All that Glitters is not Gold

by ConstanceCream

Summary

He had never doubted his sanity less.
This was so bad it had to be true.
This was just the final chapter of his especially vicious John Hamish Watson Horror Story.

John develops a serious disease. After three years Sherlock returns just during the process of diagnosis.

Notes

A thousand thanks go to my incredibly patient and accurate beta reader SwissMiss! Without her brilliant work I wouldn't ever dare to post a story. The medical details of this fic have been betaed by Lizardspots on LJ. Huge thanks for your efforts!

Any remaining errors are entirely mine. Sometimes I felt that I had to sacrifice medical correctness for the sake of plot structure and character development.

Trigger warnings for cancer and other undesirable diseases ending with -osis throughout
the text.

I do not own any of the characters. Not even my OMC. I suppose in reality he is probably owned by his wife; I just borrowed him without their knowledge, and now I do sincerely hope that they will never find out...
He most definitely could not go to work today. John Watson stood at the sink staring in the mirror. He really looked bad. And these days it was not due to alcohol and all-night partying like in his youth. When had he become so old, so messed up?

Stupid question. The last three years had been gnawing at him, he couldn't just get over it...

But this was different. This morning he not only felt unsettled, devastated, depressed ... the list of piteous adjectives to describe his mood every morning he rose to find himself in an empty flat, living a lonely life, could be continued ad infinitum. Today he had woken up soaking wet with sweat, his sheets damp, and it had not been the first time.

Every night during the last week he had crept to bed with a touch of fever, only to find the fever had vanished in the morning, after a really sweaty night. Night sweat. He knew the term well, yet he had no idea what had triggered this.

There had been no nightmares lately; in fact, he had not dreamt at all, he realised suddenly. Just fallen onto his bed and slept like a stone. He was so tired these days, all the time. He hadn't paid much attention; there was hardly anything to stay up to do in the evenings, so why not go to bed early and sleep if he was exhausted?

But this morning he had to admit that there was something wrong. He couldn't go to work today. He would have to go and see his doctor, get a sick note, and return to bed.

'Must be some sort of infection,' he thought, virus probably, influenza-like...

John Watson was a doctor himself. He should have known better. And he should have known that William, an old colleague and consultant in general medicine, would want to examine him thoroughly.

Going to his registered GP would have done as well, if he just wanted to skive off work for a few days. But he consulted his friend, probably because of his own suspicion that there might be something fishy about his condition. It was generally frowned upon for doctors to take on family or friends as patients. John knew that this was poor form, as their acquaintance could influence William's objectivity, but the older colleague was a capable doctor and John trusted in his competency.

Sitting in the doctor's office, on the wrong side of the desk, he felt trapped.

"How long have you gone without a check-up, John?" William asked him. "You should see your GP at least once a year at your age, you know that."

John just shrugged his shoulders. "It's been almost four years." he finally admitted.

The doctor scrolled the screen of his computer, then gave him another scrutinising glance. "You've lost weight."

John didn't know what to say. He was well aware of how bad he looked, ever since...
Most of the people he knew didn't bother to comment on it any longer.

"You don't think you can be your own doctor, now, do you? Honestly, John, you should know better!"

John didn't like it, but he knew the older man was right. He just had not seen a point in anything lately, so he would have appreciated it if William didn't make such a fuss about it...

"Well, I'm here now," he replied weakly.

Almost two hours later, he found himself back in the consultation room, waiting for the results of the preliminary tests. Way too many syringes for his taste had been filled with his blood samples by the nurse, his chest had been x-rayed... and why? This was an enormous effort for some minor virus.

"Could be the flu," William had agreed, when John had finished describing his symptoms, "but for all that, you know quite well that this could also be something else, don't you?" William had not looked at him, absorbed in thought.

The door opened; John's unease grew when he saw the worry lines on William's face as the older man carefully sat down behind his desk.

"Your inflammatory markers and full blood count are normal." Before John could relax he went on firmly, "However, we need to wait for the results of the blood film. It should only take a few days." He paused, and from the look on his face, John knew there was more, and it wouldn't be so harmless. "There's something on your x-ray that shouldn't be there, I'm afraid," William said.

John sat, unmoved, stunned. "What's wrong?" he asked finally with rising suspicion.

"Bilateral hilar lymphadenopathy," William answered, alert to John's reactions. "I'm afraid..." he added.

John's brain drew a blank. He tried to focus. This was not exactly his area of expertise. Yet he had quite a good idea of what these findings might indicate - it was standard med school stuff. And he knew the prospect wasn't pleasant. He briefly considered asking to see the x-ray for himself, in order to verify, to comprehend, to analyse. Then again he felt too stunned by the turn of events. He just sat there paralysed.

"Lung cancer?" he finally managed.

"Not necessarily, no," William replied, "but we have to make sure. It's a good thing that you came as soon as you noticed there was something wrong."

Had he? Had he even paid attention? John was certain he hadn't bothered with his health much over the last couple of years. He had struggled hard not to lose his sanity; his bodily needs had not been on his list of priorities.

"What else can you offer me, what sort of cancer?" he demanded calmly.

He wanted to know. Yet, did it matter at all?

"I don't like to speculate, you see, but as you are a doctor yourself, I want to be frank with you.
There's no need for you to spend all night googling or studying your medical reference books. "Look, this could turn out to be quite a nasty thing, but if we are lucky we could get away with something non-malignant. We'll need two further blood samples today before you leave, one for the tuberculin test; tuberculosis would indeed be the most harmless of our options."

Tuberculosis... John thought about the various members of Sherlock's homeless network he'd given a few extra pounds to over the years, sometimes even leftover medical supplies from the surgery. John knew that TB was a serious problem for London. Over the last ten years tuberculosis diagnoses had increased by 50%, so that today the city had the highest TB rate of all capitals in Western Europe. It was possible he'd somehow been infected. If so, William was right: it would be manageable and likely easy to treat, compared to his other options.

William went on: "The other test will diagnose whether your ACE - your angiontensin-converting enzymes - are significantly increased."

John frowned. "Sorry, angiotensin?" He was vaguely familiar with the term.

"It could indicate sarcoidosis, which can cause granulomas in virtually any organ, but as the nodules are most often located in the lungs and lymph nodes that could explain the swelling on your x-ray. It's not generally life-threatening, unless it becomes chronic. In fact it often clears up on its own. However, we could start you on corticosteroids to avoid any potential scar tissue building up."

John had no idea why he suddenly saw himself gaining weight in his imagination. This side effect of the steroids shouldn't bother him right now. At least he would have a proper chance to survive the disease.

"After that... We'll see." The older man shook his head. He clearly felt uncomfortable with what he would say next.

"However, if these tests are negative, you will have to undergo bone marrow aspiration as a next step. This will clarify whether the swelling is caused by leukaemia, or by Hodgkin's Disease."

These were terms John was familiar with: the choice between a rock and a hard place, between cancer of the blood and Hodgkin's lymphoma, a cancer of the lymphatic system.

So, these were the facts. John sat there, frozen. He felt as if he had been divided in two halves. The one, too shocked to think anything but a frantic mantra of 'shit, shit, shit!' over and over. The other half of his mind coldly analysed that this was the end which had been on the horizon for three long years.

John didn't say a word; he couldn't.

"I'm sorry, John, can I do anything for you at the moment?"

John struggled to pull himself together. 'At least try to answer,' the one half said. This was just the beginning, he would have to move on. 'What for?' the other half asked.

"Is there anybody you can go to? Friends, family? You should talk to someone..." William trailed off.

"No, I'm fine, it's... all fine," John finally managed. They both knew it was not true.

It never was, never had been. This was just one step further down the ladder. He should have seen it coming.
"Things will be clearer by next week, and then we'll discuss all the necessary steps. Just... you know, try to keep calm, John. We don't know anything yet for certain..."

Why did all good doctors sound so helpless?

The next days went by, somehow.

In fact, he had been through worse times in life already, John mused. 'Must be a shit life,' he thought sarcastically, 'if you don't even freak out when somebody tells you you have cancer.'

Of course the blood tests both came back negative.

William had examined his lymph nodes at his first appointment. Palpation confirmed that all of his other lymph nodes felt normal. 'Everything fine on the surface,' William had said.

Neither an ultrasound scan of his upper abdomen, nor a CT scan of his chest revealed any other suspicious symptoms.

"Your blood film was normal as well," John was informed, which in fact was good news, but he could not bring himself to muster any hope. What for? All hopes would be shattered in the end. He had learned his lesson, thank you. It seemed that an overdose of pain and grief had left him immune to further breakdowns. He had had his share of black despair in life already.

There were no more genuine and deep feelings left inside his chest, not even enough for self-preservation. Perhaps they had only been replaced by this lump of dubious lymph nodes...

His fever vanished.

In the mornings he went to work. Where else could he go? He had to leave the flat to escape his thoughts. In the evenings he was so knackered that there simply was no room left for deeper contemplation.

The time went by.

William called to inform him that he had used his contacts to get him two extraordinarily short-term appointments both for a bone marrow aspiration and a full-body PET scan the next day. He tried to make light of it: "Let's see what else is glittering inside of you."

In case they needed further data, John would have to undergo a mediastinoscopy, which would mean a short hospital stay, perhaps overnight, to prevent any complications related to anaesthesia and the minor surgical intervention.

"I know it sounds stressful, but with these examinations all done, we should be able to find out what's causing this lymphadenopathy and your tiredness, and work from there to give you the most appropriate treatment options. No more delays!"
William sounded quite pleased with his work.

John thanked him. What else was he supposed to do?

He didn't tell anybody about the whole affair. Just informed his boss that he would be on sick leave for the rest of the week. They had wanted to know why so that they could arrange cover, but he wasn't really surprised to get away with a few half-heartedly mumbled excuses about his fevers. Nobody else asked any questions. People's interest in him had long since died away.

He felt fine with it. He didn't want any company. Much better off without. This was just another proof. Nobody had to worry about him now.

The day before his examinations were scheduled went by in silence. He spent it with the deceased - just one step ahead of him, he thought wryly.

That evening when he returned home after seemingly endless hours at Bart's, he felt so exhausted that he earnestly wondered how to get up the miserable seventeen steps to their flat.

'Damn it!' His flat, once and for all. It had been a while since he mentally slipped up like that. All the news which had been heaped on him lately had apparently served for a little distraction. A fresh reason to wallow in self-pity.

He felt disgusted. How could he ignore for one second that the worst had already happened three years ago? Right now he wished he believed in any sort of afterlife. Then he could almost look forward to the future. It would all be over soon, wouldn't it? But being a doctor and an ex-soldier, he was too much of a realist to draw hope from anything so abstract.

He felt a little uncertain about what to expect from the aspiration. A local anaesthetic would be injected to numb the area on the back of his hipbone. He didn't like thinking about twisting needles advancing through bony cortex into marrow cavities. He could not help imagining the disgusting sounds he would have to listen to, lying flat on his stomach. And his lower back would hurt for quite a few days afterwards...

'Doctors are cowards, aren't they?'

For almost three years he had felt his heart race every time he stepped onto the landing, staring at the closed door upstairs at 221B. He always stopped for a split second to prepare himself for anything.

He had to straighten up to face the emptiness that surrounded him. Had to make sure that he could bear the loneliness of a flat that was once shared. And since that first day at his grave, the insane notion that he could somehow be still around had never left John completely.

His usual routine: stop in tracks, take a deep breath, square the shoulders, be alert, push down the handle, open the door, take a few hurried steps through the deserted living room, enter the kitchen, make a cup of tea. Tea always helps, doesn't it?

Obviously not, but it was good all the same.
Today, however, deeply lost in thought, he only shuffled up the stairs and mindlessly opened the door. Wasn't he beyond despair? He didn't even care to head to the kitchen. Tea could wait. He could hardly make another move. Why, only two weeks ago, he had been sparkling with energy compared to this! He slumped into his armchair and -

NO.

Slowly, John Watson rose.

When entering the flat he hadn't even bothered to switch on the lights. Yet, it was not completely dark in the living room.

Street lights.

He saw -

He was staring.

No tea this evening.

Slowly, like a sleepwalker, he turned, left the room, went up the stairs, so many stairs to his bedroom, opened the door, closed the door, turned the key, locked the door.

His knees gave out.

He collapsed.

He was breathing heavily, short, fast. Couldn't stop it. Small, broken sobs gurgling out of his throat. His throat, so tight. Suffocating. His heart racing, stuttering. Can you die from a heart attack even though you are supposed to die from cancer in the near future? His limbs went numb, fingers already clenched in a typical spastic way, lips tingling, no longer able to form words, a deafening swoosh in his ears.

Eyes rolling upwards.

Drowning.


When he regained consciousness, he found himself sprawled on the floor.

'Must have passed out, hyperventilation,' he diagnosed himself.

His head was buzzing. He didn't want to stop it, didn't want to focus, wouldn't allow reality to creep in. Not this sort of reality. Why could this not simply be an illusion?
But never in his life had he doubted his sanity less. It was all true. This was just the final chapter of his very personal, particularly vicious John Hamish Watson Horror Story. This was so bad it had to be true. No need to question it.

If ever divine providence, fate, the ancient gods, whatever you might believe in or not, had tried to torture one human being, it could not have been more cruel. This was better than a Greek tragedy. This was his damned, god-awful, fucked-up life. A life which would be over all too soon now.

He couldn't hold back the spasmodic sobs hysterically rising from deep inside. He tried to muffle the sounds by cramming his fists into his mouth, biting hard on the knuckles. Biting till they bled.

BITING.

Choking.

His stomach turned. Wouldn't get up, couldn't move, convulsive fits, throwing up over the carpet of his bedroom.

Lying face down in his own vomit. Panting. Whimpering. He lost track. Time, space, drifting, floating.

Somewhere in the middle of the night he pulled himself together, got to his feet.

'Got to get a bucket of water, a flannel, got to clean up the mess.'

He didn't feel as weak as a newborn baby; he felt as drained as if he had been forced to live through a hundred years within a single day. This was simply too much for one lifetime.

Chapter End Notes

To be honest, I had no idea when SwissMiss pointed it out to me, but here is what the NHS says about tuberculosis in London.
Confrontation

By the next morning the bedroom of John Watson was reasonably decent, damp stains on a cleaned-up carpet, window slightly ajar to banish the stench of despair. Bed properly made, not even slept in. Nobody had touched these sheets within the last twenty-four hours.

As for the rest, not much of a change after what seemed a lifetime. A couple of new books on the shelf, one or two jumpers he didn't recognise in the laundry basket. Harry's photo still on the desk, gathering dust as did the rest of the room. Nothing interesting to deduce from.

Or perhaps it was only the realisation of very much not good that kept him from further deduction. Flicking through the belongings of your friend without his knowledge was definitely a not good thing in John's eyes. He could still sense this.

He had been away for too long. There was no intimacy left. There was nothing left. He had destroyed everything by trying to save it. He had not been invited to this room. Softly, he closed the door again.

He was deeply confused. Ever since the day he had made sure that the three assassins targeting his friends were taken care of, and could do them no further harm, he had questioned his subsequent actions. He had put John at risk ever since he knew him. And John had happily obliged. Indeed, danger had been a vital component to their friendship. They both grew with it. He could have taken John with him. John could have even been helpful for his work.

The silence towards his only true friend had not been based on entirely rational considerations. Had he really taken three years because he dreaded the consequences of his actions? He had known nothing but rejection from most people he met, and of those few who accepted him the way he was, John was the most precious.

John had never let him down.

He was quite sure that he wouldn't like it if John could not forgive him. If John would no longer be willing to share their flat, to share their lives. Perhaps that was why he took so long to come home.

His fears had come true. What he had witnessed last night had exceeded his worst expectations. It had been so unreal, so very not like John. He had honestly doubted that it would go smoothly. John would not take him back for good. He would perhaps not even be able to show his relief, at first.

He did not dare to think of affection and warmth. Although he had to admit that such sentimental things were the ones he missed most, as typically John as his horrible jumpers and his knowing, expressive eyes. He wanted them back, together with John's undivided admiration, his whole mind and soul, sometimes, he thought, even with his body.

But John was John, and he would swear and fume and rampage around their flat, and John would need this uproar, because he had been suffering for too long. It would prevent him from breaking down. And John was strong and proud, and John would not want to show him his true feelings right at the start. This would be part of his punishment, and as he expected that much, he would
have taken it.

Fair deal.

It would be unpleasant and painful, but for all the accusations John could hurl at him, he still knew that it would be healthy for his friend. It would help John to get over the shock. And after this phase, he could eventually speak to him in a sensible way, and explain the reasons to him. The reasons why he did it.

And from then on if... no, when John had finally understood, and moreover forgiven, they could move on. He had deeply dreaded their reunion, because he had expected so much of it. And now this.

Hours passed and he was still sitting in his armchair in the living room of 221B. As he had been all night, too stunned to move, too shocked to relax, a bundle of remorse and despair, all clenching fists and contracted limbs. Not even his big coat could warm him. He was too cold inside.

When he heard the dreadful sounds from behind John's door, he wished he could shut down his heart. He would no longer feel accused of being the cause for such monumental grief. If he could only stop his heart from listening.

He didn't want to hear. He didn't want to think. He didn't want to see. He would gladly have scratched his eyes out if he were that easy to delete this image from his hard drive. The sight of John Watson, staring at him. His face. Terror.

There are things in life you can never delete.

He didn't move. He did not offer help. John had locked his door. John had turned the key. Twice.

He had never begged for anything in his life. If he could think of anything to beg for, he would, now. Too late.

In the early morning hours, when there were no more sounds left in John's throat, the miserable eavesdropper he was had finally crept to his old bedroom. He had found all his belongings unchanged, barely untouched, but everything was clean and tidy, and the sheets on his bed were more or less fresh.

Somebody had taken care. Somebody had patiently waited. Somebody had stubbornly believed in him. What had changed?

Time to observe had been scarce. He could not look over John in his usual inquisitive way, while his friend was just standing there, staring, with those eyes. The pain of a whole lifetime mirrored in his features. He couldn't deduce when his own heart was standing still.

Then John had gone. Had left the room and not returned.

'Perhaps he needs time?' he had thought at first, trying to calm himself.

But he still felt John's horrified gaze on his face. He knew better when he heard the sounds, John's sounds.
Last night had been a horror. Today wasn't any better.

The impression that something really frightful was building did not fade in daylight. With every passing hour his exasperation doubled, and an apprehension that things would deteriorate from now on became overwhelming.

By the late afternoon he was a wreck.

He had left John alone deliberately this morning. Reckoning that any sort of confrontation might come too soon after the breakdown the man had been through this night. So he hadn't left his bedroom when he heard John's footsteps on the stairs.

'No, just pathetically spineless.'

He would clearly have expected John to make his way to the kitchen. Breakfast had always been vital to John. But had he really for one second dared to hope that John might eventually knock on his door? He hadn't locked it, just in case...

Instead he found himself deeply dismayed when the shuffle of feet continued, the door of their flat closed, the steps stumbled down to the ground floor, through the hallway, the entrance door closed with a thud behind a man who obviously didn't want to look back.

He could only understand the situation to a certain extent. There were plausible, even predictable points to John's behaviour. But his conduct had not been logical. Comprehensible only to a degree. He had always judged John to be strong enough to live through their separation. He had even dared hope that their friendship was genuine enough to survive without irreversible harm done.

He had kept himself constantly informed about John's life during the last three years. Interested in every detail, he had noticed that John had withdrawn from society in an unhealthy way. He had known that John had not been well. John had even ceased dating all those women! But things had never been bad enough to force him to intervene.

He had watched him from afar, and had been virtually certain that there was enough courage and strength in his doctor left to rebuild their relationship, to reconstruct their mutual lives. Had he miscalculated? He was finally back, but things had gone wrong in such a twisted way, he couldn't rationalise it.

'Why would John not ask a question? Why would he run from me?'

Questions from a man who had been on the run for three years, and only recently discovered that hiding was no longer an option.

Finally, he pulled himself together.

He would go and take a shower, shave, change his crumpled shirt and suit. He would muster strength for them both. He had to persuade John that not everything was lost. That this could be a new beginning for them both. There were too many things that were left unspoken, too many
hidden feelings on his part and too many suppressed ones on John's side.

He had seen the signs. He would no longer ignore them. Time had come to fix things. He would not allow things to be over before they had given them a proper start.

Feeling his spirits rise, he stepped to the window, looking down on Baker Street, as he had done numerous times in his old life. This all felt so familiar, almost like coming home should feel, and if he could only speak to John, if John would only listen...

It hadn't been that bad. Imagination was often worse than reality. Only fifteen minutes. Then several samples had been taken. John had lain flat for another ten minutes to provide pressure over the procedure site. As they hadn't observed any further bleeding, he had been allowed to get up and was told he could go about his normal activities, whatever they were...

The hospital was huge. One could easily get lost. Asking his way around until he found the Department of Haematology had been quite a job. Compared to these dimensions, Bart's felt almost homely.

However, the nurses had been kind, understanding and helpful, the doctors competent. He himself had tried his best to behave like a good patient. Did what they told him, didn't ask too many questions, didn't make anybody feel uncomfortable by telling them he's a professional himself. He wasn't in the mood to argue anyway. He felt completely drained, just wanted to get it all over and done with, and be left alone.

'Wishful thinking,' he sighed.

Right now he was waiting for his full-body PET.

Sitting in the waiting area of the Department of Radiology, he wondered not for the first time how on earth William could have managed to cram so many appointments into this week. Normally people waited for ages, even for the results.

And he was pretty sure that in his stage, whatever would be diagnosed in the end, Positron Emission Tomography was not standard procedure. He would ingest certain radioisotopes, and the emitted radiation would be captured by gamma cameras, which would allow three-dimensional images of his whole body to be generated, in order to detect every area with increased cell activity. This was a highly efficient, but at the same time very expensive and therefore rather uncommon method of detecting inflammations or cancer cells.

If John hadn't been so absorbed by his worries and fears - which had now doubled, given the events of yesterday evening - he would have wondered more since when the NHS was able to work miracles.

For now the doctor in him took in every interesting detail, while the patient John Watson was just glad that everything within human power was being done for him.

Thinking about why and how was definitely for later.
Abruptly, his thoughts froze. A cab stopped in front of the house entrance. A very small, thin, hunched-over John Watson emerged, paid his fare, and slowly, carefully walked across the pavement. He didn't look up to the window, hence, clearly not interested in his company.

He tensed.

He was still not ready for this.

What was wrong with John?

And something was massively wrong, he deduced. John never took a cab when returning home from work. John preferred to take the tube, had always ridiculed his partner's distaste for this mundane means of transportation.

"Tube too everyman for you?" he would taunt.

John was hardly ever able to hail a cab himself. He always shook his head in disbelief when one stopped mere seconds after Sherlock raised his arm.

"They seem to be waiting for you, it's fantastic!"

John never took a cab, unless...

John couldn't locate the pain exactly, but his hip and lower back were beginning to ache rather badly, now that the analgesics were wearing off. He had already swallowed the two paracetamols they had sent him home with. Back home - oh God, what else would be waiting for him there today? Everything or nothing, he didn't know what to pray for - he would search in his doctor's bag, there should be another package...something stronger..

At the moment, though, it was all a little bit too much for walking in public and taking the tube. For once, John felt that calling a cab would be a good thing.

John's steps on the stairs: slow, not hesitant, heavy, exhausted, tired to the bone.


Reluctantly, the door opened.

Clearly afraid of a confrontation, but not because of a lack of courage.
The man at the window had heard enough; now he would look at John. See with his own eyes. He turned around and faced the door.

'Clear lack of strength,' he thought. He took in every detail of the man still standing at the door, not moving, staring back at him. What he saw, he definitely didn't like.

John Watson looked worse than his own ghost. Ashen face, sunken eyes. Those eyes, were they accusing? Him?

But what was really frightening was the overall air of defeat. John Watson had never given up, why would he now? He looked crestfallen, broken. This man was no longer the brave soldier or the knowing doctor.

He was the victim.

'Whose victim?' Sherlock shuddered.

There were clearly things going on he could not deduce properly.

"Sherlock..." Hardly more than a whisper.

The first time in over three years that he heard his voice again, trembling, tight.

He squinted his eyes, saw something. Realised. This was about John's body! John moved carefully, clearly sore! Hurt?

"John, you are hurt! Why are you hurt?" Without another thought he spluttered out the words.

Not good.

Without another word John turned and walked to the kitchen.

'Right, definitely tea today!'

"John you need to tell me, I need to know!" Too loud, too urgent.

"No, Sherlock, clearly, no. I mean, you walk in here, alive, after three years, without a warning, without a word! Honestly, I don't think you need to know anything... about me... any more."

The anticipated outburst? No, not angry enough, much too detached, almost resigned.

John put on the kettle, grabbed a reasonably clean cup from the sink, busied himself to find a teabag. He refused to look at Sherlock, and he clearly felt uncomfortable being watched.
With his tea ready, he finally slumped heavily onto a chair, his gaze stubbornly stuck on the contents of his cup. John lowered his head. He deliberately refused to look up.

Sherlock stood and watched, took him in. Observed.

John took a deep breath. That had not been nice. But right at the moment he wasn't in the mood for being nice, damn it.

The last week had been a horror, and talking to a bloody zombie didn't improve things. Perhaps he could convince himself he was having a really weird nightmare. John knew, however, that there was no way he would wake up to a normal life.

This was all so fucked up that he didn't even know if he wanted his old life back!

After his first shock had faded slightly, he couldn't help but feel a warm glow inside his chest, right beside the place where this damned lump was slowly killing him.

Sherlock was alive, and had anybody asked him two weeks ago, he would probably have given his own life gladly to just be able to speak to his friend once again. He would have sacrificed himself without hesitation that night at the pool with Moriarty and his snipers. He would have endured anything that day, kneeling on the pavement next to the shattered body of his friend, only to see him alive again.

He had done a whole day of thinking, today, and he had figured out that his disease could be considered a fair deal, in the end. He wasn't overly superstitious, but one could not deny that it was working. Trading one life for another.

'Too bad you can't have everything in life.' Bitter thoughts.

He just wasn't sure how to deal with this whole situation. He felt that it was simply too much. Coping with whatever lay ahead of him, plus being confronted with this immense burden of Sherlockian expectations. He couldn't deliver right now. He knew he should want to know everything.

'When, where, how and above all WHY?'

But he couldn't ask. If he began to talk, if he allowed Sherlock inside again, he would have to open himself up. And then the younger man would find what was inside. Not only the lump, but also pain and a strange love for him. And he didn't know how Sherlock would react to that.

He didn't have the strength to deal with yet another frustration. So he contained himself the best he could, kept his silence, and irrationally hoped that Sherlock for once would respect his personal space.

But as too much concern for the violated feelings of other people had never really been Sherlock's
area, it should not have surprised John that the detective gave him his most intense glare and started to deduce.

The piercing bright eyes fixed firmly on John's features, Sherlock slowly took in all the necessary details which only he could combine to a perfect image of the truth. His expression was motionless as ever when he finally started talking.

"You have clearly been in a hospital today, going by the stench of disinfectant which surrounds you. But you haven't been to work, since you never come home at such an early hour. And you are wearing shoes that are obviously not comfortable, hence not suitable for work, as your job requires a great deal of walking throughout the day. Add the fact that today you are clearly suffering from a bad pain in your lower back, this implies you have been through some painful examination or treatment. You had difficulties when climbing out of the cab, which is significant in itself, as you usually prefer to take the tube. Given your pallor and the state of exhaustion which were already perceivable before you were shocked by my emergence, plus the fact that you experienced a major breakdown last night, most probably due to wrung out nerves, one can readily assume that you are suffering from a terminal disease."

For a split second Sherlock almost looked pleased with himself to have finally solved the puzzle surrounding John Watson. He once again had proven to be the smartest person in the room. Then he stopped short, suddenly realising what exactly he had deduced.

"Where have you been, today, John?" Impatient, he wanted to shake it out of the tired, silent man. "Tell me, or do you want me to find out for myself? And you know I will!"

There was no use in denying it. A man who had faked his own death was surely capable of getting past medical confidentiality. It would take him a little longer, but he would find out in the end. John had seen him at work. He might as well tell him what he would discover anyhow.

So far he had not spoken it out loud. Nobody except William and the impersonal medical staff at the hospital knew. They were strangers; moreover, they were professionals. It was their job to deal with people who were seriously ill. They were all friendly, helpful, even caring, but in a distant, not too personal way. John had not been forced to waste a single thought on their feelings. They had learned to keep their distance, not to become too involved with the fates of their patients. This made things easier for him as well, helped him to behave more rationally. You don't break down as easily when surrounded by strangers.

He was entirely not sure what to expect from Sherlock. So he decided to go for the easiest answer. No speculations, only facts, so far.

"Look, Sherlock." He stopped, pressed his lips together. Keep it short. "Yes, I've been to hospital today...and they... PET scans, bone marrow aspiration, the whole programme. Wasn't pleasant."

Defiantly, he looked up, not sure what he expected to see in the younger man's face. He deeply dreaded Sherlock's inability to handle this, dreaded some fearful reaction. As if his problems weren't literally bone-crushing enough right at the moment! So he tried to steel himself, preparing his foolish heart for any reaction, however selfish or cold it might be.

John didn't want pity. He wouldn't want a second person to say out loud how bad things looked. Couldn't deny it, couldn't comfort, was not that strong. He couldn't handle a lamenting Sherlock. Not right now. And he definitely did not have the strength to give comfort and encouragement to another person at the moment. He could remember occasions when his flatmate had wallowed in
self-pity over some minor occurrence on a case, or simply because of boredom. But those childish sulking fits, bad as they had been, were always self-centred. How would it turn out if John was the cause for such a temper? He didn't want to find out.

John didn't want compassion, not from anybody and certainly not from Sherlock. Compassion wouldn't help; in fact, it would render him even more vulnerable. Compassion would only increase their loss in the end. It hurts even more when you know that somebody cares.

Had Sherlock ever shown compassion for anybody? He certainly could care for the people he regarded as friends, but that usually included some sort of exaggerated action. John thought of Mrs Hudson's burglar.

He had always admired his friend's mental abilities, knew very well that the brain-driven genius simply wasn't capable of giving unselfish support unless crimes, shootings, or wild chases around London's rooftops were involved. Dragging John with him, whirling him around, racing together through Sherlock's extraordinary life, had been the therapy he was able to offer from the first to the last day of their past. And it had been the perfect medicine for him, then. But it wouldn't work this time. No action for Sherlock in this case.

What was much more likely was a completely indifferent Sherlock. John had often noticed that his friend could hardly express his feelings, and would rather shut down emotionally than take the risk of being hurt. The episode with The Woman had been a classic study in Sherlockian self-defence.

He thought he knew this man. He certainly didn't expect any sort of emotional support. He wasn't that naïve.

But the face he saw when he looked up after his hesitant confession made him wince. This face was no longer plain and unreadable. Sherlock had made the connection instantly.

"Leukaemia!" he spat out.

This face did not show any sympathy, it did not even look shocked. Naked terror. This face expressed a level of hatred no sane person was capable of enduring. This was not what John had expected.

He didn't know what Sherlock had been through these last three years. At first glance he appeared to be the same as ever. He hardly looked one day older. On the outside, time had left no marks on him. John wasn't entirely sure if that also applied to his psyche.

"No, not necessarily." William's helpless reply. But it did nothing to soothe Sherlock.

"What are you trying to tell me? Don't you dare tell me your stupid doctor's lies!" Sherlock snarled. He had completely lost his composure. He rampaged around the kitchen, barely holding himself back from smashing the crockery.

"What have you done, John?" Fierce, accusing."You haven't behaved yourself. You know how to lead a healthy life! This is ridiculous, you're a doctor yourself. It's not you who is supposed to die...never you!" Violent, manic. "Why you, John, why now? Don't..."

"Sherlock ... please, stop ... stop this. You know it's not my fault. Calm down, please, would you please do this for me?"John swallowed. One of his nightmares?

Bursts of hysterical laughter: "This is hilarious! You have no idea what I have done for you, and all in vain, all for NOTHING! Why do you think you are still alive right now? Why do you think you are still leading this miserable life of yours?"
John’s mind stood still. No words to form a coherent answer. He couldn't make any sense of the vicious insults shot at him. And the more he backed off, the more Sherlock freaked out.

"Look at you! I might as well have watched you get shot. It wouldn't make any difference!" he cried out in pain, tearing at his thick black curls, as if he could tear the truth out of his head."How ignorant you are! Do you even realise what this means?" Desperate, brutish. "Why are you still sitting here? Get your arse up, do something! What are you waiting for?"

And when John just sat there, silent, and simply watched him with his wounded puppy dog eyes, as if asking if he had really deserved this, it was over, all of a sudden.

Silence crept into the kitchen.

Sherlock knew the instant he opened his mouth that this would be the ultimate in not good. That this might be so very not good that nobody could ever repair the damage it would cause. That his sentence would kill.

At this very moment in their dingy little kitchen, he felt so very frustrated, so cruelly betrayed by his worthless life that he wanted to kill.

Baring his teeth he managed to press out: "Why don't you go and get your gun? I've always thought delaying things is pathetic."

He didn't wait for a reply. There were no words left between the two men who once had thought they were friends. Having killed with his words the murderer fled. Sherlock stumbled out of the kitchen, grabbed his coat and vanished from the rest of John Watson's pitiable life in a whirl of grey fabric.
Evaluation

It hurt.

The tea was cold by now.

John Watson sat up straight. Head held high, shoulders square. Being attacked had this effect on a soldier. He struggled to his feet, back still aching, grabbed his cup, poured the cold liquid into the sink, and mechanically started to brew himself another cup of tea. Tea would be good right now.

It hurt so much, because he felt this was final. This time Sherlock wouldn't come back. This time he had gone too far.

There are things you could not speak out loud. Things you should not even think. If you did, you didn't care. You deliberately wanted to destroy. Until there was nothing left worth returning to.

The end.

He felt more alone than ever. He wished he could have told him...

Sherlock was running. He was still running. He had been running for hours now. He had lost count. Sometimes there were passersby, sometimes buses, cars, he didn't care. Hardly noticed them. He had to move fast. Sherlock was panting, he was wheezing. He needed to escape.

His vision focused on one small spot within his memory: the hurt eyes of John Watson. Didn't want to see, but couldn't look away. Didn't want to think.

'Stop the thoughts. Stop it, stop it!'

Finally he was forced to slow down. His body wouldn't obey the orders of his brain any longer. He felt like falling apart. Everything was swaying, wobbling. But his mind raced on. He would need something stronger than mere exhaustion to shut off the screaming inside his skull. He needed some... He would get some...

When he could not move any further, he dropped to the ground in a dark back alley littered with all the waste the neighbourhood produced. Pressing his head against the stained brick wall at the dead end, he thought how appropriate it was. Sherlock Holmes, the great detective, at the dead end of his life. A life that was officially over.

Now it quite literally was. Over.

With his whole body quivering and shaking, he scrabbled about in his coat pockets, finally producing what he had been searching for. This would calm him down, this would do. This would help.

His hands were trembling so badly, he almost couldn't get the fag to his lips...light it, inhale...deep...

What had he said to John? It must have been not good.
He could only remember John's eyes. His eyes. Wounded. Hurt.

Why, what not good thing had he told John?

Deleted.

John sat at the kitchen table for hours. The more tea he drank, the longer he thought of tonight's events, the more he calmed down. Perhaps it was the knowledge of the life-threatening disease which he carried inside. Perhaps it was the growing feeling of overwhelming relief that his friend was still alive. But whatever it was, he simply could not nourish a deeper grudge against Sherlock. Those stupid words he had spat out earlier were clearly due to shock. And John hadn't had a blanket at hand...

This time John would not repeat the mistake he had made after their last conversation at Bart's. Three years ago he had been deeply hurt and disturbed by Sherlock's cold rejection. Back then he had briefly wondered if the man could really be so cold, cruel, machine-like. He had blamed himself numerous times for faltering ever since. His doubts had been fatal. He had lain awake too many nights, wishing he could turn back the clock.

He had been wrong, had been taken in by Sherlock's falsehoods all those times. The madman had actually faked his own death! Left him alone with little more than self-reproach. He would not repeat his mistake a second time. Granted, he was still angry, but this was Sherlock.

He had always been a notorious bugger. This was just another facet of his unbelievably screwed-up inner life. Everything in perfect order within his mind palace, but in total confusion when it came to sentiment...

'Don't take him too seriously!' he told himself.

And the main thing was, Sherlock was back, alive and fairly unharmed. That was worth it all.

A bleak morning was dawning. He hadn't slept for ages. Slowly, John rose to his feet and went to his bedroom. Time to get his bag packed. There would be enough opportunity for sleeping later, he reckoned.

Morning was finally dawning, gloomy and eerie, when Sherlock finished the third box of cigarettes, after chain smoking for hours. It hadn't helped at all. And it would probably take him too long to develop lung cancer this way, to be able to join John in hospital.

His head was swimming, and the screaming inside had not died away. This was not simply a regular panic attack, like one of those pedestrian people who always inflicted themselves on his life would experience. This was monumental, huge, extraordinary.

He had very effectively accomplished torturing his physical existence in such a way that his mental state was forced to deteriorate to the point where even he was beyond thinking. Thinking would mean going insane.
His telephone beeped.

Breathless.

'John!' - trembling fingers - 'John?'

By now you should have managed to calm down, little brother. Feel free to ask me for help.
-MH

PISS OFF

Beep-

Indeed, Sherlock, this is not about you. Whatever you have told John, you just cannot leave the man behind in such a state after all he has been through.
-MH

Sherlock didn't bother to answer the pompous message. He was staring at the text, uncomprehending. Hadn't he deleted the events of the evening?


Mycroft's message had built up an agonising wave of fear. He had been biting and scratching and running like a wounded animal. Only feeling the shock, the loss. Now he remembered.

He had deliberately chosen to hurt, to kill, because he had never before felt anything so true and deep like this. He hadn't been prepared to feel his heart. For when you fully feel your heart, it hurts like hell.

John had known that, he had been there before, Sherlock had seen it in his eyes, and that had been the point when he could no longer bear it, and tried to rip the heart out. Any heart. Both of their hearts. An act of mercy. Kill the heart and it won't hurt you any more. He had forgotten that lives end without hearts.

Those acid words he had flung at John. What if John actually did...? This was what he had been trying to escape all night. He had gone too far. What if John had? What if John...? John!

He had to make sure that he hadn't, not now, when he was finally back, not without having spoken to him, not without this meagre rest of their lives, however short their time might be. How could he ever have thought about giving that away for nothing? He would cling to this man right till the end. He couldn't let him go one day too early. It might be over too soon, but they would not end it by choice.

'John wouldn't. Would he? John!'

With a new burst of adrenaline pumping through his system, he was up on his feet, finding himself in Baker Street in no time. Apparently he had been running in circles all night, unconsciously trying to stay close to his friend. He hadn't noticed. He didn't reflect upon it now. He was just so
relieved to be home again, to see John's good face, to make sure that he hadn't actually done anything stupid. He would apologise, explain, beg forgiveness, beg for mercy. If only it was not true. At some point this horror had to end.

His hands were shaking so hard, he could hardly push the key into the lock. Try again, brace yourself, open the door, head up those endless seventeen steps, burst into their flat - it was still theirs, wasn't it?

He stopped short, coming to a halt in the middle of their living room. Searching. Empty, abandoned. No John, not here, not in the kitchen, oh God in the kitchen, could it really be here that he had told him to...?

This time he didn't hesitate. He needed no invitation. He had done worse to John. He rummaged around the bedroom, searching, desperately begging, actually doing it out loud. Where the hell was John's gun?

"Not taken with him, not listened to my stupid, stupid words, has he, please, please God, no he hasn't?"

"Please John, no,"

"DON'T..."

"What on earth...? Really, Sherlock, the mess you've made! What are you doing up here in John's room? You're supposed to be... oh, dear,... I thought I heard your voice last night,... you've given me such a shock, you have!

"Sherlock, get up, come on, what's wrong, Sherlock, please, I can't lift you up. My hip, you know! Sherlock, are you crying? Hush now... shush, there, Sherlock...

"Dear me, what's going on with you boys? John looked like death himself when he left this morning. What have you done, Sherlock?"

Mrs Hudson would probably have rattled on endlessly. Indeed, that was what she did when she was in shock. And she clearly was. Still.

She had been a witness to yesterday's hubbub up here. At first she had deliberately turned on her telly: she wouldn't want to listen to the quarrels of her tenants. But it wasn't at all like John, was it? He was such a quiet young man, wasn't he? In fact, he hardly ever had visitors since... Was it already three years? How time flies.

When she made out Sherlock's distinctive baritone over the chatter of her daily soap, she earnestly considered faking a heart attack. Why, John was a doctor, and if she called him, he would come and help her, and then she would find out...

The boys... their discussion didn't sound very pleasant, so she figured that an interruption wouldn't be welcome right now. If Sherlock had really managed to return from the dead, she would find out soon enough; there was no way to overlook the boy.

Shortly afterwards, someone was down the stairs and out on the street before she could even get out of her armchair. To hell with this bloody hip of hers!
But nobody else had ever rattled down her stairs that way, and together with the fact that Mycroft had never returned his brother's key, Mrs Hudson felt quite positive with her own deductions. That evening she was fairly certain that Sherlock Holmes had returned from the dead.

You wouldn't believe it if you saw him right now. She had seen many faces of Sherlock, and she hadn't liked all of them, but what she saw this morning in his flatmate's ravaged bedroom was beyond all imagination.

What she had lived through since he moved in! Sometimes it had indeed been a bit much: bullet holes in her wall and body parts all over her flat. She had found it rather annoying that this Inspector Lestrade would drop in and carry out a drug bust in her house every now and then. Her need for herbal soothers had increased dramatically since Sherlock had come to live in Baker Street... And then he had actually been dead! What else did he expect her to endure?

But Sherlock was a good boy, after all. It really made her heart ache with compassion seeing him like this. Sherlock was a wreck! And his doctor hadn't looked much better this morning, when she, by chance, had bumped into him as he had left the house.

"Sherlock, dear what have you been doing?" The question was rhetorical, she knew, more soothing than querying. So she was really not prepared for his muffled outcry.

"John!" He cleared his throat, blurring the words out: "What about John? Where is he? This is about John!"

If she hadn't already been deeply worried, she would be now. This wasn't anything like the Sherlock she knew, repeating himself and stating the obvious!

He startled, grabbing her by her wrists, fingers cold and firm like steel. His eyes were blazing, and seemed to bore through her.

"Have you seen him today, have you spoken to him...?" The ferocious look he gave the elderly woman would have been enough to make any criminal confess.

Mrs Hudson, however, having known Sherlock for so long, felt herself calming down slightly, for this was his usual conduct. Well, perhaps not this manic, but so much more like Sherlock than sobbing. Deeply confused, she wondered what on earth had happened last night. Carefully, she tried to answer, but she knew she was of no great help.

"Look, Sherlock, I don't really see what I could tell you. I actually did speak to John only about an hour ago, on his way out. He was the same as always, well perhaps a little quiet, but he hasn't been overly communicative ever since, you know..." Mrs Hudson trailed off. She had no idea what Sherlock was looking for, or how she could help him. "But he'll be so happy to have you back, I can tell. It'll be all fine, Sherlock..."

Would it?

Mrs Hudson was... nice. Somehow she had managed to hush his inner turmoil. He tried to regain his composure, releasing her hands gently. He focused his thoughts. Back to task.

There was no use in pestering the old lady any further. John wouldn't have carried his gun openly, he was always so cautious about it. If he wanted to find out what had happened to John and his gun, he would be forced to tap another source. It would be utterly humiliating. Of course there were other ways, about eight he could think of right away, but if he swallowed his pride and went to ask his arch-enemy for help, he would speed up the flow of information significantly.
In one whirl of flying coat and scarf he leapt to his feet, pulling Mrs Hudson with him.

What on earth was going on here? The old lady was clearly shocked the third time within less than twelve hours when she found herself wrapped up in Sherlock's arms, being tightly hugged. Sherlock only rarely showed his affection; he must quite literally be out of his mind!

Then he was gone, without another word, leaving her behind in John's devastated bedroom. She knew exactly what he had in mind.

She huffed in annoyance and called after him: "Just for once, young man, I will clear up this mess today, but bear in mind, dear, I'm your landlady, not your housekeeper!"
Half way through, and I want to say thanks to all of you who have left comments, kudos, subscriptions and bookmarks on this story!

You should know that I deeply treasure each and every single one of them.

Sherlock headed down the stairs and rushed through the hallway when his phone beeped again. 'Not now!' He grimaced, determined to ignore it.

Yet it had been enough of a warning. As he darted out of 221B, he was by no means surprised to find a black limousine in front of the house. He gritted his teeth in annoyance; he didn't need an escort. This was abduction. He would have come of his own free will. He hated being patronised, and right at the moment, seeing all his hopes dashed, this left him feeling extremely tetchy.

Once inside the car, his phone continued to emit its highly annoying noise. Why could his pain-in-the-arse brother not stop mortifying him even further? Was it not enough that he was eating humble pie by asking him for help? When had he ever done this before? Oh well, only three years ago...

And now again, and it was always because of John and all those sentiments he had only discovered since he had met him. What was all the fuss about this sentiment and feeling thing, he honestly wanted to know? Sometimes it was nice: he really liked Mrs Hudson, and he enjoyed the notion of being liked back even more. For it was rare. But for most of the pedestrians who crossed his path, he could hardly feel anything but tedium.

John was different. John had accepted, even admired him from the start. At first he had noticed that he liked it. Then he had grown used to it, slowly but steadily, in such a massive way that he sometimes compared it to his earlier addiction. John would have laughed at the idea, shaking his head in disbelief, but for Sherlock with his one-track mind it was a noticeable issue.

When torn between an interesting case and an ever-so-fascinating John, it had become increasingly difficult to focus. This was new and irritating in his life, and it had directly led him to where he stood right now.

It had all begun with Moriarty finding out who held the key to his heart. Playing him like a puppet, holding the strings, determining direction and pace. From that day at the pool on, Sherlock had been forced to protect, to save the people he cared for. He had honestly believed that if he struggled hard, he would some day be repaid for his efforts. Now he felt it would never be enough, all that he had been through, simply not enough. He could not change the future. Moriarty was dead, but John was dying, and neither his brother with all his power, nor a consulting genius could alter that fate.

By the time the limousine approached the Holmes manor, Sherlock was in a state of blackest despair.

'Couldn't get any worse,' he thought, reluctantly looking at his mobile.
When you have finally come back to your senses, I would kindly advice you to see me as soon as possible. I could provide you with some vital information.

-MH

On my way. Information required. But for the rest: Do shut up!

-SH

It couldn't get worse, could it?

"Hello, brother dear, you look worse than ever."

It seemed it actually could.

"No, I don't. Last time you saw me, my hair was stubbly and blond, remember?"

Sherlock managed an indifferent face. He wouldn't give in to his exhaustion. He wouldn't show his brother how frightened he was. He pulled himself together. No need for Mycroft to know how weak he actually felt. So much not in control of what was going on. But Mycroft was observant. In order to pull it off, he couldn't look at him. He didn't like to be deduced. This was humiliating! Mycroft would find out what was going on in his own way somehow or other. Better to jump right into it.

"I need to know where John's gun is." Sherlock tried to get it out deadpan. 'Express nothing, give him nothing to deal with,' he told himself. But it wasn't working. His nerves were strung out to the breaking point. 'Stop fidgeting!' he scolded himself.

"Really, Sherlock, what is it this time?"

Mycroft sighed and covered his eyes with his hands for a brief moment. This was a surprise. John's gun had long since disappeared from his agenda. He hadn't expected the turn their conversation was taking right at the beginning. He had to be careful, no mistakes! Sherlock was in a pitiable condition, which meant he was even more erratic and dangerous, both for himself and for those around him. This was serious. No matter how much he tried, his little brother could hardly contain himself. Stiff as a poker, head bent, haggard face, he was a study in nerves, obviously.

"What would you need John's gun for? I don't suppose you would want to shoot either yourself or him." A careful request, brought forth in his most amiable voice.

He only half expected the effect his innocent question had on Sherlock. His brother almost jumped at his remark. Obviously Mycroft had touched a sore spot. It took Sherlock several seconds to regain control. He didn't utter a word, just glared. And within his agonised gaze, which was clearly meant to be threatening, Mycroft could deduce quite a few things. This time he truly had every reason to worry about Sherlock. Things were in a bad way, then, worse than Mycroft had
feared.

He sighed, frowning.

"Look, Sherlock, this is obviously not about John's gun." He tried to appease the younger man. "I honestly would appreciate it if you could spare me the details about the discussion you two had last night. But the gun is our least concern at the moment, I can assure you."

And with Sherlock still just staring at him, as if in disbelief, he sighed: "I took care of the gun almost three years ago, Sherlock. I figured it would be safer for all of us. John never objected, perhaps he knew it was better this way. But he is very well aware of the fact that his gun did not just vanish into thin air. Besides, he never tried to replace it."

He didn't have to add 'there was nobody there for him to protect, once his detective had died.' Sherlock knew it very well.

There was no reply.

Sherlock had the inward look on his face which told Mycroft that he was straying through his mind palace, evaluating, cataloguing, sorting whatever facts and events he had accumulated. When he reemerged from the depths of his brain, his eyes were no longer blank; they were wild with fear.

Mycroft watched his brother slump into a chair opposite his desk.

He had deliberately chosen his office to meet Sherlock. The room had a more formal atmosphere, which should make it easier to say certain things out loud. Hopefully the conversation would not drift into too personal an area.

Sherlock, however, did not seem to notice his surroundings at all. Now that his prime concern had been satisfied, his younger brother seemed to literally crumble. All of his strength, his arrogance, his pride had vanished. Even his good looks had deteriorated, Mycroft noticed, not amused, not really. He was nothing but another broken man. Mycroft had seen so many in his life. But he was still his brother.

'How on earth can two people have so much bad luck?' he wondered. Definitely time for him to step in and fix things.

For three years he had been well aware of the fact that a highly critical stage in Sherlock's Moriarty business would be his return. Not from the regulatory side. Delicate as it might be, it shouldn't be a major problem for him to bring Sherlock back to life, officially. However, his concerns seemed to be justified.

Sometimes Mycroft even wondered if Sherlock had any plan at all, or if his little brother, being the genius that he was, simply jumped from one brilliant impulse to another. The evaluation seemed to align with reality accurately, for Sherlock was regularly forced to improvise, or react to unforeseen circumstances.

'Clearly an indication for sloppy or non-existent planning.' Mycroft loathed this. And things only improved when he himself was called forth to help out, which happened all too often.

Life had been so much easier for both of them when John Watson had stepped in to take care of Sherlock's messed up existence. After three years of constant worries, Mycroft would have very much appreciated sharing his compulsory control with the doctor again. But for once, he could not claim Sherlock was responsible for the disaster they had to deal with at the moment.
Mycroft had known that John Watson would play a crucial role in his brother's return. There were times he could almost understand Sherlock's obsession with the man. Indeed, John could be quite interesting. You could hardly ever predict his reactions. This was for the most part... entertaining? At any rate, John Watson was a man to be reckoned with.

And now this! It really wouldn't do to let John Watson out of one's sight. With all of Sherlock's cops and robbers games successfully come to an end, nobody had noticed that the doctor had managed to sneak away from his life. This was just his typical noiseless way to tell the world that there was nothing left for him to do. Make his bow and exit the stage.

It was as if no one realised that Mycroft had his own job to do as well. Alongside dealing with Sherlock-related troubles, there were other things he had to take care of. Mycroft had almost overlooked what had happened. But only almost. Surveillance was still working effectively. After he had set aside the initial sense of alarm, he had resolutely stepped into action. This wasn't the way he would release John Watson from his duties!

As soon as he had found out what was going on, Mycroft had contacted John's doctor. He had been reliably informed that John had indeed consulted an eminently respectable colleague who would be able to coordinate all necessary steps. That made things easier. He only had to support any action John's doctor considered appropriate financially, and make sure that all contacts were encouraged. That way, John wouldn't be bothered by details, while Mycroft could pull the strings unseen.

At first John's doctor had been slightly surprised by the level of interest his patient raised. But the man was not stupid. Soon enough, he had happily complied. After all, it was all for the good of John Watson.

Things had proceeded rapidly since John's first doctor's appointment, and Mycroft could have almost been satisfied with his achievements, had there not been the overall threat of a terminal disease that was lurking over John's head.

He was being kept comprehensively informed about all procedures and results on a daily basis. John's electronic patient record was regularly updated, not only on his own computer, but also on the computers of his assistants. John Watson's case file had top priority on his agenda these days.

And things could look a lot worse, according to the experts. Granted, there was something inside John's chest that should definitely not be there, but with all the scans and examinations negative so far, they should not give up hope too soon, he had been told. This was what he had to implant into his stubborn brother's brain right now.

With events moving so rapidly during the last week, he had found it difficult to inform Sherlock about what was going on. He would have preferred to confront him with hard facts, rather than speculation. He knew how much his little brother loathed waiting for results. Patience had never been Sherlock Holmes' strong point.

That was probably why Sherlock had provoked yesterday's encounter in the first place. Mycroft had done his best to play for time and distract Sherlock since his return to London. Yet with his brother's increased vigilance, the task had been tricky. Sherlock had never shared his plans about when to confront John with the truth. Sherlock wouldn't have wished any intervention. Now Mycroft felt that he should perhaps have warned John. But how to warn anybody against his brother? There was no way that words could ever be enough.

Sherlock had acted on his own account. But as far as Mycroft could tell, things had gone terribly wrong. Neither of the two men had been prepared for the shock they gave each other. Their reunion must have ended up a true nightmare, so far so obvious. It was once again his turn to
straighten things out. And he didn't like it, not at all.

"Sherlock, the reason why I asked you to come and see me."

"You didn't ask me, I came of my own free will," Sherlock interrupted him.

The younger man was still struggling to regain his balance. His reply had come weakly, mechanically, born from a lifelong habit of objecting.

"Yes, anyhow..." Mycroft had to muster all his patience to continue. 'How was John able to...?'

"Sherlock, I'm trying to provide you with all the necessary information about the results which have so far been secured concerning Dr Watson's indisposition."

Mycroft could not help but notice the face his brother made, while literally shrinking in his chair. Sherlock didn't look up, clearly avoiding meeting his eyes. What was Sherlock trying to hide? It was high time to stop this!

"Sherlock, John is not suffering from leukaemia."

Sherlock's head jerked up, eyes blazing with suppressed emotions. Fear? Hope? Definitely disbelief.

"Don't you dare try and fool me, Mycroft!" he hissed, voice pressed with pain. "You should know by now that I'm aware of how he spent yesterday. And we both know the indication for a bone marrow aspiration!"

This would be difficult.

"Please, Sherlock, I don't deny the fact that this is a serious crisis. However, the examinations that have so far taken place serve the purpose of diagnosis. In order to diagnose him correctly, John's doctors had to exclude a variety of possibilities." Mycroft made sure that his brother was focusing on his lecture.

Sherlock's eyes had narrowed into small slits, glistening with suspicion. But he kept his silence, obviously highly intrigued by Mycroft's explanations.

"I have been trying to contact you ever since I had access to the examination results. And believe me, I have made sure that the diagnosis, although conducted under high time pressure, is reliable in its findings. So far all samples, including the bone marrow, have been labelled NAD. No abnormality detected, do you understand? Even a full body PET scan has revealed nothing aside from the already well known findings from the chest x-ray."

Mycroft hesitated. Well, almost nothing, he had to admit, but the minor gastritis that had also glittered on the radiologists' images was nothing he would bother Sherlock with. Two or three weeks on antibiotics and a little peace and quiet would mend that... as if John ever would, now his brother was back...

'Perhaps I should consider undergoing a thorough examination myself within the next few weeks.' Mycroft frowned. 'Who knows what these doctors might find out?'

Mycroft rubbed his forehead. This conversation was giving him a bad headache, he should have known. And this had been the more pleasant part, so far. From this point on, they would be skating on thin ice again.

"Then why...?" Sherlock trailed off, leaving the question unspoken. Non-typical, stress-induced.
He was filing through the massive amount of data available on his hard drive. Something was wrong, missing. Apparently. Things didn't add up. "What are you holding back, Mycroft?" he snarled, baring his teeth. "This doesn't make any sense!"

They had finally reached the core.

"I'm not holding anything back. Don't jump to conclusions, Sherlock. That will only lead you to premature deductions. I have just been trying to give you the good news first. You made a rather agitated impression on me when you came here. In fact you still do."

Lightly patting the laptop which sat on his desk, Mycroft reluctantly continued. "This computer contains John's patient file. You will find it all unadorned and unabbreviated. On John's chest x-ray, his doctor discovered a severe swelling of the mediastinal lymph nodes. We are all well aware of the fact that this is a highly alarming finding. But with no abnormality detected in all of the samples so far, the possible variety of diseases is decreasing."

Mycroft took a deep breath. "With your profound knowledge of biochemistry and human anatomy, I am quite confident you will agree that John still has a fair chance to survive all of this.”

He peered at the younger man. Sherlock did not show any sign of understanding. Still deeply locked within his nightmarish imaginations.

"Look, even if the mediastinoscopy which will be carried out today provides the doctors with cancerous tissue, they all agree on the prospect of Hodgkin's Disease. And this is, as I have been told, in fact good news. While this is a malignant variety of lymphogranulomatosis, the average long-term survival rate is about 70%.”

Still no reply.

Sherlock looked even more helpless. When had his aloofness vanished so completely? By now he should have grabbed the laptop, flipped it open, fingers flying over the keyboard, frantically surfing the internet for information, all of his brilliant brain focused on solving the problem. What had Mycroft missed? He had been firmly convinced that with the required information given, Sherlock would regain his senses rather quickly. But the younger man did not seem to be recovering. Slowly it began to dawn on Mycroft that there was something else. What had gone on between Sherlock and John yesterday?

Sherlock was not only petrified with horror at the thought of a number of malignant cells. This went deeper. But, for heaven's sake, this was an issue Mycroft could not fix. What else would be expected of him today? Well, it seemed as if he had to drain the cup to the dregs... Far too much sentiment involved in this conversation for his taste.

"Listen, Sherlock, I would prefer to remain ignorant about the topics of conversation that were touched on by John and yourself yesterday. I have already told you that much, and you should know how I loathe repetition. I can only give you my advice that you should go and sort things out, as soon as possible. Delaying a reconciliation is definitely not appropriate given the state you are both in at the moment."

Finally, he seemed to have hit something within his younger brother. Mycroft was on the right track.

Sherlock was ever so slightly shaking his head. "He wouldn't listen. He couldn't, not after what I told him..." His voice was muffled, hardly perceivable, not thought for anybody's ears. Then louder, choking out the suffocating words: "He wouldn't have me back."
A quivering wreck.

Mycroft lifted himself up. This had to end. What had Sherlock done to himself? Hadn't he told him that caring... Oh well, so many broken hearts.

Slowly, he walked around the table. Stood beside the shivering frame of his brother. Rested a hand on his shoulder, lightly. Neither of them cared for too much physical contact.

"In fact we both dislike repetition. I will only speak about this once."

Sherlock didn't even look up.

"John has been waiting for you for three years. He knew that your death was real. He had convinced himself that you had left him forever. But his heart still believed in you. He has never given you up completely, God knows how you deserve this...

"Sherlock, you may be a genius, but you don't see through people the way I do. John will always take you back, no matter what you do to him."

Sherlock had tensed during the speech. He still didn't look up, but Mycroft could tell he was listening. Good.

"He never gave you up, not even in death, and you can't give him up now! He may be severely ill, but he is still alive."

Still no reaction. More provocative measures required.

"Sherlock Holmes, pull yourself together! John needs you right now! This isn't about pirates and detective games, this is real life, you need to grow up!"

Mycroft had finally managed to penetrate Sherlock's contemplative state. His head popped up, and he gave his older brother a consternated glance.

Time for retreat. Mycroft headed to the door, stopped dead, turned around, door knob already in hand; one last thing.

"When you have finished your research" - he pointed at the laptop - "my driver will be waiting to take you to the hospital. John will have to stay for routine monitoring for the night. After that feel free to take him home." He opened the door. "And Sherlock, do me a favour, please go and clean yourself up beforehand. I don't exactly know in which rubbish dump you've spent the night, but it is clear that you haven't seen a bathroom from the inside for at least two days - the state of your chin gives the date. You stink of cigarettes and you clearly need to shave, brother dear!"
**Determination**

John woke up to find himself in a room that had private health insurance written all over its walls. It was spacious and furnished decently enough, and best of all he was its only inhabitant, and would stay as undisturbed as possible in the face of everyday hospital life.

Right at the moment he didn't bother to mull over the obvious fact that somebody must have had a hand in arranging his treatment ever since the first diagnosis had been made, back at William's surgery. No big mystery, that one. But how on earth had sodding Mycroft found out so soon? It was as clear as day that Sherlock's brother was the one who was pulling the strings here.

When he had arrived at the hospital that morning, he had first been informed that he had an appointment for clarifying consultation with the medical director and head of the Department of Internal Medicine within the next half hour. That had already raised his suspicions. Being informed by the chief physician himself about the findings of yesterday's tests was definitely not standard procedure. Honestly, who had ever heard of progress that rapid? Normally, people in his situation would wait for weeks, both for the necessary examinations, and later on for their results. As a doctor he had witnessed the ordeal too many times. No illusions about public health service. He knew how nerve-wracking it could be. Most patients didn't react well to it. He, in contrast, could hardly keep up with the pace his life was moving at right at the moment.

Well, he shouldn't be too ungrateful about it. He really felt deeply relieved that his bone marrow was perfectly normal. He could well do without leukaemia, thank you! The PET scan had revealed nothing new, thank God, apart from a minor gastritis. With the miserable life he had led over the last three years, a little stomach-ache was the least he should have expected. He had never given it a second thought.

"But with no other lymph nodes affected in the better accessible parts of your body, which is a good sign, indeed, mediastinoscopy is inevitable, I'm afraid," the head physician had informed him. "We are at a point where we need to obtain a biopsy to find out which type of tissue we are dealing with, but I assure you that this will be the final examination, for now at least. After that we should see more clearly. Now, go and see my colleague in the Department of Anaesthesia. You've got an appointment with him, so that our surgical team can take over immediately afterwards. Any further questions, Dr. Watson?"

Hundreds so far, but none which could be answered in hospital...

He shouldn't waste a thought on Mycroft. Yet it was infuriating how easily the man could take control over the lives of others. No, he had to stay away from that topic. Thinking about him would inevitably lead to much more dangerous areas. He had never shied away from danger, but with everything that had befallen him lately, he felt he couldn't handle thinking about those brothers at the moment. What had Mycroft been playing at, after all? He had known about Sherlock all the time. He had kept him in the dark for three years! Both of them had, fucking Holmeses...

It was better to distract himself and recall the details of the surgery he had undergone earlier. He carefully examined the dressing which covered the incision approximately one centimetre above the suprasternal notch with his fingertips. A little stinging feeling, not really painful, roughly revealed the size of the scar he would have to face once the stitches had been taken out. It was really not a big thing. But it would add to the other scars he had accumulated so far in his life.

He briefly imagined the scope advancing through the tunnel created there, down to the pretracheal space and into the carina. His windpipe did indeed feel slightly sore. What had the surgeons found...
in his thoracic cavity? Two lumps down there, the one his heavy heart, the other this accumulation of lymph nodes running riot. The lymph nodes had been dissected. Yet he felt no inclination for dissection as far as his heart was concerned. Was there ever a right time to dissect one's feelings?

Sherlock dashed down the corridor, round the the corner, up the stairs, down the next endless corridor of this impossibly confusing monstrosity of a clinic. A city within the city. Its streets, for lack of necessity, so far not yet catalogued in his mind palace. A challenge for the future, should John stay here more frequently...

He had been following numerous signs and fingerposts on his way through the various departments of University Hospital, but was still far from finding room number 3244, new building, Departement of Surgery. This had cost him seventeen minutes of his lifetime, so far, and he had absolutely no intention whatsoever of continuing to be misled any longer.

To a stranger it might seem as if several hours of research and a quick freshening up had given him back his habitual air of aloofness.

When he approached the small group of hospital staff gathering at the next turnoff, he automatically scanned their appearances, and promptly made his decision.

Sometimes he deliberately intended to intimidate with the toffee-nosed expression he had adopted from his bigger brother. This face - which he deeply despised when it was directed against him – served not only Mycroft's purposes very well. In fact, Sherlock had found out that he was capable of performing quite a spectacle by putting it on and letting his big coat flare out at the same time.

So far everything was going according to plan. The two doctors - the older one female, senior physician, clearly the mother of the other doctor, male, very young in fact, medical assistant - were rapidly retreating when he rushed up to them.

'Doctors,' he thought, 'never very helpful to relatives and friends.'

Good. Heading for his prey, then.

The young nurse, clearly involved in a sexual relationship with one of the two withdrawing doctors, very obvious by the extent of her blush, would not be able to resist him for long.

"Could you please be so kind as to show me the way to room number 3244?" he asked in the most polite voice he could produce right now. He didn't particularly like to ask, but he was in a hurry.

"Oh, I'm sorry, sir, but visiting hours are over for today, and..." The little mouse of a non-descript nurse trailed off when she saw the expression on his face.

He wasn't in the mood for any of this. Baring his teeth rather than smiling, he very calmly explained to her what would most definitely happen if he went to see the senior physician in order to inform her about the goings-on in the laundry room during lunch break.

"And be assured she will not be amused to find out about the protagonists, for she clearly has in mind a very different kind of daughter-in-law."

After that things sped up satisfactorily.
He felt almost relieved when he finally found himself standing outside room number 3244 only two minutes later. The little nurse had hastily hurried away, but only after assuring him that no disturbance was to be expected within the next several hours.

Both his arrogant airs and his self-confidence decreased significantly, however, the longer he stood and stared at the closed door. Dr J. Watson was written on a tag attached to it.

Since leaving his brother’s house his only concern had been to get to this doorway. He had strictly refused to allow his confused mind to move any further. His vision had always stopped here. He wasn't sure what he could expect once he stepped over this threshold, but he suddenly dreaded it more than anything in the world. He feared the sight of a frail, helpless and mysteriously ill John. For all his limping and trembling, his John had always been strong. He feared the facts they might learn about John’s disease. He intended to stay by his side until the cards were put on the table. But most of all he feared rejection. And his own inability to explain himself.

This was most definitely not his area. But this was also something he had delayed for too long. He wouldn't excuse himself for everything he had done. Those hard times had been inevitable. As to last night's failure, he didn't even know the words to express his remorse. How to beg for forgiveness. He had no idea what to say to John. Where to start.

He had to face the possibility that John was too deeply wounded to forgive him. But he wouldn't accept it. He had always been told he was a damned nuisance. He would not silently give up. He would fight for a second and a third chance, and he would regain John's confidence, simply because he couldn't live without the man. Together they would fight off everything that dared to step in their way.

And John would survive. And John would love him back. And these were only his dreams, and he didn't honestly believe in them. But he would try. This was what he owed John.

Sherlock Holmes took a deep breath, and gritted his teeth. He would enter this room now. And he would see John. And it would be all fine.

'His voice!'
John had heard Sherlock talking to someone outside, probably that little nurse in charge who had shown him to his room earlier. He wasn't surprised to feel his heart thudding like a sledge hammer against his ribcage all of a sudden. He was rather surprised to feel his eyes watering a little. And he was very surprised when he realised that what he felt inside his chest was overwhelming happiness. It was glowing there very brightly even though he tried to tell himself with all his might that it was utterly insane and inappropriate.

Nobody could foresee the mission which Sherlock Holmes had undertaken. Their confrontation could as well lead to a monumental disaster. Once again. But for a split second John Watson simply wanted to be happy, because his friend had come to visit him.

Sherlock had found him. Sherlock had come. Sherlock was back. He had strictly banned these thoughts from his mind, ever since Sherlock's return: high hopes would only end in tragedy. These days everything seemed to go wrong, so very badly wrong. Who could tell what might happen to them if he let Sherlock take over his heart and soul a second time? The last time it had felt like slowly dying.
This time something else was possibly killing him, and who could say if it was all purely accidental? Sometimes he thought that all his uncried tears had formed the lump inside his chest. What would happen, should he allow Sherlock to come anywhere near this place? After all, his heart was only six inches away. If he allowed Sherlock to enter his heart again, he might be crushed as well.

Sherlock's reaction when he had found out about his state had made it clear enough. The younger man wasn't able to cope with another blow. These three years had been hard years for Sherlock, too.

But John Watson was still a soldier. And soldiers fight. And if the heart inside his chest wanted to sing with joy, he would go out and defend the feeling for as long as it would last. Yes, he was afraid of the consequences. And more than anything else, he wanted to protect Sherlock. But he would no longer allow his fears to take control.

'There are always people who survive.' Who should know better than him? Just look at them both. He had survived Afghanistan, and Sherlock had survived the fall. What else could happen to such a couple? He would fight again. This time his enemy would be a vicious disease. But other people had survived worse. John Watson was a doctor, too, he knew things. And he knew he could fight this and he would. He had to. This was about them. And with Sherlock back, he would not give up. He would fight until it was over, either way.

And he would allow his heart to sing and glow inside his chest as long as it would last. Because his friend had found his way back.

He stubbornly raised his chin and waited for the door to open.
Sherlock was still pacing the narrow side corridor next to John's room, trying desperately to steady his breathing and stop his hands from shaking. To and fro, mulling over unpredictable eventualities, repeatedly scratching his head, tousling his hair mechanically. This was ridiculous! It made no sense! 'Just go for it!' He was a wreck. So very nervous.

"Excuse me, sir, may I...?" A rather sturdy older gentleman with short-cropped grey hair, metal-rimmed glasses, and a good-humoured face had approached him from behind. How had he not noticed him?

'Polite manners, but highly self-confident, feeling comfortable in this environment, but not completely at home, the way he looked around. Looking for what? Ah yes, the room number, so looking for John's room, but not family; a doctor then, but not staff, wrong clothing, not bossy enough.'

"Good afternoon, Dr Mannen," Sherlock replied automatically. At least he'd gotten there eventually.

"Do we know each other?" the older man asked, his eyebrows raised. He regarded Sherlock curiously. "I'd have thought I had a rather good memory for faces, but I can't remember..."

"Oh, no no no, not at all, I was just... thinking." This was embarrassing. 'Stop fidgeting!' Sherlock scolded himself. What was he doing here?

Very intelligent eyes were taking him in from head to toe. Was he actually being deduced?

"So you're a friend of John, he's told you about me!"

'Well, sort of,' Sherlock thought with a smirk. He knew the man quite well, having spent half a day studying his reports this morning.

"Fine!" Dr Mannen was rubbing his hands with glee.

What was the man so happy about? The stench of disinfectants in these hospitals seemed to bereave Sherlock of even the most basic skills of analysis.

"It's always good to see people who are supported by their friends and families when times get rough! Sadly enough that's not always the case, and with John in particular, I had the impression that he was rather trying to cope with it on his own. However, nice to see that I was wrong!"

John's doctor hesitated for a moment. "Now, if you don't mind waiting another minute, I would just like to talk to John in private first -" But he was cut off mid-sentence.

This was exactly what Sherlock had needed. Resistance brought him back to task. He suddenly felt that it was of the utmost importance that he should not be excluded from whatever sensitive information this doctor could pass on to his patient. And it wouldn't do to receive the information second hand. He had to be present, the very moment when John Watson would be informed about the diagnosis!

"Your precaution won't be necessary, I can assure you, Dr Mannen, as I will clearly come with you to hear what you've got to say to my friend and partner." Sherlock blurted out the words without a second thought.
There, he did it! It was out and it even felt good! So why did he simultaneously feel a mortifying blush blooming on his face? 'Just ignore it. Delete it,' he told himself.

The only thing that kept him from running like hell was to open the door, that very instant. Sherlock knocked, grabbed the doorknob, shoved open the door furiously, and froze.

What the heck was going on outside? Why did the bloody bugger not come in? It had been almost five minutes since he had heard his voice. Had he left? No, he could hear him again now.

Sherlock was talking to someone else, and this time John almost started to panic. The new voice was clearly that of his physician. What was going on? William and Sherlock visiting him at the same time? What an awkward situation for their reunion. Depending on Sherlock's emotional stability and the news William was to bring, this could end up in yet another disaster. Nobody could predict Sherlock's reactions.

He was only scheduled to stay one night for observation. Without a fever or any other sign of infection, and with the anaesthesia more than twelve hours past, he would be discharged tomorrow morning. That was what they had told him, and he hadn't considered being visited by anyone. William being here could only mean new information. John swallowed. What news was his friend and colleague bound to bring? The question dried his throat. But he found himself hardly able to speculate about test results. There was simply no time for further worries. A short, energetic knock and the door swung open. He still wasn't prepared for the sight of the two men standing in the doorway.

Sherlock, his hand still on the doorknob, wore a frantically determined expression on his slightly blushing face. His eyes were darting about, never meeting John's. Jaw clenched tight, he looked almost manic, as if he desperately wanted to be miles from here, but couldn't drag himself away.

In fact it was William who finally shoved the younger man forward. The doctor was a little bit confused about the status of John's visitor. Had he got anything wrong? Well, he wouldn't argue with the man in front of his patient. If John wanted to keep things private he would have to say so. If he actually was John's partner, whatever that implied, John might even be happy to have him around...

Sherlock still didn't look up.

John cleared his throat, uncertain how to begin. Licked his lips.

"Hello, William." His voice came out steady. Good. He waved his hand. Introducing. "This is Dr William Mannen, my doctor."

"He knows me, John, even knew my name. I'm sure you have told him everything about me already, haven't you?" Why did William sound so excited?

"Yeah ... he's always like that..." John shook his head and sighed. He honestly didn't want to find out, ever... Sherlock was impossible!

"Sherlock..." His voice was not trembling, was it? - Well.

Sherlock looked like shit. When had he last eaten or even slept? Had he perhaps resumed smoking? John didn't want to think about it. The man had only returned to him one day ago, after
leaving him alone for three horrible years. They hadn't even had the opportunity to exchange one single sensible sentence. Yet everything was back to normal, in the way that he was constantly forced to worry about him, just because the bugger simply couldn't ever take care of himself. Just look at him! Haggard face, deathly pale, tense shoulders, clenched fists, so tight the knuckles stood out white.

John's heart was aching with...what? No... love? And after all he probably wasn't looking any better, not with his bedhead hair and the johnny gown he was still wearing.

John took another deep breath, as if to dive into deep, dark water. He raised his chin defiantly. His words were addressed to William, but he was steadily looking at Sherlock, when he said in a clear strong voice: "This is my friend Sherlock Holmes – friend, not colleague."

William actually looked a little bit surprised. The name... Had there not been a scandal about some spectacular suicide several years ago? It had been in all the papers, yet he could not remember the details. Who had spread the rumour that John had been involved in it? That was an odd thing! But his memory for names had never been overly reliable, and besides ... Well, the man did look knackered, but most certainly not dead. And this was definitely not his concern!

'Don't you stare at them like this!' he told himself. 'It is so impolite!'

In Sherlock's brain something clicked, almost audibly. John's last sentence had brought him back. There was not one thought in his mind about how, or when, or why. Not one doubt. Not now. This was a knee-jerk reaction. For once his large brain could shut down. For this instant the spinal cord would suffice.


Just lips. And hearts. Seconds.

His knees buckled. He opened his eyes and saw John. John's face. Shocked.

He needed something to hold on to. Something steady. He grabbed the chair next to the bed and managed to drop onto it, just before his knees gave way. His hands were shaking worse than ever. He didn't care what these two doctors might think of him. He needed an anchor.

He grabbed John's hand. It was strong and warm and firm and steady. He clung to it. John didn't remove it. John's hand calmed him down. He could breathe again.

"John?"

John's hearing finally resumed working. He could definitely perceive the sounds William was making. It didn't take long until he could actually distinguish single words. Although their meaning stayed blurred for several more moments.

"Tissue sample?" Then he could actually understand that William was talking about the tissue
sample which had been dissected earlier today. A lifetime away.

"...have been informed about the frozen section analysis...of course wait for the final results, but... Wanted to tell you face-to-face... sarcoidosis …"

"What?" Blank.

"John, this is the best news you could possibly have expected! Would you please listen to me?"

What was going on with these two boys? William really wanted to know. He had just tried to tell John that he was indeed one of the luckiest guys he knew! Not a single sign of cancer in all of the results, and today's tissue sample clearly said sarcoidosis! They should be jumping for joy, both of them! Instead they were holding hands... Well, they were young, and they clearly loved each other. William was sure they would understand sooner or later how lucky they both were. They had just been given a second life.

"Well, you two ... I won't disturb you any longer. You clearly have a lot to talk about now. John, see me next week. I'll give you two a break over the weekend, but you need to make an appointment with my receptionist so that we can coordinate your further treatment. I will assess you from the cardiac and respiratory point of view, but I'll also be referring you to dermatology and ophthalmology for their opinion, as these are the areas which can rather often be affected by sarcoidosis as well. Just don't worry too much, with your ACE test negative, and no clinical symptoms showing up so far, you are clearly in an initial stage. We will probably be able to manage without any administration of steroids, at the moment. And bear in mind, around 40% of patients diagnosed with sarcoidosis heal spontaneously!"

With a broad smile William nodded to them, and then he was gone.

Sherlock couldn't believe it. Did miracles actually happen? Obviously. This was his own very personal miracle, sitting here beside a now-not-dying-so-soon-never-ever-I-won't-let-you-go John, holding his hand tight. And the thing that made this so special, so very, very good, was that John was holding his hand, too. Warm, firm and steady, even when the doctor had spoken about test results, even before it had sunk in that he was actually ill, but not... terminally, not at the moment, not ever, hopefully.

John was brave and strong. And alive.

And then John squeezed his hand, gently.

For a long time neither of them spoke. They just sat. Holding on to each other.

The nurse who brought John's dinner entered the room and hastily placed the tray on the bedside table. As soon as she caught a glimpse of Sherlock she wanted to run, like she had the Devil on her trail.

The spell was broken. They both felt as if they should say something. Anything, perhaps trying to get back to normal. Would that ever be possible with all that had happened that afternoon? John had no idea what Sherlock was feeling right now. Regret? Embarrassment? An overwhelming relief at having gained back both their lives? Was he feeling anything deep or disturbing at all,
being the Sherlock he knew from the past? John for his part was still flooded with a mixture of emotions he could hardly cope with, let alone express.

"You don't want to eat any of this, do you?" And indeed, this was Sherlock, rudely interrupting his thoughts, most definitely not interested in the area of sentiment.

"Of course I do!" John decided he could play the game as well.

"How can you possibly eat any of this rubbish? Just look at it! This is disgusting!"

'What? Hang on...' This wasn't Sherlock at all. Sherlock wouldn't see a point in fussing about anything as dull as food. 'Right, rather a red herring to conceal his thoughts then.'

"No, it isn't. And I'm actually quite hungry. I skipped lunch today, remember?" John managed to stay calm. He couldn't work out what his brilliant friend was aiming at, right now. But he felt there was something going on beneath the surface.

Sherlock just grunted. His face was the impassive mask his friend knew so well. It was getting on John's nerves. 'Try to tease him!' he told himself. 'Try to shake him out of his complacency.'

"Would you like some? It's enough for two. You look as if you haven't been eating properly for three years." A shot in the dark, perhaps he could break through Sherlock's indifference by mentioning the past.

"Just tea for me, thanks."

Apparently it didn't work. John sighed. One last attempt. He started to gently pull his hand out of Sherlock's grip in order to reach for the cup. Sherlock hesitated. Then he grabbed John's hand even tighter. He didn't look at the man in the hospital bed, but he stubbornly refused to let John's hand go.

"Eh...?" John wasn't quite sure what to make of it. This could be a hint. He felt his pulse increase.

"Oh, come on, John, don't be so pedestrian, I presume that you can manage to eat your dinner with only one hand?" In John's eyes, this was probably as near to a declaration of love as anyone had ever heard Sherlock Holmes utter. John was duly moved.

"Oh God, yes!" No more mixed emotions. When John Watson started to help himself to some food single-handedly, he felt something definitely-not-ill inside his chest glowing with warmth. Finally he had got a glimpse of Sherlock's inner life. Whatever face this self-proclaimed sociopath might show to the world in order to prove he had no emotions, John knew better. And if it was his hand that Sherlock needed right now, he would just keep holding on.
The night was peaceful. They hadn't done much more talking during the evening. But there had never been a doubt that Sherlock would stay with John. What was a private room for, after all? When night fell, John fell asleep. During the night he woke up three times.

The first time John came to was around midnight. The corridor outside his room was brightly lit, as work and care continued day and night, shift after shift.

Something had clattered, and there were hurried footsteps. Sherlock was still holding his hand. He hadn't let go since he had first grabbed it that afternoon. Then, his grip had been desperately clenching. Now his touch was light. Almost shy, apologising. As if embarrassed, because he had forgotten how to not hold it. But still persistent. He wasn't sleeping, of course. Was he ever? He was staring into the void, eyes wide open, his face like a mask, pale, angular, all cheekbones, dark shadows and hollows. Motionless, withdrawn, inward.

What was he thinking? Would John ever find out how that brilliant brain worked? Would he ever find out about his heart? Sherlock didn't react. John wasn't sure whether he was too absorbed in his mind palace to notice his gaze, or if he just didn't mind being watched, being stared at, in fact.

He should have asked by now. Perhaps Sherlock had expected that much. Perhaps he even felt the urge to talk about it. Sherlock could be so talkative sometimes. But mostly when he was bursting with information and ingenious ideas. Never when it came to feelings. And this was about feelings, at least partly... In those cases, he might not talk for days. John should really have asked by now.

Perhaps Sherlock was disappointed by his lack of interest. How on earth had he managed it? Christ! There are very few people who could have done it! And why, always why? How many times had this question tormented him, kept him awake all night? Why had he done it, and why had it lasted for three years?

John didn't ask that night. The night was peaceful, and for the moment it was enough that his own personal miracle had come true. His eyelids dropped, he fell asleep again.

Later he found out why. And he felt guilty. He had long since suspected that he himself had been the reason. Yet he had been wrong all the same. He had been wrong about his heart all those years. It hadn't been about pride, or reputation. Not even about hurt feelings. It had been an act of sacrifice. Sherlock had sacrificed their hearts in order to save their lives. John's life.

The second time John woke up that night was because his arm had fallen asleep. In the darkest hours of the night, even the continuous operation inside a hospital had curbed its noise. Everything was quiet. Almost.

Sherlock was sprawled on his chair, endless legs spreading across the floor, his lanky frame all wrapped up in his big coat, serving him as a blanket. The upper part of his body, however, was curled up on John's bed, with his head resting heavily on their entwined hands. He was sound asleep. His features were relaxed, mouth slightly agape, snoring easily.

He looked so bloody young and vulnerable that John earnestly wondered if his heart might burst
with the pain of it. For his heart hurt like hell at this sight. That's what hearts do when they love.

He wanted to kiss that man. In the middle of the night, John allowed himself to think about their kiss. It had just happened. It hadn't felt accidental. It had felt... right. But it hadn't been deliberate. On either of their part. John Watson wasn't actually gay. He had never felt sexually attracted to men, and he was pretty sure that he never would for the rest of his life.

Apart from Sherlock. This was different. It somehow didn't matter whether Sherlock was a woman or a man. Sherlock was human. And he was the one human being in the world John's heart had chosen to hurt for. And if John Watson would be labelled as gay by other people, then let it be so. He didn't care any longer. As for the rest, they would find out eventually.

With a little smile on his lips John went back to sleep. He was still tired, and Sherlock's head was still resting heavily on their hands.

The third time John woke up, dawn was already breaking. A new day. Not long and the hospital would come to life again. There was one thing left to do.

Sherlock was awake. He was watching him. John looked up at him. Looked at him for endless seconds. Pale eyes. Intensely bright. Burning. John reached out a hand. It was the hand Sherlock wasn't holding. John swallowed. Hard. His turn.

Tonight Sherlock had slept. For the first time in so many nights. He had been able to sleep because his mind felt calm. He had done his thinking. It was all made up now.

It was difficult. He could not bare his heart to John completely. Perhaps John would expect that. But John was inside his heart already. Perhaps he would someday find out, and that would be enough.

In the meantime there were other things he could do. He couldn't change. He would always be different. But he could do things for John. He could never again leave him alone. Not even if it killed him this time. That was one thing he could do for John.

It had not only been the shock talking that night. Deep down in his heart he felt like there was nothing worse than watching the ones you love die slowly. Sometimes he felt that it was merciful when death comes swiftly. But he would never again tell John that. That was a secret he would keep buried. That was another thing he could do for John. He knew that sarcoidosis was not a mild disease. It could become chronic and it could end fatally. But this time he would stay by John's side, until the end. He could do that. For John. And never let him know how much his heart was hurting for him.

And perhaps, just perhaps, if they were lucky, their life would still last a long, long time. Their hearts hurting together.

When Sherlock woke up the room was still dark. But it wasn't long before dawn, and life would soon speed up again. John was still asleep. He was still holding his hand. He looked... beautiful. Had he slept all night? Sherlock hoped so. He hadn't been able to resist his need to snuggle up to
John. He didn't want him to know. He wasn't quite sure how John would feel about such an open display of intimacy.

Sherlock remembered. 'That, er... thing...that they, er, that they did; that was, um... good.'

Dawn was breaking when John woke up. Sherlock was watching him. He knew that he probably shouldn't. Normally people would tell him to piss off. He often did it anyhow, shrugged his shoulders, didn't care. If he wanted to, he would stare and watch. He would learn their life stories by observing. Preferably their secrets. And this was what others despised. Nobody liked to be deduced, but it was what he did. This was not only his work. It was his true nature. He couldn't help it. He wanted it to happen, because it was exciting and thrilling and kept his brain from rotting. Watching was interesting. Deducing banished boredom.

But people were scared. They feared his power over them. Sometimes power was useful. More often it was simply l'art pour l'art, but they just couldn't see it with their funny little brains. Nobody had ever accepted him the way he was. Not even his family. Nobody apart from John.

John had never been scared of him. John could see that watching wasn't bad. That it was a good thing, because it would keep him away from more illegal distractions. That it was a good thing, because only he could do it. The world called him a freak for it. John found it amazing. That's what made John so special. And this was why he wanted to watch John even more. Endlessly trying to find out what made him so fascinating and attractive, so much that he wanted to crawl into him, or swallow him up whole, all just by watching.

Sherlock was watching him. Watching as John woke up, all placid and gentle. He was watching how John slowly came to his senses. The way he remembered. He probably shouldn't have watched John. Then he would not have seen how John began to change. The way he tensed.

Sherlock couldn't help it. Couldn't drag his eyes away.

John was looking up. Not nervous now. Determined. Eyes all dark and deep. John was lifting his hand. It was the hand that wasn't holding Sherlock's.

John Watson was a brave man. The first time it had been simple. No decisions, no thinking. The kiss had happened and it was good. No questions, no doubts. Sherlock had done it, he had wanted it. It was good.

This time it was different. It wasn't exactly complicated. This time it was dangerous. Because there wasn't a rush, and their brains were still working, and the room was still dark and quiet, and if Sherlock didn't want it, after his first shock had subsided...

This time a kiss could fix their relationship, or it could break it.

And because John Watson, the soldier, had never resisted danger he just went for it without a second thought. He reached out and cupped his hand around Sherlock's neck, pulling his face down. And because Sherlock was willing and following and wanting, they kissed a second time.

They took their time. Careful, a test, an experiment. Their brains were still working, thinking, cataloguing, experiencing. Eyes closed. Noses right; no, left, breathing in and out, sharing the air.
Chins and cheeks, tickling, scraping, stubbly, smooth and rough, both together at the same time. Lips, still hesitating, lightly touching, once, twice, brushing, questioning. Lungs, breathing the same air. Mouths, challenging, demanding, opening, firm, warm, soft-hard, impossible but true.

No brains  
Senses  
Tongues explore tease taste playful fast deep  
Vocal cords moan low rough  
Saliva lick swallow hot wet  
Teeth bite hard  
Animals growl pant urgent  
Hearts invite feel sing know beautiful  
Souls drink own tremble fall dark  

And because John Watson was also a man with some experience he broke away at the last possible moment. There was a place deep down which he knew he had to leave before it was too late. He felt as if he might not be able to find his way back, if he stayed there for too long.

Sherlock would have rather they kissed themselves to death.

"What are we doing, here, John?" Utter confusion. He felt as if his brain had become irreparably damaged from a serious lack of both oxygen and sense.

And because John Watson had dared to start this, he knew that he was now responsible for gently bringing his friend down to earth.

"Proving a point. I didn't know you needed to shave, Sherlock."

They would have their breakfast at home, they decided. John would be discharged that morning, and they both wanted to get home as soon as possible. Sherlock would have one of his sulking fits if forced to endure the hospital stench one minute longer, John could tell. Sometimes the man was such a wimp!

When they left, they wandered the endless hospital corridors hand in hand. They wouldn't have to do it tomorrow, or any other day in the near future. Sherlock would recover from this, John thought with a little smile. And he would proudly participate, however long it would last. After all, this was their first day.

The black limousine was waiting for them when they left the hospital. Sherlock deliberately ignored it. As soon as his hand was up, a cab stopped.

'How on earth?' No, John honestly didn't want to know.

"The address is 221B Baker Street."

This was amazing. It was quite extraordinary. Sherlock Holmes was still holding hands with him.
Epilogue - Conclusion

Chapter Notes

Finally, the last chapter, and I would like to thank all of you lovely people who have read and enjoyed my story!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

One year later John had found a job as a GP in a small, but well run London clinic. He had never found out whether his new bosses were so impressed by his medical skills and his rather uncommon career, or if one of the Holmes brothers had had a hand in the arrangement. To be honest, he didn't care much. He liked the job in the A&E department, and he liked even better the fact that it felt like a new beginning. Nobody was interested in his past. Nobody displayed any open curiosity where his private life was concerned.

He didn't miss Bart's or his old colleagues. After all, he had spent his worst years working at that hospital day and night, trying to escape an empty flat, filling his life with a job which was a constant reminder of what was and what could have been. At that time he had found it quite fitting to work in the same building from which his friend had jumped, to spend his days in the same building where his body had been kept in the days after. Or so he thought...

To punish himself constantly.

No, he didn't miss that part. His new job was satisfying, and if it was not always as thrilling as he might have wished, the rest of his life more than compensated for that.

On the other hand John was a patient himself now. He had to visit his doctor regularly for check-ups. He still felt grateful in William's presence, although he knew that this was probably a bit irrational.

'But you know, the bearer of a message...' John shrugged his shoulders and smiled. It had really been a good message.

And then there was the third aspect of his new life. A life he once again shared with Sherlock Holmes. This part of his existence so full of excitement and madness that it outshined all the dullness of everyday life. He probably even needed the mundane routine of his days to stay grounded when life was once again thrilling, soaring with danger, being whirled around by his high-flying lunatic.

When he returned from work this special evening he wondered briefly if Sherlock had remembered the anniversary as well. Exactly one year ago, he had been diagnosed with sarcoidosis. And that was only one of the good things which had happened on that day. He smiled as always when he thought back. It had been the best year of his life.

Back home he wasn't much surprised not to find any signs of his flatmate other than the usual mess the man always left behind. Lestrade hadn't come up with a case in the last few days to occupy Sherlock's unruly mind, so he probably was still at Bart's. No issues with working again in that place, unlike himself.

With his first cup of tea for the evening, John returned to the living room, intending to spend the
quiet and peaceful time before Sherlock's return in his armchair, relaxing, thinking, perhaps reading this new book...

He didn't get that far. On the mantelpiece leaning against the skull sat an envelope. John was written on it. Distinctly in Sherlock's handwriting.

John exhaled; he hadn't realised that he was holding his breath.

'Easy,' he told himself. 'This may not mean anything.'

But he couldn't help himself. Ever since that last note, he dreaded any message from Sherlock other than his perpetual texts on the mobile. And this was most definitely a letter, he thought, ripping open the envelope with slightly trembling fingers.

He read.

John

Don't look so alarmed, this is not my last note. Don't be stupid! You should know by now that this has been the best year of my life, so far.

John looked stunned. What was the idiot thinking? But he could not deny a warm glow of relief. He took a deep breath and went on.

John, this letter is about something which I cannot tell you. I have thought about it a great deal, and I would estimate that after a whole year it is time that I should speak it out loud, but I honestly can't. So I will try to write it down.

We have never spoken about your disease very much, and sometimes I wonder how much it weighs on you. I for my part try to disregard it, most of the time, because it is something which is completely out of my reach. Be assured that I have done my research thoroughly, and that I am very well aware of what the future might bring us. I can tell you all the organs that might be affected, and I can list any complication that might occur.

This is not a puzzle that can be solved by mere intellect. And that is why it scares me.

I know I will never be able to help you, once the sarcoidosis breaks out fully. Yet, I am determined to never again leave you alone, whatever comes.

So, if the sarcoidosis affects your eyes, let me watch out for you. And if it affects your skin, let me cover you. If it affects your bones I will carry you, and I will share my last breath with you, if it affects your lungs. Please don't let it affect your brain. Mine would never be enough.

But if sarcoidosis ever affects your heart, don't feel frightened, you have mine.

SH

P.S. I would appreciate it very much if you would not refer to this letter when I return home tonight. In fact, please don't ever mention it. I mean it. I can't speak about it.

That night John was confronted with a difficult problem. He had to find a place where he could safely keep the most precious inanimate possession he had ever owned.
Two years later John and William were standing in the surgery in front of the screen, intensely studying John's last chest x-rays. The swelling of the mediastinal lymph nodes was definitely subsiding. Finally they looked at each other and smiled. It looked very much like it was in remission.

"You know the saying 'all that glitters is not gold', John, don't you?" William asked calmly. "Well, in your case I'd say it definitely is."

John just smiled for an answer. William had no idea how right he was. His last two years had not just been glittering, they had been golden.

Today the violin was creating lovely tunes. Sherlock was just composing, passing the time. Standing at the window in his most ratty dressing gown. He put down the instrument and crooked his head. Wondering. He lifted the violin to his chin again. He probably should apply rosin to the bow, it would produce a smoother sound. He was actually looking forward to this evening. John hadn't heard this one before.

Three years later John was impatiently fumbling with his keys outside 221B. When he finally managed to unlock the door, he headed through the hallway and up the seventeen steps to their flat, taking two at a time. Flinging the door open, he rushed in, bursting with news, only to be greeted by a highly irritated consulting detective with a short and rather harsh: "Shut up, John!"

"I haven't ..." John never finished the sentence.

"Not now, please!"

Sherlock was bent over his microscope, the sleeves of his insanely expensive silk shirt rolled up unceremoniously, all crumpled fabric, his hair falling black and wild and curly and ruffled and unkempt into his face. His bright eyes blazing with the energy of a thousand unsolved puzzles. To John he looked glorious.

"Sherlock, I've..."

"And I said. Not. Now."

The only consulting detective in the world looked up from his whatever-it-was-it-was-clearly-rotting-sample under the microscope and threw a glance at the shorter man. With an annoyed huff he turned round, narrowed his eyes and directed the impact of his undivided concentration at his friend.

Deducing.

A quick smirk curled the corners of his mouth. He fixed his eyes on John's with an almost amused expression, lifting a single eyebrow; John expected to that look to drive him crazy one day.

Then he turned round, staring into the microscope again. Without a warning he started to rattle out his monologue, never expecting any input from John's side.

"You've just returned from work. You've been tetchy and jumpy the last three days. In contrast,
you were almost bursting with joy as you dashed in. You needed to tell me immediately that your annual Tine test has produced a positive result at last, which clearly isn't related to tuberculosis in your case, but which means that your sarcoidosis has officially and finally gone into complete remission, on which I want to congratulate you very much, indeed!

"You should know by now that I deeply loathe repeating myself, it's tedious. But as it turns out you expect me to acknowledge an already confirmed miracle again, which I will most definitely not do out loud tonight, because it is all so obvious! That is, unless you provide me with a plausible explanation to the question of why the retina of a blue-eyed female Caucasian takes thirteen seconds longer to dissolve after pickling it in accumulator acid, compared to the retina of a brown-eyed male Caucasian, when I say that this clearly should have turned out vice versa."

John stood and... well, nothing, just stood there.

"Perhaps the woman had worn contacts for several years, or your male sample wasn't that fresh," he offered calmly, vanishing towards the kitchen.

He couldn't see Sherlock looking after him with a rapt smile on his face.

A cup of tea would be nice now. John's first impulse had been disappointment and irritation. He stood at the sink, head bent, brow furrowed. Eventually, his features smoothed. A broad smile slowly plastered itself over his face. Something inside his brain had just clicked into place.

This had been better than a Sherlock beside himself with joy. This was as normal a Sherlock as humanly possible.

'Arrogant git!' John thought affectionately.

They could never return to where they had started more than six years ago. But this was their new life. And it was finally back to normal.

It was all fine.

The End

Chapter End Notes

This work is dedicated to the one who knows.
If you ever browse the internet for fan fiction and stumble across my story, you should know that it is thought as a belated apology.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!