

The Murder of Mr. Patrick Tarkell

My name is James Watts. I used to work for a major hospital on a patrolling med-team, one of the high-speed armed flying ambulances that drop down anywhere a subscriber has an accident, or an attempt made on their life. Same thing, more often than not. The pay was good, had a bit of adventure every night, saved lives. I was living fairly comfortably in the Corporate sector and had everything I wanted.

Then one night, I went out on the job, typical work shift. Our patrol route took us into the middle of the Non-Corporate sector, and a little before sunset we got a call from the border of Non-C and the Outskirts. That was out of our range, normally, but we were the only team close enough to get there in five minutes (or your money back, guaranteed).

The scene was not pretty. It never is, but this was decisively on the high end of ugly. If the fight had been a block further into the Outskirts, we wouldn't have answered. Against company policy. As it was, the call came from right where the buildings turn from run-down to ruins of rust and old concrete. There was a man with some substantial tech in the middle of the street being attacked by three guys with even more tech. Bodies of four other people were scattered around, beaten to a pulp. There was no way to know, but I had a feeling they'd just been bystanders when the cyborg fight broke out. We fired on the attackers, drove them off a distance, and landed.

I was working ground crew duty. The familiar smell of blood and burned out wires assaulted me as we rushed out, the ambulance's siren wailing a monotonous soundtrack to the job. The one who had been ganged up on was the client. I could tell from a distance that he had cyberlimbs from the shine of the chrome, but up close I saw the whole left side of his artificially tanned body was cybernetic. Cables were plugged into the back of his head, but the weapon they would have attached to was missing. The targeting scope in his eye sealed it for me; our client was a professional killer. We stabilized him, and rushed him back to the ambulance. Stupid me, I stopped when I heard one of the bodies talk to me. His young face was covered in blood, limbs askew at unnatural angles, barely alive, and asking for help.

I remember he passed out as I lifted him and carried him toward the ambulance. My teammates screamed something at me, I felt a hot searing pain in my thigh, and I collapsed. Everything went black.

I woke up in the hospital. The nurse told me I became my own customer. I didn't find it quite as funny as she did. I'd lost my left leg from just below the hip down. The hospital's insurance policy was trying to figure out whether or not they would cover the replacement, since I wasn't helping a client when I was injured. They ultimately did, provided I opted for a cyberlimb rather than a biological replacement, which was fine with me. With a synthskin covering, it looks like the real thing.

I quit as soon as I checked out. I hadn't had my contract for long, but I was shaken by the experience and couldn't go back to work knowing I had no choice in who to save and who to leave behind. Clients were the ones who paid the bill. Anyone else was out of luck, no matter how injured. I never found out what happened to the kid I'd tried to help. The hitman, on the other hand, was back on the streets in a week.

Of course, the company didn't take kindly to me quitting as soon as the insurance went through. There was no way in hell I was going to find a job in another hospital, either. Word travels fast, and they don't like it when you disobey policy. They get particularly pissed off when you terminate a contract early. I had saved up some and my credit was decent, which kept me going for a while, but pretty soon I was unable to pay the rent. With only a week to find a new apartment, I found myself in a small office on the sector border.

It was done in false mahogany paneling, a few prints of mediocre paintings of flowers hung on the walls. The landlady at the small desk was a nice, fashionably older woman with a love for the color lavender, who owned a few buildings scattered around the City. Private real estate owners are rare and often questionable, but sometimes you can find a decent place for cheaper than what the big companies would charge for a closet.

I told her what I was looking for. "Well, I'm sorry," her face wrinkled slightly as she smiled, the only indication of her age other than the silver sheen of her hair, "but I don't have any single bedroom apartments open right now." I was crestfallen, but she stopped me as I turned to leave, "How would you feel about sharing a house?"

"I suppose that would be alright," I hadn't even thought about it, but it was a possibility, "Where is it?"

"On Break Street, close enough to the Corporate border to be safe during the day. Two bedrooms, one bath, with a combined living and dining area, small kitchen."

"The price?"

She consulted her computer and named a figure, “Assuming the two of you split it evenly, I’m sure you’ll agree that’s very affordable –”

“Who’s the other tenant?”

The landlady was a little hesitant, “He seems a nice enough young man, certainly polite, but he’s rather... strange. He recently came from one of the Historic Colonies.”

I was shocked. “I thought they never went into cities.”

She nodded, “I know, that’s what I said, but apparently this one chose to come make a living here. Doing what, I don’t know. He paid in advance, but now he needs someone to share the house with in order to keep up with the payments. I told him I’d keep him in mind if anyone came looking.”

“Huh. Can I meet him?”

“Of course, here’s the address. If you think you can get along, I’ll put you on the lease.”

“Shiny. Thanks.”

122 Break Street is not very impressive looking from the outside. The building itself is small and sturdy, just one more simple utilitarian grey block sitting next to larger grey blocks. What struck me as peculiar about 122 though was the lack of any security, like a camera, touch pad or scanner. It was just a curtained window looking out onto the street, a heavy door at the top of the steps. The fact that there was no visible security set off warning bells in my head. There had to be some intense, high quality stuff at work, but why on earth would a small house on the wrong side of the Corporate border have such security?

There was only one way to find out, so I went up the stairs and knocked. When there was no answer I tried again, expecting a light to come on, a scanner to start. I was pretty surprised when I heard the high strident voice of a man call from behind the door, not through any speakers, “Yes, come in!”

I slowly slipped inside. To my right was a small kitchen area, basic, but with all the essentials; refrigerator, small stove, large microwave, a sink, and plenty of cabinets all in plain blue-grey and black plastics. There was a small metal table, grey, and a couple of simple matching chairs. The floor was false wood, which abruptly stopped when it reached the thin brown carpeting to my left. On my left was the living space, with the window with dark curtains. There was a beige sofa in front of a concrete grey fireplace. A large burgundy armchair sat

towards the window and a dark wooden chair sat in the far corner by a matching desk. Black shelves lined all the maroon walls more than halfway up to the ceiling, all of them full of books and old-fashioned chemistry equipment. Standing in the middle of this room was the man I'd come to meet.

I didn't know what to make of him. He looked to be around my age, somewhere in his middle to late twenties. That was where our similarities ended. I'm a blond man of average height and build. The man in front of me had to be just over six feet tall, very lean, with a narrow face and his dark hair slicked back. His clothes were peculiar; dark pinstripe pants, a black suit jacket over his white dress shirt and black vest, on which I could see a gold chain. Given the rest of his outfit, the chain was probably connected to an authentic pocket watch. What struck me the most about him though was the way he looked at me, those grey hawkish eyes piercing through me, as if he was trying to read my life history in a matter of seconds.

"Please, come in. Have a seat," he gestured to the sofa, "You've recently fallen on hard times, may I offer you a drink?"

I sat down and looked up at this odd man in surprise. It was a weird way to greet someone. "Sure. How could you tell –"

He waved a dismissive hand as he poured a glass of something off the mantelpiece, "Your clothes, sir. At one time, you were able to afford some rather high-quality brand names, but they now show various signs of wear and your shoes are quite roughed up. I can think of no reason why someone with enough money to buy them in the first place would let them become so worn out and still continue wearing them, other than he no longer has the same funds he once did."

"Huh," I took the offered glass. The liquid was lightly colored, and smelled earthy. I didn't much like the idea of drinking a strange drink in a stranger's home, but I didn't want to be rude either.

"It's scotch," he said, "Put simply, it is an alcoholic drink made from barley and matured in oak casks. Trees being a rare commodity, it's hardly made anymore. I am not in the habit of offering it to visitors, since I only have the one bottle, but I thought you might appreciate a friendly gesture."

I was skeptical. "You're suggesting I haven't had many friendly gestures lately."

He just barely shrugged, "Judging from the way you walked in here so cautiously, along with a number of other small indicators in how you carry yourself, I think it is a safe

conclusion.”

“Right,” I said slowly, still baffled by his behavior. I sipped the scotch and nearly died. I thought I’d never be able to taste anything again. Coughing a little, I put the glass down on a side table and addressed my smirking host.

“I heard you were looking for a roommate. Housemate. Whatever.”

His eyes lit up as he pulled over the armchair to sit directly in front of me, leaning forward eagerly, “Yes, I am. Are you interested?”

“Well, it seems a nice enough place. I wanted to meet you before deciding.”

“Of course,” he stuck out his hand, “forgive my manners, and allow me to introduce myself. I’m Sherlock.”

I shook hands with him, startled by his strong grip, “Most people call me Watts.”

“And what is your profession?”

“Currently unemployed, but hopefully I can find another job soon. I just need a place to live until that happens. I’m a doctor.”

His brow rose slightly. “A doctor?”

“I worked on a patrolling med-team,” I clarified, “Got injured during a pick-up. Lost my leg, and lost any desire to work that kind of job again.”

“Ah. Cybernetics?”

“Better add-on possibilities,” I joked.

Sherlock didn’t quite grin back, and I remembered he was supposed to be from a Historic Colony. The idea of cybernetics bothered him. “So, you chose to quit,” he pushed his uneasiness aside, “your skills are perfectly fine?”

“Some months rusty, but otherwise fine, yes.”

“Yet you referred to yourself as a doctor, rather than a paramedic.”

“I am a doctor. I went through all that trouble of getting an M.D, and wound up rounding up wounded instead of sitting in an office or an operating room.” At his skepticism, I sighed, “I thought I could help people better that way. Wasn’t satisfied with waiting for patients to come to me. I got the chance to pick up a lot of useful skills too. I’m a hell of an improviser, not that it’s done me a whole hell of a lot of good.”

I don’t know if he believed me or not, but he accepted it. “I see. Yes, I think this arrangement will work. Dr. Watts, I must warn you that I have some odd habits. I play violin and

I smoke a pipe, would either bother you?"

"No, I don't think so."

"My line of work requires that I keep strange hours, that I may get unannounced visitors, and that whenever one of these visitors calls I must have use of this room," he gestured around him, "to conduct my business. Is that acceptable?"

Here I hesitated. I didn't much trust the idea of frequent unannounced visitors. "What's your line of work?"

A sort of half-grin tugged at one side of his mouth as he leaned back in the chair, the tips of his fingers together. "I am a consulting detective."

"You're a what?"

"I'm a detective, but I do not work for the police, nor am I a private detective in the traditional sense. My interest is in the strange cases, the puzzles that the police cannot quite solve. People come to me when they need a fresh look at a baffling situation. Like Sherlock Holmes."

"Who?"

"Surely you've at least heard of him?"

I shook my head, "Nope."

With an aggravated sigh, he rose and walked over to the bookshelves by the desk. "I have the collected works here on this shelf. He was a late nineteenth-century British detective, the world's first consulting detective and possibly the greatest master of crime-solving. The books were written by a Sir Arthur Conan Doyle... or they were merely published by him, depending on who you talk to," he smirked at this, though the joke went over my head. He turned back to face me, "Read them. It will give you a better idea of what I have come to the City for."

"Alright." I slowly stood, wondering what exactly I was getting myself into but not really seeing any other option either. Not until I got a job, at least. "Well, then, I guess I'll just go back down to the offices and sign my name to the lease."

"Have you many things to move?"

"A few bags, some furniture."

"Good, between the two of us it should go quickly. Where is your old residence?"

I was surprised at the indirect offer to help me move, but thankful. "Corporate sector, Tenth and Prime Street."

Sherlock looked mildly impressed, “My, hard times indeed.”

“Yeah, well,” I was uncomfortable, “funny how no one on that side wants to hire you again once you’ve quit on account of moral conflicts.” My new housemate fixed me with a questioning look. I shrugged it off, “Never mind, I’ll explain later. Let’s go.”

The first thing I did after moving in was to jury-rig a basic security camera and intercom system. I hadn’t seen any security before because there wasn’t any. Sherlock stood to the side and watched, vaguely interested and very amused as I cursed at the wires and did my best to make things slightly more secure. At least an alarm came with the place in case someone decided to break in as we slept. The camera and intercom meant we would be able to see and talk to people before letting them in.

Sherlock pointed out that he had been living without a security system for some time now, and hadn’t had any trouble yet. Also, no one would break in during the day, and during the night they would expect heightened security. He used my own wariness of his bare front door as support for his argument. I retorted that a) he was insanely lucky, and b) nighttime was when the unpredictable residents of the City came out. I think the exact words I used were “crazy people and cybernetic psychopaths.” Besides, I was going to make the camera as hidden as possible. He sighed and let me finish working.

I hadn’t expected actually using the camera that night. A thunderstorm was providing a fitting backdrop to Sherlock’s dreary violin playing. He’d been quiet since I finished moving in, introverted and apparently bored out of his mind. I didn’t mind the music much, I’ve heard stranger, more depressing stuff pouring out of bars on the street, but I was glad to hear a knock on the door and even gladder to see him put down the violin.

Practically leaping out of my chair, I went to the security cam. “There’s a cop outside,” I said, surprised.

Sherlock was both pleased and amused. “Then we had best answer the door.”

The cop muttered a ‘thank you’ as she entered, dripping wet. Dressed in black slacks, white t-shirt and bronze-tinted jacket, the only reason I’d known she was a cop was the badge she’d flashed at the camera. I’d have to do a better job hiding the thing. She looked early to mid-thirties, firm jawline and blue eyed, with short fiery red hair. Sherlock stood as she entered, looked over her once, gestured to the sofa and said, “Please have a seat. What can I do for you?”

She shook her head, “I’ll stand thanks. I’m Detective Maureen Murphy. Don’t have much time for pleasantries, I’ll just get right down to business. I’ve heard a little bit about you, Mr. Sherlock –”

“Sherlock is my first name,” he did that half grinning thing again, “I find that the informality is an asset in my line of work nowadays. It puts potentially helpful people more at ease than insisting upon a prefix, especially in an informal modern society.”

Detective Murphy paused to think before moving on, “Right. Well, then, I’ve heard a little about you, Sherlock, seems you like solving problems and you’re pretty good at it. Some people I work with aren’t all that happy about you, but I figure whatever help we can get is welcome, so long as it doesn’t overstep its boundaries. Anyway, there’s been a murder, and I thought you might like to take a look before it’s cleared away.”

“A murder?” Sherlock’s eyes instantly focused into the piercing gaze I’d received earlier that day, “and your colleagues will not object to the outside help?”

“Oh, they’ll object, sure, but they won’t stop you. We’ve got nothing to go on, no fingerprints, nothing to run DNA tests on, just a dead man in an abandoned building on the Corporate border.”

Sherlock grabbed a long coat off the rack. “Come, Watts, we’ve a case.”

“Pardon?” I asked, stunned.

“Who’s this?” Detective Murphy looked at me, suspicious.

“This is Dr. Watts,” Sherlock told her with a tiny smile as he grabbed a black walking stick from its holder by the door, “I believe he is trustworthy and I would welcome his company and help. Unless you have something better to do?” he asked me.

Only sit around here and be bored, I thought. Watching this strange, displaced Colonist work might be interesting. “I’ll come.”

“Good. Lead the way, Detective.”

Detective Murphy took us to an abandoned building on the border. It had once been an office building until a Corporation merger eliminated the need for it, she explained, and no one had bought the property yet. It was one of few abandoned buildings this close to the Corporate sector, and wouldn’t be there long.

Though I doubted I would be of any help, it was worth the trip just to see the look on the faces of the street cops on scene when Sherlock got out of the Detective’s car. I suspect it was

the top hat and stick that pushed it over the edge from ‘acceptably eccentric’ to ‘is he crazy?’ Detective Murphy smiled at the reactions, and led us inside the building.

The police had set up a few standing lamps in the corners to illuminate the bare steel-grey lobby with a soft fluorescence. Lying in the center of it was a middle-aged dead man, an expression of terror and pain frozen on his face, his body and limbs twisted as if he was a discarded old ragdoll. He was dressed in the best brand names, flashy clothes that accented his likely biosculpted body, typical of the Corporate night-life high fashion. His eyes were still open, showing off a vibrant turquoise dye job. The light made him seem washed out against the grey floor, a strange unnatural victim on a steel slab. I’ve seen a lot of death in a variety of fashions, but the sheer terror on this man’s face, combined with the sensation that he’d been thrown to the ground like a toy, struck a chord somewhere inside me. This was oddly disturbing.

“Who discovered the body?” Sherlock asked, the perfectly professional voice at odds with the childlike anticipation on his face. If he had even the slightest feeling of unease, he was hiding it perfectly.

“A couple coming from a nearby bar.”

“They wandered into an abandoned building and happened to find a dead body?” his skepticism was obvious as he slowly walked around the perimeter of the room, pulling out an old-fashioned magnifying lens from inside his coat. I was stunned by the complete change in the man I’d taken for a drowsy and coldly intelligent academic. In this room, he was nearly quivering with energy.

Detective Murphy grinned, “Yeah, that’s what I asked. The man got scared, admitted they’d ducked in here to do a dose of Blue. We confiscated it, thanked them for calling the police, and fined them for possession of an illegal drug.”

“Yes, the highly popular and addictive solution of synthetic cocaine,” Sherlock muttered as he collected a bit of dust on the floor in a small envelope he pulled from his pocket, “called Blue for the vibrant blue color the treatment of the drug gives the solution...” his voice trailed off as he knelt next to the body, leaning close over the head.

Detective Murphy was amused by Sherlock’s sudden impression of a textbook, “Well, yes. That’s what Blue is. Have you found anything interesting?”

Long fingers flew over the body in minute examination and limbs were manipulated, all done with the distinct impression that Sherlock hadn’t heard the question until he suddenly rose

to his feet. “Yes, but first, do you know who the deceased is, and second, where are his belongings?”

“His ID said his name is Patrick Tarkell. His belongings were just a wallet with credit cards, a security card for his home and office, and a phone. You want to see them?”

“No, that won’t be necessary. Off hand, I’d say he was poisoned by a man about six feet in height, who smokes –”

“Hold on just a minute,” Murphy interrupted him, “how do you know this?”

Sherlock sighed. I managed to hide my smirk at his frustration, “Detective, despite the utter ruin of the floor around the body due to people wandering around, there are still some distinct prints in the dust of the room around the edge. Through a quick calculation of approximate distance between prints, I can give you an approximate height. I know he smokes from the ample amount of cigarette ash I found, which your men no doubt dismissed as small piles of dust, if they noticed it. As not one of the officers here smokes, I am not surprised they did not see the difference. The idea of poison is obvious from the fact that the man is dead, with no external injury to account for it and the agonized position of the body. A more technically advanced solution is conceivable, but I tend to use more basic options as my working theories until they are proven otherwise. Do you follow me so far?”

Detective Murphy looked like she was trying to decide whether to be impressed or annoyed. She settled on cynical. “Toxicology will tell us exactly what’s in his system. We’ll let you know the cause of death after the autopsy, I’ve got your number. Meanwhile, I’ll just round up all the six feet tall smokers in the city.”

A smirk flashed on Sherlock’s face. “No, that won’t be necessary. I will keep you informed.”

“Sure, here’s my card. Ask for Red.”

“Red?”

Detective Murphy gestured to her hair. “I thought you were a detective.”

Sherlock chuckled lightly as we made our way out of the building. I couldn’t resist a slight jab, “Good thing there wasn’t any DNA to go on, or they wouldn’t have called you.”

He glanced at me with a strange smile. “That may be true. DNA testing is extremely helpful in finding anyone involved in a crime, and often the most influential piece of evidence where juries are concerned. However, it is still just a tool, a very useful tool to be sure, but a DNA test

will never 'solve' a case; all it can do is tell you who was there when the crime happened, and if you're lucky which knife in the kitchen was the murder weapon. To find out why it happened, and how, you still need old-fashioned detective work."

"I hadn't thought of that."

"You are surprised."

"A bit. I didn't expect –"

"I know. The phrase 'historic colony' immediately evokes pictures of people from anywhere between the eighteenth to twentieth century. No one in the City realizes that the Historic Traditionalist movement didn't have any objection to technology itself. It was the way in which technology was being developed without any thought to the consequences that they were rebelling against."

Even though he was perfectly matter-of-fact, I still got the impression I was being lectured – and for some reason I felt sheepish instead of annoyed. "I didn't know that."

"I am not surprised," he nodded, "only historians pay attention to history anymore. Of course, by necessity the Colonies have developed into strange amalgams of historical periods, trying to patch together a functioning society from whatever limited technological skill the residents possess. And all of them have an... aversion, to cybernetics."

Aha. Hence his discomfort about my leg. I wondered if he was uneasy around all his clients with cybertech, but didn't ask. I'd noticed that we'd shifted direction walking, and I was a bit confused. Rather than going back towards Break Street, he turned the opposite way, apparently following the sounds of the nearest club. When I saw which club it was, I started to think Sherlock might really be crazy after all.

"You're not going in there, are you? You're dressed for the theater or a cosplay joint, not The High."

He stopped. "Excellent point. You will have to go in, instead."

I blinked. "I'll what?"

"I need someone to find out if Mr. Tarkell was in this evening and how he left."

"I get that, but it's not going to be me," I protested, "we just met, I'm not going to go into any bar asking for info on a guy that was just murdered."

"Nonsense, with all the money in there it's one of the safest bars in the City. But I see your point. You hardly know me and here I am asking you to help me do my job," he smiled

knowingly, “but aren’t you just a little curious?”

“... Curious?”

“Your previous job was full of danger; you knew perfectly well that you could lose not only a limb but your life. I might be persuaded to believe it was purely out of some altruistic sense of duty towards preserving the life of your fellow man, but I doubt it. That sense of duty was likely at the center of your reasons, certainly, but somewhere in you lurks a thirst for the thrill of the hunt. Aren’t you just a little curious to see how this case will turn out? A man lies dead, and somewhere inside you is a yearning to know why. You could have stayed home tonight. Why didn’t you?”

“I wanted to see if you’re as good as you seem to think you are.”

He laughed at that. It was a strange sound, as if his lungs weren’t used to the exercise, “Ha! Indeed. But you could do that any other time, we’re living together after all. What made you want to come out on a wet night, when you must be tired from moving in earlier today, just to see me examine the scene around a dead body?”

I shrugged, “I had nothing better to do. My options were to stay in, or see the scene of a murder –”

“Which you have done plenty of times in your line of work. Much more violent scenes, too. Come, doctor,” he lowered his voice, emphasizing his point with a thin hand on my shoulder, “after months of living a quiet and comparably boring life, here is your chance to have a little adventure again.”

Damn it, he was right. He hadn’t even known me for a whole day and he was right. “There’s no way they’ll let me in.”

“Of course they will,” his detached manner was back, “They’re on the border for a reason. It may be known as a gathering place for Corporates who like to step into the ‘dangerous side’, but there are just as many Non-Corporation sector residents in there. Supposedly, it gives the place an ‘authentic’ feel. Why, doctor, you look shocked.”

“Yeah. How the hell do you know that much about it?”

An odd feeling told me I would be seeing that irritatingly smug grin a lot more. “Just because I dress strangely and come from a Historic colony, does not make me ignorant to modern culture. On the contrary, it is my business to know a bit about my surroundings and the popular gathering places of people.”

I couldn't argue with that. "Right. Shiny. Guess I'll be right back, then."

I made my way into The High on the Border. The place had been out of my price range when I'd been on the med-team, and it sure as hell was now, too. Smoke from a variety of expensive scented cigarettes hung in the air, giving the place a smell like someone set fire to a perfume bottle inside a candy store. The music was loud and fast tech-pop mix, and the dance floor was crowded with every high-fashion style of the month. Once my eyes adjusted to the green and purple lighting, I saw men in skintight neon colors dancing with women in flowing translucent scales, right next to couples in mock animal hides and the latest in ColorShift fabrics, flashing vibrant patterns as they moved. A couple of women sitting at one of the metal tables against the wall were sipping glowing blue drinks, tiger tails wrapped around their tall chair legs. Personally, I think altering physical characteristics to something inhuman in the name of fashion is just weird, even if I could afford it. But I digress.

I slowly made my way over to the equally crowded bar, done in chrome like the rest of the place, and managed to get the attention of the bartender, "Have you seen a middle aged man, very fit, good looking guy, dark hair and turquoise eyes? Name's Patrick Tarkell?"

"Yeah, he was here," the bartender said as he dropped some liquid nitrogen into a pink drink, "Why?"

"Do you remember when he left?"

"No, just remember he left with a tall scruffy guy a while back. Hard to keep track of time in here. Are you going to order something?"

"Thanks, no. Sorry for the trouble."

I stumbled back out into the electric glare of the City's night lights and took a deep breath of air. Once the smell of the club was out of my lungs, I looked around for Sherlock. He was standing in a shadowed corner of the street, smoking a cigarette. At least his only smelled of burning tobacco. "Well?" he asked.

"Tarkell was there, left with a tall scruffy guy. Bartender didn't remember when, though."

"Anything more about 'tall and scruffy?'"

"Not unless you can afford the drinks in that place."

"It is the best that could be expected, I suppose," he sighed, "Come, let's head back to Break Street and see what we can make of it."

I found us a public car. When I asked if he wanted to drive, Sherlock gave me an amused

look and said, “No cars where I come from.” He would have been perfectly happy walking all the way, but I insisted on taking the car and drove us home. I was not in the mood for a long walk at night, unarmed. As soon as we were back, Sherlock pulled a thick book down from one of the shelves by his desk.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“It will eventually become part of a collection of articles and clippings. Many of the pages are blank right now.”

“What do you mean by clippings?”

“Back before the explosive development of the internet, there were things called newspapers.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, big sheets of paper, the printed word mass produced and sent out. They became obsolete once people could get news from anywhere, written by anyone they wanted to read, anytime they wanted to read it, just by going online. I do have some small knowledge of ancient culture.”

Sherlock smirked. “It is hardly ancient.”

“But we don’t have newspapers anymore, just the news sites. What are you putting in the book?”

“Printed out articles from the sites.”

I blinked. “What on earth for?”

“I like having hard copies of material I can reference.”

“Oh.” I didn’t know what to do with that idea, so I ignored it. “So, this murder case. Thoughts?” I asked.

“I would prefer to reveal everything at the end.”

“Like an old crime movie,” I grinned.

He glanced up at me, then back down at the book, “Something like that. The name of Patrick Tarkell seems vaguely familiar to me. Ah, here we are, gossip column from a month ago mentioning him being seen at a major society event with an unknown young lady on his arm. He works for an arms corporation, fairly high up but not so high for his death to warrant any alarm from the company. The reason he made the gossip is because he was drunk that night at the gala and flirted, rather successfully, with a number of businessmen’s wives.”

“So you think he was poisoned by someone he pissed off that night?”

“A possibility, but not a likely one. Though murders between business rivals happen, I sincerely doubt a Corporation would look kindly on an employee getting caught taking personal revenge. Why risk it?”

“They could have hired someone.”

“True, but the risk is still there, if it was traced back to them.”

“What else could it be if it’s not revenge?”

Sherlock looked up with a puzzled expression. “Why have you ruled out revenge?”

I was equally confused. “You think it’s revenge from someone he hasn’t publicly insulted?”

He placed the book back on its shelf, “I think that there is an excellent probability for it. We will see what information our new friend ‘Red’ can give us in the morning. Can you access the news archives from your computer?”

“Sure, why?”

“As my collection of articles is rather slim at the moment, I need you to access the archives and find all the information on Mr. Tarkell that you can.”

“Hell, I’ve already checked out a bar for you, why not do research,” I muttered as I brought my computer over to the kitchen table.

He grinned, “Exactly.”

I got set up as he slowly joined me, his features a mix of both curiosity and apprehension. “It’s not the best computer in town, but it gets the job done,” I said, almost apologetically as I rolled up my sleeve, “Haven’t had a chance to update for a while, being unemployed and all.”

With a wince, Sherlock looked the other way when I inserted the interface plugs into the jacks in my wrist. “Why do you do that?”

“What, jack in? How else would I use the net?”

“People used to use keyboards.”

I scoffed. “Ok, look. You know how this works, right? The-”

Sherlock rolled his eyes, “Yes, the screen translates the data from the internet into a visual. The pieces of cable protruding from your wrist connect to the machine and let you send specific mental commands which enable you to browse at the leisurely speed of thought. I do have some small knowledge of modern technology. The question, doctor, is why are the cables necessary? Why a direct link?”

“Because it’s faster.” I thought it was fairly obvious. He shook his head, dismayed, as if I’d

missed the point, and went back to eying the screen suspiciously. His uneasiness about the most common bit of cybertech was starting to bug me. “How the hell do you print out articles if you don’t jack into a computer?”

“I am forced to rely on outside assistance, which is the primary reason my collection is so slim.”

“So the hard copies aren’t so much preference as necessity.”

“They are both.”

I laughed to myself and started searching. “Every picture I can find of this guy has a different woman on his arm,” I said as I ran searches through all the top Media Corporations’ public archives.

“Yes, Mr. Tarkell, aside from being a modest socialite, seems to have been quite popular with women,” he said as he looked over my shoulder, “Also, rather fond of drink.”

“Had lots of sculpt work done, too.”

“Sculpt work?”

I nodded, “Biosculpt. It’s hard to tell just in pictures, but from the changes in his facial structure and what I saw of him tonight, I’d say he had work done at least to his face, if not his whole body.”

“Similar to plastic surgery.”

“Without the plastic. Biosculpt is all natural, grafting and removing real tissue and bone.”

“Just as ridiculous, if not more so,” Sherlock shook his head. “See if you can identify the unknown woman from the gala.”

“Can I ask why?”

“She’s the only one who hasn’t been identified in the papers.”

I started to run a search for her face in the photo databases, “And why is that important?” I asked, glancing at him. He was looking at me like one of my teachers in med-school, after I’d just asked something I should have known the answer to.

“Surely you find it slightly unusual that the media would be sure to identify every woman seen with this man, except for this one?”

“Oh. I get it, she’s not anyone special, no one would notice if something happened to her, which works with your private revenge idea.”

“Precisely.”

“You don’t have to sound so – wait a minute, I’ve got her. Her name’s Rachel Scarlet, she works at the City Gardens. She’s a botanist, revealed the opening of a new exhibit a little over a month ago.”

“A week before the picture of her with Tarkell. Anything more recent? Watts?”

“Yeah... something more recent,” I muttered, dazed, “Sherlock, I just found her obituary. She was found dead, the morning after the Tarkell photo.”

The phone rang. In a single leap across the room, Sherlock had answered it.

“Yes? Detective, what news? ... Are you sure? ... Suicide? You aren’t serious... I have an idea. I will give you one piece of advice, visit the City Gardens... Well, of course you must do your job as you see fit. Goodnight!” He hung up. “How long are the Gardens open?”

“They close at dark,” I must have looked like a small animal in a headlight, “why?”

“I’ll have to wait until tomorrow, then. Well. Is there any more information on the nature of Miss Scarlet’s death?”

“I can’t find any, but what did Red say?”

“Oh yes of course, it was strychnine poisoning.”

“Strychnine? Where the hell would someone get strychnine? They stopped using that stuff in pesticides decades ago, you can’t find it anymore – was the other Sherlock this smug all the time?”

“Hm? Oh, I don’t think smug is the word. I’m sorry, Watts, really, but this is quite an entertaining puzzle. I will go to the Gardens in the morning and hopefully have some news by the afternoon. Is there nothing on the manner of Miss Scarlet’s –?”

“No, Sherlock, I can’t find anything. There is nothing in the public archives.”

“Ah, well. I’m sure tomorrow will throw new light onto it.”

“Wait a sec, what was that about suicide?” I was frustrated. If I was going to be doing errands for him on a case, I at least wanted to know as much about it as possible.

He made a dismissive gesture, “Oh, nothing. The police have not yet ruled out suicide as a possible option is all,” he explained as he went into his bedroom.

“Why would they?”

“Because someone else was in that room tonight.”

“Right, the footprints you saw. Those could have been left by anyone.”

“Precisely what Red said, and there is some small truth to that. But, if I were a successful

businessman, I could think of at least a dozen easier and more dignified ways to end my own life than to deliberately go out and find a rare chemical to poison myself with in an abandoned building. Goodnight, Watts.” He closed his door.

I woke up to find him gone. Not surprised, I helped myself to the pot of coffee sitting on the table and fixed some breakfast. I had just finished eating when he arrived, full of energy and grinning. He hung up the long black coat he’d had on over his suit and tossed his soft hat into the closet after it. I was glad to see he didn’t wear the top hat everywhere.

“You found something.”

“Yes I did,” he poured himself a cup of the coffee I’d reheated and started looking through the practically bare cabinets in the kitchen, “I found some very interesting facts. Where the deuce is the bread?”

“Sorry, I moved it. It’s in the middle drawer by the—”

“Thank you.” Bread had been one of few things I’d actually found in the kitchen that morning. Toast, coffee and tea were apparently staples of the man’s diet. Fortunately, I’d bought some instant meals the day before.

“Didn’t you have breakfast this morning?”

“Just coffee, if you can call that stuff coffee. I couldn’t spare the time or energy for anything else.” He surveyed his empty refrigerator. “Ah. That’s unfortunate.”

“There are a few instants in the freezer,” I offered but he shook his head.

“No, thank you. I will make do with jam and toast this morning, until I have time to restock.”

“You don’t even eat prepackaged food?” I was bordering on incredulous.

He grinned, “Of course I do, if necessity calls for it. I just prefer to cook my own, even if my cooking is somewhat less than desirable.”

“Uh huh. Well, I’d planned to go shopping anyway. What did you find out?”

“The City Gardens are actually quite impressive. Have you ever been?”

I shook my head, “No. Thought it was too expensive to go look at plants.”

His toast finished, he sat down on the other side of the table, giving me a slightly disapproving glance. “You miss the point, doctor. You are not paying to look at the plants, you are paying to get a glimpse of nature, no matter how pruned and regulated, and to sit in her quiet.

It is an oasis from the chaotic hustle of the City. Granted, an oasis that only the people in the quietest part of the city can afford regularly, but,” he shrugged, “there you have it. Not that any of the regular visitors appreciate it as such. They go to marvel at the wonders the world used to hold, and then promptly forget about them until they grow bored and feel the need to flaunt whatever fashion is in style amid the roses.”

Grinning, I drew the detective’s mind back to the case at hand, “I’m sure Rachel Scarlet would have agreed with you.”

“Actually, by all accounts of her former co-workers, she did,” his eyes re-focused to their hawkish gaze as he told me what happened between bites, “I got there early enough to catch the workers finishing up their preparations for the day. After a few dead ends, people not wanting to discuss her or simply not knowing her well enough, I found a woman who was more than willing to talk to me. She gave me some very interesting information.”

“Such as?”

His eyes glittered, “Such as the fact that Miss Scarlet was engaged to be married.”

“Really?” I was astounded, “to who?”

“Whom, and the answer is to one Mr. Jack Warren. Miss Scarlet’s friend didn’t know where he worked, or where he lived, but apparently he came to meet her when she got off work every day and the two of them seemed very happy together.”

“So what was Scarlet doing with Tarkell?”

“Indeed. My informant didn’t know what happened, but she did know how Miss Scarlet died,” he paused to take a few long sips of his coffee, obviously enjoying the suspense.

“Well?” I asked, getting caught up in it, myself.

“She died at the bottom of Mr. Tarkell’s stairs.”

“What!” I smacked the table, “Damn it man, stop smiling at me and tell me how it happened!”

Eagerly leaning forward, the remains of breakfast forgotten, he launched into the story, “The night of the picture, Mr. Tarkell took Miss Scarlet home with him. In the morning, he called the police to report that he had found her at the bottom of his stairs. She wasn’t moving, and wasn’t breathing. The cause of death was determined to be a broken neck. According to Mr. Tarkell, Miss Scarlet had quite a bit to drink at the party, and he feared she must have fallen down the stairs in the middle of the night, after he was asleep. The reason you could find no explanation

for her death was that the family decided to keep the circumstances very private, for obvious reasons. As there were no witnesses, and as there was a woman with a broken neck at the bottom of some stairs, Mr. Tarkell's word was taken and the matter kept out of the papers."

"How did her fiancé react?"

"He accused Tarkell of foul play, but since there was nothing to go on, he was never taken seriously."

"But you think he was right."

"I think there's good probability for it. What would cause a happily engaged, apparently quiet and intelligent woman to go out with a boisterous socialite like Tarkell?"

"She and her fiancé had a fight," I wagered.

"It is certainly the simplest explanation. We will assume, then, that Miss Scarlet and Mr. Warren had a fight. To spite him, or prove a point, she goes out on the town with Mr. Tarkell, whom she may have met at the Gardens. Now, that leads us to the night of the tragedy. It must have been an incredible fight for Miss Scarlet, a happily engaged woman, to willingly spend the night in another man's house."

"If she'd been drinking, maybe he didn't want to leave her alone."

"A noble sentiment, Watts, and it would be possible, even though I doubt the nobility of Mr. Tarkell's character, were it not for one important fact."

"What's that?"

"The staircase Miss Scarlet was found at the bottom of leads to the master bedroom."

Wide eyed, I asked, "There's nothing else on the second floor?"

"Master bedroom, bathroom, and a private study. The guest room is on the ground floor."

"How do you know that?"

"I went there."

My amazement faded to skepticism, "You visited the place Tarkell lived, and the City Gardens, all in one morning? When did you get up?"

"The Gardens open at seven, after I got the information I needed, I went to the late Mr. Tarkell's home."

"How did you get in?"

"I told the company I was interested in buying it. They let me in to look it over. Then I changed my mind."

“They let you into a dead man’s house?”

“There was a representative there, of course. He kept a very close eye on me, made sure I didn’t steal anything. I apologized for wasting his time and said it wasn’t quite what I had in mind. Then I hastily made my exit and came home.”

“Shiny. So you think the fiancé, Warren, killed Tarkell because he suspected murder or some other crime toward Miss Scarlet.”

“Exactly.”

“Ok, then. Where’d he get the strychnine?”

Sherlock walked over to the mantelpiece and picked up a pipe. He stood there, packing tobacco into it, and making me wait. It wasn’t until smoke was wreathing around his head that he finally answered me.

“There is a lovely specimen of *Strychnos nux vomica* in the City Gardens.”

No hits. “A what?”

There was that smug smile, yet again. I was too surprised by the answer to really mind. “A tree, doctor. The seeds of its fruit contain strychnine.”

“Sherlock, if you’re wrong about this-”

“Detective, if I am wrong about this, you will have my deepest and most sincere apology, followed by a solemn vow never to interfere with one of your cases again.”

Red smiled, “I notice you specified one of my cases.”

Sherlock slyly grinned, “Yes, well, it wouldn’t do to let one failure get in the way of a career.”

Seeing that some official help would be needed, Sherlock had called Red shortly after finishing his pipe. We were now on the way to Jack Warren’s home, where Sherlock assured Red he would get a full confession from the man. How, I had no idea, but I knew it was something I had to see.

Red parked her unmarked police car right outside the apartment building. “He’s supposed to be in number 47,” she told us as we made our way to the door. Red buzzed, and a man’s voice came over the intercom.

“Yes? Who is it?”

“Mr. Warren, this is Detective Murphy, City Police. Can I come up?”

“Uh, sorry, Jack’s not in. Try again later.”

“That’s a shame,” Sherlock said, “we had information about the death of his fiancé.”

There was a brief moment of silence, and then the door opened. Red looked at Sherlock, mildly amused. “After you, detective,” she said.

Jack Warren’s apartment was a small one-bedroom space, sparingly furnished in cheap industrial style. The concrete walls were painted white, the carpet was navy, the furniture black and dull steel. A few pictures of smiling people hung on the walls, a leafy potted plant sat by the single small window. Warren, six feet tall and looking like he hadn’t shaved in a month, stood by the round table near the tiny kitchen, smoking a cigarette. As we entered, he stubbed it out in the ashtray, where it joined the remains of three others.

“Smoke?” he extended a half-empty box towards us.

Red and I declined and made our way towards the couch. We planned on getting comfortable and watching the show Sherlock promised.

“Yes, thank you,” Sherlock took one and pulled out a match to light it, ignoring the lighter offered. Warren was trying not to stare at him, unsuccessfully. His walking stick in hand, Sherlock was in his top hat and coat, the black one he called a ‘frock coat’. It made him stand out more, but the oddness of it was the point. Warren didn’t know whether to laugh or be scared.

“Mr. Warren,” he said, “my name is Sherlock, I’m a detective,” he made a face at the cigarette he was smoking, “good lord, to think people actually smoke this cheap imitation... well. Mr. Warren, I have been looking at the circumstances of Miss Scarlet’s death.”

“You have?” there was suspicion in his voice, but no one could mistake the joy in his face, “You believe me, then? What can you do?”

“Sadly, the only service I can give you now is my support when you explain to Detective Murphy why you murdered Mr. Patrick Tarkell.”

Warren took a step backwards, wide eyed. “I don’t know what –”

“Just have a seat, Mr. Warren.” Sherlock waited for him to comply, and launched into his explanation. He sounded like a professor in front of a class, and was definitely enjoying himself. “What first caught my eye were the footprints of a second man in the room, with the cigarette ash. This told me that whoever was there must have waited while he smoked. The waiting must have happened after Mr. Tarkell arrived, as he was extremely unlikely to enter an abandoned building, no matter how drunk, and would have to be brought there. The agonized position of the

body, along with the absence of an external wound, suggested poison to my mind. This was obviously a premeditated murder; one does not happen to carry poison for a random killing or a mugging gone wrong. The possibility of suicide could be safely eliminated by the simple presence of a second person, along with the fact that there are a number of more dignified ways for a businessman to take his life than illegal rat-poison in an abandoned building. Thus far, my working hypothesis was that the murderer had brought Mr. Tarkell to the building, poisoned him, and then waited, smoking, to make sure it worked.

“My next step was to research Mr. Tarkell, which brought me to a picture of him with your fiancée, Mr. Warren. I noticed that none of the papers mentioned her name, which was unusual, so I had Dr. Watts run a search for her. We found her obituary. When I recommended you visit the City Gardens, Detective Murphy, I was not being glib; I was giving you a hint. Rachel Scarlet worked there, and from a former coworker and friend I was able to determine the nature of her death. I also found the strychnine tree growing there, which was likely the source of the poison as strychnine is otherwise very difficult to obtain. Her coworker was also kind enough to mention your name, Mr. Warren, and describe the nature of your relationship. Now, the question remained, what was a happily engaged young woman doing in Mr. Tarkell’s home, at the bottom of the stairs? Mr. Tarkell’s official story explained the broken neck, but not the circumstances surrounding the event –”

“All right!” Warren leaped out of his chair, startling all of us. Even Sherlock jumped a little. “That’s enough. I killed Patrick Tarkell, and I’m not sorry for it. He killed my girl, just because she...” Warren broke, sinking back into his chair.

“We had a fight, a vicious one. Worst fight we’d ever had. She was so mad at me, she accepted Tarkell’s invitation to an event. He came to the Gardens some, and Rachel was such a beauty. He was bound to notice her eventually, even with dirt on her hands and leaves in her hair. So, she went with him. Then the next day, I found out she had died. Found dead at the bottom of the stairs of that monster’s house. Tarkell blamed it on drink, but I knew Rachel, and she never drank.

“I managed to talk to the coroner, and after a small bribe he told me her toxicology report showed traces of alcohol, but she probably wasn’t drunk. Her cause of death was a broken neck, but there were other bruises too, not just from falling down stairs. There were bruises on her arm that matched a hand gripping her, hard. No one would pay any attention to it though, since

Tarkell was a public figure, with friends in high places.

“I knew Tarkell had lied about her falling. If she fell, it was because she’d tried to get away from him. Personally, I think she was pushed. Doesn’t matter now, though. The police didn’t follow up on any of my claims because there were no witnesses, other than Tarkell. Nothing to suspect he’d killed her, not even by accident. The fact that there was no alcohol in her system just meant that Tarkell had ‘misjudged’ how much she drank. Her obituary even left out the cause of death. If no one else was going to see Tarkell brought to justice, I would. I wanted revenge. My only regret is that I was harsh to her, that in a small way I drove her to that womanizing wretch in the first place.”

Warren paused for a moment to catch his breath before continuing. “Rachel had often told me how stupid she thought it was that the Gardens kept a poisonous tree, just because they liked the way it looked. I thought it would be fitting to use it, so I stole a fruit off of it, powdered the seeds and made a pill out of it. I carried it with me in a little box all the time, until I could figure out a way to give it to Tarkell. My chance came one night when I was out and spotted him going into The High, already drunk. I acted on impulse, going in after him, grabbing him, and taking him to the abandoned building. I don’t remember what I said to him, but he came willingly. Once we were in, I gave Tarkell the pill, telling him it was a guaranteed high, but he’d have to wait a little bit for it to take effect. He took it, and sat down to wait. I paced the room, smoking, nervous. I don’t know anything about poisons, just that the plant was supposed to be deadly. I hoped I’d done it right. I guess I did.

“Like I said, I don’t know anything about poisons. I didn’t know what it would do to him. He started twitching. Then it got worse. He realized what was happening, I could see the fear in his eyes and the pain, but the convulsions were so bad there was nothing he could do about it. I watched as his entire body spasmed, his back arching against the ground, unable to get a breath, until he stopped. It felt like hours. I guess I’m lucky no one came inside, I don’t know what I would have done if someone had. Once it was all over, I ran.”

Silence.

Red sighed and stood. “Jack Warren, as tragic as your fiancée’s death was, and as sorry as I am that we didn’t do more to help, you are arrested for the murder of Mr. Patrick Tarkell.”

Warren nodded. “I know. Tarkell got what was coming to him, that’s all that matters.”

“Sherlock,” Red said as we stood by her car a little later, “thanks for the help. Bit of guess

work, though.”

Sherlock’s expression was impassive, “Detective Murphy, just because I do not have machines to verify all my conclusions, it does not make them guesses.”

“Please, call me Red,” she held up her hands, “and you’re right, it all made sense. It’s just not the only explanation there could have been. I can’t help but think you had to guess somewhere along the line.”

“Not guess, but infer from the facts. I never guess.”

“Uh huh. Eliminate the impossible and all that remains is the truth, right?”

Sherlock was stunned. “Close. Have you –”

Red shrugged, “I read a couple. Recognized your name, thought I’d check them out. Kind of fun, though I didn’t understand a lot of the stuff mentioned. The historical references, I mean. Now I know why you dress strangely, though.”

Sherlock grinned. His opinion of Red had obviously gone up, “If you ever require my services in the future, Detective, ah, Red –”

“I know where to find you. Thanks again.”

The trip home was quiet. Now that the case was over, Sherlock slowly slipped back into that bored academic state I’d seen the first night. He’d probably head straight for his violin when we got back. I was too wrapped up in my own thoughts to say anything until we reached Break Street.

“I have to admit, that was pretty impressive. Even if you are crazy.”

Sherlock cocked his head, confused. “I beg your pardon?”

As we walked up to our door, I tried to explain. “You got the murderer, but it’s a bit scary how much fun you had. Your cool logic combined with a total lack of emotion except when there’s a dead man in the room is... disturbing.”

He looked as if he were trying to decide whether or not to be offended. “You find my methods impressive, but you object to me deriving satisfaction from their use?”

“No, I object to you looking like a kid in a game shop in the face of human tragedy.” I went inside, throwing my jacket onto a hook and sitting on the sofa.

Sherlock entered with a puzzled look on his face. By the time he got to his chair by the window, the puzzlement had turned to a sardonic grin.

“The altruistic doctor objects to the disconnection necessary for objective thought.”

“Damn it, Sherlock, I’m not complaining about scientific objectivity, I’m questioning the ethics of taking pleasure at the sight of other people’s pain. Like the way your face lit up at the sight of a dead body.”

“Ah,” this time his grin was almost embarrassed. “Very observant of you, but you’re off the mark. The reaction you saw had nothing to do with the body, but everything to do with the problem. The puzzle presented there. That a man’s murder was involved was unfortunate, but I would have had the exact same reaction to any sort of case you can think of that provided the same quality of uniqueness, no matter what the crime.”

I was still skeptical. “Why did you become a detective?”

He was quiet for a few moments, prepping his pipe while he thought. Once it was lit, he said, “It’s what I thought I would enjoy doing.”

“Not a very good answer.”

He chuckled, “It’s a perfectly decent answer, it’s just not the answer you wanted to hear.”

I shrugged. “Maybe.”

“Have I assuaged your conscience?”

I smirked. “My conscience? I guess I can cope with the fact that I’m willingly living with a madman. You seem good at what you do, even if I don’t understand why you’re doing it. And the cops need all the help they can get.”

Sherlock smiled a little. “I’m not as mad as all that.”

“Maybe not,” I stood, “but you’re not quite sane, either.”

He held his hand up in defeat as I started towards my room, “That may be true. Watts!”

“What?”

He was still smiling. “What did you think of it?”

I shrugged. “I enjoyed watching you work. You’re strange, but that was... fun.” I disappeared into my room, where I could easily ignore the contented laughter of the detective. Not that the laughter really bothered me. It had been fun, and I found myself liking the man for some reason. I’m still not sure why.

The next couple days were quiet, which I was glad of, as it gave me a chance to read a couple of the Sherlock Holmes stories, which really just convinced me further that my housemate’s crazy. Still, he’s good at what he does. Even if he does play his violin at odd hours, leave cluttered messes of documents and chemistry experiments all over the living room, and

smoke incessantly, at least I'm never bored.

I still haven't found a job, but Sherlock suggested I run a private practice, providing medical services to people who can't afford Corporate treatment. I wouldn't mind being a rogue medic... but something tells me the person I'm going to be patching up most often is Sherlock.