

Alfred

A2B4 gave an uneasy grin as LMM320 gave him a clap on the shoulder. It reverberated through his metallic arm and his suit. While as a Sentient, it did not hurt, he wondered if it should have.

“Fantastic work, yet again, A2B4! Share your secret—what sorts of software are you hogging? The Mother Computer outdid herself with your code!” LMM320 said, bursting into a bellowing, highly pixelated laugh. His face, consumed by a large circular screen where it digitally defined all their features, morphed into a wide grin. He leaned in closer, lowering the decibels on his voice box. “Your stories; they’re so good, even the humans like ‘em! I haven’t seen books fly off the web that fast, you hear?”

A2B4 only nodded, wanting to slip away and go home. Somehow, he found himself under the presence of LMM320, the head of the publishing industry, and one of the most influential Sentients who controlled the output of entertainment media.

But the truth was, A2B4 was not supposed to be at the Sentient Artificial Intelligence Authors Convention, designed and made for Automated Authors. In fact, A2B4 was not an Automated Author (or any sort of Sentient writer) at all—he was designed and programmed to be a Resident Assistant, Sentient androids whose jobs were to be primary caretakers of the elderly human population. He had already been assigned to a human as well: Silas Floyd, an 80 year old man with an obscure passion for mint cookies and peppermint tea, defensive about his ‘young’ age, and his horrid, creaky knees.

“The humans always said we Sentients would never quite catch up to their, what is it? Levels of creativity and artistry, but look at you! They’re eating up your tales like it’s their new addiction. Speaking of addictions, when is the next part coming out?”

“In all due time, LMM320. I’m honored you found it so entertaining.”

A2B4 felt like his gears were twisting. It was an odd sensation, a sensation he had never experienced in the 18 years of his functionalities. He made a note to stop by the mechanics. “I believe it is time for me to refuel, LMM320. Thank you for hosting a lovely evening.”

LMM320 let go of A2B4’s shoulder, and he watched the pixels rearrange themselves into a calmer expression. “Very well, A2B4! Our mysterious Sentient. Don’t forget about our publishing deal!”

A2B4 nodded before rushing out of the publishing department, strolling quickly past the other department doors plastered to the walls. Finally, he pushed open the doors of the House of Governing, a child sector of the National Sentient Intelligence and the International Human Race Committee Coordination. The twisting of his gears felt worse, and he patted himself down to find where the flimsy screw could be. A2B4 was dismayed to find no misplaced screw, bolt, or button, and wondered if this was what humans called the weight of secrets.

A2B4 reached into his pocket, fishing out a folded note and scrawny handwriting. Written on it were the only things Silas Floyd wrote on his notes: *Alfred, bring mint cookies. Not the cheap ones.*

The Mother Computer had never given A2B4 a writer’s algorithm. Or any data even pertaining to the subject. The truth was, A2B4 had never written a word of literary value since his conception. And he only knew one person who did.

“I thought you were supposed to have more flesh.”

A2B4 blinked before he smiled. It was not a typical introduction a resident would have with a resident assistant, and most certainly not the type of introduction A2B4 had expected from

his very first resident, but nevertheless an introduction. And A2B4 was programmed to never take any offense—living in a world with humans and androids coinciding was bound to have some uncomfortable questions. Shifting to the side, A2B4 looked down past the half open door, smiling at Mr. Silas Floyd, the elderly resident he was responsible for.

“Hello, Mr. Floyd. I am your new Residence Assistant. Skin is an option. If you would like, I can make immediate adjustments for our next meeting. Does it make you uncomfortable, Mr. Floyd?”

Silas just rubbed his nose again, sniffing. The android looked fresh off the assembly line. Body built similarly to that of a human’s but its face was full metal, every inch polished and buffed steel. Typically they wore some kind of skin, a layer or covering of some sorts—but A2B4 only wore a casual suit.

“No. A hunk of metal should look like a hunk of metal. Keep the clothes, though.”

A2B4 smoothed out his shirt, smiling. “Wonderful, Mr. Floyd! Shall I come inside then?”

Silas eyed the android. He didn’t care much for the previous android; he was the one who requested a new one. Although, he wasn’t sure exactly why he needed one. Silas supposed he enjoyed having his tea freshly brewed three times a week, but he was weary of a metallic caretaker. And, Silas was still (somewhat; arguably; he insists) young. The ripe age of 80 and in good health (except his knees). “Your name, what was it again?” They were all a weird slew of numbers and letters, and it bothered Silas that they couldn’t be bothered to choose a name. “Your name, what was it again?”

“As per regulation by the House of Governing, the sentient do not have names,” A2B4 said, still smiling. “We have titles instead, Mr. Floyd. All android titles are unique, carefully crafted sequences from the Mother Computer.”

“Didn’t ask for your mother’s name. I asked for your name, so give me your name.”

A2B4 chuckled. He enjoyed working with the elderly, it was what made his job so refreshing. The elderly were the easiest—and most difficult—subset of the population to analyze and predict. While their beliefs, ideologies, and interests were more solidified, they had a delicious habit of saying things outside of the algorithm. He didn’t know why humans had ever given up the role of being resident assistants. They all grew old anyway. “A2B4,” he said. It was actually A2B49012348590194263101976391238764-23 but most humans found it daunting. Even the sentient occasionally grew tired of pronouncing thirty syllables to call each other’s titles.

“A2B4,” Silas said. He chewed on the words, or letters, really. It was easier to remember than his other android, who was something further down the alphabet.

“Oh, Mr. Floyd, I nearly forgot. I must ask: do you consent to be part of our human parsing program? This is different from the resident-resident assistant agreement. I must ask if it would be alright for me to analyze your behavior in real time and provide you with a better tailored experience. Your data is safely stored in an encrypted file on the Mother Computer and you may opt out any time.” A2B4 waited for Silas’ response. It was only a scrunched up nose and narrowed eyes.

“What?”

A2B4 opened his mouth to recite the speech. “I must ask if it would be alright for me to analyze your behavior in real time and provide you with—”

“No, I don’t want any cookies,” Silas said annoyingly, waving his hand in the air. He shuffled back into his house, leaving the door slightly ajar. “That’s what you bots call ‘em right? Taking my, what was it? Data?”

A2B4 strolled into Silas' house, smiling widely as he closed the door behind him. His sensors scraped the view wildly in the background. He noted possible safety hazards, like that crooked picture frame 7.85 inches away from the door, or the sharp edge of a glass coffee table in front of the sofa next to him. He also noticed how dark the house was; lamps were placed periodically around the floor, one of them blinking slowly. A2B4 made another note to change the bulb. At least the house was rather small—although there was a second floor, it was only five steps, not winding. There were only two rooms (excluding the bathroom) on the first floor, one being the makeshift living room, dining room, and the other being a kitchen, medium sized. Only the sofa, coffee table, and a small rounded table with a singular chair populated the first half of the floor. A2B4 was pleased to find the kitchen rather spotless—except for the sink, which had some questionable brown stains along the edges. “I’m impressed, Mr. Floyd! Yes, cookies are exactly that. So, I must ask, do you consent—”

“Why are they cookies?” Silas muttered, hoisting himself on a stool to reach into the cupboard. Speaking of cookies, they sounded rather delicious now. The sentient always ruined things that weren’t meant to be touched. He shook open the box, grumbling profusely when there were nothing but crumbs. The previous (dumb) bot never refilled his cookie box.

“Well, they are dubbed cookies because of the—”

“I don’t want it.”

“The cookies, sir? Or do you consent—”

Silas waved his arms in the air, grunting when he waved them too hard and could feel his knees groaning. “All of it! The Motherboard, digital scan, whatever! I’m no pet.”

A2B4 shook his head indignantly, catching onto Silas when he wobbled on the stool. Helping him reach the floor and settle into the singular chair at his dining table, he said, “Of

course not, Mr. Floyd! We sentient beings have never regarded humans in such light, especially the elderly. We understand and respect all hesitance—”

“Did you just call me old?”

A2B4 paused, this time unable to hold back a laugh. It was a computerized laugh, and Silas could almost feel each pixel reverberating off the screen.

“Mr. Floyd, have I mentioned how excited I am to assist you?”

Silas rolled his eyes. “AB48, have I mentioned how excited I am to have you?” Silas said, leaning forward in his seat. He stared upward, clicking his tongue as his neck protested. He gestured for the android to level with him on the floor. A2B4 followed, a hand on its knee.

“A2B4. But no, Mr. Floyd.”

“Exactly. So let’s keep this nice and simple, yeah? You lot do the same things. Clean my house. Cook my food. Fold my laundry. Don’t let me walk into the street unsupervised. Occasionally keep me entertained.” Silas pointed to himself. “And I just have to keep out of your way so you can do your job. So let’s start with me sitting nicely at my dinner table, and you,” He pointed to the cookie box on the floor, “get me a new batch of Lemon Mint cookies.”

A2B4 smiled. The elderly. You had to love them.

“I apologize, Mr. Floyd. But cookies are not recommended for your age group—”

“Get out.”

A2B4 did what all droids, sentients, did best. He analyzed his options. He ran through approximately 123,094,980,593 possible outcomes, tabbed and annotated his options, and ran them again. Lying, (un)surprisingly, was the most frequent outcome. And A2B4 did consider it. He did this three times over the course of his walk to Silas’ home, not noticing the city drift into

suburbia, a quaint little neighborhood, untouched by most technology. It was probably the only place where the clamoring roads twisted into two mere lanes, and trees began to emerge from the ground. It was built and maintained especially for the elderly, who appeared to have a copious time adjusting to the Digital Revolution.

On his third run through, A2B4 passed the gates with the engraving: *Elder's Hollow* across it. Here, the road began to open up into rows and rows of white, block, square buildings. Among the Resident Assistants, they were called cottages, and each cottage housed a single, elderly human. A2B4 did not say hello to the neighboring sentients, nor his fellow Resident Assistants, as they all stood on the porch of their human's home, pin straight, in a neat line. There was a chorus of doorbells as they all rang it at the same time.

As always, A2B4 waited for three and a half minutes before he used the spare key. He found Silas sitting on his orange sofa, as he always did, greeting A2B4 with a grunt.

A2B4 forced a smile to formulate on his screen, feeling the twisting gears again.

“What horrid activities have you planned today for my benefit, Alfred?”

His gears churned. If A2B4 had a heart, he assumed this would be when he lost the right to have one. Three options with the highest probabilities of success were what his computations offered. In Silas' home, A2B4 was Alfred, and just Alfred. Partially because the man could not remember the A2B4's title for three weeks (frustrating him immensely), and partially because Silas hated mixing his numbers with his letters. What defined success for Alfred in Silas' home? Anything that ended with Alfred staying as Alfred, and Silas as the same grumpy, cookie enthusiast man he knows.

“I brought you something to read today, Mr. Floyd.”

He arched his brow. “You know I don't read the things on the screen. Hurts my eyes.”

A2B4 handed him a newspaper. At least, it closely resembled one. It was folded neatly, tinted gray with heavy black ink penned all around it.

Silas' eyes widened as he grabbed it hesitantly out of A2B4's hands. "Where did you manage to find such a thing, Alfred? I haven't seen these since I was a boy."

A2B4 could only plaster a smile. He hoped it was one, and the pixels did not betray him. All he could hear were the gears grinding against his wires. He was sure it would tear him apart, breaking every fiber of his being and he would become exactly what Silas said he was: a heap of metal.

Typically, this was when A2B4 guided Silas to his dining room chair, and stirred his tea. A2B4 could not watch Silas unfold the paper.

"I must ask, Mr. Floyd. May I sit?"

"Is that flour?" Silas hadn't seen flour in years. He couldn't remember the last time he had flour scattered over his counter, and the last time anyone had used flour to make anything.

A2B4 nodded, setting out more packages on the table. "I have conducted online research pertaining to some healthier alternatives to your mint cookies, Mr. Floyd. I am pleased to say I have found one that does not breach your dietary restrictions and will not harm your health."

Arching a brow, Silas leaned forward. Perhaps androids were not all that bad. "With tea?"

"With tea," A2B4 confirmed.

Silas just grunted. "You can stay today then."

"Fantastic, Mr. Floyd." It was almost endearing how much more lenient an old man could get after he had his cookie. In fact, it was the first time A2B4 did not sit on the porch for hours. Typically, he would have been asked to leave by mid-afternoon, and A2B4 would sit on the front

porch, waiting. Eventually Silas would open the door, grumble about him still being here, but leave the door open anyway as he shuffled back to the dining room. Instead, A2B4 shared tea (his cup was empty of course, he was not built to consume human delicacies) with Silas.

It was also the first time Silas had shared something.

“My daughter still paying for you?”

A2B4 hummed for a moment, eyes glowing as he parsed through his files internally. “A woman named Georgia Alyssa Floyd made a recent payment to your Residence Account on July 10th, 3000, two weeks ago.”

Silas just grunted, taking a sip of his tea. He stared outside the window for a moment. There were androids walking baby strollers, androids playing catch with the boy three houses down, and another handful of droids walking an array of dogs down the street. 50 years ago, it would have been humans, just humans, walking these streets. It felt like a torn, mismatched picture. Something he could only dream of. Now he could hardly glance out the window before being met with a glaring metallic plate. He wondered where the time had gone. A2B4 watched the steam curl upwards and dissipate into the air.

“See she hasn’t forgotten me just yet,” Silas said with a huff. He broke away from the window. A2B4 looked at him, catching a glimpse of a smile flick across Silas’ face. Daughter, smile. Humans smile when experiencing positive emotions. A2B4 made note of this in his Resident Assistant log.

“Would you like to contact her, Mr. Floyd? I can pull up her means of contact immediately—”

“You droids got family?”

A2B4 paused. “We have the Mother Computer. She is the one who writes our code. Sentients do not have mothers, fathers, or siblings in the traditional human sense.”

“You like it that way?” Silas turned to look at A2B4. He wasn’t sure what response he wanted. How much could a droid know about family? Something even Silas knew so little of. “You droids got feelings now, don’t you?”

“I do not mind, I believe,” said A2B4 thoughtfully. “This is the only way I know, Mr. Floyd.”

Silas grunted again. He sipped his tea and A2B4 stared out the window.

“You got a different name?” Silas said. “I’m tired of calling for AB35.”

“A2B4 is my call number, Mr. Floyd. Sentients are not granted names. A title is easier for data management.”

“Robi or Alfred?”

“I don’t understand, Mr. Floyd.”

“Pick a name, you tin can.” He took a long sip from his cup, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand afterwards.

“A name is not necessary.”

“Alright. It was your call, scrapyard.”

“Alfred. Alfred works.”

A2B4 expected uproar. It was in his analytics. Most humans would display signs of anger, aggression, coupled with vocal expressions of other negative emotions when they learned their work had been stolen. Especially by a sentient android.

But Silas just read the paper, as if he read the paper every morning. Only a slight crease folded between his brows. A2B4 sat in the dining room chair, not daring to move. The brightness of his screen dimmed.

The rest of the afternoon was silent. Silas did not ask for tea, nor did A2B4 make tea. The sun set and evening bloomed on the horizon. A2B4 contemplated lying. *Someone else had actually stolen your old papers, Mr. Floyd. In my pursuit to catch the thief, I realized we shared the same name. Or, I had wanted to surprise you, Mr. Floyd. But the publisher must have misheard me as Alfred when I said Silas. Or, the chance for the truth. I wanted you to achieve your dream, Mr. Floyd. I spent our midnights piecing together an ancient newspaper. I never planned for it to conspire to something this big.* His calculations were wrong. His analytics failed to note Silas Floyd was an old man. And the elderly were always the most difficult—and easiest—subgroup to analyze.

Silas retired to bed early that night. A2B4 sat in the same seat, staring at the empty seat opposing him. And if he were human, he would have cast a wish, right then and there.

He wished to be sitting for tea with Silas grumbling, watching a tendril of steam reach for the sky.

“You write?” A2B4 asked Silas. A2B4’s eyes widened on his screen, and he flipped through the stacks of papers, scanning them within milliseconds and uploading them to his drive. In the midst of cleaning Silas’ attic for the winter, he had discovered a box of stray papers, then another, then another. Handwritten, scrawny letters all over them.

Silas sniffed, grabbing a manuscript out of A2B4’s hands. “If you can call it writing.”

“While literature is a subjective topic, by human literary standards—” Alfred finished reading them “—it would be one of the materials Sentients would parse to develop automated writing.”

“Then it’s not very good, is it, Alfred?” Silas tossed the paper to the ground. His tone hardened and a slight blush began to color his cheeks. “They’re old dreams now anyway. Burn them, trash them, I don’t care. I don’t want to see these again.”

Silas turned abruptly, breathing sharply when he took the first step down. A2B4 jumped immediately, grabbing Silas by the elbow and leading him down the stairs. Silas shrugged him off as soon as his feet hit the floor, shuffling awkwardly towards the sofa.

“Tea, Alfred.”

“Of course, Mr. Floyd.” A2B4 glanced at the stairs. A couple pieces of paper had also made their descent, floating lazily towards A2B4’s feet.

It was a week of silence. A2B4 made his weekly trips to Silas’ home, although the only thing Silas did was sit on his sofa. The curtains were shut closed, and the only moment Silas would spare a word was in a harsh whisper to close them. LMM320 had pinged A2B4 72 times the past three days, and A2B4 had grown tempted to tear his own telecommunications pad out by the end of it. Guilt, A2B4 learned, was a heavy weight to carry, and he was not sure how much longer he could bear it.

A2B4 set a cup of peppermint tea next to Silas. Settling on the floor, A2B4 looked at Silas. 80 was still 80, but age was not drawn from his wrinkles or graying hair, but his eyes. They seemed to pool inwards, and for a moment A2B4 was jealous there could be such depth in a small thing.

Every android, regardless of occupation, was given a Human Manual. It listed instructions, mannerisms, common ethics and morals humans shared and believed in. It helped them mimic humans and allow them to find some comfort in the unfamiliar that was Sentients. Yet, despite reading it all night, A2B4 could only find a single paragraph on apologies. He tried his best.

“I offer my sincerest apologies, Mr. Floyd.” A2B4 was met with a blank stare. He tried to tune his voice box to a lower discrepancy, something closer to an apologetic tone humans used. “To say it was wrong of me would be a severe understatement. May I ask for your forgiveness, Mr. Floyd?”

A2B4 blinked when he felt something wet on his hand. He knew there was a loose screw somewhere; he looked for the leak hastily when he saw a droplet touch his iron hand. A2B4 looked up to find them rolling down Silas’ cheek.

Silas, tears. A2B4 did not make this note in his Resident Assistant log.

A2B4 wasn’t sure where it started. He could only pin them as feelings of elation, pride, and reluctantly, greed.

He had wanted to see Silas’ writing recognized. A2B4 didn’t have dreams. He was a droid. A2B4 could learn to have dreams, aspirations. But if he learned them, then would it be a dream or a planted seed? If he could see those stacks of papers get put somewhere, not gathering dust, A2B4 thought he could guess what dreams might taste like. He didn’t know why it bothered him so much; but if Silas had an inkling of a passion for his scribbles as he did for those mint flavored cookies, A2B4 wanted to see it.

The only issue was that humans did not publish anymore. Nor did they write. They had not written anything since at least 2080. A2B4 wasn't even sure if humans could still publish. All systems were catered towards Sentients. The Digital Revolution had changed society from its very root; humans were freed of all occupations and social demands. Sentients could fill those roles. Humans did not need to worry needlessly about what would bring them dinner, how to build apartments, or the next best thing to watch. They didn't even need to worry about who would raise their children, teach in schools, or care for the planet. The Sentients took care of those concerns—and got good at them. Better than humans did, at the very least. There were higher bounds of efficiency, quality of life, and general satisfaction.

So when A2B4 had brought a sample to local Automated Authors publishing house, and they had scanned for plagiarism, unethical writing, or scandalous ideas and found nothing, and then put it in their algorithms to check for probability of success and it reached a whopping 95%, A2B4 had grown so excited that when the publisher had asked for a name, he had given it his own: A2B4.

And it only went from there. It picked up incredibly fast at the local e-shops, causing an excited buzz among the Sentients, who had not fathomed such possibilities from their algorithms. It sparked greater excitement when the humans began picking it up, some incredulous over the quality of writing, and others skeptical. Still, the demand for more heightened, and A2B4 rationed whatever scans of Silas' writing he had left.

Sentients began complimenting A2B4, clamoring for a word, a conversation, a hint or scrap of his code. Some complained about the Mother Computer. Some praised the Mother Computer. But suddenly, A2B4 was not just a Resident Assistant. He was the Sentient among

Sentients. He was an Automated Author who could appeal to everyone. Who could mimic humans. There was a different fullness to A2B4. He could feel it stirring, somewhere.

But the writing ran out. Soon, A2B4 had published the last chapter in Silas' papers. A2B4 had a week until the next deadline, and despite trying for days, secretly, while Silas was asleep, he could not replicate Silas. A2B4 prolonged the deadline for as long as he could. Sentients were antsy, humans began to lose interest. LMM320 messaged him around the clock, A2B4's telepad overheating at times. Looking at words began to scare A2B4, and each sentence he wrote felt even more suffocating.

"As much as I hate it, Alfred, we are alike." Silas grabbed a tissue, sniffing. "Allergies."

A2B4 handed him another one. Silas didn't have allergies, and none were listed on his human profile. Quiet settled over them. Sunlight peeked under the edges of the curtains, and the familiar rhythm of the leaking sink hummed in between their silence.

"I didn't ask Georgia for forgiveness." Silas said finally. "She caught a fever once, cause I left her out in the rain. Took days to break it. I was so busy trying to catch a publisher, I forgot I had a child at school. Stubborn like me, she walked the five miles home."

"It was one time," A2B4 said. Although, he wasn't really sure how to console Silas. Leaving a child out in the rain did seem dreadful indeed.

"It wasn't." Silas balled up the tissue in his hand. "I left her behind, eventually. On the playgrounds. At graduations. On her wedding. I don't even recall what day she gave birth, but I remember when I wrote my first publishing letter. All for a chance of fame. All for that." He gestured to the attic. "Paying for Resident Assistance was the last thing she said she would do. Gracious thing." Silas smiled again, but his cheeks drooped.

“I haven’t talked to my girl in 30 years. She requested an android for me on my 60th birthday. But if she pays the bills, she must be well.”

A2B4 only stared. He had never seen Silas look so small. And Silas was quite small already (because of his age, of course).

“I’m no good man, Alfred. I almost enjoyed seeing my work in that paper. I’m ashamed to say I enjoyed that it wasn’t my name under it. Because it wasn’t my greed that published it, but yours. Blame is a fickle thing.” Silas arched his brow. “You were a stupid bot for that, Alfred.”

“I agree, Mr. Floyd.”

“You dumb tin can, you not supposed to agree.” Silas flexed his hand, leaning back on the couch. “Now go fix this mess you made. I don’t write.”

“I am but a tin can, Mr. Floyd.”

“Don’t utter that nonsense here. You’re Alfred and I didn’t name you for nothing. I want this mess cleaned up by the time I get up from my nap, you hear? I want it off the web or cookies or whatever you lot call it.” Silas waved his hand, brushing A2B4 away. “And bring me some peppermint tea when you’re done.”

A2B4 smiled. Silas truly had no idea the scale of his mess. His book was about to go international. The elderly, you had to love them.

A2B4 stepped out onto the front porch. A kettle was already brewing, its hiss dampening as soon as he closed the door behind him. He’d be back for tea. Another buzz interrupted his thoughts, the telecommunicator ringing. He was tempted to tear out LMM320’s telecommunicator. A2B4 opened the mailbox in front of the porch stairs. There were other things in Silas’ piles of papers. One box dedicated to Georgia’s apology letters. Placing a letter in it, he

smoothed out the scrawny mess of an address and a singular name, Georgia Alyssa Floyd. It was his best handwriting, and he hoped the Sentient who picked it up would be able to parse it.

Elder's Hollow was the only place that accepted the ancient things.

Alfred smiled, his pixels arranging themselves into a grin, but still his insides shuddered.

Dumb, dumb, heap of metal. How was he going to wipe a corner of the Internet?

He could almost hear Silas grumbling after him. *You better.*

To the Mother Computer Alfred went. He was a Resident Assistant. He had to be back for tea, and Silas was even scarier when he was hungry.