he snuck downstairs in the middle of the night, so he could watch the telly programs he’d secretly recorded. Oh, did he love his Doctor Who… And, they certainly don’t know about the anonymous acts of kindness he makes. The small bits of assistance he gives when they are most needed. That he keeps very quiet, but… we have our ways.”

Greg swallowed the rest of his scotch in one gulp and carefully set down his glass to avoid the tiny army that was milling around in front of him and, for some reason, trying to remove the buttons from his sleeves.

“Mycroft has spent his entire life hiding himself from others. I suppose he’s afraid they’ll see what you saw. That he’s human. That he has a heart. A personality. Strengths and, yes, weaknesses. One of them is that the façade he’s erected… his father and I are truly scared that he’s started to believe it defines who he is. That the façade is him. And, I will tell you with perfect certainty… it’s not. With his fears and worries locked away behind memory walls, other parts of himself were able to peek out and have a bit of sun and fresh air. Now, with his history fully back in his head, they’ve been shoved back down and… Mycroft may always be a reticent man. Serious, calculating, focused. We’ve peeked at some of the information Sherry gathered and… no, Mycroft may never be comfortable being quite so expressive, but… would you hate him for it? Hate him if every day wasn’t filled with peals of laughter but, instead, quiet, shared smiles. A giggle here and there that maybe only you would ever hear? Or… who knows! Maybe with support and encouragement, if he felt safe enough to open up a bit… socialize with that delightful group of friends you have. They seem such a lovely sort… We can’t promise that you can have your Mycroft back, dear. But you could have Mycroft back. And he could have you. He needs you, Greg. And you need him.”

Another fresh glass of scotch landed in Greg’s hand, this time accompanied by a slice of cold pizza from his refrigerator. At least the gnomes were thinking about his poor stomach…
“The wife’s right, son. We’ve watched him for a very long time, so we’ve a lot of data to support our analyses. That doesn’t change, though, that you’re hurt and you have a perfect right to be. Mycroft was a nasty little bugger to you and he has to be held to account for that, but… reach out to him, Greg. Reach out and keep reaching. It’s not fair to you, not at all, but until that stubborn child is convinced you won’t pull your hand away he’s going to stay in that shell like a frightened tortoise. You’ll have to meet him more than halfway this time, son, but what you’ll reap in reward…”

Taking a large bite of pizza to forestall answering, Greg wished with a good bit of mental might that he’d been slipped some form of drug and this was all a dream. Why did he have to be the one to keep getting kicked? Put his arse out there for Mycroft to kick over and over again until what… his foot fell off? It was… he wanted to believe this could happen, that he and Mycroft could be together again, but… being kicked repeatedly only to learn that they had no real chance… it wasn’t an easy thing to think about.

“Greg? Are you alright?”

The pizza slice and scotch were somehow gone and he was letting a robot walz with his index finger, while several of the others hummed a tinny, but jaunty tune. Apparently, he’d been thinking for longer than he noticed.

“I… I don’t know, honestly. I heard what you said and I don’t think you’re telling tales, but…”

“It’s hard to believe?”

“Basically. I’m not… I don’t use my brain when I think. Ok, that came out the wrongest way possible. Try again… I don’t only use my brain when I think. I use my instincts and what I feel in my gut… right now, it’s not all pointing in the same direction. It’s like when you’ve got evidence for a case in front of you, but you know, you know and you feel, that It’s not telling the right or whole story.”

“What do you then?”

“Get more evidence. Think. Let things sink in. Try to fathom out what it is that’s wrong, what’s bothering you, and begin to pick at it. Don’t make the arrest or finish the report until all of me is sure it’s right to so.”

Another round of whispering began and Greg decided one piece of pizza wasn’t soaking up the alcohol fast enough, so he rose, carrying his dance partner in his hand, and took the rest of the pizza, as well as a few half-full cartons of leftover Chinese from the refrigerator, setting it on the table with forks and motioned the gnomes to feel free to partake, which he was rather surprised they did. But, everything about them was defying his expectations, so… whatever.

“Oh my, this is delicious! We don’t have a truly top-notch spot for Chinese take-away in the countryside and our cook just doesn’t have the right sort of flair for the task. Now and then we consider buying a little place in London for the occasional weekend, without the children knowing. Eat lots of take-away, see a few films, do some shopping… Howard and me having fun, just like in the old days before we had little ones to mind… we should look into that tomorrow. Dear, what do you think?”

“We still need to have a look at Sherlock’s boyfriend, so we could stay overnight and make an efficient day of it. What’s your opinion of him, Greg? We can’t meet him officially… yet… but we’re good at being sneaky when we want to. Worth our time to do it?”
Glad the spotlight had turned away from him, Greg took another bite of pizza and gave in to the small robots’ demands by placing a few crumbs on the table for them to investigate.

“John is a fine man and he cares for Sherlock as much as Sherlock cares for him. They’re a good match, in my opinion. Intelligent, curious, brave, honorable… I can’t think of a reason I’d hesitate recommending him as someone to be part of your son’s life.”

And maybe he’ll be your target now and you’ll happily forget about me. Look how excited the two of you are… there, go find a new son-in-law and leave me to… I don’t know. Think, I suppose.

“Two of our sons found love, Helen… two! I thought Mycroft’s go-into-hiding plan was a load of bats in the belfry, but I can’t argue his results! Oh, this is wonderful… we’ll definitely stay overnight and… ah! We’ll tell Sherlock to invite his doctor to lunch or some such and we can sit at the next table and observe the goings on. Sherlock will be beside himself, which is always fun to watch. He’ll probably do everything possible to make us miserable, so we can have a game of thwarting him and giving back worse in return.”

Two sons… ok, no, not campaigning for that position, at the moment, but do enjoy yourself pestering Sherlock until steam is rising out of his ears.

“Our day is made! Oh, Howard, do you remember the time Sherrinford dripped methyl mercaptan on all of Sherlock’s clothes? Oh, that was an energetic afternoon watching Sherlock chase Sherry through the gardens, throwing smelly socks and pants at him… one day, you’ll have stories like that to tell about your own children, Greg. My heavens, they’ll be absolutely precious, what with yours and Mycroft’s DNA to work with. Do you want boys, girls or a mix, dear?”

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!

“Uh… remember the bit about me not being convinced about… anything with Mycroft?”

“Oh, that’s right. I suppose I’m just filling in your thinking without you having gotten there yet. It’s a bad habit, I admit, but it does save a great deal of time. And speaking of time, if we leave now, we might be able to catch the early showing for that film you wanted to see, dear husband. Then maybe a few cocktails before Sherry finds us and makes us go to bed. Not that we’ll sleep of course…”

NO! No, there will be no gnome sex discussed at this table. Not allowed.

“If you want to catch a film, you definitely have to move quickly, so… have a nice time! Thank you for stopping in and good to meet you and… all of that.”

“You’re such sweet man, Greg. Our Mycroft is so lucky! Here, let me find my bag… ah! There it is.”

Which was not the purse Greg was expecting, but a backpack like the Uni students carted their books about in.

“Well, this has been such a treat. Helen, hasn’t this been the nicest treat imaginable?”

“Absolutely. Let us hear from you soon, Greg, so we know how things are going. We’ll ring you, too, in case you get busy and forget.”

As the heads of the Holmes empire began to leave, Greg looked around and cleared this throat loudly.
“Forgetting something?”

“Oh! Oh dear, Helen, he’s right. We did.”

“That’s fine, Greg. You can keep the rest of the beer we brought. I think there are a couple of bottles left. We started a bit early and once you got here… well, scotch seemed a far better companion to the conversation!”

“I meant the robot army!”

“Could you look out for them, son? I’ll send Sherry or Sherlock by to collect them at some point, but those little rascals would make quite a stir at the cinema and wouldn’t that be funny if you had to come and arrest us for creating a disturbance! Do they have cells that I could share with Howard? I might not mind being arrested if we could put the time to good use. Anyway, ta ta! We’ll talk soon.”

And, with that, Greg was left alone with his new friends who seemed very content to begin finding ways off the kitchen table to explore the flat.

“No! Let’s set the rules right away, you lot. No snooping about, no tearing things apart, no… don’t… stop trying to dig through the floor! I’ve got to pay to fix that!”

As the small invaders began to claim the territory as their own, Greg decided two things. There wasn’t enough scotch in the house for this and he was screening all his calls for the next few months. Whatever it took to keep the Holmes’s out of his head while he was trying to think, was going to be the top few bullets on his plan for every single day going forward. Better put a new lock on the door so it kept them out of his flat, too. Next thing you know, there’d be a family reunion in his kitchen! He didn’t have nearly enough take away to cater that. He didn’t even have his Chinese food anymore. At least there slices of…

“No! Don’t put the pizza in the toilet!”

This was going to be hard.
“Ooooohhhh! They’re adorable! Wherever did you get them?”

And Greg was just as adorable, Molly thought, with his two large pet carriers in hand, each filled with small robots who were now beeping and hooting a greeting at her.

“Uh… That Sherrinford bloke! This is his idea of a joke, which proves he’s got about as good a sense of humor as a golf ball. So, can you? I can’t mind them when I’m working but, I thought, if you had an autopsy or two going…”

“You’re not going to make them stay in there, are you? Look at them, all cramped and upset. It’s nice you got them toys, though.”

The dash to the pet shop near his flat with a large cardboard box full of robots wasn’t kind to his bank account, but leaving the wee robots home alone today would have left him without a home and that was a far unkinder thing, in the long run. By the time he’d gotten to the pet shop, for pity’s sake, they’d already begun tunneling through the box and scrambling onto the top to have a word… or beep… with him about being unjustly confined.

“I bought one of those soft dog pen things and they can roam about in that. It’s… I dropped it somewhere in the corridor.”

Fucking thing was heavy, but it was the only way he got any sleep last night. When the bots, and that wasn’t a slur this time since they were robots, finally settled in their pen with their toys, it was a quiet night with only little whistles, beeps, whizzes and other small noises to break up the silence. Truth be told, it was fairly soothing and got him to sleep quicker, he suspected, than if he’d simply laid in bed thinking about his woes.

“Well, it won’t be stolen since everyone here today, but me, is dead and I don’t think a corpse needs a puppy pen for much at this stage of their lives.”

“Probably not. These little buggers don’t mind it, though. Just keep the top bit zipped or they’ll be in your corpses before you can blink.”

“Ok. Do… do they need anything?”

“No, I don’t think so. They’re solar-powered, I believe, and the top lets in enough light to keep them going and their little batteries charged. If not, they’ll just sleep until something changes.”

Waking to silence and creeping into the sitting room to watch his little sleeping bots for a moment had actually warmed his heart. Cuddled together like puppies… little joys were not to be walked past and ignored, especially when the rest of one’s life was a bit crap.

“Alright, then. I’m your child minder! Never thought you’d have such cute children, though. Look at you waving at me… and that one’s doing a flip!”

Greg set down the carriers and went to find the pen, which he quickly set up and filled with small robots. He could have left them home in their pen, but… how do you leave little buggers like that at home alone? This was why he couldn’t have a dog! He’d have to get a tiny yappy one to fit in his pocket, because he’d never be able to leave for work in the morning with a sad little face starting at him while he closed the door.
“Thanks for this, Molly. It’s really a big help. I should have them back to their real home in a day or so.”

“Oh… that’s a shame. Must be nice for you to have a bit of company in the evenings.”

“They tossed my last two slices of pizza into the toilet and kept trying to stick their arms into electrical sockets.

“Must be nice to have toddlers to keep you company in the evenings.”

“If they give you trouble, try a stern voice. It actually seems to work.”

“Definitely toddlers. Well, I’ve had enough experience with that, now that Sherlock’s slipping over here when he has a free moment. Stern voice and a solid rap on his knuckles with a rib spreader does the trick to keep him in line.”

Greg laughed quietly and gave Molly a gleeful wave, stopping to say goodbye to his minions and play with them for a minute or two, before leaving them with their schoolmistress for the day. Molly waited until he left to sigh softly and let her mind wander into the extremely dangerous ‘what if’ land. Greg would be a wonderful dad. The sort that not only parented his own kids, but took others under his wing so they had someone there for them when their own dads weren’t up to the task. If he and Mycroft had made a go of things… oh well, that didn’t seem to be in the cards. Not that she would pry, but the word from those in the know was that the door was firmly closed on that front and not likely to open. Might be time to start looking about again for potential dates for their new Detective Sergeant. Maybe Mike knew a few lonely men or women lurking about the android services arena who would like a nice evening out with an even nicer man. Greg deserved that… unfortunately, the most deserving in this world rarely got anything near what they deserved in life…

“I’m coming… hold on…”

Greg brought over the pet toys he’d left at home during the day and placed them in the bot pen next to the sofa, much to the tootley rejoicing of his little charges.

“There… Molly gave you a good report today so you get all your toys to play with. And look! Some yarn!”

Putting several lengths of colorful yarn into the pen brought the tiny bots’ version of raucous glee and they immediately began unwinding it into threads and creating their own tiny toys, hats and whatnot, something which would keep them busy for awhile. One of the benefits of elderly female neighbors was an abundance of yarn which, for these few days, could be a necessity for his survival.

Today was a good day, though. His start date for moving to his new job had been pushed forward and tomorrow would be his very first day as a true Detective Sergeant. So, instead of being on patrol, he’d gotten to spend the day browsing files for the case he’d be assigned to and officially meeting the people with whom he’d be working. He knew them by name, but had never interacted with any besides on a professional level at a crime scene and… he’d fit in. Solid men and women who took their jobs seriously, with a few nobs tossed in as you’d find for any job to keep things interesting.

So, all in all, he was looking at tomorrow as the beginning of a fresh start. A new job and a new outlook, too. He was going forward, not going backward. That’s how he was going to make choices, too. What would keep him moving forward and keep him from moving backward. Not
what others thought, not what others wanted, but what was best for **him** to clear the smoke from his path and keep him going forward. No, he didn’t know right now what those choices would be, but that was what thinking was for. Time and thought and a good hard look at what he wanted and what he needed and what was good for him. And, if a stern voice was needed to people who were working for other aims, then a stern voice it would be. He was getting a lot of practice with that lately and becoming something of an expert at it. Probably should look about for a suitable knuckle-rapper, though. Rib-spreaders weren’t exactly easy to come by…

___________

“Mummy and Father have been here.”

Greg looked up at the new arrival in his flat and shook his head in complete surprise that Sherlock had stopped in for a visit and complete lack of surprise that he had simply barged in as if he paid the rent.

“Thanks for not knocking, Sherlock. Your manners truly are second to none.”

The android snorted and took in the full sight of Greg, on his sofa, with tiny robots in his lap, in his shirt pocket, on the sofa table, on Greg’s shoulder…

“It was clear you were at home, so there was no reason for me to knock to ascertain that fact.”

“How about knocking to see if I actually **wanted** visitors?”

“John said you required companionship to maintain your spirits, so I am blocking any attempted naysaying on your part.”

Laughing gently so as not to disturb his bot babies, Greg wondered if John had any input at all or if this was Sherlock’s way of hiding his concern. Either was alright by him…

“I have companionship! Loads of it, in fact. Your parents were busy little elves, as you can see, while I was at work yesterday. And I have you to thank for that, you bastard, so come and mind your nieces and nephews. Bring a few bits of that yarn on the kitchen table and they’ll think you’re Father Christmas.”

Sherlock snorted again, but surprised Greg by snatching up some yarn before hurling himself into the chair next to the bot pen and dangling the yarn to catch the little robots’ attention.

“There they go… be off with you tiny friends. Or at least some of you. You lot can explore this old shirt. Look at all the buttons!”

Plucking a threadbare button-up from the floor, Greg set it down on the sofa cushion next to him and waited for the remaining bots to scramble over to begin their investigation.

“When we were children, Mummy and Father often made small robots to keep us amused. Also, supposedly, to teach us the value of gentleness and taking care of one’s things.”

“Did it work?”

“Surprisingly, yes. It… it is rather hard to want to do anything devastating to creatures like this and they do require careful handling, to some degree.”

Greg watched Sherlock patiently wait for the robots to scramble up into the chair, some requiring a bit of help, and let them settle to play with their fresh supply of yarn, as well as a receipt and a few
coins that Sherlock had removed from his pocket to add to their wealth.

“Good to hear. Anyway, back to you being the reason I have these happy little minions…”

“That was not my fault! Sherrinford made me phone them and affect an air of concern about Fatcroft. I did not anticipate their mode of interference would be to visit you. I was actually hoping for some degree of thrashing that Sherrinford could record for my viewing delight but, again, my family disappoints me profoundly. What of yours did they cannibalize for your adoring worshippers?”

“Most of my small appliances and electronics. I will expect your bastard of a brother to replace them.”

“Your gathered-from-the-bins possessions do not merit more than a microscopic measure of concern, however, I will remind Sherrinford to have replacements delivered. Rather like Mummy and Father, he can be somewhat forgetful of little things.”

“Speaking of little things…”

“I will also remind him to collect your robotic friends. At some point.”

“You like watching me suffer, don’t you?”

“I would argue the word ‘suffer’ for you are merrily finger-playing with two of them and allowing one to lurk in your hair.”

“Forget about him! It’s the smallest of the lot and I worry he gets a bit steamrolled by the others.”

Sherlock shook his head and ran a special eye over the robots in his chair. The odds Lestrade would be in any manner aware of the various sensors they possessed that were collecting and, likely, transmitting data on their guardian and his surroundings was nil. Apparently, Mummy and Father were a tad concerned about their hoped-for son-in-law and were monitoring his health and well-being. How typical… Mycroft’s snoopery was honestly inherited, there was utterly no question about that. At least there was no video data being collected. The image of Lestrade first thing in the morning was positively horrifying… that was a historical record that should not be curated for posterity…

“True. Can’t say they’re not good company, if I’m honest. Nice to have someone to talk to when it’s been a long day. Speaking of long days, how was yours? I hear one of the cases you were working on saw a break.”

“The detective in charge finally agreed to collect hair samples from the suspects and my theory concerning mold spores proved correct.”

“Congratulations! It’s a grand feeling, isn’t it? Getting that big break in the case, seeing your hard work pay dividends…”

“You are ludicrously easy to please.”

“Probably. That’s why I like you!”

Sherlock huffed loudly, but the minute flash of happiness in his eye lasted long enough for Greg to notice and reaffirm that his skirts were wide enough for all these little robots and one lanky android besides.
“That you properly recognize my value is in no manner surprising, as it is a rather obvious thing.”

“Correct. So, Mr. Value, why isn’t John with you tonight?”

“He will be here in… ten minutes.”

“Oh, am I hosting a party?”

“Yes.”

The flatness of Sherlock’s voice had Greg gathering robots to put in their pen so he could make a mad effort at tidying his flat and making himself guest-presentable.

“What! No! I…”

“That was a joke.”

“You…”

“I am practicing my deadpan delivery.”

It would be unhelpful to throttle Sherlock since, first, he didn’t actually need to breathe very often and, second, the evil android was trying to exercise his social skills… had to encourage that. His skirts would be quite cross if he failed in that basic duty.

“You did a very good job. I actually believed you.”

“That was the thrust of my prank.”

“I feel duly pranked.”

“Excellent. For your information, I am joining John at his flat later when he is done with his shift at Bart’s. This need for employment is tedious, but, I suppose there’s nothing for it but to endure.”

“Yeah, it’s that way for us poor working souls. Not like you, who can swan about with your parents’ fortune buying your socks.”

“It is Mycroft’s fortune, mostly, on which I swan, but tomato tomahto…”

Using his full senses, Sherlock registered all anatomical and physiological indicators for emotional response and glowered mentally at the data.

“His name should not pain you to this degree.”

“It doesn’t, really. It’s more how often I’m hearing it! Your parents… it doesn’t matter…”

“They want you to crawl to Mycroft and beg for reconciliation.”

“Well… that’s not precisely the way they put it, but it amounts to the same, in some ways. They said I’d have to reach out and keep reaching until he finally got the nerve to do a little reaching back.”

“Balderdash. All you shall receive for that action is a hand cut from the wrist, but if you do choose that foolish route, you had best do it quickly.”
“What? Why?”

“The probability of Mycroft self-destructing or being murdered is increasing exponentially. Today, his PA, who is as aggressive as a rabid badger, fled his office in tears. He is a monstrous person at the best of times, but that has escalated to a level that alarms even me. He threw a crystal desk ornament at my head yesterday and it was only my catlike reflexes that prevented me suffering significant and debilitating trauma.”

That didn’t sound good.

“Maybe… Sherry should get him some help.”

“Sherrinford is a romantic idiot and believes Mycroft will magically metamorphose if he but experiences your loving touch and doting smile. I become nauseated even thinking about it.”

“Yeah, that does seem to be the gist of his thinking.”

“And, to achieve his goal, he is applying pressure on you to provide those things.”

“I… yes. That, too.”

“Lack of interpersonal skills is a hallmark of our family, myself excluded.”

“They care, I suppose. Sounds like it’s warranted, too, if Mycroft’s that off his head.”

“His histrionics are best ignored until he realizes that the attention he apparently craves is not going to be bestowed. And, do not let Sherrinford convince you to phone Mycroft again. It will only bring you grief and Mycroft is undeserving of it.”

Sherlock was now his best friend.

“That’s… I don’t want to think that way, but…”

“If you are not a dimwit, you will heed my words and content yourself with finding someone who is not a barge-bellied bore, like my unbearable brother. I will set Sherrinford on that task, as recompense for forcing me to participate in his meddling scheme. He knows an unseemly number of unattached individuals and can prepare a dossier of the ones most likely to find you acceptable. It will certainly be a slim dossier, but slim is better than none.”

“That’s…”

Not the worst idea in the world, actually. It wouldn’t find him the love of his life, but it might give him a few enjoyable evenings with people looking for the same thing. With his new job, his hours were actually going to be more grueling than before and finding time to put himself out on the market was going to be difficult. If there was a spot of help on offer…

“… he’s got better things to do than hook me up with a date. Busy man like that.”

Come on, Sherlock… let me appear, at least, as if I’m not leaping at your offer. That was undignified and no man with an robot in his hair would stand for being undignified.

“Sherrinford sits in his office all day playing with his inane desk toys and counting his money. I will further demand he perform this service as penance for his and our parents’ harassment, which was unacceptable and, most likely, toxic. Expect an assignation to be arranged no later than week’s end.”
Blind date? Worse things had happened to him.

“Alright… but remind him that I’m not one of you lot, who has money to sit around and count.”

“Ah, yes. Your poverty. That does pose a problem. Nevertheless, John has convinced me that there are entertainment options available that are not funds-intensive, if one has a ‘sense of fun.’ I will set clear the expectation that your romantic partners meet that criteria.”

Ok… apparently this was going to happen. Sherlock did have a way of getting what he wanted, so it might be wise to shop for a new jacket…

“With that firmly in mind, Sherlock, I’ll say thank for any pleasant evenings you might toss my way. I appreciate the mucking in to see me free of toxic harassment and with a little fun tossed in for good measure.”

“I accept your thanks and, now that I have made my obligatory visit to bolster your mood, I am leaving.”

Never let it be said that Sherlock was the guest you couldn’t ever be rid of.

“And, in return, I will thank you for your visit, as well as its brevity.”

“Mummy and Father likely made an impression of your lock, so I will have Sherrinford craft a key to give to the appliance delivery team for access to your flat tomorrow.”

Wonderful.

“That’s great, Sherlock. Very efficient of you.”

“Thank you. Now… Lestrade, your robots have desecrated my scarf.”

This time they’d torn small holes through which to stick their faces while they used the rest of the bottom as a little dress. Probably should give them some socks or handkerchiefs if they were looking to give themselves a wardrobe.

“Oh! Yeah, they have a thing for fiber, apparently. I’ll pay for coffee tomorrow to make it up to you.”

“Yes, that will be easily managed, since you are assigned to one of the cases on which Anderson and I are taking the lead.”

“Assisting with the forensics.”

“Semantics. I shall expect pastries with my coffee.”

“I can buy pastries, too.”

“Then…”

Sherlock removed his scarf, carefully extracted the robots and tossed it onto Lestrade’s face, before returning the small bots to the sofa.

“… let their fabric celebration continue. Until tomorrow, Lestrade.”

Without waiting for a goodbye, Sherlock, spun and strode out the door, leaving Greg to chuckle and remark, probably not for the last time, how out of his hands his life seemed to have become.
However, in this case, he wasn’t going to complain. Might be just what he needed, actually. Nothing serious, just a little fun, with a pleasant dinner or drinks companion. A chance to catch an admiring once-over or that ‘oh, you’ll do’ smile that gave a bloke a spring in his step. It was fair payment, too, for the shite he’d had to eat since this mess began.

Ok, then… watch a bit more telly, have another beer or two, put the babies to bed, then get some rest himself. Tomorrow night, at least, he could watch a film on a new video player and have a bite or two of pre-dinner toast while he tossed some leftover pasta into his new microwave. Then, who knows? Things seemed to be looking up for Greg Lestrade and he wasn’t going to look any flavor of gift horse in the mouth. Speaking of mouth…

“No, Blossom, you can’t play with my teeth right now. Papa Greg needs to get a beer, so his mouth is going to be in use for awhile. You can tap and toot and giggle all you like later when the news is on. A little distraction from all that nonsense is probably for the best anyway…”
“You want me to what? And, hello, Doctor Watson. It’s nice of Sherlock to drag you along for his parade of delusion. Surprised you’re not bedecked in garlands or flowers or something so the people have something colorful to look at while he throws his hysterical tantrums.”

This was not, in the least, how John had expected the head of Holmes International to react when Sherlock barged passed through the large and intimidating outer office and into this… far less intimidating… inner office and began shouting, but it beat being hauled away by security by a country mile. Besides, this was giving Sherlock someone new to shout at and it was a kindness to his own ears that he very much appreciated. Shouting had been Sherlock's preferred mode of communication since last night, but he couldn’t say it was completely unwarranted. Poor Greg… people needed to leave him alone to lead his own life without old ghosts clinging to his trouser leg.

“Hello, Mr. Holmes. Actually, I thought about providing a little music, I did play a bit of clarinet at school, but I decided the shouting would just drown me out, so why bother.”

John weathered well Sherlock’s laser-like glare, while Sherrinford added a big +1 to John’s record. He’d hoped for some direct interaction to get to know the doctor a bit better and this was a very nice time to get that started. Sherlock in one of his tizzies was always a good scenario for taking the true measure of a man…

“Your lack of support does you no credit, John.”

“Sherlock… maybe you should calmly explain to the kind head of the company you work for, officially, what your idea is and why you think it’s a good one. Remember our chat about employment and money and not living rough? That’s the bloke who can make the living rough part a reality for you., so a little consideration would be a good plan.”

“Pfft. Sherrinford would see his own life immediately enter a catastrophic spiral into the deep recesses of Hades if he discontinued my tenure with Holmes International.”

The fact that Sherrinford laughed gave John further confidence that they weren’t about to be tossed out on their ears and he took the enormous risk of letting himself relax enough to take a seat in one of the comfy chairs near the large desk, because there was every indication this wasn’t going to be a quick conversation.

“Your opinion of yourself, Sherlock, never fails to impress. But, back to the original piece of lunacy that brought you here…”

“Why does everyone say I am a lunatic!”

“Because they’ve met you. So, back to the lunacy… you want me to hook up Greg with a date?”

“Many.”

“This keeps getting better. Many dates. Specifications?”

“They must not be put off by either his tedious profession or his poverty.”

“He’s not poor. I put his accounts aright as soon as I got back to London after collecting Mycroft.”
“What Lestrade considers an acceptable wealth level would scarcely fund a broken pencil. Beyond those two criteria, he seems fairly open to a variety of options for suitable romantic companions. From my research, he has engaged in dating with both men and women of different races, religions, occupations and personality types. I, however, will insist that the portfolio of possibilities you produce possess… kindness. I will not tolerate another situation where he is treated abhorrently and suffers because of it.

John was highly intrigued by the unmistakable look of pride on Sherrinford’s face, as well as the fact he didn’t bat an eye when Sherlock then hurled himself into another of the comfy chairs and put his feet up on the large and expensive desk.

“Interesting… of course, the basic premise of your request is more what I’m confused about. Why should I have the job of being Greg’s pimp? One, I have full faith he can attract people for whatever level of romantic interaction he wishes on any particular night and two, have you forgotten why he’s currently single and what, perhaps, I might already be doing to try to remedy that?”

Sherlock’s rude noise was accompanied by enough spittle that Sherry had to pick up a couple of papers from his desk to fan about to encourage drying.

“You are attempting, in your typically Machiavellian manner, to maneuver him back into Mycroft’s frigid and uncharitable arms. This is also something I will not tolerate, so you can shelve that particular misguided plan immediately.”

“Mycroft is disintegrating and it’s because…”

“Because he is an ungenerous, uncaring martinet who deserves every bit of self-created torture he is enduring.”

“That is utterly untrue and you know it.”

The back and forth between the other two men continued to interest John mightily and he felt he had a much better understanding now of why one of the richest and most powerful men in the world had motored out to the middle of nowhere to personally intercede in Mycroft’s and Sherlock’s situation. Apparently, the brothers had a high degree of familiarity with Sherrinford Holmes and, maybe, there was some level of affection and concern there, as well, if the obvious press to see Mycroft sorted was to be believed.

“I do not know it. From this moment forward you will cease to…”

The eruption into the office by the topic of their conversation scarcely earned a raised eyebrow from either Sherrinford or Sherlock, but it had John jumping out of his seat, his military instincts on high alert. Then, after he took in Mycroft’s appearance, his medical instincts pushed everything else out of the way and he quickly leapt onto Sherrinford’s side of the argument, at least to the extent of agreeing with the disintegration description. Mycroft was showing clear signs of systems malfunction that were precursors to systems failure. This was serious. Very, very serious.

“You will never again cross line-items off of my operating budget, Sherrinford, or you will learn in a very painful manner that flight is not a talent you possess to any degree, though you are surrounded by a plethora of windows.”

“Doctor Watson, I’m certain you remember Mycroft. Do forgive his appalling manners and… well, everything about his is appalling at the moment, so I hope your forgiveness is rather… stretchable.”
John was almost positive he saw a flicker of shock and another of something that he could only describe as an unhealthy mix of shame and fear light in Mycroft’s eyes as the android swiveled to face him. The almost positive aspect was the only thing preventing him from declaring the android functionally incompetent and having him carted off to hospital immediately.

“Ah, John. I see Sherlock has decided to provide for you a tour of the company for which he draws an unearned salary. Do feel free to visit as you like and speak to our designers about issues that might be of use to you in your training.”

The attempt to appear and sound poised and collected failed utterly, in John’s opinion, catching the tell-tale tonal breaks in Mycroft’s voice, slight tremor in his hand and color shift of his eyes that all screamed he was teetering on the brink of collapse.

“I… thank you. I appreciate the consideration. Perhaps you and I could have a chat today about… things. I’ve heard you’re really the brains behind the design side and…”

“I’m afraid that will not be possible, but I shall happily address any questions you might have at another time. Sherlock will provide you an email address to address any correspondence and I will answer your inquiries in a most expedient fashion, have no doubt. Now, if you will excuse me…”

“Actually, Mycroft, John accompanied Sherlock so your brother here could present me with a rather interesting demand. Sherlock insists that I prepare a harem for Detective Sergeant Lestrade so he can enjoy a quick and satisfying return to the dating world. How about a bit of advice on the subject since I would assume you’d have some useful ideas what with living with the chap and all. What does Greg like for quiet evenings at home? Any scents he’s sensitive to? Preferences for sexual positions…”

That was a dangerously angry look on Mycroft’s face and John wasn’t entirely sure if he was happy or not to see it. It implied some form of residual feeling, didn’t it? Or did it. He really needed to pay more attention to those women’s magazines that littered the waiting rooms. They covered things like this in great detail. Or so he was told.

“ENOUGH! That is… that is scandalously inappropriate and that you would make light of Gr… the Detective… Detective?… Detective Sergeant’s situation is reprehensible! On this topic, you have already been warned.”

“I’m not making light of it! This is serious data collection! If I’m going to set some prospects in his path, I want to be certain they’re compatible!”

“ABSOLUTELY NOT! You are not going to interfere in his life!”

“You don’t care, remember, so bugger off. However, your raging fit does give me an idea…”

John felt lucky he was looking directly at Sherrinford when it happened or he would have missed the infinitesimally-small cut of his eyes towards the wall behind where John was standing and that would have been a shame since it was the trigger that launched Mycroft over Sherrinford’s desk to tackle Holmes onto the ground. It was with no small amount of relief that Sherlock’s reflexes were lightning quick and that he, apparently, found the situation worth his effort to intervene or Holmes International might have been minus a CEO.

“YOU WILL LEAVE ANTHEA OUT OF YOUR INSANITY!”

“Gr… Greg woul…would adre hr Shrlk hlp…”

It took every ounce of Sherlock’s strength of pry Mycroft’s hands off of Sherrinford’s throat and
John immediately dashed over to begin an examination, not liking what he saw one tiny bit.

“We should get you to hospital.”

“N… Nah… it isn’t… it’s not…”

“It is not the first time something like this has happened, Doctor Watson. The silliness of men is not something to underestimate.”

John’s head whirled around at the unfamiliar voice and found himself looking at a small, wizened woman tutting at the scene and shaking her head in exasperation.

“Uh… ok. But there could be…”

“A lot of things, I have no doubt, but if Sherry isn’t using his emergency button, then I suspect he’ll have a sore neck for awhile, but nothing more. However, I do advocate a rather healthy helping of some sweet, cool and soft to soothe his distress. Sherlock, when you feel your brother can be trusted not to continue his murderous rampage, do phone the employee café and have something appropriate delivered. For you, as well, dear, if you’ve a taste for it. I’m sure they have something lovely and fruity which always gives you a smile.”

Sherlock snarled, not smiled, at Mycroft and, to John’s delight, gave the android a solid push when he broke their hold.

“Mycroft, return to your office. You will not be having ice cream, using the time, instead, to prepare for our upcoming discussion about this incident. Now, Doctor Watson, do me the honor of escorting me back to my rooms. Something is obviously in the air and I would hate for it to meet an unhappy fate because it chose me as its target.”

John watched Mycroft speed out of the office without sparing anyone a single glance and, after getting a ‘go on’ motion from Sherrinford and a ‘don’t go’ motion from Sherlock, let his curiosity take point and offered his arm to the new arrival, who giggled girlishly before taking it and starting their walk.

“If I might ask, ma’am…”

“Oh! I’m Helen. Helen Holmes. This was my company once upon a time. Well, mine and my husband Howard’s. Now, we leave the day-to-day matters to younger heads.”

He was escorting the legendary Helen Holmes like she was his gran wanting to look over her flowers! This was… ok, don’t appear stupid. Whatever you do, don’t appear stupid…

“But don’t worry about my thinking you’re an idiot, John, can I call you John? I’ve had you checked out, you know. A fine man with a very strong mind. Really, Sherlock couldn’t ask for better.”

She knew his name and that he was with Sherlock. And she’d had him checked out. The mind reading bit was almost the least alarming bit of news.

“I… thank you?”

“You’re welcome! Polite… just like Greg. Decent, polite men who really do merit good things happening in your lives. I’m not completely convinced Sherlock can be described as ‘good things,’ but he’s interesting things, at the very least, and that has its own value. And his heart is truly a tender, loving one. You just have to brush away the twigs, evict the hedgehogs and dig a little
Dear god, she knew Sherlock! *Knew* knew Sherlock… and not just what sort of ice cream made him smile. Fruity flavors really did, too. He lit up like a candle with the tiniest bite…

“Oh, look at you… surprised about little things, what a wonderful trait that is! Of course I know Sherlock, dear. It’s rather difficult not to, what with him being, well… Sherlock. A steadying, balancing influence is precisely what he needs, too, and that’s certainly you, isn’t it, John? I know it is… the husband and I are simply thrilled that he’s actually let himself care for someone. We worried, nearly as desperately as for Mycroft, but only nearly, since Sherlock’s emotions are closer to the surface than his brother’s. Mycroft’s are there, of course… attempted murder is a fairly good bit of evidence, I think, but Sherlock has an easier time letting them show. Normally. So, what are your plans for today?”

It *was* his gran! Happy to talk about anything with anyone and a response was only necessary if she actually paused after a question. Questions with no pause were those she’d provide the answer to herself.

“Oh… I have to work tonight and Sherlock doesn’t report to NSY until noon today, so… I don’t know.”

“Take the morning to poke around here, then. It’s actually fairly interesting and I suspect a talented doctor could learn a lot about androids and their function from all of that poking. In fact, I’ll tell Sherry to put you on the approved list, so you can putter about whenever you’d like, even if Sherlock’s not here to flash his ID card. Not that he does, mind you, since everyone well recognizes his disgruntled-raven silhouette stalking the halls, but the principle stands.”

“Oh… that’s very nice of you, Mrs. Holmes. I’m certain that would be very beneficial to my training.”

“Whatever you need, John, dear. Just tell Sherry and he’ll take care of it. He’s a good boy for things like that, though having to take care of Mycroft right now is a bit above and beyond the call of duty.”

“I don’t mean to pry, but… you do know how desperate Mycroft’s condition is, don’t you? Someone with your knowledge of androids must have noticed the signs…”

The first crack in his companion’s cheerful demeanor appeared and it broke John’s heart into pieces.

“I have. He is aware of it, also, do not believe otherwise. Mycroft is highly aware of it, in fact, which makes him try to hide it with even greater intensity of work and longer hours, which simply exacerbates the situation. It’s a dreadful, destructive feedback loop and he is slapping away any attempts to help.”

“Couldn’t you or Mr. Holmes, Sherrinford, that is, just order him home for some rest?”

“Tried and failed. Barring instructing security to forcibly evict him, he simply does what he pleases.”

“I… I hate to suggest it, but he was disabled once before when he was abducted. I don’t know if you know about that, but…”

“Oh yes… yes, I do. And I had very strong words with Sherry over it, too. He watched far too many James Bond movies as a child and loves to do things in complicated ‘sharks with laser beams on their heads’ ways whenever he can possibly get away with it. However, since his father and I are
the same way, truth be told, I’m not in the least surprised. But, it was terribly rude and one does not play lightly with EMP’s and an android’s circuitry. The smallest miscalibration of the emission device and the effects could have been frightfully damaging. Admittedly, Sherry calibrated it himself, so the chance of error was fantastically slim, but... well, water under the bridge. As to your suggestion... I would consider that a last possible effort. No different than for a human who was rampaging about on drugs and needed a cricket bat to the head to get him under control. Or a charging rhino and a tranquilizer dart to its arse. The rub, of course, is that Mycroft would view it as a complete betrayal and... I can’t say that would be helpful in the long run.”

One, the legendary Helen Holmes would fit in brilliantly with the ladies’ reading group that met on Thursdays in his local bookshop. Old birds discussing dirty novels and how ridiculous their children and grandchildren were, despite being brilliant and perfect in every way. Two, the legendary Helen Holmes was very informed on the lives of Sherlock and Mycroft. Three the legendary Helen Holmes was now smiling and waving at a similarly-sized man who simply had to be the legendary Howard Holmes. The father and mother of android technology right here, right now. They were... legendary! Fuck! Why was his brain’s dictionary glued to one page!

“Found my replacement, wifey dear? Can’t say I blame you. He looks like a prime specimen.”

No... don’t give me a hug and giggle because I’ll start blushing and truly be a ridiculous fanboy git and kill me now.

“I’m auditioning him. You can watch if you like.”

Kill. Me. Now.

“Actually, I was looking for you to see if you fancied a trip to the scrapheap.”

And... abandoned. Apparently, prime specimenhood is no match for a good rummage through the rubbish. Rubbish rummaging could gain a body some very handy bits for one’s flat, though, and that was actually more useful than any amount of specimenhood.

“Ooh yes! There’s always fun to be had there. But... first we have to have a chat with Mycroft. He’s gone further off his nut and tried to kill Sherry, which hasn’t happened since Sherrinford swapped the cream in Mycroft’s morning pastry with ceiling plaster, unless I’ve forgotten another incident between then and now. Though it probably won’t make a bit of difference, we need to sit down with him again and try to get through that adamantium-quality skull of his...”

Please let adamantium be real please let adamantium be real please let adamantium be real

“No, John, you dear thing. We haven’t invented that yet, but that doesn’t mean we’re not trying!”

That is sufficient.

“But Howard, you do have to meet John. Sherlock’s John! Isn’t this a marvelous turn of events!”

Having his hand shaken nearly to bits was a new experience for the good doctor, but he appreciated the enthusiastic sentiment.

“Heavens, but it is! A superbly marvelous turn of events. Looking every bit the stalwart soldier and excellent doctor we know him to be. So good to meet you, son. So very good, indeed!”

Apparently, Mr. Holmes was as much in the know about his life as Mrs. Holmes. It was like
meeting the in-laws! Though he never actually suspected that particular ritual of life would go quite this swimmingly.

“Very good to meet you, too, sir. I know you and your wife by reputation and it’s a true honor to get to meet you in person.”

“Polite! Helen…”

“I know! Sherlock and Mycroft each found one! It… we have to calculate the probability of that. I suspect it’s lower than Sherry selling his comics collection.”

“I do love a good statistical analysis… before or after our scrapheap trip?”

“After. We can do it over lunch. First, we have to talk to Mycroft and… John! Sherlock has to work at noon, but you don’t. Why don’t you spend the day with us? It’s already shaping up to be a cracking lot of fun.”

Oh god she was serious. Alright… on one hand, get the sleep he needed to actually function tonight and not be sacked. On the other… Helen and Howard Holmes! And a scrapheap! Plus, there’d be lunch. Probably a very good lunch, too. These two didn’t seem like the type to enjoy tiny bits of complicated food that tried to look a piece of modern art. The other hand wins by a landslide…

“That’s very kind of you. I’d hate to be a bother, though.”

“Not at all! It’ll give us loads of time to get to know you and that’s going to be important, what with you now a part of little Sherlock’s life. Come on, then. We’ll bring you back to him to putter around a bit while we try and get Mycroft sorted, then we can be off!”

John had his arms taken by the two Holmes parents and was marched back through the corridors towards Sherrinford’s office. This was not how he imagined today would be. Not at all. But, it was quickly heading towards the top of the list of best days he’d ever had and, when Sherlock heard of his upcoming adventure, he’d explode, which would be a perky cherry right on the top.

But, he’d also try and dig more into Mycroft’s situation and, if possible, get a private moment with the android. Maybe a neutral third-party and one with medical knowledge might break through to him. Something had to… he really didn’t want the next time he visited here to be for signing the paperwork that forcibly put Mycroft under medical care because he was unable to take care of himself anymore…
“Shit. Really?”

John leaned back on Greg’s sofa, checking first that none of the little robots were behind him when he did so, and nodded, before taking a long drink of his beer. What a day! As expected, Sherlock blew in forty directions hearing his plans and Sherrinford’s laughter, followed by pained coughing, didn’t help matters. Then it was… once in a lifetime really described things. Puttering around a greasy scrapheap with two of the world’s richest and most influential people, putting bits and pieces of this and that into knapsacks for the pair to play with in their lab… stopping in at a solid pub he actually knew for a hearty lunch and a few good pints… an insider’s tour of Holmes International and a photo shoot for the image that now adorned his official ID badge so he could visit anytime he liked… it’d been an evil thing to phone Bart’s and affect a last-minute shift-swap, but… how could he work after a day like today! It would be… sacrilegious!

“I had to give Sherrinford something for the pain and swelling and promise to check in tomorrow to see he’s not got problems surfacing that didn’t show today.”

“Ok… that’s troubling.”

“I would say so, yes. And the signs of malfunction in Mycroft are… too numerous to be anything other than frightening. I’m going to try and stop in tomorrow and see him as well to get a better look at things, but… well, at least nobody in the know seems unaware that he’s on the path to self-destruction, so I’m hopeful they’ll intervene before things get too far out of control. On the positive side, I had a rollicking day with Helen and Howard Holmes…”

The little robots began tooting a happy song that had John laughing along despite himself. Apparently, Greg’s baby bots loved their grandparents very much.

“Nicely done, little ones. Greg should teach you some Christmas carols. You could probably go on Radio 4 and do a musical programme during the holidays.”

“Don’t give them any ideas. Today, they learned, apparently, that some things make large sounds when you tap them and some things make small sounds. Some things make high sounds and some things make low sounds.”

“Are you Dr. Seuss now?”

“No, but I’m the audience for impromptu drum performances which seem to erupt when there’s something especially pleasing on the telly, like any form of animal or traffic lights.”

“And you love it.”

“I… ok, I do. Now that I’ve got them keeping my food on my plate and I bought those child-thwarting plugs for the electrical outlets, I can worry less and enjoy more.”

“You’re a dad. Or a mum. It’s a bit of both at this point, I think.”

“So… a mad or a dum. I’m not certain which is better.”

The various hoots and chirps sounded very much like ‘dum’ to both Greg and John’s ears and Greg’s pained groan only served to make the tiny chorus louder and more excited.
“We have a winner! And what a good dum you are to these little darlings. I’d ask Mr. and Mrs. Holmes for some of my own, but I don’t think Molly would be too happy to provide child minding services for an even greater number of robot babies.”

“Anderson put them in his lab for a few hours today so they’d drive Sherlock insane.”

“Oh, how’d that turn out?”

“Sherlock went insane.”

“That’s always fun. And, I have no doubt I’ll hear all about it tonight. I did mean to ask, though, and maybe you’re the one to try first…”

“No, I won’t marry you no matter how desperate I become.”

“Fuck you very much. Anyway, do you know why Helen and Howard, and Sherrinford for that matter, are so invested in Sherlock and Mycroft? I mean… I understand they’re supposedly modeled after their real sons, who I have yet to meet, but, they really do seem to take a big interest in their lives and well-being. I spent the day with what felt like my in-laws! And they’re punishingly worried about Mycroft… what’s the story?”

Something that can never be revealed until the sun goes supernova.

“I… you’d have a better chance for knowing that than me. I only knew the ‘real’ Mycroft for about five seconds and discussing his relationship with the gnomes wasn’t a topic of conversation.”

“Gnomes! That’s the word I was looking for. All they needed were those colorful, pointed hats. In any case… I’ve asked Sherlock what the connection is and he gives me vague answers that don’t really go anywhere. However, with Sherlock, it could be that he’s mostly oblivious to the attention, so…”

“To be honest, from my impression of them, the gnomes seem genuinely caring people and I suspect they’d take an interest in anyone who crossed their path.”

Utter truth. Greg Lestrade was the master of misdirected truth. The babybots could fashion him a yarn-based medal for his excellence.

“That could be true, I suppose. Especially if there was some connection to their company. They know more about me now than I do, I suspect. At least, that’s the sense I got from the afternoon.”

“They have my pity.”

“Your craptastic praise warms my heart. Oh, is this for me? Thank you.”

John paused to take the half of one panel of a take-away menu from one of the bots and pretend to give it a highly-approving inspection.

“That’s Dickens.”

“Because he’s a mischief?”

“No, because he has a thing for paper and books. Shredded two of my cheap paperbacks to make himself a nest and is a terror for my menus, as you can see. Hold on, Dizzy has something for you, too.”

John waited patiently for the second little robot to lift the loo roll and hand it to him.
“Dizzy?”

“That magic cylinder he’s handing you, as well as any other little tube becomes his roll-about toy. The others are happy to give him a push, too, especially in that section of floor by the kitchen table that’s both smooth and slopes slightly towards sofa.”

“Got it. Watch this, Dizzy.”

John put the roll on his finger and twirled it round and round, smiling broadly at the giddy delight from the little bot who made ‘back to me’ motions and stuck his head in the newly-returned roll to whirl it about like a tall hula-hoop. Then fall over.

“Ooh. Did you hurt yourself?”

“He does that a lot, so I suppose it’s not terribly harmful or he’d stop.”

Unlike…

“John… no shine or gloss… how bad is Mycroft right now?”

The lightness of John’s mood evaporated and he, again, checked for bots before leaning back in his chair.

Whatever you’ve been told about him, it’s true. As a doctor, I’m highly concerned at the symptoms he’s showing and his complete lack of interest in addressing them. His emotional control is, apparently, as easy to snap as a dry twig and if he’s not in full systems failure in a week, I’ll be shocked. At that point… it’s going to be a matter of how much degradation his core systems experienced whether he can be well or poorly restored.”

“You mean he could be doing permanent damage to himself?”

“It’s not guaranteed, but it’s a possibility I can’t ignore. I don’t know Mycroft’s official status, I presume he’s a free android and not owned by Holmes International, but with no official family, taking medical action becomes a little tricky legally. I’d have to have him declared incompetent with only my word for support and have someone installed who would make decisions for him and that’s not something I want to contemplate. Frankly, I think my suggestion to Mrs. Holmes that they just knock him out again, and keep him out until he can self-repair, is the best course of action.”

“I have complete confidence she said no.”

“Absolutely. Though she’s considering it a last resort. And… I wouldn’t consider it either if things weren’t so dire. I have to do some reading on the legality of something like that, actually, because what I don’t doubt is that Mycroft would not react well to it, done in his best interests or not, and I wouldn’t put it past him to launch legal action against anyone who was involved.”

Greg knew that wasn’t true, since that would mean suing his parents, but… having that done once by his ridiculous brother was one thing, but his parents or brother acting specifically to make decisions about his life without his consent… it would fracture his relationship with his family, most likely, and that wasn’t good. It was far, far, far from good…

“I see the gears turning… Greg, this isn’t your fault. Do not start thinking that way.”

“Start thinking? The start line’s back in Wales somewhere by now.”

“Then stop thinking that way. Nobody knows what’s in Mycroft’s head, regardless of what
anyone might think… for all we know, this is an artifact of having his memories restored. Until he lets himself have a medical exam, that can’t be ruled out. Do not carry guilt that’s not yours to bear.”

If only he could be sure it wasn’t his to bear… smarter minds than his believed he could make a difference. That Mycroft might listen to him when he was tuning everyone else out. But, he’d tried! Made the offer! Swallowed his own pride and made a real effort at getting Mycroft to listen. Once. He’d known people with problems, drugs or alcohol or gambling, even good officers he worked with, and one try by family or friends hadn’t done a thing. Repeated trying, though… that had helped, finally. Not for all, some seemed determined to fall to the very bottom of the ocean and stay there, crushed by the weight of what was above them, but those were, by far, the few.

Yes, he’d tried, but he hadn’t continued. Hadn’t made another call, despite a couple of voice mails and texts from both Sherry and the gnomes, ostensibly asking how he was, but he wasn’t so stupid to think it wasn’t a subtle reminder that he was still on their radar. That they wanted him to try again. Which is what they seemed to be doing, but Mycroft was blood and that was a different level of… something… wasn’t it? Weren’t siblings and parents supposed to put everything they had into helping family when there was a need? The gnomes were still in London, which was right and proper, since Mycroft was their son, so why was his sword needed for the fight? It wasn’t even much of a sword. More of a penknife… Why did life have to be so hard? So unfair? Why couldn’t his brain just rest…

“Greg?”

“Huh? What?”

“You’re going to try and talk to Mycroft again, aren’t you?”

“I… no… yes.”

Greg watched John tap his lip with his scrap of menu, then nod.

“Alright, I can’t say I disagree with you mucking in, given this is one of those situations where lots of hands are needed, just… don’t take it all on yourself. He doesn’t come around, don’t blame yourself, don’t beat yourself up over it. By all means, try to help, but don’t fall victim to thinking that it’s you that failed him or weren’t good enough if he doesn’t come around. Do you know how you’re going to do this? Another phone call?”

“He wouldn’t take it.”

“That only leaves seeing him in person.”

“Yeah. You said you were going to Holmes International tomorrow, right?”

“In the morning, yes.”

“I’ve got the day off, strangely, since I just started my new job, but I won’t complain. Mrs. Fisher next door won’t mind looking after the bots while I’m gone, so… meet me here and we can go together. You can flatter your ego by flashing your fancy ID card and I’ll be your very impressed guest.”

“Sounds good.”

Something in John’s tone and two clipped words sparked a neuron in Greg’s brain, which made his arm rise and throw a magazine at the doctor, which bounced off his head and was immediately claimed by Dickens, who hooted over two other bots to help him drag it away for destruction.
“You came here to get me to muck in, you bastard.”

“No!”

“Lie!”

“No… not entirely.”

“Oh, fuck me…”

“I promised Helen and Howard I’d stop in and do two things. One, pass along the news of today and, two…”

“Yeah?”

“See if you seemed happier today than when they saw you. Yes, I’m certain the motive for point one was to push you towards going to visit Mycroft, but they genuinely seemed concerned about you and how you were managing. I think they might feel a touch guilty themselves, for what reason I don’t know, that you’re hurting because of Mycroft’s rejection. Don’t look unkindly on them, Greg. Oddly, they seem to be trying their best for both you and Mycroft and… it’s a lot to juggle. Oh, yes… that’s brilliant. You can juggle, can’t you…”

Smiling, Greg looked inside himself and found no unkindness for the Holmes family hiding even in the darker parts that still kept him awake at night since Mycroft left. Exasperation, but no unkindness, and John wouldn’t have agreed to being a secret agent if he wasn’t of a mind that it was for a good cause.

“Charlotte.”

“Charlotte?”

“Watch…”

Greg dangled a piece of yarn and John watched the little bot drop its minute wads of tinfoil and waddle over to the yarn, which it began to climb very much like a spider would a loose strand of its web.

“It was Charlotte or Shelob and since my babies are sweet, happy babies…”

“Got it. How are they at retrieving beer and crisps? The match is on in a few minutes and I’m in no hurry…”

Unsure whether John was wanting to enjoy a spot of company, keeping an eye on him for the gnomes or taking a break from Sherlock, Greg decided the reason didn’t matter because having a bit of fun was exactly what his mind needed at the moment.

“Piss poor, actually. They can roll an empty beer bottle around and Stuart… Stuart Little… can actually crawl inside of one, which is a joy since I have to try and bribe him out and, then, spread bribes around to the others so they don’t feel neglected, so I’ll handle beer-and-crisp duty if you’ll start putting them in their pen so we can have a bit of peace while we watch the carnage.”

John shook his head and began to wonder if the Holmes monarchs didn’t make these little creatures specifically to keep Greg from falling too far into a mood. How could you when there was a small robot was sitting on your knee waving bits of what looked like a thin, striped shirt around in time with the jingle on the TV advert. Maybe he’d ask tomorrow when he and Greg paid their respects at
Holmes International. Depending on how Greg’s portion of the mission went, the mood he’d be in afterwards could be very black indeed…

“Do you do any work at all?”

Sherrinford leaned back in his plush office chair and grinned at Greg with a perfect ‘no, because I’m rich’ smile that both of them knew was completely shit.

“Nope! My PA actually runs the company and I simply sit in here looking good for when the media pays a visit.”

“You parents are going to be furious when they have to come out of retirement to save the company from your laziness and narcissism.”

“Well, they’re already here, so it’ll save them a trip if I just nip off to Tahiti now and spend my ill-gotten gain on hedonism and debauchery.”

“Why do I imagine your parents would be trailing after you and making you take them sightseeing and shopping and complimenting all your hedonist friends on their nipple rings and choice of lube…”

“Oh god, you’re right. It’s a burden to have parents with no real sense of prudishness, but it’s one I suppose I shall have to bear stoically…”

That was a burden for which Greg felt great sympathy, given the individual that stood as the matriarch of his own family…

“… and now that we’ve had a jolly moment of reacquaintance, I’m going to ask you, with surprising serious, if you’re actually ready for this, Greg. He’s… he’s gone downhill since you last talked to him and… want me to go in there with you?”

Greg closed his eyes a moment and missed the concerned look John and Sherrinford shared, but it would have only underscored his own uncertainty, which had taken a turn for the worse seeing the bruises on Sherry’s throat. Not that he worried Mycroft would get physical, more that he would get vicious with his tongue and… that would be infinitely worse than a crack to the jaw.

“Oh, I’ll be fine. Besides, John has to give you your prostate exam, so you’ll be busy enough without another arse to worry about.”

After a moment’s hesitation, Sherrinford buzzed his PA who escorted Greg to Mycroft’s lab and gave him a quiet smile and small squeeze of his arm before leaving him alone outside the door.

Which wasn’t even an impressive door. Just a door like every other door along the corridor. Not even a name, just a number. Ok, he was stalling. So… knock or not? Not. But, peek… peeking was one of his well-honed police skills and it would be put to full use in this treacherous situation. So, crack the door just a touch…

“This had best be of critical importance.”

Oh yes, forgot Mycroft had ears like a bat. Well, nothing for it now.

“I think it is, but I may be biased.”

Greg hoped the apparatus in Mycroft’s hand wasn’t expensive since it hit the floor and splintered into
bits when the android whirled around at the sound of his voice. But, that shock gave Greg the best view possible of how… lessened… his Mycroft had become. He looked as if death had already visited, but was still enjoying his tea before the final stages of the reaping began.

“Oh, love…”

“What… why are you here? Leave! You w…were not… I shall call security!”

Greg couldn’t stop himself moving forward and startled when Mycroft literally leapt over the workbench that had to be as wide as he was tall.

“Not another step! Not one!”

The list of what he had been expected from this visit was long, but fear wasn’t even penciled in as a remote possibility. Mycroft was positively quivering with it…

“Mycroft, talk to me. Come over and we’ll sit… I’ll clear off that little sofa and we’ll sit for a nice chat, just you and me, alright.”

“LEAVE!”

“No… No, I won’t…”

Not with you like this… dear god, but this was worse than he ever imagined.

“… and look. I brought a gift.”

Reaching into his pocket, Greg extracted what he’d had a devil of a time keeping in good condition while he and John were on the crowded tube ride over here. Extending the perfectly golden, completely unspotted banana, the detective smiled broadly when Mycroft’s eyes lit up like jewels… then he ducked as Mycroft’s roar shook the room before the android flew into a frenzy seemingly with the purpose of destroying everything in the lab.

“Mycroft! No!”

Greg shot towards the android and tried to tackle him, only to be shoved away roughly as Mycroft continued his rampage.

“You’re going to hurt yourself, you bastard!”

Going lower this time, Greg got his arms around Mycroft’s legs and crashed them both to the floor with a teeth-jarring thud.

“Release me! Do no… do not touch me! Do not!”

Holding firm to the legs that were trying to kick him away, Greg kept them from gaining any true leverage and waited while Mycroft bucked, howled, swore and beat on his shoulders with tightly-balled fists for what seemed like a century, until the android’s manic energy slowly faded and Greg experienced an even worse sensation… the clear and unmistakable sound of Mycroft weeping.

“It’s alright, love. It’s alright…”

Crawling slightly forward over Mycroft’s shaking form, Greg ran a gentle hand along Mycroft’s cheek, eyes widening at the moisture he found there.

“Come on, Mycroft, let’s… you have rooms here, right. Let’s go there, just you and me, and
we’ll talk. It’s alright, love… I promise it’ll be alright.”

Nearly throwing out his back lifting the heavy and unresponsive android off of the floor, Greg wrestled the distraught form towards the door and nearly shouted when he opened it to find Sherry and John standing there.

“The way is clear to his suite. Straight down this corridor, take the lift up two floors and then the door halfway down on the right. Good luck, Greg.”

Without another word, Sherrinford left and John followed a moment later, after a reassuring pat on Greg’s shoulder. All of which suited the detective nicely, thank you very much. Whatever was to happen it was on him and him alone and, honestly, Greg wouldn’t have it any other way. Mycroft… Mycroft needed him. Him. And he’d be there for whatever Mycroft needed, as long as it took… his Mycroft wasn’t going to hurt anymore. He wouldn’t let anything or anyone hurt this man, not even Mycroft himself…”
Chapter 51

Greg was very happy Sherrinford was right about the way being clear to Mycroft’s suite, because the effort to keep the android moving and not collapsing in a puddle on the floor was a staggeringly hard and ungainly one, but after a few years, he was standing in front of Mycroft’s door and thanking Sherry one final time because the door was unlocked.

And, when he walked through that door, he was struck by how much the space he entered was exactly like and exactly unlike the Mycroft he knew. It was scrupulously tidy, unlike the lab they’d just left, but... too tidy. Almost obsessively tidy and set up with the sense that if one thing was moved even a millimeter off its position, the owner could become unglued from the resulting chaos. The furnishings were expensive, but not the sterile, decorative expensive you saw sometimes. They showed personality, comfort… just what he’d predict his Mycroft to choose for his home. The quick peek he had of the kitchen as he pulled Mycroft towards the large sofa showed, again, a fantastically-organized space but one that was obviously used or had been once upon a time. Top-quality cookware at the ready, hanging from hooks above the large island cooktop… more gadgets, though, than he would have predicted for his love...

“Here we go… a nice comfy sofa to sit on and… you just wait there and let me get you a little water…”

He hadn’t before noticed Mycroft’s grip on his trousers, but Greg was made aware of it when he heard fabric ripping, a sound he’d become extremely familiar with of late and he stopped moving before he was exposing more of himself than Mycroft might be comfortable with at the moment.

“The water can wait, I suppose. Here, let me sit… oh love, it’s alright, don’t cry…”

Mycroft had released his trousers, but only to be able to use both hands to cradle his face as his sobs broke through again and, this time, Greg’s arm around his shoulders had nothing to do with moving him towards the suite.

In this moment, though, Greg saw the truth the gnomes’ words… beneath the ice that had nearly given him frostbite from even the slightest approach was a man who did have emotions and deep ones at that. Anyone could break down, even the coldest, most stoic of people, but this was different. There was a sour hotness to it that he’d felt in himself... too often, it seemed, lately. A queasy, burning, churning miasma of emotions that had him, some nights, wanting to do just what Mycroft was doing right now. Partly because of Mycroft and partly because once the party started, a legion of uninvited guests showed up with bottle in hand and had a go at his heart and brain. He recognized this. He knew it all too well. His poor love...

“It is alright, Mycroft, I promise you that. No matter what’s wrong, no matter how you’re feeling right now… it will be alright.”

He hadn’t gotten a scintilla of response out of the android since they’d hit the floor in the lab, so the tiny shake of Mycroft’s head felt like progress, even if wasn’t what Greg wanted to see.

“It will. I won’t let it be any other way. I’ll take care of you. I will.”

The second tiny shake of Mycroft’s head was met by Greg reaching up to stroke his hair, then lightly rub his neck while the android continued to pour black emotions out of his soul.

“I’m here now, Mycroft and I’ll stay here as long…”
The almost inaudible ‘no’ stopped Greg’s words and he sighed deeply, before gently prying Mycroft’s hands from his face and softly wiping away the tears with his shirtsleeve.

“None of that. You can tell me to leave a hundred times and it won’t make a difference. I’m here for you, love, and if I knew you were hurting this badly, I would have been here sooner.”

When Mycroft finally lifted his eyes to meet Greg’s, the detective moaned softly in distress at the bottomless despair he saw in them.

“You should have phoned me, Mycroft. I will always…”

This ‘no’ was followed by ‘you won’t’ and Greg sucked in a lungful of air in shock at both the words and the dull, resigned tone that uttered them.

“That’s not true. I know… after what happened that night at Gran’s, you might think that, but you’d be wrong. You know me. You know I’d help anyone in this much pain. But… beyond that. You know I love you, Mycroft, and…

“NO YOU DON’T!”

Mycroft’s shout was more of a wail and Greg moved too slowly to keep the android from leaping to his feet and kicking one of the heavy side chairs so hard it flew across the room.

“You… You do not! I cannot bear hearing… you do not love me! YOU DO NOT LOVE M..ME!”

Mycroft’s voice stumbled on the last word and Greg felt the tiniest of lights begin to flare in his mind. Shoving aside a few pesky issues that were starting to make themselves known, Greg stood and cautiously wrapped his arms around the android, who was simply standing and staring at him with a look so defeated and lost that the detective knew he’d move heaven and Earth to never see it on Mycroft’s face again.

“Shhhh… don’t hurt yourself further, love. Just don’t. It won’t help, but you know what might? Talking. Telling me what you’re thinking and why. What’s driving you along this… you know where this road leads, I know you do. And I want to help. Let’s sit down again, alright? Or, you sit and I am going to get you a little water. You look… dry.”

And he did. Now that, apparently, it was systems fully functional, Mycroft appeared exactly as you would expect for an out-of-control human. Drawn, dehydrated, pasty, haggard… the nanobots were getting quite the workout now they were back on duty.

Risking leaving the android alone for a moment, Greg darted into the kitchen and found a glass, which was plain but heavy and looked hand-crafted, and checked the refrigerator for bottled water first before simply filling the glass from the tap, which looked exactly like what you’d get if you asked a talented and creative designer to make a modern version of something from a Victorian-era manor. It was… beautiful. Unique. A cold piece of marble didn’t commission this. An interior designer on salary didn’t either. This was selected by someone who valued seeing it every day because it brought them a smile, even if nobody else would be there to witness it.

“Here we go… have a sip, you need it.”

Back to unresponsive. Lovely.

“Mycroft… even if you don’t want to, will you do it for me? I’d worry a lot less right now if I knew, at the very least, you were getting a little fluid inside of you. Please?”
One very heavy and reluctant hand reached out and took the glass, slowly raising it to Mycroft’s lips. After checking that the level had gone down and not because of dribbling, Greg relaxed a little and took the glass to set on the sofa table, after drawing over a coaster to prevent any marring of the handsome wood. Another gorgeous, unique piece that screamed to the world the man who lived here was anything but a soulless robot.

“Thanks. Now, and I know it’ll be hard, but… can you tell me what’s wrong? What’s done this to you? I think I can help you a lot better if I know what’s brought you here in the first place.”

Mycroft didn’t answer for the longest time then, when he did, it was simply a small shake of his head that earned him a soft, sad sigh from Greg.

“Ok… is it because you don’t know or you just don’t want to talk about it?”

Another long wait, but, this time, it didn’t produce any results.

“Then I’ll assume it’s the latter and use my extremely sharp and almost superhuman detective powers to fathom things out.”

There. It was miniscule, it was fragile and it only lasted a microsecond, but the corners of Mycroft’s lips twitched and that was going to be scored as a smile by the only person whose opinion on things like smile-scoring counted today.

“So… from what I hear, whatever this is started that night. I won’t lie to you, Mycroft… my own life has been… hard… since then. The pain, the rejection, seeing all my hopes and dreams vanish, losing the man I wanted to spend my life with…”

There was certainly no trace of smile now as the tears began to flow down Mycroft’s cheeks again and Greg took a moment to simply reach out to take the android’s hand, giving it a small, reassuring squeeze which intensified rather abruptly hearing ‘that man wasn’t me’ fall from Mycroft’s lips. Yeah, time to get the large spade and start digging deep.

“That’s why you left, isn’t it? Because that man wasn’t you.”

It was odd how you could tell when a person, who wasn’t looking at you to begin with, now was pointedly not meeting your eye…

“You… woke up… and realized that you were in a life, a good life, built around someone you felt was a lie. A fake.”

“He… he was not real.”

Words! That was helpful.

“So, you had to leave.”

“I… yes.”

“Because you were embarrassed you’d stooped to being with someone like me.”

“YOU WERE MY WORLD!”

Mycroft was back on his feet, balling his fists, which made Greg more than a little aware of those pesky issues again that were really… not worth thinking about now since he might be getting somewhere with his android.
“And you hated that your world was built on someone as common as me.”

“I HATED…”

Mycroft stood there, breathing heavily, face contorted into such agony that Greg truly had no idea if remaining still or jumping up to comfort him was the best idea. Since comfort might stop the flow of words, remaining still won out.

“I… I hated that I was not worthy of you! That… you loved someone who could love! Who could laugh! Who… who could show you, every day, how desperately he loved, wanted… and needed you…”

Greg was off the sofa the second Mycroft’s body began to sag and caught the android, drawing him back down to the sofa where took Mycroft in his arms, wondering if Mycroft even realized that he’d immediately sought out his shoulder to rest a very weary head.

“Shhh… it’s alright, love. It’s very, very alright… you were trying to protect me, weren’t you? Keep me from disappointment or feeling I’d been a fool. Even though it was killing you, you were trying to protect me, as well as yourself. You couldn’t bear to see it, could you? When the light went on in my head that you couldn’t be a man I loved. That you couldn’t be a man I wanted.”

Greg felt his own tears rise at Mycroft’s tragically-broken ‘yes,’ and he almost failed to notice the slight repositioning on Mycroft’s part that nestled him deeper in Greg’s embrace. Then, the risen tears did begin to flow, but as much for Mycroft’s pain as for the pure joy that his highly-vulnerable android sought comfort and protection in his arms.

“And it murdered you, didn’t it? Knowing you loved me, wanting to have what we had but knowing you couldn’t. Made you try and keep from thinking about it. Keep from noticing the constant, ceaseless ache. Work and work some more. Don’t sleep, because dreams are fuckers and might remind you of what you wanted to forget. Don’t stop working, don’t stop moving, don’t try and connect with anyone who knew what you’d lost because they’d make it all real again and you were, maybe, hoping you could convince yourself it was all a story. Something your fractured memory created. Do anything, anything at all, not to feel the pain anymore.”

The tiniest of nods was rewarded by Greg nuzzling Mycroft’s hair with his cheek, then placing a small kiss there to leave no doubt about his feelings.

“My poor love… I understand, too. I tried the same thing, really. Do my job, go home, politely refuse invitations to the pub or for coffee, change the subject when our relationship came up… the difference was I had people who didn’t let that work. Who didn’t let me be alone, refused to let me live with a rotten place in my heart that never got to heal. You didn’t have that, did you? Or, I should say, you didn’t have a lot of it and… the help you had thought you’d not let them help. That you wouldn’t want it or appreciate it. Maybe that you didn’t even need it because you weren’t capable of making any use of it. You make people see what you want to see, don’t you? Push people away so they never get to know what’s under the skin. So, there was nobody to help when you needed it terribly. No, I take that back. That’s not true. Sherry was trying, in his own bizarre fashion, but, maybe, not the in the way you really needed. At least, not at first. He was trying, though, love. He was worried, horribly worried, and I suspect it terrified you when he started to pull me into the thick of things. That’s why you got so bloody angry, wasn’t it?”

Another tiny nod and Greg tightened his arms slightly, ignoring pesky issues like a champ because all of him right now was for Mycroft.

“Thought so. I’m glad he did, though. I’m tremendously glad he did because… I could have
lost you. Really and truly and forever…”

Loosening his arms as Mycroft wriggled against him, Greg prepared himself to face the next portion of the conversation which… which he was ready for. Ready for and ready to fight for, too.

“You have lost him. He does not exist!”

Greg ran a hand along Mycroft’s cheek and smiled at the trembling he felt beneath his fingertips.

“You would like to try…”

“Yeah, he does. My loving, devoted Mycroft is right here. My protective, supportive Mycroft is sitting right here with me. Maybe he doesn’t show all of that in the way I’m used to seeing it, but he feels it. He feels every single bit of it. And, now that I know it’s there, know for certain that all your love for me is still there, I can learn the ways this you shows it. Shared smiles rather than open laughter… running a hand along my arm rather than a massive hug. My Mycroft loves me and he’s a good, caring man besides. I think I can adjust pretty easily.”

Smiling as warmly as he could, Greg leaned in and pressed the gentlest of kisses on Mycroft’s lips, adoring that his android’s face ran through a hundred emotions from disbelief to confusion, though shame and regret to settle on something tentatively approaching the most cautious type of getting-towards the vicinity of hope.

“You… you would… like to try…”

“To be with you again? Yes. Yes, I want to try that. And succeed with it, too.”

“But, Gregory… I truly am someone different than you knew…”

“So I gather. You’re more closed off, work too long and too hard… and I’m not looking for that to change, necessarily. I work too long and too hard, too and it’ll be worse now that I’m a detective. And… I suspect holding people at arm’s length isn’t going to work on me very well, because you’d rather be using those arms for something a touch more fun.”

This smile wasn’t warm… it was wolfish and it widened gloriously seeing both a tiny grin in return and a faint rosy flush on Mycroft cheeks. His Mycroft could blush! Oh, the pleasant surprised simply kept on coming, didn’t they…

“I don’t want you to change, love. I wouldn’t ask that of you. It’s part of relationships, the good ones at least, that you accept the person for who they are, but work for compromises in places where they’re possible. For instance, how long would this lovely suite stay tidy if you let me flat-sit for a week or so?”

“Oh dear god…”

“Exactly! You know how messy I am, but we worked to the middle ground, didn’t we? I had my few little piles by the sofa and the rest of the flat stayed nice and clean, with me helping with the tidying… admittedly, after you’d give me the evil eye, but I did it! So, maybe we have to sit down sometimes and talk, just like this, so I know what’s going on with you. Inside, I mean. And you making me stop and listen when I’m blathering on about something or making plans that I assume you’ll find brilliant when that’s the furthest thing possible from the truth. It’s no different from any other couple, love. And, if in the end, we’ve tried everything, every possible thing to make it work and we simply can’t make a go of things… then we know we tried and that going our separate ways is what’s best for both of us. That we both benefit and we were both part of the decision.”

Reaching to hold Mycroft’s hand, Greg drew in a long breath, feeling the tightening of Mycroft’s fingers around his.
“I… I am not as easy man to love, I fear.”

“How often have you tried to love and let yourself be loved in return?”

The tilt downwards of Mycroft’s eyes was all the answer Greg needed.

“I suspected as much. And, I suspect it’s why that notion has stayed in your head. You could be right… maybe you are hard to love or it’s a case, as it is for most of us, of what makes the difference is finding that one special person who sees in you something worth loving and lets that feeling grow. The Mycroft I knew I loved fiercely and that person is a part of you, whether it gets to come out and play very often or not. Your lost memories… I think they had you forget all the reasons you built thick walls and you didn’t have the chance to erect them as fully again before I met you. But the old, ‘real’ you was still there, if you think about it. Stamford said you responded dreadfully to embarrassment and I have no doubt that’s what you do now, too. You didn’t suffer fools easily and had little patience or tolerance for incompetence. I really think that all of you was always there… just without the memories that made you select some things to show and other things to hide. And, like I said… I’m not looking for that former Mycroft back. I’m looking for you. I want you, love. Because I love you and know what you have to offer. This, for instance.”

Knowing it was a large risk, Greg leaned in and took another kiss, letting this one linger and slowly blossom with heat, mentally shrieking with delight when Mycroft began to kiss him back, running a cool, long-fingered hand along his shoulder and up his neck, where, with a few soft strokes of Mycroft’s thumb, the android drew their kiss to a close.

“You place great faith in me, Gregory.”

“I do. But, you’d be placing a great deal of faith in me, too.”

“Touché.”

“I don’t have one of those! That’s my own hair on my head, I’ll have you know.”

Mycroft’s tiny snort of laughter visibly shocked the android, who seemed to marvel that he was able to do such a thing.

“See? Sometimes it just takes the right person. A particularly ridiculous and messy person, in this case, but…”

This kiss wasn’t Greg’s to start, but it was just as gentle, warm and lingering as the last and only stopped when Mycroft was certain the fresh round of emotion that crested in him wouldn’t spill down his face.

“Oh Gregory…”

“What can I say? Oh, I know. I love you. I can say that. And mean it, too.”

Mycroft looked deep into Greg’s eyes and saw nothing in there but perfect honesty and utter joy at the idea of rekindling their life together. If there was, in this universe, a right person for him, it was surely the man sitting here now, love radiating from him like light from a candle.

“And I love you, my dear. I have never stopped loving you. Not for an instant.”

Reaching out to give his lover the massive hug he deserved, Mycroft gloried in how familiar and home it felt to do this. The feeling threaded through him and stilled the scathing self-doubt and loathing that had filled him since he realized, or thought he did, that he had committed a gross
injustice against the man who he loved with the fullness of his heart. How scathingly he’d berated himself for deceiving his Gregory. For giving him false hope and a cruel, fictitious dream of what could never be. Now, perhaps, those wounds could begin to mend…

“Th… that’s my Mycroft. S… see? And you can have one of these whenever you like. Don’t worry, either, that I’ll sneak up on you in public or something and do it to make you l… loony. I p… prefer my looniness somewhere more private.”

Pursing his lips, Mycroft broke their embrace and wagged a finger at Greg, who tried to continue it, whining his patented sad-puppy whine at being empty-armed.

“Gregory?”

“Since I w… was a day old, yes.”

“What is wrong?”

“Discrimination of any form.”

“True, but I am seeking a more proximal response.”

“Isn’t Proximal a star or something?”

“Proximal, not Proxima Centauri, and I am very well aware that you are aware of that fact.”

“I love that… that you’re so smart.”

“Gregory…”

“Nothing! Not a s…single thing. How about we celebrate with a drink? Got scotch?”

Mycroft gave Greg a quick jostle and focused on his lover’s face, which couldn’t hide the pain anymore.

“My dear, please… tell me what is the matter.”

“Uh… maybe, I’m just a little sore from… stuff.”

Narrowing his eyes, Mycroft ran through his memory and gasped when he hit one that had been shoved aside when other matters took precedence.

“Oh, Gregory… let me see.”

“Ummm… no.”

“An insufficient answer, so I shall summarily ignore it. Can you… would you lift your arms?”

“If I say no, will you j… just go and cut my shirt off of me?”

“In all likelihood, yes.”

“Ok… get some shears.”

“Oh dear…”

Racing to a small table at the far end of the room, Mycroft grabbed scissors and made short work of Greg’s shirt, hissing loudly at what he saw.
“How bad is it?”

“If you do not have cracked bones, at the very least, I shall be supremely surprised.”

Mycroft felt his heart sink at the sight of deep, heavy bruising and swelling along Greg’s upper back and shoulders where his fists had pummeled for what seemed an eternity. He was always careful, kept a continuous algorithm running to maintain his android level of physical ability within human parameters when he was here or in public, however… it had failed, and rather spectacularly, in light of the catastrophic cascade of stimuli, both internal and external. And his beloved had paid the price.

“Nah… not that bad. Just… oh, they’re going to love me needing a f… few days off work when I’m just starting my new p… position.”

Now that the adrenaline and whatever other chemical business had kept him going these past minutes was rapidly wearing off, Greg hoped he’d even be able to get up off the sofa to make it back to his flat for the last few of his broken-toe pain meds that John had prescribed. This really did hurt…

“My dear… promise me, promise me with completely truth and solemnity, that you will never again hide such things from me. Mental or physical, if you are in pain…”

The tiny flare in Mycroft’s brain that his next words would be spoken with equally as much truth and solemnity as he was begging from his human was his own bit of surprise, but it was a staggeringly comforting one, to say the least.

“… I want to know about it. I want to help you, Gregory. Never hide things from me, for I want nothing more than to be there to provide whatever help you need, even if it is only to hold you in my arms and lend an ear to your troubles.”

“You’ll do that, too? Street goes north and south.”

“I shall do my utmost, although…”

“Not trying to change you, Mycroft. Just know that you can, always, bring your problems to me and I’ll be there for you, too. And I will ask if I think something’s b… bothering you that you’re holding inside.”

“Very fair. Now… wait. I… I seem to remember a glimpse of… is John here?”

Oh yes… John. The man with the medical degree. Probably a useful chap right about now…

“He was, we came here together. Pr. probably still is. Your brother’s office, most likely.”

“Yes, they do seem to be forming an alliance.”

“Sherry’s a decent sort. Your parents, though… they are positively b… brilliant! And they like scotch!”

“What! Mummy said they had spoken to you, for which they gained my most strident wrath, however… oh no. You have met them in person. The skies have fallen and the seas have boiled.”

“Yep. And I got botlings from it, too.”

“Botlings?”

Greg laughed a somewhat brittle-from-pain laugh and carefully pantomimed a happy little robot that earned him Mycroft’s very familiar roll of the eyes.
“Dear heavens, they burdened you with their nonsense creations.”

“Don’t call our children nonsense! They’re wonderful bab… babies!”

“You have bonded with them, haven’t you?”

“Maybe.”

“Gregory, the messiness compromise must now be renegotiated.”

“They’re not… ok, you’re right. We can start right on that after… call John, please?”

Mycroft quickly grabbed his mobile from his pocket and shouted a summons to his suite before his brother, the nosy parker, could ask a single bothersome question. For every pie in existence, there was fingerprint evidence of Sherrinford’s meddling, but this pie simply did not have time to bake. His Gregory needed immediate attention, so immediate attention he would have.

“John is but moments away, my dear.”

“You’ll let him look you over, too?”

“I…”

What an abhorrent thought… however, if he was honest with himself, there were some issues in his systems that had progressed from inconvenient to worrying, and it appeared that John still believed him the android Mycroft that he had previously known. That, however, could easily change if John was to be a more familiar presence in this building and a continuing presence in Sherlock’s life. One concern was enough for now, though, and concern for Gregory would always be a priority in his life.

“I shall. I will submit to a full and complete examination if it soothes you concern.”

“It will. Make your p… parents happy, too. They’re mad with worry, love.”

And will be utterly… exuberant… by the restoration of his and Gregory’s romance. How delightful.

“I shall seek to assuage their concerns, as well. Ah, I believe we have guests.”

Mycroft ran his hand tenderly along Greg’s arm before rising to answer the door and let himself take great pride in the fact that the action had come unbidden to his mind. Perhaps his lover was correct… there was something in him of that other Mycroft… something that his Gregory easily called forth, albeit in quieter, more restrained form. Perhaps, despite his fears, he could be worthy of the man he loved. Make him happy and build a life they could share. It was a rapturous idea and one, likely though many tiny steps, he could fully and unconditionally embrace.

“You look like shit. What does Greg see in you, anyway?”

His brother, however, was a different matter. How convenient that his and Sherrinford’s suite was connected via the ventilation system and Gregory’s new charges would easily fit through the ducts for any degree or form of riotous gameplay. And, Sherry’s bedding was filled with eiderdown, was it not? Oh, the botlings would believe themselves in heaven…
“John, how is Gregory?”

John had imagined he’d been summoned to tend to android-related issues, and was a bit taken aback by the startling incorrectness of that assumption. However, Mycroft’s free and easy use of Greg’s name and the profound and obvious concern for the detective’s health said that whatever happened to give Greg that carnage just may have been worth it. Hopefully, that is, because he was going to be a very hurting person for the next few days.

“Uh… fair to middling. I’d need an X-ray or two to check for breaks, but if it’s ribs or shoulder bones, there’s not much I could do but immobilize and prescribe rest, which I’d do anyway based on the degree of bruising and inflammation. I’ve given him something for the pain, but the best thing for him right now is rest and keeping quiet. I… I’m not certain where…”

“Gregory shall remain here while he recovers and I will see his needs are met, as well as ensuring he gains the rest he requires. Sherrinford, make appropriate arrangements so that there is no negative impact of this incident on Gregory’s career.”

“You want me to write him a note?”

Mycroft looked about for a moment, found the remnants of Greg’s shirt, wadded it into a ball and threw it directly into Sherrinford’s face.

“You are an insufferable buffoon. Unfortunately, you occasionally are useful, so I will not summon security to have you tossed into the bins to feed the various feral wildlife that patrols the area, hoping for scraps from the employee café. Now, you will make arrangements for Gregory to have clothing and any personal items that are necessary, such as his laptop, which he shall likely prefer to one we provide, and check that any fiscal responsibilities that are looming are managed so he is not in arrears in his accounts.”

“Ahem.”

“Also, inform Mu… Mrs. and Mr. Holmes that Gregory shall be staying here and that… they may cease their rather intrusive worrying about his and my relationship, which, as an ancillary benefit, eliminates their need to remain in London and they are free to return to their home and… continue on with whatever it is they do to occupy their time.”

“Ahem.”

“If you are contracting a cold, Doctor Watson, kindly wear a surgical mask when you again examine Gregory as any form of illness will certainly distress his condition further.”

John glared at Mycroft who seemed to have regained both his composure and his overwhelming arrogance.

“That wasn’t a cough, that was a ‘pay attention to me, you pompous bastard’ clearing of the throat.”

“I stand corrected. For what purpose is it that I am supposed to grant you my attention, pray tell?”

“First, you need to ask Greg if he agrees to stay here. It seems you two have worked out a few
things, but…”

“Ah… you are correct that we have mended our proverbial fences, but… yes, discussing this issue would probably be wise.”

Gregory’s pride would certainly rise like a kraken if an imperious action were taken and there was more than a single reason that was not a productive or helpful consequence… therefore, compromise and meet in the middle. Make the offer to stay here while he recovered and festoon said offer with bountiful indulgences to sway Gregory’s decision in the most healthful direction. Oh dear… that was more than slightly manipulative. Very well, Strategy Number Two… make the offer and outline the reasons it would be beneficial to his health and, because it was completely true and not at all manipulative, season the offer with a personal hope of time together to celebrate their reunion. Much better.

“Second, I’d like to have a look at you, if you’ll permit it. I… I’ve noticed a number of symptoms that trouble me greatly and I’d rather have a firm hand on them now, so we can see those issues moving towards repair. If you’re going to help care for Greg over the next few days, he needs to be able to count on you and not worry that you’ll collapse due to malfunction.”

Mycroft cut eyes at Sherrinford, which John didn’t miss, but, frankly, didn’t care about at the moment.

“If it suits you to personally conduct the examination, that can be arranged, though we do have individuals here who are most competent at the task.”

“Honestly, and I’m not being prideful when I say this, Greg would be more reassured if I did it. Not to disparage the people here, but he knows me and will trust what I say. He’s worried as much as me and the energy for that worry is not something he can really stand to invest right now when it’s needed for other purposes.”

“Very well. Sherry will make available any equipment you require and we can begin when that is ready.”

“Thank you. I have the data from your last examination so I can easily compare things and get a solid idea of where we need to go. I don’t think you’re in imminent danger of critical failure, but I don’t want to risk any permanent damage because of dawdling.”

“Yes… that is certainly something to avoid.”

“Third…”

“Oh dear heavens…”

“Someone either has to mind Greg’s botbabies or someone has to bring them here. I’d advocate bringing them here, actually, because the good they did to improve his mood and help him think about things other than his problems would actually be useful here. He’ll be in pain and fairly bed or sofa ridden for a few days and that will make him cranky. Well, crankier… which could cause him to make poor decisions, such as gadding about this building, bothering everyone in sight, as well as risking further injury.”

Mycroft’s shudder was not lost on John, who supposed the android had some experience with the tiny troublemakers. *Any* experience with them would make a serious, fastidious person shudder…

“I do not suppose, that for a tidy sum, you would…”
“No. Besides I do have to work.”

“Pardon, I had forgotten. Is there… perhaps someone else?”

Sherrinford kicked Mycroft and gave him a ‘you ridiculous coward’ face that Mycroft happily waved off.

“Well, Molly’s done a bit of bot minding, but she’s got plans with Stamford for the next two nights that I know of.

“Oh… are they discussing a new android employment program?”

“Doubtful, though… now that I think about it… that’s actually somewhat likely. But… oh yeah, forgot you wouldn’t know that. They’re a couple now! A sickeningly cute one, too.”

The number of people in the world who would correctly interpret the imperceptible shift in Mycroft’s features as equivalent to another person’s broad, pleased smile could be counted with the fingers on one hand, but the oldest Holmes brother was one of those fingers and he felt his own chest pressure loosen just a bit more. He’d been insanely nervous that his brother would either self-destruct or fall even deeper into a colorless, emotionless cocoon, but Greg seemed to have found a way to keep that from forming and, maybe, thin the walls of the one that already existed, at least to a small degree.

“That… I am pleased to hear that. Both are great-hearted individuals and deserve like in return.”

“I’ll pass along your congratulations. It’ll… it will make them happy you thought kindly of them.”

Something, oddly, Mycroft genuinely believed. Both had accepted his friendship gladly and made him welcome, even when he was a simple android with little to offer besides the friendship he extended. Perhaps, with Gregory at his side, he could make, at least, some small gesture to acknowledge that their friendship and respect had been sorely appreciated. With sufficient preparation, he could likely weather a shared meal or hour of drinks with something other than the naturally-taciturn nature he sported in social situations when he was not otherwise required to be… charming… to satisfy one of Sherrinford’s dastardly publicity events. Yes, he would broach the idea with Gregory and they might consider something along that line… at some point.

“Excellent. Now… one moment…”

Mycroft extracted his mobile once again and tapped a contact, sighing and rolling his eyes when a knock was immediately heard at his door, which was gleefully answered by Sherrinford.

“Oh, Anthea. How convenient you were strolling by.”

It was likely a sackable offence to make that gesture to the head of the company, John suspected, but Mr. CEO didn’t seem to share his views on workplace propriety.

“Yes, Mr. Holmes?”

Mycroft’s eyes widened and Sherry quickly stepped in to answer. Must remember the John Problem and see it sorted swiftly.

“Would you, Anthea, be so kind as to cancel Mycroft’s appointments for the day and… tomorrow, as well, I think. Anything particular pressing, see it’s added to my schedule.”

The PA breathed a sigh of relief because her Mr. Holmes taking a day or two off was exactly what
the bastard needed. And didn’t this mesh well with the gossip she’d gathered from the people who would certainly be in the know, Mr. and Mrs. Holmes themselves, that he just might have a specific reason to take those two days off of work. ‘Juicy’ didn’t come near to doing justice to this bit of news. Details *would* be had at the very first opportunity.

“Of course, sir.”

“Oh… Anthea…”

One slightly unsure smile was directed towards her direct boss because Mr. Holmes’s moods were more than a little unpredictable of late, love interest in his life, now, or not.

“If you would… please stop in to speak with our travel manager and arrange a holiday for yourself. It has been a trying period and I am hopeful for you to have a chance to relax from your laudable and valuable efforts of late to maintain my productivity. You mentioned wanting to visit Japan, did you not? Do take two weeks to enjoy a well-deserved break from… the unexpectedly hectic nature of my recent work. Direct her to charge the costs to my personal account and… do be lavish with you plans.”

Pinching herself to check for signs of dreaming was probably a touch over-the-top… alright no pinching, but offer a sincere smile and ‘thank you, sir’ before scooting out the door to chase down Alice, the travel manager, and set things in motion. Apparently, while boiling and festering in all that looniness, her Mr. Holmes found a bit of good cheer and who knows if that would happen again. But… if he actually had someone in his life, someone real and not that Irene Adler woman, then good cheer might not be as rare anymore. Which would be… good. Mr. Holmes deserved a bit of good cheer. But, since she deserved more for having to put up with his lack of it, Japan best prepare for her arrival…

“How dare you!”

Mycro swatted away Sherrinford’s finger, which was happily poking him in the chest, and glared his mightiest glare.

“Could there actually be a heart growing in there, Tin Man?”

“Begone.”

“No. First, I now have to hide to avoid all the appointments Anthea is going to fill my day with and, second, I have to see John sorted with the equipment he needs to make sure you’re not going to fall to bits and pieces by nightfall.”

“Since none of that equipment resides in my suite, my pronouncement maintains its relevance.”

The good doctor grinned at how not Mycroft, yet sort of Mycroft, *this* Mycroft was and breathed deeply in relief that, apparently, what was needed was a good dose of Greg to fix what was ailing him. Oh, the healing power of love… no, he did not think that because he did not write romance novels for a living, so his brain was obviously mistaken about its insipid inner workings.

“Uh… true. John, fancy a stroll?”

“Sounds good. Mycroft, keep an eye on Greg? He should be fairly zombie-like right now, but if anyone could defy good medical chemistry and be a bastard, it *would* be Greg.”

“I shall monitor him closely.”
Making an ‘after you’ gesture, John, followed Sherry out of the door and, this time, decided a comment on the shared sneaky look between Sherrinford and Mycroft was in order.

“Alright, what’s with the sneaky looks between you and Mycroft. If there’s something I should know, relevant to his condition…”

Sherrinford paused their walk and took a long look at John, which gave the doctor a spot of uneasiness because a truly serious look from the normally-affable CEO was a bit startling. Fortunately, it broke quickly and was replaced by a more familiar, baiting grin.

“Uh… well… how about a question for you, first. What are your intentions towards Sherlock, John Watson, doctor and army person?”

“What?”

“Answer the question, Captain Watson, or it’ll go hard for you.”

“Do I need to examine you, now? I can do both, you know, humans and androids alike.”

“You have as much joie de vivre as Mycroft and that’s a sad, sad thing. I thought only those old gents who’ve been sitting in the same chair at their local for fifty years and are still complaining about women getting the vote shared his rung of the ladder. Just answer the question.”

“I… it’s a bit personal!”

“I don’t care. Answer it.”

“You do care, though, and that’s… why do you care?”

“If you answer the question, maybe that’ll be your reward.”

“Funny.”

“Yes, I am. You should see me at the corporate Christmas party. Actually, you can, because I think there are quite a few videos of me on the internet by now and, let me tell you… it’s worth it.”

“Oh my god… how does Mycroft tolerate you?”

“Reward… look at it, John. It shines, it gleams, it’s a tasty, tasty morsel just waiting to hop upon your tongue…”

“You’ve got a wrongness in your brain, do you know that.”

“Actually, I do. We have a love-hate relationship, which makes for some very sexy dreams. Come on, John… see the glittering reward giving you come-hither eyes…”

“Fine! I… Sherlock is the most amazing, interesting, maddening, surprising person I’ve ever known and…”

“Tasty morsel waiting to be licked…”

“… I can’t imagine being without him anymore. It’s unsettling, actually, how quickly… we fit together, in a way I never thought I’d fit with anyone.”

“Are you happy?”
“Happy? I wasn’t. When I returned to London, I wasn’t happy at all, just getting by day to day. I was starting to forget a bit what it felt like, actually. Then I met Molly and started to get a few sparks in my days that… truthfully, they hurt, in a way, because they didn’t last long and it’d be me again, alone in my flat, wondering what it is I was looking for, what I needed to just make my heart start to beat again. And… I finally found it.”

John watched Sherrinford nod thoughtfully as they continued on with their walk, then startled as the CEO put an arm around his shoulder and diverted him to the only other door on that side of the corridor.

“Well then we need to talk.”

“Ummm… but what about Mycroft?”

“He’s not going anywhere. Besides… stuff.”

“What?”

“The tasty morsel is coming, John. Gird your loins.”

“What does that even mean?”

“Oh, you’ll find out.”

__________

“Mycroft! My sexy, wonderful, yummy Mycroft.”

Apparently, when Gregory turned zombie, it was a somewhat delightful form of the species into which he transformed.

“How are you, my dear?”

“Oh, you have no idea how I love hearing you call me that. Puts a big pint of warm in my form.”

“I am pleased you enjoy your nom d’amour. Now, can you tell me the level of your distress?”

“Naught! John gave me very good pills and I am feeling no pain. Not feeling my hands or arms either, but fuck ‘em. I don’t need them right now, anyway.”

His beloved was positively blissful and a blissful Gregory was a joy to behold.

“That you do not, for I shall gladly feed you when you are hungry and render your hands unnecessary for the process.”

“See… that’s the Mycroft I know. He’s there… the Mycroft I love and want to spend my life with and figure out last names with and all of that… he’s right there.”

Greg used one of his unnecessary hands to reach out and encourage Mycroft to take it, along with a seat on the bed. It did take a second for the stunned Mycroft to comply because… well, if that was not a clear statement of life-long commitment, then nothing would meet the standard. Mummy and Father must not hear of this or… oh dear, they would be incandescent with glee and that was never something to encourage.

“I am finding, much to my amazement, that… at least, with you, it is easier, perhaps to… relax.”
“Kiss for being amazing?”

Mycroft’s lips twitched even more realizing they were twitching at all from Greg’s medicated jesting.

“But, of course!”

And a slow, gentle kiss it will be for your poor body certainly can stand no more, despite the opposing opinion of your miraculously-restored hands.

“Why don’t you lose those clothes and we take advantage of this very big and comfortable bed?”

“Because you are considerably injured and that would not be conducive to proper healing.”

“Ummmm… what are those chemicals that erupt in your brain when you come?”

“Endorphins?”

“Yes! They’re nice.”

Stroking Greg’s hair, Mycroft felt his heart clench at how utterly he loved this man. It was unquestioned and unconditional and… nothing he had ever believed possible. So pure and pervasive in his system… however, there were matters to attend to first, before any true contemplation of endorphins could occur.

“A viewpoint against which is punishingly difficult to argue. Pursuant to that, in rather tangential fashion, I do admit, I would ask if you will agree to convalesce here, where I shall be near to tend to you and see your needs met without your overtaxing yourself.”

“Want me to stay for a bit? Sure! I wasn’t sure how I was going to get home, in any case, since… owwwwww… so this is brilliant. And we get to sleep together in his lovely bed and do all sorts of scandalous things…”

My, that went well. Was it a potential omen for broaching the subject, in the days to come, as to where his love might choose to reside permanently? This suite was already, in some sense, his home and it was not entirely inconvenient for his Gregory, in terms of traveling each day to work. Easily, weekends and holidays could be spent in his larger residence or the house he owned in the country that… had not seen his presence in a very long time… Gregory would adore that house with its vast expanses of land to explore…

“Excellent. Then I shall make suitable arrangements for your stay. I am glad for it, as well, my dear. Very glad, indeed.”

“I am, too. Get a chance to suss each other out for making it a more permanent thing.”

Was it illegal to periodically drug one’s lover in order to gain a wealth of extremely timely and critical information? Likely so… but, Gregory did enjoy his scotch and that was freely available to whomsoever might enjoy a sip or twelve…

“Do you know that was one of the very things I considered before making the offer?”

“Hurray! Great minds think alike!”

“That they do.”

“Great bodies, too. Want to know what my body is thinking?”
“I believe I can express that with but a single word – sex.”

“Hurray! Great minds think alike!”

This time, Mycroft’s grin came out more fully and he raised Greg’s hand for a small kiss, much like the one he gave it the very first time he revealed his secret, as least as much as he remembered of it.

“That they do. Again. Now, however, my mind must direct body to take a moment and affect certain changes so John’s examination of me does not reveal too much.”

“Oh… forgot about that. My Mycroft is going to grow old with me…”

Greg’s large, satisfied smile earned him another moment of hair-stroking and a tiny smile returned that made the detective smile all the wider. His Mycroft had the most gorgeous smile…

“I shall and I do look very forward to seeing you, garmented in a warm jumper with spectacles perched upon your nose, reading the news as you look over our garden for any sign of treacherous and hungry rabbits.”

“We’ll have a garden? I’d like that.”

Their country home would now quickly be returned to a pristine state and made ready to host two for a small holiday at their earliest opportunity.

“We shall have a garden for you to enjoy during the day, with warm fires and books to while away the evenings.”

“That’s… that’s so beautiful…”

It was certainly not polite to smile at his Gregory’s moist eyes, but… oh, the years ahead were going to be magnificent…

“A match for your own incomparable beauty. But, I suppose I must turn from this pleasant reflection and prepare myself.”

“We do have to tell John something, you know. Molly and Anderson and Stamford, too. They’re going to get suspicious and, let me tell you, when Molly’s suspicious, she’s a beast! One with big claws and teeth and she keeps ripping until she gets to the truth. Would have been brilliant at interrogations. Then she’d give them tea and biscuits because she’s kind.”

Ah yes… those were other matters to be tended to in the very near future. His brief time out of the shelter had created quite the stir… a situation he never would have predicted prior to setting his plan in motion. Meeting people that he, himself, gladly embraced. Friends! He had never actively sought friends but now he had a number to his name, though their current view of him was likely fairly black. And Sherlock… escaping continuously to try and have some word with Sherlock. Stealing a car when he believed him in danger! All of that feeling released into the world and… the world had not ended. His life had not crashed and burned before his very eyes. Yes… yes, he would try to take those tiny steps… many, tiny steps, with Gregory’s steadying hand and seek, if possible, a place where old and new could coexist peacefully. What a grand and frightening journey that would be…

“I shall turn my mind to that very thing, my dear, and I have no doubt a solution will be found that satisfies all parties.”

“Ahem.”
Oh dear heavens.

“We’re back!”

Mycroft turned around to face his privacy-invading brother and noted two important things. First, there was no medical equipment to be seen, which was beneficial since he had yet gone through the process of resetting his systems for a typical android mode and, second, John was staring at him as if he was witnessing the beheading of Charles I.

“Very well, if you will kindly assist John setting up his equipment and leave Gregory and my bedroom…”

“That can wait.”

“Sherrinford, I have no interest in socializing with you, especially since Gregory is the one in need of my attention at the moment. Kindly go and take yourself somewhere your presence is appreciated, such as the zoo.”

“See, John? Told you I deserved your pity. My entire life listening to his evil mouth. Of course, now, he uses longer words than he did when he was a boy, but, in fairness, not much longer. Always a wordy little bastard who loved the sound of his own voice. I think he even wrote a love letter to his voice once when he was younger. Called it ‘my dulcet darling’ or something equally horrifying.”

Greg’s laughter mixed inharmoniously with Mycroft’s somewhat strangled squawk and Sherry took the opportunity to simply point and mouth ‘aren’t I lucky’ to John who was just beginning to shake off his shock.

“You… you…”

“I what, brother dear? Let John in on our little secret? Well, it had to come out sooner or later, what with him being embarrassingly in love with Sherlock and Sherlock being just as suddenly besotted. Besides, this gains Sherly and you a private physician that you can trust, so no more worries about what might happen if you or baby brother actually do have health problems, especially since you hate beyond hate asking Mummy or Father to take a look at the issue. And, see…”

Digging in his pocket, Sherry pulled out a crumpled piece of paper and waved it about like one of the botbabies with a piece of yarn.

“I got his signature! He’s your private physician now, with all the confidentiality that goes with it, so I can sue him into penury if he so much as breathes a peep of anything, not that I think he will, but I suspected it would make you feel better, nasty piece of work that you are.”

That got John’s mouth moving…

“WHAT! I… that was supposed to be some paper for my building access!”

“That I scribbled on a piece of note paper to give to HR as an official document for their records? You poor thing; at least Sherlock believes you have your looks going for you, so that’s something. Anyway, don’t worry about the taxman finding out about our little arrangement. Cash transactions only, like it should be with family. Ok, so now you’ve seen that learning who that baggage really is hasn’t actually changed who he is, more’s the pity, let’s actually go and roll in the equipment I stealthily gathered this past week and you can give Mycroft a proper check. Greg… good job still being alive.”
Greg’s enthusiastic thumb’s up made Mycroft’s eyes roll, but it broke the tension that had flooded his body and allowed him a moment to realize that… again… the world had not ended. And, Sherry did have some rather interesting insights about Sherlock’s relationship with Doctor Watson. Given that revelation… Mummy and Father could easily be diverted from any smiling, hugging and cheering in his direction and vent their parental exuberance on the other happy couple in the family. Dear John, you are becoming quite the valuable asset…

“Yes, please go and do the job you actually left to accomplish, if you would be so kind. I am certain Gregory would appreciate having his mind set at ease about my condition.”

Plucking John by the collar, Sherrinford dragged him out of the bedroom and towards his own suite once more to pull together what John needed to check over the most stubborn android in existence. In truth, Mycroft had been about a day away from being handcuffed, with android-proof handcuffs, to a chair so that the family could do their own diagnosing of his issues and that plan had been nebulously brewing in his head for some time. Fortunately, his cleaning staff never found anything strange about the extra equipment in his suite because… maybe, just maybe, he was a bit gadget happy and had, on occasion, accompanied the parental pair to one of their scrapheap/jumble sale/charity shop adventures and came back with rather large collections of… stuff. All of it spectacularly useful, of course, and… cool.

“You are smiling, Gregory, my dear. It suits you.”

“John’s going to be a top-notch partner for Sherlock. We’ll need to buy a wedding gift, won’t we? Ooh, I’m not good at that. When there’s one of those wedding or baby do’s at work, I usually have Molly choose something and Anderson and I pay her back. Or give money to whoever’s collecting. Could we do that? Make… make Sherlock do the shopping and just give him money? Noooo… he can’t shop for his own gift! My brain is fuddled.”

In the most adorable manner possible, in Mycroft’s opinion.

“A situation we can ponder in more depth another time when your brain is more fully under your explicit control.”

“That’s smart. But you’re a genius, so I expect that. Kiss for expecting your genius?”

The pursed lips making kissing motions at him made Mycroft sorely wished he had his mobile in hand to take a small video to play when his day was particularly dreary, but alas, his memory would have to suffice.

“Oh, I suppose complying with your request will not be too arduous a task.”

Leaning in, Mycroft took the offered kiss and a few more besides, before he found himself yanked away by the collar and dragged out of the bedroom to the soundtrack of his lover’s giggles. However, after he trounced his brother and submitted to his examination, he would return for more of those giggles, and kisses, as well. He had rather a long number of years for which to recover ground and was finding himself most eager to continue on at the pace he had begun.

“Walk, damn you! You weigh a bloody ton!”

Trouncing, however, would come first…

“Why have I been summoned to his soul-sapping hell hole?”
Four pairs of eyes looked up to see Sherlock standing in the door of Mycroft’s bedroom and the fact that two of those pairs seemed scheming did not please him in the slightest.

“Mycroft and Sherrinford are staring at me and smiling. That is intolerable and I demand it cease.”

To John, so many bits and pieces had fallen into place that this was perfectly in line with his new understanding of Sherlock’s interaction with the smilers.

“Stop being an arse to your brothers, Sherlock, and come be truly humiliated by the photos we’re looking through. You were such a cute baby, even with a pout on those tiny lips…”

Sherlock’s gasp and wide eyes made John laugh, unfortunately, because that brought a thunderous pout to Sherlock’s face and even more laughter from John, which escalated the pout to a scowl and the nearness to a foot stamping and shouting event had Mycroft intervening to break the circle of provocation.

“Yes, brother, there is now another who is aware of our nature and John was fully willing to agree to the mandatory execution should he divulge our secret to the tabloids. He affected some degree of protest over my insistence on a firing squad, however, my negotiation skills have not gone to rust during my small holiday from such things.”

At least the rude noise was both baby-brother-esque and completely Sherlock, signaling the return of the android from his incipient tantrum.

“You could not negotiate a sugar packet from a coffee vendor if they were in a pail at the counter boasting a sign labeled ‘free sugar, please take lots.’ “

“As I abhor sugared coffee, I suspect my incompetence shall not trouble me unduly. But do come, Sherlock, and join us. You can, perhaps, provide narration for some of the more amusing of these photographs, such as… this one! Was it a basset hound or a beagle that took hold of your nappy and dragged you through Mummy’s primroses? Such a muddy little boy you were…”

John patted the space on the bed next to him and gave Sherlock a beckoning smile. There was certainly a long, private conversation ahead of them but, honestly, it was more to learn all he could about Sherlock’s life, his real life, and… talk honestly about their future. Which, as far as he was concerned was set to be a good one. A long, successful one that certainly wouldn’t be boring. Infuriating, headache-inducing, but never boring. And, really, what more could you want? Well, companionship, support, amazing sex, love, happiness… and wasn’t he a lucky fellow that he had all of those, too…

“I will join you once you make the decision as to what to do with Lestrade’s foolish toys.”

“Toys? Whatever are you… oh no.”

Little hoots and toots erupted as the small robots found their way from their opened pet carriers to the bedroom, in search of the sources of the voices and heat signatures they detected, some of which were happily familiar.

“Sherrinford promised me funds for a new microscope if I collected them and delivered them here.”

Greg’s joyful ‘my babies!’ made Mycroft groan, but that didn’t stop him helping the first arrivals onto the bed to further climb onto Greg’s legs and begin to whistle, hum and beep a variety of jubilant songs that had the detective smiling proudly.
“Thank you, brother mine, for this welcome addition to my home.”

“Pfft. Something needs to enliven this mausoleum. Especially if I am correct and Lestrade will be here for some time. His contribution to the grim, ghastly atmosphere cannot be overstated.”

“Grim and ghastly? I beg your pardon.”

“There is little more nauseating than the mental image of you begging, Mycroft. Though, I am certain it is a frequent sight at every bakery in the vicinity.”

As Sherlock and Mycroft fell into a very familiar pattern of argument, with Sherry happily joining in to egg them on, Greg and John focused on the new arrivals and keeping them from shredding the bedding or scurrying off to create their own brand of excited mayhem. This was their family now, squabbling brothers, eccentric in-laws and a host of surprises and chaotic turbulence that stretched out beyond the horizon. And they wouldn’t have it any other way.

“I DO NOT RESEMBLE A DONKEY!”

 Quieter, maybe they would have it quieter, if that was an option. Fortunately, ear plugs were cheaply had from a wide variety of suppliers…
And we come to the end of our tale! What I thought was going to be about a 30k ditty truly grew into something I didn’t expect, but am very, very happy to have written. Thank you all so very much for your continued bounty of kind and encouraging comments. Many a hard writing day was made easier knowing that I had the support of wonderful people who enjoyed the story and were eager for more!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Mycroft lay in bed and allowed himself the luxury of staying in bed and reveling in the heat, scent and soft snoring of the man at his side. Normally, he would immediately rise when his recharging was complete and begin his day, but… not today. Today he would indulge his senses and let his imagination wander to… a life of days that began this way. Not each one, of course, but… so, so many. And a life of days that ended as had this last one. Taking his place next to the man he loved and watching that man drift slowly off to sleep. After, of course, they had shared long, languid moments of quiet conversation and kisses that defied romantic description. He was not unaware of the idyllic concept of contentment, but had not truly paid it heed until he experienced it in its most powerful form. Needless to say, he certainly had no idea what he had done to deserve it, however, that would not stop him from treasuring his great gift and doing everything in his rather limited power to offer his lover the same in return.

“You have the most beautiful eyes, love.”

Smiling gently, Mycroft turned slightly to look into eyes equally as beautiful and suffused with the most heart-lifting adoration.

“Actually, everything about you is beautiful. Or handsome. It’s hard to know the right word for that when you’re talking about a man. But you have it! Lots of it. Kiss?”

Every day he had this to which to look forward… truly, it was an unimaginable thing, but one that had his imagination sparking wildly, which was something of a paradox. Fortunately, he was not averse to a bit of paradox in his life…

“Of course! I would hate to see your day begun with a denied request.”

Laying a tender kiss on Greg’s lips, Mycroft then simply gazed at the man shaking off a night’s rest and reminded himself to keep his partner’s good humor intact regardless of the inevitable protests he’d receive when issuing the reminder for medication. Having his partner suffer pain was not an approved agenda item for today and no argument centered on either manliness or ‘no, really, it’s all fine’ was going to suffice to change his mind on the subject.

“Delicious. My Mycroft is a very delicious man. How’d you sleep?”

“Rather like a stone, which is somewhat a unique thing for me. And… the rest was most necessary, I suspect. John and Sherrinford recalibrated certain of my systems and made various adjustments that should move my health in a more positive direction, however, simple rest and recharging was also prescribed and, apparently, for good reason.”
“And we got to do it together, which was the very best part of it all.”

“Unquestionably. Moreover, it is something to which I look very forward to repeating.”

“Me, too. Ugh…”

“That was a rather conflicting statement, my dear.”

“What? Oh, sorry. Just… can’t really stretch or scratch or do any of the things I usually do when I’m waking up. It’s owful.”

“Aawful?”

“No, owful. It’s full of ow.”

“Oh… oh, Gregory. I had hoped your medication was still providing some measure of help, but do not fear, for I shall get more for you.”

“In a bit. As long as I don’t move around much, I’m alright. I’d rather have you stay here with me and be cozy and warm, than be all alone and cold while you get my pills.”

“Perhaps it would be prudent to train one of your tiny supplicants to deliver your dosage, along with some form of closed-container measure of water.”

“Steve’s the best for that, probably. My very scientific observations say he’s the strongest.”

“Steve?”

“Steve Reeves.”

“Pardon?”

“I see a Hercules movie marathon in our future.”

“Ah, the connection is now apparent.”

“You’ll need to learn their names, you know. They’re our children, after all.”

“I still cannot believe Mummy and Father rained upon you their handiwork. No, in truth, I can, for they are wholly unseeing of the chaos and discord they spread as they go about their day. There really is no mystery as to the origin of that particular attribute of Sherlock’s character.”

“That genetics is a pesky thing at times. I suppose, though, they were bored that day waiting for me to come home. And… maybe they thought the smiles the little buggers gave you lot when you were young might do something good for me, too.”

Further, my dear, they provided your amusements with a plethora of monitoring equipment to keep their infernal eye on you, though, that shall remain my secret and… well, given the world we will now share a small amount of eye-keeping on my part, as well, is certainly not unwise. My hours shall not diminish, most likely, and it would be a blessing to know of a pressing, safety-related need at the moment of need and not a distressing time later. For that alone, the robots shall continue to gain my approval. In, at least, some small, mostly-tolerable measure…

“You are probably correct. Mummy and Father do invest their actions with multiple intentions and purposes whenever possible. Speaking of…”
Mycroft’s sensitive ears began registering the now-familiar cacophony of the tiny robots, helpfully in their pen, making their presence known and that their… oh dear lord…

“What?”

Oh, that was aloud.

“A fact for the day. We are now ‘dum’ and ‘mot.’ Is that not a transcendentally joyful thing to know?”

“You’re officially adopted! This deserves a celebration. How about you get me a pill and I’ll make the most luscious breakfast…”

“Which you would have to leave the bed to craft, breaking John’s prohibition for the day. Also… I have nothing from which one could craft a breakfast, luscious or not. A proper diet was not… let us say, it did not occupy an elevated position on my priority list.”

Greg made to reach out to stroke Mycroft’s cheek, then winced and used a foot to stroke his leg, instead.

“Well, that’s changed and I’ll see you properly fed, washed and dressed every day, don’t have a single worry about that.”

“Such a good dum you are.”

“My talent astounds even me, at times. Oops, they’re getting loud because they know we’re awake. You’d better let them out of the pen or they’ll render it to shreds and I’m not in a position to pop out and get another one.”

“I am somewhat more concerned about what havoc they might wreak with my rugs, however, your point is valid. I shall free the robots and take the opportunity for a small chat with them concerning proper conduct while they are granted freedom of movement.”

“If this is a bit… racist… tell me, but, can you talk to them at all?”

“The question is an interesting one and not something I find offensive. The answer is that, to some degree, I can interpret their signals, but I can also affect some direct programming for the purpose of communication.”

“Don’t you dare reprogram our babies! I love them just the way they are.”

“I promise to only make it clear that investigations of new discoveries should be undertaken through non-destructive means.”

“They’ll still be able to play with the stuff we give them, right?”

“I shall make certain that is thoroughly understood and… punctuate the discussion with some of the various bits of paper, metal foil and what appears to be half of one of your socks that Sherlock brought with them.”

“That’s alright, then. I don’t want them taking apart your nice suite, but I also don’t want to see them walking… or rolling… in an orderly little queue or struggling to toot out ‘Mycroft’ because their mot likes things a bit more formal.

Drat.
“Such things never crossed my mind for an instant.”

At least four instants were required, so that is most agreeably classed as truth.

“Bollocks.”

Must work harder on agreeable truth to avoid Gregory's withering scorn.

“Those have crossed my mind and I have full intention of indulging myself once you are fit to fully appreciate my exemplary technique.

Which I shall begin to research the moment you take your medicated morning nap so that I have a technique to demonstrate.

“Ooh… I like the sound of that. Tonight?”

I am a quick study…

“Let us evaluate your condition at that point and then make a decision. It is not as if we do not have ages of time to revel in debauchery.”

Knowing Greg’s smile was equally as wide for the prospect of intimacy as for the knowledge that they would be together for ages of time brought a quiet, contented smile to Mycroft’s own face, which prompted him to give Greg a final kiss before gently sliding out of the bed to begin their first new morning together. Free the robots, phone to have breakfast delivered, then devote himself to doing everything possible to make the man he loved as comfortable and entertained as possible. It was the very least he could do for someone who had given him both a heart and a life and made him see that having both was something to celebrate.

“Crispy bacon for breakfast? Maybe with honey drizzled on it?”

A heart and a life did not, however, buy one an affront to breakfast. He was in love with a madman. The penalties for his lifelong dour nature were now being enacted and they were both stiff and dire…

But, those penalties were nothing compared to the benefits…

Looking out over London from the window of the study of his suite, Mycroft found himself doing something he’d grown accustomed to doing over the past three days. Smiling. Not a large, toothsome smile, but a smile, nonetheless and it was one that came easily and naturally to his lips. When Gregory had stepped through the door to his lab, he had believed his life at an end, but he’d been wrong. It was firmly at the beginning…

These past three days had been… there were not entirely unlike those they had spent before his memories were restored. Quiet, engaged in shared pursuits, even if those shared pursuits involved each reading their own book while curled under a blanket on the sofa… enjoying meals they both worked to prepare or… well, his affinity for cooking while his memories were blocked was, apparently, an innate interest for he had always enjoyed, and greatly at that, the art and science of cooking and was agog at how appreciably his satisfaction from preparing a well-cooked meal had skyrocketed now that he had someone to whom to gift his efforts.

Today, though… Today would be a rather significant change of pace as they were, somewhat against his partner-protecting instincts, taking a ride so that he could face and apologize to the people
who he now felt most comfortable considering his family-by-marriage. Not that the marriage part had occurred, of course, but... it was not a subject that had been avoided in discussion, since Gregory had good memory of his rather revealing disclosures while under the inhibition-suppressing effects of the pain medication and had not, in the slightest, backed away from those admissions.

“There are you ready, love? The car’s waiting.”

Not backed away in the slightest...

“I am. I simply needed a moment to ready a few things for my staff to tend to while we are away.”

“It’s only for the day.”

“True, but we have several projects at critical stages at the moment and every day is a valuable one until we are ready to see manufactured the first final-stage prototypes.”

Greg walked forward and carefully put his arms around Mycroft’s waist, gauging the amount of discomfort from applying a gentle squeeze and pronouncing it acceptable.

“We don’t have to go today, you know. Mum, Dad and Gran aren’t going anywhere. I know you already worried that the trip would be too hard on me, so if you want to postpone, we can. Your work is important and I don’t want to see that impacted for something we can do anytime.”

“Thank you, my dear, but I would prefer to see this done sooner rather than later. It is a stain on my soul that I am hopeful to see washed clean and it will only set in further the longer it remains unattended.”

“Alright, then. Off we go! Don’t forget, we have to stop on the drive back and buy Anthea something nice for minding the botlings for the day.”

“She is actually most looking forward to the experience, partially, I suspect, because it means I am not present to create headaches for her and what headaches may be caused by the robots shall be minor by comparison. You do know, however, Gregory, that they shall have to remain alone a great deal of the time once you return to work.”

“We can hire a nanny.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I sincerely doubt there is a nanny or au pair in existence with the necessary training to mind your horde of hellions.”

“You’re still upset about your dressing gown, aren’t you?”

“Silk! It was the most indescribable garment of precisely spun and woven silk and is, now... robot hammocks!”

“And that was after you had your little chat with them, too. They do seem rather independent of spirit.”

“Gregory, you are smiling.”

“T’m proud.”
Mycroft tried, tried with all his might, to glare blazingly, but it fell to ash immediately from the soothing balm of his lover’s happy grin. Grudgingly, too, from his own pride in the tiny robots’ staunch autonomy and, frankly, creativity when it came to affecting engineering solutions with the crudest of materials and tools. Apparently, design talent was a family trait.

“How utterly paternal of you. We shall, though, stop for a bracing cup of tea at our earliest opportunity for, I suspect, it’s invigoration is something I shall sorely need to meet this day with both your gleaming paternalism and your family’s rather colorful manner of bonding.”

“You know… we still have time to pack up the babies and take them for their first visit with the grandparents.”

The sheer horror on Mycroft’s face made Greg laugh loudly, which earned Mycroft a kiss before the detective took his hand and began to lead him out of the study. This was great! No, this wasn’t exactly the Mycroft he remembered, but he was just as brilliant and sexy and interesting and talented and marvelous and… oh, the years ahead were going to be brilliant! Though, the gnomes were a little pointed the other day, during their unannounced and Mycroft-vexing visit, about grandchildren. Fat, happy, biotech-created grandchildren. Mycroft could deal with managing that, though. They were his mum and dad, after all and it would be more efficient that way. Naturally. Anyone would agree with that line of reasoning. Of course, once his mum and dad were informed about their relationship being on again and moving in a fairly pointed direction… ok, maybe cooperation was the best strategy for a successful relationship where parents were involved. Colorful would not begin to describe his family once they caught wind of a true happily ever after for their sad and lonely son…

“How are you faring, my dear?”

That his Gregory did not grimace was a very good sign, but Mycroft would not let anything other than a voiced assessment stand for evidence.

“Ready for another pill, actually, but that’s only because it’s the proper time and not because I’m in agony from the trip. You’ve got nice cars at HI.”

“Comfort facilitates many a negotiation, I do admit. The greater value today, however, is your well-being and I shall see you provided with every comfortable conveyance in existence until you are sufficiently well to manage with less.

“Then I get a horse and cart.”

“Which your children can groom and ride to their heart’s content and scavenge horsehair for whatever new projects have popped into their minds. Ah, I believe I see your grandmother’s house looming ahead. Interesting… do your parents have a new vehicle?”

Stirred from his happy daydream about the botbabies and a horse, or any other form of pet, Greg looked forward through the windscreen to see the older, mid-size silver car parked near his gran’s door.

“I… I don’t think so. But, I haven’t talked to them in a couple of days and their car was a bit knackered. That’s one a bit knackered, too, though so who knows?”

Happily accepting his medication, Greg then did his own bit of bracing for the coming conversation with a few deep breaths and a slow cleansing of his slightly-simmering anxiety. All he’d told his
parents was that he was coming for a visit and that he’d meet them at his gran’s house. This was going to be a shock for them, but a good one, he hoped. He also hoped Aggie wasn’t near a firearm when Mycroft walked through the door or he might have to run about looking for a cork to plug the hole she’d put in his android. Given the botbabies’ love of investigation, a gaping wound would have to be guarded fiercely against tiny explorers who would gladly make good use of the opportunity to find out what their mot looked like on the inside.

Pulling up the drive, the two men took a breath, shared a smile and exited the car, feeling the smiles vanish and the urge to run rise when a familiar black monster erupted from the barn, bearing down on them fast, followed quickly by an equally enormous reddish monster who seemed as determined to bring them to ground like antelopes.

“Gregory?”

“Mycroft?”

“Car!”

Swearing loudly, Greg moved for the car, then swore even louder from moving quickly and it was only a valiant leap by Mycroft that blocked the two behemoths from slamming the injured man into the vehicle.

“Dinky! U evl krtur. U nrly mrdrd Grgry.”

Chastising when one’s face was being licked by two tongues the size of toddlers was no easy feat.

“There you are, love! And you’ve already met Daphne!”

Greg peered from around Mycroft and the mammoths to glare at his mother who didn’t seem at all upset they’d nearly been flattened.

“Why on Earth does Gran have two monster dogs?”

“Isn’t she beautiful! And Dinky just loves her, which was sort of the point. They play together and run together and nap together… it was love at first sight! Daphne’s so good to him… such a darling girl, she is.”

“Mum… there is not enough room in the world for Dinky and litters of Dink-sized puppies! What is wrong with your brain?”

“Well, that’s the beauty of it, now isn’t it?”

“What? Mycroft, Mum’s had a stroke or something.”

However, Mycroft suddenly wasn’t quite so sure… and a very quick check with certain of his ‘special’ senses took the issue of strokes cleanly off the table.

“Oh no… no no no no no”

“What? Now, you’re off your head. I’m doomed.”

“Ooh… listen to Mycroft. He’s got the right end of the stick, I suspect. Our Dink’s had a rather lonely social life, if you know what I mean, what with being so… big. Well, that’s not a problem for our Daphne and she’s not exactly equipped to give mum the army of warbeasts she’d likely adore, what with her hope to raise the bloody head aloft of some poor PM one day.”
“What? Mycroft, what was in that pill you gave me?”

“What your mother is intimating, in a rather circuitous manner, my dear, is that Dinky’s lady friend is an android.”

“WHAT!”

Greg looked hard at the dog, who was built very much along Dinky’s lines, but with an almost Irish-Setter red to her fur and, what he had to admit, were very sweet eyes. However…

“Mycroft, I can only think of a few people who could do this and they’re all connected to you. Including you!”

“I… not me!”

“How could he Greg dear, what with going off his head like that then having to take care of you these last few days. My son’s not quite the detective he claims, now is he?”

“Mum! Now, look here… wait. How do you know all that? I certainly didn’t tell you any of it. And why aren’t you surprised Mycroft’s here? I didn’t tell you he was coming.”

“I think, Gregory, we have an answer.”

Mycroft crooked his index finger at Greg to beckon him over to the unfamiliar car where Greg muffled a squawk seeing two knapsacks sitting on the rear seat, filled with bits and bobs, and a scattering of sweets wrappers littering the floor.

“What! Oh no…”

“You two lovebirds are so silly. But you’re lovebirds again and that’s really all that matters! Oh, your mum and dad, Mycroft. Such lovely people. We’ve already got scads of plans, Tom and me, with Helen and Howard. Well, come in and say hello! There’s someone you haven’t met yet, too.”

Greg and Mycroft were both frozen in place after the ‘your mum and dad, Mycroft’ comment and it took the combined efforts of Dinky and Daphne to push them forward towards the house. Which was ringing with laughter even before they got nose-shoved through the door.

“There’s my boy! Looking like he’s swallowed a cricket ball, which is about what I’d expect. Howard, give Mycroft a slap on his back and see if he spits up something useful.”

Mycroft considered diving behind the wall of dogs to hide from his parents, but realized that would leave his lover unprotected and that was not the act of a devoted partner. However… it might be wise to research the limits of devoted partnerhood for situations like this…

“I beg your pardon! I have not swallowed a thing.”

“Then Greg’s not getting a good time from the likes of you. Greg! Go find someone who’ll suck your cock properly or you’re no grandson of mine!”

“Gran!”

The fact that everyone was sniggering didn’t make Greg feel any better, especially since one of those everyone’s was a stranger.

“And who’s that? The one you’ve already got picked out for me, you miserable old bird?”
“Nope. This one’s mine. Every plastic inch of him. And he’s got a lot of inches, you can take my word for it.”

Greg did his own bit of choking at that revelation and didn’t protest Dinky nudging him down into a chair so he didn’t have an unfortunate collision with the floor due to lack of oxygen.

“Wh…what? You got a sexbot?”

More sniggering didn’t convince Greg his guess was wrong, but the ‘really?’ look on the man’s face was a story of its own.

“Not yet, but I’m working on it. I’ll wear down his resistance, just you watch. Sebastian here might be ex-military, but he’s not met the likes of me before!”

Greg turned to glare at Mycroft who understood fully now that whatever atrocities his family perpetrated would be credited to his account in the new household domestic bank. Joyful.

“I… I assure you, Gregory… oh my…”

“Oh, he’s no use. It’s like this, Greg. His mother and I were talking to your parents, oh a week or so ago…”

The combined gasps and blanched faces made Dinky and Daphne each take a victim and lean gently against them so that their human and synthetic-human friends didn’t collapse from shock.

“… about Aggie being out here alone and we thought it might be nice if she had a body around to help with things, like bringing in the firewood, giving Dinky there a good bath when he needs one, carrying her guns out for a shoot… we had Sebastian just come in for some reprogramming and we decided why bother with that when he can put his military experience to good use! His record as a sniper is top notch, too, just brilliant, so he and Ags can have a grand time. Just a grand, grand time, I suspect. Anyway, we’ve got another one coming in soon from… let’s just say a rather confidential place and he’s a bit more chatty. Already knows Sebastian, too, so that’s a plus, wouldn’t you say! I think the pair of them will be nice company for your grandmother and give your parents a spot of help when they need it, too.”

“Isn’t that marvelous, son! Your dad and I can certainly use an extra hand around the house and the garden… your dad’s going to start his own little business, don’t you know, unofficial, of course, fixing this and that for people, now that he can ring Howard and Helen to get some advice for the fiddly bits with the gadgets and the like, so the more the merrier milling about I’d say!”

Neither Greg nor Mycroft had any illusion they had a speck of either control or comprehension of the conversation and only hoped that if they clung on long enough some degree of enlightenment might occur.

“Mu… Mrs. Holmes, if I may…”

Sniggering!

“Always knew you were a lying Tory! Lies! Nothing but lies! Can’t even give Greg a good suck! Good for nothing piece of plastic.”

“Agatha… kindly gaze fondly upon your concubine and…”

Proudly wearing a pinpoint-precise flicked fag end on his shirt, directly above his heart, Mycroft made the executive decision that the new arrival was a villain, though a spectacularly accurate one.
“My apologies. Now, as I was saying…”

“We know, Mycroft, lad. Your mum and dad told us and… well, don’t worry Edie and I are going to say anything. Aggie might, but everyone knows she’s mad, so there’s really no worries there about anyone believing her.”

Now, Greg’s dad was wearing his own fag end like a badge, which clearly drew the lines of alliance in the now-expanded Lestrade kingdom.

“They… they told you?”

“That we did, Mycroft dear son.”

The twinkle in his mother’s eye put Mycroft on alert, which was fortunately not allowed to stand unaddressed for long, for his on-alert reservoir was beginning to run a tad dry.

“So true, Mycroft love, and… oh, it breaks my own motherly heart, it really does…”

Knowing it was likely a strategic mistake to cut his eyes at his partner or his parents, Mycroft simply smiled politely and hoped his future mother-in-law continued on with her thoughts. That was usually a good wager when Edith seemed in a talkative mood.

“…your mum and dad losing two sons, two, in such a tragic way. Traffic collisions are nasty, nasty things and to take two brothers like that… you’re a right honorable person to have stepped up to keep the company from having one of those big financial wobbles. What sort of memorial would it be if all that hard work just collapsed and the family was left living above a chips shop! And then when there was a whiff of the truth floating about… so brave of you, so very very brave, to hide away so nobody could get hold of you and wring out the story. You’re a true and proper son, Mycroft Holmes… Sherlock, too… and I understand completely why Helen and Howard think of you that way. I do! Of course, you’re marrying my son, so that’s to be expected, but the principle stands!”

There was no part of that speech that was not profoundly troubling, but… the happy, satisfied smiles, except on Aggie and this Sebastian person, said no one else shared in the profound troubles. Oh, this smacked of Sherrinford’s foolishness… the blackguard could always steer their parents in meddlesome directions, especially if someone else paid the cost of the meddling… but, if he was forced to admit it, the story wasn’t the worst possible explanation to blend the publicly-human Mycroft and Sherlock with the privately-known android Mycroft and Sherlock… Sherrinford was still an arse, though.

“Ah… yes. The tragic accident. Thank you, Edith, it is most kind that you believe Sherlock and my actions to be noble ones.”

“I do, I truly do… Tom! I need a tissue; I feel a little cry coming on.”

“I still think you’re a fuckweasel! But, now I know you’re a rich one, you can buy my approval.”

Agatha was Sherlock’s spiritual grandmother. There really was no doubt about it.

“Excellent. I shall script you a cheque.”

“A big one. I’m not cheap.”

“Of course not. Gregory… my dear… isn’t it nice that my little secret is now in the open so that
we have no longer to hide it?"

If his beloved’s smile became any more strained, Mycroft feared he would need to escort him outside for a few moments of fresh air and room to scream.

“Uh… yeah. Yes, I think it’s… great. Really, just marvelous.”

Which, actually, he meant, in a roundabout way. If any of his family, or that blond android, told a few tales, his Mycroft could simply prick a finger and let everyone see blood. Or, from what Mycroft said, he could actually pass a physical exam by a doctor, with blood pressure and pupil dilation and temperature lung sounds and all of that, so the stories could easily be laid to rest. The stories about a highly-specialized, DNA-based android were another matter, but those seem to have faded away since the corporate spies never came up anything but empty, so… smooth sailing? It was something to hope for, at least.

“And now we have a wedding to plan!”

“What! Mum, no… just, no.”

“Bollocks, Greg. Your mother and I are pleased as we can be that you two are getting yourselves settled and… we understand that it’ll take a bit of time for you to get down to the business of sending out invitations, but I’ll tell you from experience to not leave things until the last second. Edie and me nearly had to get married in the barn because we couldn’t find anywhere in the area that could host wedding party since we’d sort of forgotten we had to plan for that, and Aggie thought it was a laugh not to remind us.”

Greg glared at his father, then at Mycroft, who startled and glared at his own parents in revenge. That none of the parental pairs seemed to care was positively un sporting.

“Better be a posh one, too, because I’m not buying a new dress for a bag of crisps and crap American beer!”

Oh, it will, Aggie. Our Mycroft will get the wedding of his dreams and don’t his father and I know he doesn’t dream cheaply! We’ll probably have to push out our new android surveillance birds to MI-6 early just to have enough money to pay for it! But, I do think, Howard, we should explore Tom’s suggestion of mice or rats, too. Those buggers get everywhere and a rat is well sized to pack in a few handy pieces of equipment to collect all sorts of interesting information.”

“I agree. Tom, you and Edie are coming to London this week anyway, so we’ll stay in the city and do some thinking on this idea. Besides, we have to fill out your paperwork to get your ID cards, so we’ll make a day of it! And, we can start discussing the important things, like caterers, who’ll make the wedding cake, flowers… Helen’s got a good sense for flowers and, Edie, you really need to see our garden at home. Such a beautiful thing it is from the wife’s magic touch. Maybe next week you can come and stay for a few days. Nothing to speak of for good Chinese, but…”

“What!”

“You say that a lot, Greg. Our Mycroft has you a bit tongue-tied with his handsomeness?”

Watching arguably the most powerful man in the world giggle at him gave Greg a very good idea of what his life was now going to be like. Time to lay in a LOT of scotch…

“No! I mean… sometimes, but not now. What’s this about ID cards?”

“Oh, your mum and dad…”
“And me!”

“… and Aggie need to have access to the building for their visits. We’ve got more than enough room for them to stay for a bit, so they don’t have to get a hotel or have the guest room with you at Mycroft’s house. We’re nicely located, too, for getting to all the fun things, so it’s a good situation all around!”

“What! Ok, yes, I recognize I’ve got nothing for verbal variety right now, so just ignore it. Mum, Dad… Gran, you especially hate London! You say it’s geographic pestilence! And it’s got politicians!”

“I could learn to like it. Especially with Mr. Plastic paying for my fun. I plan on having lots of fun, too.”

His grandmother had turned pirate. Bloody wonderful. But not terribly surprising.

“Can we all agree, at least, that any and all visits in the near future will not involve any form of wedding planning, since there’s no official wedding on the horizon?”

Those weren’t agreeing looks. Those were ’you poor, foolish, deluded boy’ looks. They were doomed. And his Mycroft there wasn’t exactly wading into the ocean to help hold back the tide of doom one tiny bit.

“Gregory…”

He speaks.

“Perhaps such matters are a conversation for another day. Today… let us simply enjoy the blessings of family and make merry with our time together.”

Coward. That was a perfectly phrased, mum-pacifying speech and I know, now, who can handle ALL mother-related issues from here to eternity, you craven, but gorgeous, android.

“Ok… making merry it is. Well, since our big announcement’s already been made, how about a drink?”

“Gregory… it just passed noon.”

“Like I said, how about a drink.”

“Finally, my useless grandson talks sense. Seb, new bottle of gin or three.”

“Mum, remember Sebastian’s not your servant, he’s your old-person minder, so don’t give orders like you’re Churchill.”

Sebastian snorted because he and Aggie hadn’t smoked enough yet this morning to have more fag ends to flick, more’s the pity. The loony old bat didn’t need an old-person minder any more than he did. But… he’d avoided having himself reprogrammed, which was good, and was getting a wage and chance for emancipation, which was good, and the car they’d come in would be left behind for his use, which was good, the cat on his lap liked him and was its own brand of evil, which was good, those little elves knew about Jim already, which was good, and they were getting Jim and setting him up with a wage and path to freedom, which was good, with the path to freedom being here. With him. Which was the best. That Mad Aggie was one of the few people in the world who wouldn’t bore Jim to death and wouldn’t get upset when Jim… was Jim… was just very tasty icing on a pretty decent wedge of cake…
I’m got an idea! Howard and I haven’t seen anything of this part of the country, so… is there a good pub nearby?

That got smiles growing, even on the two glaring at the rest over the shotguns they were cleaning, so the plan for the day was apparently set.

“Mummy, can I trust that this shall not end in the same fashion as when last I accompanied you and Father to a drinking establishment.”

“No. It’s a party!”

Greg was officially frightened to ask about Mycroft’s worries, but knew that, at some point, that story would, undoubtedly, be shared. Likely over the third or fourth pint brought to the table. But… today was a good day for a party. All the t’s were crossed and i’s dotted, with no shot Mycroft to put a damper on things, so… why not have a few or many good pints in celebration. They had a driver, so no safety concerns, meaning getting a touch tipsy was fully allowable. Though, it still remained to be seen if Mycroft could get drunk now that he was… new Mycroft. Oh, that was a question that desperately begged asking. And, fortunately, he might soon get the answer…

“He’s pissed!”

“Isn’t he cute! Howard and I debated a very long time on certain design choices, but we decided that everyone deserves a good drunk if they can have one! We had hoped, though, to block drugs effects, for many reasons, but Sherlock, curse him, found his ways around that one.”

Greg laid a kiss on Mycroft’s head, which was resting on his shoulder as Mycroft hummed a quiet little tune to himself that Greg noticed was almost identical to one of the tunes their botlings liked to whistle when they were contentedly playing in their pen. Such a good mot… their babies were going to be the happiest in the land…

“Hangover?”

“That we spared him out of compassion. Also, because if, and we had no idea it would ever happen, but if he found someone he could be the functional one during the day-after misery of his husband, wife or whatever which, as I’m sure you know, is nothing short of a blessing. Of course, he can disable the function to get drunk, but… oh, I’m happy as I can be he didn’t today. Howard, dear… our Mycroft had a nice time with people!”

Watching the gnomes clasp hands and share a gleeful grin, Greg marveled at how what he’d worried would be a tense day, at least to start, turned into something far, far different. Everyone clustered around a table at the pub, having a good time like any family might and his Mycroft taking it all in and adding his contribution here and there, always with a twinkle in his eye even if he wasn’t beaming in delight. More reserved, more sedate, but that was perfectly alright. His Mycroft was a part of things and was accepted by his family just as easily as was the other, more open version. Still loved, still welcome and still subject to the standard level of looniness his family was famous for.

A looniness that was now set to explode by leaps and bounds from… the alliance. This would require very close monitoring. Luckily, it sounded like the alliance was going to be an active one and often staging their acts of terror in London, so monitoring could be done in a very efficient fashion. They’d have to conscript Sherlock and John, too, for the task. Those two bastards were part of this whether they liked it or not and a burden shared is a burden lessened. Besides, they’d
need all hands on deck for holidays, at the very least. What the gnomes, his parents and his gran could get up to with enough food, drink and holiday cheer was painful to imagine. Maybe he and Mycroft could look into a nice cruise, instead… or get arrested so they spent a quiet Christmas in a warm, peaceful cell…

“This looks a-ma-zing!”

Mycroft smiled shyly at the truly pleased grin on his lover’s face and lost the fear that his work wouldn’t pass muster. However, in the two weeks since he had been so warmly embraced by the Lestrades, his level of concern about such things had lessened to a highly-manageable level.

“Thank you, Gregory. I do hope the guests will enjoy it.”

“How could they not? Look at all of this! And it’s just for starters! You are a genius in the kitchen, love. Our friends are going to be so impressed.”

‘Our’ friends… there had been a small discussion on the issue, how to make a gesture of continued friendship to the group he had so quickly become a part, and the decision to bring things back to the beginning, with a shared meal and football match for entertainment, was deemed the best choice. And… he was glad for it. Gregory had proposed to have food delivered, but there was something in him that wanted to make the gesture more personal, more of an obvious effort that highlighted the desire to make that effort for people that had meant so very much to him. And who, he hoped, might choose to continue along that line in the future. Though, from the enthusiastic acceptance of their invitations, the latter seemed somewhat assured…

“Excellent. I have only entertained rarely and either for business purposes or when Mummy and Father have visited, so this is a new experience for me.”

“Well, I can tell you that everyone is going to be thrilled. They’re already looking forward to seeing you again and Molly was nearly quivering herself to death all day today in anticipation. They missed you, love. Honestly and truly, they missed you and are very happy to have you back again. And, we’re still going with the same story my parents got about you, right? Any changes I should know about?”

“No, I believe that fabrication will be sufficient. It is a dishonor to offer a lie, but when the truth cannot be told, a palatable lie will have to do.”

“If it helps, I know they’d understand, if they could know the full truth, that is. Be ready, though, for questions. Anderson, especially, is going to ask a lot, Mike, too, likely…”

“I anticipated such and do have a number of satisfactory answers to the most probable lines of inquiry. It… oddly, as it is not my standard mindset, but I sense that… all shall be well. I have no real basis for that, but I feel it, nonetheless.”

Greg gave Mycroft a kiss, then another just to savor the taste of his dear android’s lips. All would be well. Of that he had no doubt. Already they’d fallen into routines that were both familiar and new, at the same time. They’d managed to sort out living arrangements, with time spent in Mycroft’s lovely home in the city when possible, and time spent here in the suite when that worked best. Next week, they’d take the night before his off day to drive out to Mycroft’s country home to spend time there… and all of it was everything he could ever want in this life because his Mycroft was there to share it.
They’d even helped get Sherlock and John sorted! Out of John’s crap flat and into a nice set of rooms in Baker Street with a landlady who seemed well suited to manage their nonsense and enough space for Sherlock to do his sciency things and not destroy John’s bed for the third time because he’d performed an experiment on it and left it unfit for human contact. And the two of them couldn’t be happier. Not that Sherlock gave any indication of it, but he was learning those little signs that said Sherlock was jumping with joy on the inside, and Sherlock had jumped fantastically high when he scrawled his name on the lease that put the seal on him and John officially setting up a home together. Of course, John already had to visit them twice to get a break from whatever chaos Sherlock was causing, but that’s precisely what friends were for…

“You’re right to feel it, too. All will be well, I promise you that. We’ll have a lovely time tonight and it’ll just be the first of a long line of nights ahead. We both have harder hours now, but… we made time tonight! And we’ll find time again when we want it. Ah ha… is that knock I hear at the door?”

As if the happy chiming of the botbabies wasn’t its own form of visitor alert system.

“I believe so. Well, the wine is breathing, the food is on proper schedule, the cushions are fluffed and the children are in their pen with an abundance of amusements. I believe we are ready to receive our guests.”

Kissing Mycroft one more time, Greg linked their arms and walked his lover to the door, taking a deep breath before opening it to let his Mycroft see the gaggle of smiling faces of the people who still cared for him and cared deeply. Oh, and Sherlock.

“I… I am so pleased all of you could come. Gregory and I have been most anxious to have you in our… home.”

Drawing his surprisingly-emotional partner from the door, Greg kept his arm around Mycroft’s waist as Anderson, Molly, Stamford, John and Sherlock darted in the room, with Molly darting back to give Mycroft one of her patented rib-crushing hugs. While the guests explored the room, and gathered around the tiny robots, Greg took a moment to simply hold the man he loved while Mycroft soaked in the sensation of being back in the thick of it. All would be well, there was no doubt about it. There were too many people on his love’s side for it to be any other way. Speaking of…

Greg answered the second knock on the door and shared rude gestures with the oldest Holmes brother, which made Mycroft’s eyes roll and Sherlock announce that the gathering was now tainted and he would not be held responsible for any adverse health effects from the presence of ‘two deplorable louts’ within the confines of the room. That outburst earned him a smack from several hands, signaling the true start of the party, which Sherry gladly kept rolling by holding up two bottles of champagne and ordering Mycroft and Greg off to get glasses for a toast.

“You your brother doesn’t do things except grandly, does he, love?”

“Not often, but… it appears that shall not be amiss with our friends.”

“No, I think he’ll fit right in. Just like you.”

This smile from Mycroft wasn’t shy or quiet or anything of the like. It was wide and free and Greg knew that only he would ever see that particular smile, but it was more than fine with him. Couples should have things they shared just between themselves and his Mycroft’s truly happy smile was something he was proud to have all to himself. Just like the man he was taking in his arms for one long kiss to say ‘I love you’ in the most unmistakable way possible. Well, there were other ways, but those were certainly not for an audience. Later on this evening, however… ‘I love you’ was
going to be expressed in all sorts of wonderful ways. And it’d be same tomorrow evening, and the one after and all those that followed… That was the amazing thing about love… you always had wonderful ways to show it and a lifetime of days to learn more and more…

Chapter End Notes

Well, once again, thank you all so very much for reading this tale and do feel free to leave kudos here and comments here, on my tumblr or twitter (eventhorizon451). The latter two are good to keep watch on as that's where announcements for new chapters, new stories and other ridiculousness appears...

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