The Eye of the Beholder

by days_of_storm

Summary

After having lived and worked together for one year, John realises that a few things have changed between him and Sherlock; and not necessarily for the better. So what is going on?

Notes

This is the first part of a 5-part series. This part consists of 25 (rather short) chapters.
The first time they met, Sherlock barely looked at him; a few seconds and he had everything he needed to see right through John. He had been confused, but as soon as Sherlock had explained his deduction, the confusion had given way to amazement. Therefore, he was more than surprised to find that the more and the longer Sherlock looked at him now, the less he seemed to be able to read him.

Sometimes John stated his opinion or let out one of his unconscious praises at Sherlock’s abilities, and he would look at him sharply, not giving away any of his thoughts, but John noticed that he was increasingly frustrated by his inability to read him. There were only little details that gave that frustration away. The most obvious was that he rarely responded to him after he stared at him for longer and more intently than necessary. Another one was that sometimes he would ask for more data, information that John was sure he would gather from anybody with a single glance.

He looked across the room to where Sherlock was staring out of the window, his long fingers running fisting at his hair. He was clearly working on a case that excited him, but it wasn’t a serial killer. Sherlock’s natural reaction to serial killers had become one single step on the coffee table and down, taking the shortest route to the door in which Detective Inspector Lestrade was usually almost self-consciously standing. No, this was not a serial killer, but what was it? John put down the newspaper he had intended on reading when his thoughts wandered to his friend. With a small smile he realised that he had stopped referring to him in his head as his flatmate or colleague.

"Sherlock, what is it?"

Sherlock spun around with one fluent movement, John noticed in fascination. He had never met anyone of his height with such complete control over his body.

Usually, tall and lanky people moved a bit awkwardly, nervous about their stature and somewhat unable to coordinate their limbs, but not Sherlock. Sherlock had complete control even over the smallest muscles in his face. He used his acting skills quite a lot to acquire information from witnesses, knowing exactly what facial expression on his side would unconsciously force people to speak the truth, and sometimes John found himself to be on the receiving end. However, that was usually when Sherlock did not want to make his own tea or buy groceries. And in these instances, John wasn't even sure if he was acting at all or being a stubborn pain in the arse who was used to have people cater for him.

"Nothing." He said, clearly lying. "Well," he tried again, inhaling deeply, "there is a small problem which I should be able to solve eventually but I do not yet have enough information on the case to be able to work it out."

"Can I help?" John asked, knowing that Sherlock expected him to anyway. His friend looked at him oddly, his eyes locking with his, and for a moment John became self-conscious, not quite knowing why. He had gotten used to his stares, and most of the time he had been sure that he was not really looking at him, but that his mind was in ten different places at the same time, finding patterns, drawing conclusions. Not about him, though, that had become obvious. Sherlock had eventually gotten used to the fact that he couldn't properly read John, and he had been surprised more than once by an unexpected answer which John had given to a question he had asked. His occasional sarcasm was another issue which seemed to confuse Sherlock more than it helped him with his work.

"You might." He said, turning back to the window. "But then again, it's not really dangerous."
"Oh, come on," John said, trying to sound annoyed, at least. "I'm not just going to help you when it's dangerous. Actually, it would be quite relaxing to be able to be of help without having to save your life or get you out of trouble."

Sherlock didn't turn around, but tipped his head to the left a bit, and John could see his reflection in the window. Clearly, he was smiling.

"Thank you, John." He said it quietly, and something in his voice had changed. It sounded as if he wanted to say something else than what he had said, and it sounded somehow as if he had lied about the danger; as if there was more to it than he admitted. Something that could potentially scare him.

"Do you care for some tea, or will that slow down your metabolism?" John sounded more sarcastic than he had intended to, but again, he found that Sherlock was smiling.

"Tea will be fine."

Busying himself with making tea, John didn't hear Sherlock enter the kitchen, and when he turned around to place the mugs on the table he jumped. Sherlock was staring intently at him from only three feet away.

"God, what in the world are you doing?" Once more, it didn't come out quite the way he wanted it to. He was confused by how irritated he sounded, but he just leaned back against the counter and stared back into those eyes that were fixed to his face. He noticed that their colour had changed somewhat since the last time he had looked at him, and somewhere in his mind he was surprised that he was thinking about the colour of Sherlock's eyes and he wondered why he remembered them so clearly to be a different shade of blue. They were blazing now, undoubtedly because of the light behind him, illuminating the kitchen counter and work space; or maybe he had come to a satisfying conclusion, but he was too calm for that. With a small smile he realised that he had unwillingly started to see things Sherlock's way. Not that he would ever claim to possess an intellect anywhere close to that of his friend, but he had clearly changed his thinking pattern.

That unconscious smile had a rather impressive impact on Sherlock. For a few seconds he remained staring at him in that strange way, as if he was looking for something, but then his face lit up as he mirrored the smile.

When he leaned forward, John found himself short of breath. For one second his heart seemed to stop and then hammered away. Sherlock picked up the kettle and regarded him with an enquiring look that somehow seemed to amuse him. He could hear him mutter something that sounded an awful lot like "fascinating" as he poured water into the mugs. John blushed, and he cursed himself for it. Thankfully, Sherlock had picked up his mug and was making his way back to the window without any further comment.

"I'm sorry," John apologised, "I don't know what's wrong with me today. I suppose I might be under the weather a bit."

"Nonsense." Sherlock said, sounding calm and reasonable. "There's nothing wrong with your health."

He didn't know whether his subconscious was trying to interfere or if he had been closer to the truth than he himself expected, but just as Sherlock had finished speaking, John sneezed.

This time, his swirl wasn't quite as impressively smooth. Sherlock didn't say a word, just looked at him, his eyes narrowed as if he expected something else to happen or for John to explain that he had done it on purpose.
When he was sure that he wouldn't sneeze again, John took his mug without a comment and made his way back to his arm chair.
Chapter Two

John didn’t sleep very well that night and when he found the moon shining so brightly into his room that he could sense the light through his closed eye lids, he decided that getting a drink of milk might help. He had been aware of that cliché and enjoyed strengthening it since he had been a child. His mother had read him stories in which the greatest problems became easier to solve after a forbidden sip out of the milk carton. It always had been comforting to him.

With a grin he made his way downstairs and into the kitchen. He gasped at the cold tiles under his naked feet, realising too late that this would only wake him up further. He opened the fridge and grabbed the milk, taking a sip, reminiscing about his childhood. Just as he was about to put it back and close the door he heard that all too familiar deep voice from the door to the living room.

"John?"

He dropped the bottle, milk spilling out on the floor and his feet. "Fuck!" His heart was racing. He was definitely not young enough anymore to take such shocks lightly. He turned around to Sherlock. "What the hell?" There were so many indecencies he wanted to shout at him, but he was still too much in shock to think of any proper curse that would befit what he really thought. His soldier instinct had kicked in and he was full of adrenaline, ready to jump into action, but being unable to do anything at all.

And something in the corner of his mind whispered to him that Sherlock might not have done it to scare him or even to make him feel guilty for standing in his pyjamas in front of the fridge at four o’clock in the morning, drinking milk straight out of the bottle. It had been more of a question, really.

He wondered why he was thinking all of this while he stared at Sherlock, still angry with him, his heart-beat only calming slowly.

"I do apologise." Despite his words, Sherlock looked a little smug, but at least he had not laughed at him, and for that alone John was indeed grateful. "I expected you to hear me."

"No doubt something that you would have, I presume."

"Obviously."

John sighed and lifted his right foot, letting milk run off it onto the tiles. So much for a small sip of milk before going back to bed. Thank God the bottles were plastic, he thought.

"Oh, John, look at you." Sherlock walked towards him and reached for the tea towel, throwing it down at his feet. Then, realising that it would not suffice, he went to the drawer and pulled out a fresh one. John stood there for another few seconds until he lowered himself, holding onto the fridge for support. Despite having lost his crutch and his hobble, he still felt his leg ache sometimes, as if he hadn't yet gotten used to use it properly.

Sherlock, with one swift move, got rid of his dressing gown, which had seemed ridiculous to John when he had first seen him wear it. However, he had soon realised that Sherlock seemed to uphold an image of himself just for the sake of it, or so it seemed, clearly not caring for other opinions than his own. And – John noticed amused as he looked up at his friend looming over him, seeming even taller than usual – he looked much younger without his dressing gown. Like a too tall teenager in pyjamas. He had to look away, because that image was definitely uncomfortable, and he did not want Sherlock to notice him frowning.

"Anything the matter?" So maybe he wasn't such a lost cause after all?
"No Sherlock, nothing is the matter, except that I'm standing an inch deep in milk." But his anger had left his voice and he sounded tired now. He took the towel and started to soak up as much milk as he could when he found that Sherlock was actually rolling up the legs of his pyjamas before stepping closer. John couldn't help but snort.

Sherlock chose to ignore it and picked up the empty bottle before he started dabbing at the milk with the towel he had pulled out of the drawer. "I will ask Mrs Hudson to clean up properly tomorrow morning."

John looked at him surprised, but all he could see was a head full of curls as Sherlock was still trying to sponge up milk. "No, Sherlock, I'll do it, of course. I really just wanted some milk because I couldn't sleep properly, and now ..." he trailed off, not quite knowing why he felt the need to justify himself.

"There," Sherlock said, and with a sigh stood up again. He looked disoriented for a second and John couldn't help but grin at the fact that despite his body control, the blood would still need just a second longer to reach the head of a tall person who rose quickly, and Sherlock was no exception, "case solved."

"Thank you." He said, even though he wanted to blame him for getting him into this situation in the first place.

Sherlock smiled tiredly at him, just for a split second, before he turned and wandered out of the kitchen. "Good night, John."

John shook his head to clear it. What had just happened? Why had he shown up at this hour of the night to enter the kitchen and then leave again without having gotten anything for himself. For a moment he pictured Sherlock standing in front of the fridge, secretly drinking milk, just like he had. It made him smile widely. He leaned against the counter and rubbed his face. He knew he would not be able to sleep properly anymore, but the prospect of staying up now did not seem too inviting either. He went into the bathroom and washed his feet. John wasn't even surprised when the real motive entered his clouded thoughts. Of course Sherlock had heard something and he had merely checked on the noise and had found him. He wondered what it must have looked like for him, and whether he would remind him of the situation the following days or whether he would delete as irrelevant information.

When he was back in bed he decided that when he’d wake up, he’d feel different. He did not understand why he had been so confused today, as there had been no reason at all. His health was fine as Sherlock had observed quite correctly; and yet, something was off. Moments before sleep took over he understood that the reason for his own confusion was Sherlock's strange behaviour.
Chapter Three

Waking up, John felt absolutely awful. Something told John that he had slept well past noon and that his late night adventure had not helped at all to make him feel better. Checking his own pulse, which had become a habit when his sleep was frequently disrupted by nightmares about the war, he found that it was perfectly normal. Why then did he feel so irritable? He couldn't quite remember falling asleep, but he was surprised that he had even fallen asleep so easily after he had gone back to bed.

When he came down into the kitchen he found the floor cleared of any evidence of the accident, and he made a mental note to thank Mrs Hudson. Sherlock was nowhere to be seen, and there was neither a note nor a text explaining his absence. Maybe he had decided that the case might not require John's help after all. The uncomfortable feeling of disappointment settled in his stomach and then guilt rushed through him and settled heavily in his stomach. It was Wednesday and he should have been at work hours ago. He must have slept through his alarm. He walked back into the living room and just as he picked up his phone he saw that he had received a voice mail.

"John, it's Sarah. Your ... colleague ... friend, whatever he is, rang to say you're unwell and I just wanted to make sure that you're alright. I could come over and bring soup if you want me to, after work I mean. Just let me know how you are. Okay? Bye."

He smiled. Her voice made him much happier, he found. And then, distinctively, he was also incredibly happy about the fact that Sherlock had lied for him so he could sleep in. So whatever he had claimed concerning his health, Sherlock must have realised that he had been wrong and forseen that John would not feel his best when he'd wake up.

Back in the kitchen he decided he needed something stronger than tea, but remembered that he had emptied the last milk on his feet last night. With a sigh he opened the fridge, almost ready to find a new extremity waiting for him. He had started to mentally prepare himself to find body parts in the most unlikely of places before he opened the fridge, but last night, he had not even bothered to look, knowing exactly where the milk stood.

He was more than a little surprised to find a new and unopened bottle of milk in the refrigerator. He would have to buy Mrs Hudson flowers. So Sherlock had obviously taken the time to inform her that he was still in bed and unable to clean the floor and buy milk. It would have been the first time that they had finished the milk and not gotten into an argument about who would buy more. Unable to suppress a smile, he wondered why Sherlock was so completely opposed to grocery shopping.

John ignored the new set of fingers that were floating around in a rather murky looking liquid in a jar, and took out the milk. For one second he expected Sherlock’s deep voice to surprise him again and he still smiled to himself as he made coffee. The day was definitely looking much bright now.

He sat down on the sofa, pondering on the fact that it had just the right length so that Sherlock could lie on it without having to pull up his legs or distort his body in any other way. That was probably why he had chosen it as his number one place to think. The second one was in front of the window, the third one the armchair opposite his own and the fourth, as Sherlock had told him once, was in the bathroom. He had not inquired further, remembering that he had once read in an article that most of the grand ideas had actually been born on top of a toilet seat.

Grinning, he leaned back. The world looked a bit different from the new perspective, and he wondered if Sherlock would mind if he found him sitting on his couch, pretending to be him. He sipped his coffee and reflected on yesterday. He had been incredibly irritable and now that he had
coffee and felt his strength restored, it just seemed silly. But then again, he had felt truly miserable when he had woken up.

His phone rang, but he was sure that this would not be Sherlock. He never called if he could text, just as Sherlock's older brother Mycroft would never text if he could call. For a moment he simply let it ring, not feeling interested in talking to anyone at the moment. However, after a few seconds he realised that he was being unreasonable. There wasn't really a reason to ignore the caller and he wasn't really ill. So he picked up and found Lestrade calling from an unknown number. "Dr. Watson? Could I possibly speak with Sherlock?"

John raised an eyebrow. Why wasn't he with Lestrade, and if he was working on a case, Lestrade should at least know where he was.

"I'm sorry, but I haven't seen him all day."

"That is strange. His phone is ringing out and I need to speak to him. Where are you?"

"At home," he sighed. "I overslept." No reason to lie to the police. "May I ask why?"

"Why am I looking for him, you mean? Well, we received a threat yesterday. At first it seemed as if it was nothing at all, but then during the night, we received a new one, and this time it was clearly a threat directed towards him."

"Are you saying someone threatened Sherlock?" His voice rose an octave, and he checked himself.

"It seems like that is the case, yes. The problem is that we haven't had contact in the last sixteen hours and that is not like him, not when he is on a case."

But that wasn't entirely true. "He could be with his brother, maybe?"

"Do you really think that when suddenly someone mysteriously threatens the consulting detective of the Metropolitan Police he would simply disappear and run to his brother for help, which he has never done willingly, as far as I remember..."

John didn't have an answer. It was true. Sherlock had been more than reluctant to help his brother and his strange political affairs, and only when there had been some kind of bribery involved on Mycroft's side Sherlock had helped him. And John had always gotten an ear full of how much Sherlock disliked it.

"Well, he was here last night. He didn't leave the house until sunrise at the earliest."

"And how do you know that?"

He sounded confused, and John was sure he was implying something, but he decided against explaining their nocturnal encounter in the kitchen. "He was downstairs, I heard him. He must have experimented with explosives. I was wondering why nobody called the police, thinking someone had been shot." So much for not lying to the police. He hoped his story would sound reasonable. The good thing about Sherlock was that there was literally no way of telling whether something was a figment of imagination or reality where his methods were concerned. The stranger it seemed the more likely it was to be true.

"Well, and you checked on him? The mad bastard is going to blow himself up one of these days, and it might have been an actual shot."

"Of course I did. He was perfectly fine."
"Good, so we can establish that he has not been out of contact for sixteen, but approximately six
hours. Please let us know when you hear anything."

"I will."

"Good bye."

He stared at his phone. Lestrade was obviously concerned about Sherlock, and that was
something he had not experienced before. He wondered what the threat had looked like and
whether Sherlock was aware of it. He had seemed distinctly relaxed last night, and yet it made
sense now that he had been up, checking on the noise in the kitchen. But he had said that it wasn’t
dangerous.

Knowing it would be futile, he tried to call Sherlock. The phone rang out, just as Lestrade had
said. So instead of calling, he texted him, considering the possibility of him being unable to reach
the phone; but the text would appear on the screen, so he might at least be able to read it.

He tried to think of something intelligent to write, something which would mean something to
Sherlock, but not his possible enemies.

*Am awake now. Will get flowers for Mrs Hudson. Where are you?*

Nothing. He put the phone on the table, wondering why he was starting to worry. He had only
been half joking last night when he had said he would like for once not to have to save his life, but
Sherlock had said that it wasn’t dangerous, and if he had known that it might be, he would
certainly have informed him. Yet, Lestrade’s concern had been evident in his voice and he felt
uneasy now.

*Dinner tonight at 6? Tas?*

He tried to think like Sherlock might. If he was just away, for whatever reason, he would at least
answer him, or just show up. He might not always tell him what he was up to, but regular dinner
talks had become an outlet for Sherlock to keep John updated on his brain activities. And he had
never missed an invitation. John wondered about that now. It seemed as if their dinners, usually
somewhere close to Tottenham Court Road, were something distinctly human and normal, which
Sherlock had come to enjoy. He wasn’t always eating, but he would always and unfailingly show
up.
John found himself pacing. Something was wrong. He cursed himself for letting Lestrade's worries get to him. It wasn't that unusual for Sherlock to disappear, and he knew that despite telling himself otherwise, he was also perfectly capable of taking care of himself. The only real danger to Sherlock was Sherlock himself; his strange moods and boredom, and even though he had been calm, he had definitely not been bored.

He decided that he would wait, and then he would make his way to *Tas*, the Turkish chair restaurant close to the British Museum where they had recently spent an entire day observing pedestrians passing by or stopping to read the map, eventually finding a murderer the police had been after, because Sherlock recognised a strange behavioural pattern from the way he folded the map. Sherlock had never explained to him how that had been relevant, but on the same day the man had admitted killing his wife, and John had not inquired further.

And yet, something made John uneasy, gnawing at his mind. Something was off, and he couldn't put his finger on it. He felt as if the answer to his questions lay in the day before, in Sherlock's strange behaviour which had caused him to feel strange as well. He forced himself to think about it again. The confusion really had started after he had come home to find Sherlock standing by the window. He hadn't said anything, but Sherlock had made it a habit to distinctly not greet him, considering their relationship to be a constant that was interrupted occasionally by cases or John's work or dates, but which essentially always stayed the same, with no need to mention these breaks explicitly. An occasional 'good morning' or 'good night' was as much of a greeting as he got out of him. John wondered for the first time why that didn't really bother him.

The way he had stood there by the window had clearly hinted at a case; and definitely a standing up case, because the couch had not been in use. So John had settled in his chair and had started reading the paper when his thoughts began travelling. It definitely got awkward from there on. He felt uneasy recalling his own thoughts, but he blamed Sherlock for confusing him, although he didn't quite know what he had done to cause that reaction. He rubbed his face. This was leading him nowhere.

Of course there was also the nocturnal encounter in the kitchen. Had Sherlock really not known that he would scare him? He had looked innocent enough, but with him he could never be sure. Or maybe he could? Maybe he was able to do with Sherlock what he hadn't been able to do with him for a while now?

John found it impossible to think more deeply about this, and yet he couldn't quite push those thoughts away. Had Sherlock tried to hide something from him? Had he known that John would read through his masquerade? Had he been thinking about something important or dangerous or would he show up at the restaurant and ridicule him for thinking that anything was going on at all? He really shouldn't let this get to him so much when he had no proof than anything was wrong in
he really shouldn't let this get to him so much when he had no proof than anything was wrong in the first place with only gut feeling to base his assumptions on.

Unable to stop moving, he grabbed his coat and left the flat. He might as well actually move forward instead of walking the length of the room back and forth. Walking south, he tried to think of the closest flower shop that would have flowers beautiful enough to show his gratitude to Mrs Hudson. It really wasn't that big of a deal, but considering how often and to what extent both of them, but especially Sherlock, abused her good nature and help, a proper thank you was long overdue.

He walked down Gower Street, and at 110 – the department of biology – an elderly lady with a strange big colourful hat was looking up at the plaque of Charles Darwin which he had walked past hundreds of times. When John passed, she turned and said quietly, "don't wait for him." John spun around, fixing her with a stare, but she was already looking back at the plaque.

"Pardon me? What did you just say?" The lady turned towards him, looking not directly at him but down the street. "I didn't say anything, my lad."

John stared at her a little longer, but she took one more look at the blue plaque and then walked away. "What in the world?" He was sure that he had understood what she had said, but it didn't make any sense. But then again, this was London and he should not be surprised by strange characters walking around, saying strange things. And compared with some of the people he had gotten to know through Sherlock, she was pretty much normal.

Hands in his pockets, John walked towards the restaurant. He sat down at a table by the window, now sitting where Sherlock had sat the last time, the perfect spot to observe the street. John looked forward to seeing him. He wanted to know what was going on and then go back to living his regular slightly unconfused life as a doctor and semi-bodyguard of Sherlock Holmes. He chuckled, realising what he considered to be normal these days. He was clearly out of his mind. Checking his watch, he ordered a starter.

Chapter End Notes

Just a few things. In this verse, both bedrooms are upstairs. I started writing this before I had taken the time to consider the proper makeup of the flat, and took a friend's London house as inspiration, and then just decided to keep it that way. So, living room and kitchen are on one and the two bedrooms plus bathroom are on the level above.

I also relocated Baker Street; which is North Gower Street here. So the geography of this is generally realistic and exact, except that I exchanged NGS with Baker Street.
Chapter Five

Chapter Notes

There's a bit of John/Sarah in here. I hope that won't scare you off. Nothing explicit.

An hour later, Sherlock had not shown up. It was now just after 6 o'clock, and John expected him to walk through the door any second. At 7 o'clock he realised that he might not have misheard that old lady after all. His phone was still silent, and no sign of life came from Sherlock, but if that old woman had actually spoken to him, he had to be around somewhere. She had delivered a message, and that message was intended for him to calm him down and stay out of whatever was going on.

Just as he dialled Lestrade's number to inform him of the news, his phone rang. For one second he prayed that it would be Sherlock, but very soon he realised that was Sarah calling. "Fuck." He grunted at the phone. She had promised to come over with soup, and he hadn't even bothered calling her back to tell her how he was.

"Sarah." He said, trying to sound somewhat surprised by her call.
"Hello John. Why aren't you at home?"
"What?"
"Well, I'm here, and your landlady just came back from her trip and she let me in, but nobody's home."
And here we go, he thought. "Sarah, I'm sorry. I wasn't feeling very well today and ..."
"Yes, so I've been told, but where are you? Are you at the doctor's? I could have taken a look at you."
"No, no, I don't want to be your patient."
"Really now, you wouldn't be my patient. I thought that's what girlfriends do, you know. They care for their sick boyfriends and if they happen to be doctors, they might make use of their knowledge to help their ... boyfriend."
John smiled despite himself. "You almost said patient," he pointed out.
"Okay, I might have. Are you on your way home?"
"Yes, I'm taking a cab, I'll be down in twenty minutes." He would walk slowly and get home just in time.
"Good, see you then."
"Bye Sarah."
"Bye John."

He felt awful for not telling her the truth, but she had offered him the easy way out and he was glad to take it. A part of his mind told him that it was unfair to her and not exactly model boyfriend behaviour, but he had been on edge and worried for the past few hours he didn't want to think about what was morally right and what wasn't.

He walked back north, passing Darwin's plaque again. Looking up at it he wondered if Sherlock would ever get one for his service to mankind, or at least to the general population of southern England. Grinning, he remembered him adamantly refusing his brother's suggestion of a knighthood.

Sherlock seemed to think in similar patterns as Darwin had, always wanting to know more, always inquiring further, burying himself in his cases until neither sleep nor food would be acceptable before they were solved. And there had been the issue with music, a half-hearted justification for his violin playing in the middle of the night "Do you know what Darwin says about music? He claims that the power of producing and appreciating it existed among the human..."
race long before the power of speech was arrived at." John smiled, remembering how earnest he had sounded then.

Taking a left towards Tottenham Court Road to lengthen the way, he thought of an ailment that would justify a doctor's appointment, but that wouldn't be identified as false by Sarah.

As he continued north he found the perfect solution. He had been to Harley Street, seeing a physiotherapist for his shoulder. Sarah knew that his limping had only been psychosomatic, but his shoulder? Now that was a real scar, and scar tissue hurt sometimes and muscles tensed up and caused headaches and general indisposition. Watching cars and bicycles pass him slowly, he wondered why he didn't feel worse about lying to Sarah, of all people. Surely he could just tell her the truth about why he had disappeared. But it was too late. He had picked up Sherlock's lie and needed to stick to it to not offend her.

When he arrived home, he hoped to find Sherlock sitting on the couch, regarding Sarah with a look that let her know that he knew everything about her, but was civil enough not to say anything. He knew she wasn't particularly fond of him, especially since he happened to accidentally show up at their dates on a disturbingly regular basis, but she had calmly tolerated him so far.

Strangely disappointed, he found only her sitting on the couch, a cup of tea in her hand and a wide smile on her face. "Finally! I thought they had kidnapped you or that Mr Holmes had forced you to help him with one of his strange adventures. Well, it would be a kind of kidnapping then, I suppose."

He chuckled. "It's only kidnapping if you leave a ransom note, right?"

"Come here, John." She pulled him down on the sofa, looking at him, checking for obvious signs of illness. "Where does it hurt?" she asked, clearly speaking to her patient, and not her boyfriend.

"I felt awful last night, and then all morning and I just slept for quite a long time and when I couldn't lie down anymore, I decided to see the physiotherapist."

"Do you feel better now?"

"Quite, but I think I want to go and lie down again. He gave me a shot in the shoulder and I feel quite knackered now."

She smiled. "Well, I'll warm up the soup and then tuck you in, okay?"

He nodded, and as soon as she had stood up he walked over to his armchair and shook up the Union Jack pillow, but instead of sitting on it, he wrapped his arms around it like he would had he been a child. It comforted him, and he wondered why he needed comfort when his girlfriend was right there to deliver exactly that. He hadn't even felt like kissing her. It was almost as if by pretending to feel unwell, he was beginning to feel it.

Sarah came back, raising an eyebrow at him, but not saying anything. She handed him a cup of tea and then shook her head. "You should take off tomorrow as well, you do look like you could use a break."

"Can you manage?"

She smiled. "Well, I hate not to have you there to chat me up in between patients, but I think I can, yes."

"Thank you, Sarah."

He sounded sad, even to his own ears. He couldn't quite explain why, but he had the distinct feeling that he did not deserve her kindness.

"Are you okay, John?"

He shrugged, not knowing what to answer her. Thankfully, the soup started to boil and she hurried back into the kitchen to stir it. Eventually she brought him a bowl and a spoon, after having encountered several dead cockroaches in a jar right next to the soup bowls. Her gasp told him that even she had gotten used to these things, after having screamed and dropped three dinner plates on her first introduction to the content of their cupboard.

"Thanks." He said, starting to eat very slowly, blowing on each spoon to cool the soup a little.

"Do you want me to leave you so that you can get some rest?" She sounded like she knew the answer already.

"Oh, I don't mind." Perfectly safe. He wouldn't be the one suggesting for her to leave and she
could do what she wanted. Again, he knew that he was being unfair, but he was supposedly ill, so she wouldn't take it personally. She was, after all, a doctor familiar with stubborn patients. But why was he planning his answers strategically. With her, of all people, he should not have to be careful.

"Right." She looked at him in a way that made it clear that she wasn't satisfied with his answer, but she did not ask again. "I will tell Mrs Hudson that you're up here, so she can check on you." She put on her coat. "Oh, and from doctor to patient, you should get more sleep. Don't get too involved in his work, you have your own job and your own life, you don't need to split yourself into two. That's not healthy."

He tried to smile, but wasn't sure whether he succeeded. Things were definitely not as they had been two days ago.

"Bye, John. Get better soon."

"Thanks, Sarah."

He breathed a sigh of relief when the door closed behind her.
Mrs Hudson! He had forgotten to get her flowers. He pushed the pillow away and put the soup bowl on the mantelpiece. He would have to go out again and buy some. Just as he pulled on his coat, he heard the familiar click of their landlady’s heels approaching.
"Dr. Watson, what are you doing up? Your girlfriend informed me that you are ill and in need of some motherly care." She looked him up and down. "You certainly look tired. And are you feeling cold?" He nervously ran his hands over his coat, knowing that there was no way of him getting out of the house now. "Come, we'll get you to bed."
"Mrs Hudson, I just wanted to say thank you."
"Oh, not at all, my dear. I'm glad to feel useful."
"No, I mean, for everything else you do for us; particularly for cleaning up the kitchen this morning and buying milk." She gave him a strange look. "It must be the fever," she muttered to herself.
"No, I don't think it's fever, and I am serious. Thank you for what you do for us. I wanted to get you flowers but then … I forgot." He felt his cheeks flush.
Mrs Hudson took a proper look at him and held the back of her hand against his cheek.
"Definitely fever."
John knew that there was no way of making her see that he wasn't behaving strangely because he felt under the weather and that he was serious with his appreciation, but Mrs Hudson was clearly enjoying it to mother him a bit.
She took him by the arm, obviously concerned that he might not be able to master the stairs on his own and led him into his bedroom. Then she looked around, raising an eyebrow, but she didn't say anything. His bedroom was clean and very ordered. Everything had its place and purpose, and there nothing that he did not need or use regularly. A remnant of his military days. He had only been in Sherlock's room once, and he had been surprised that his friend did not injure himself on the way from the door to the bed. It was stuffed with all kinds of things. Not only weapons that had to be illegal in Britain, but also boxes full of pictures and files, test tubes and a lot of things that he hadn't managed to identify in the few seconds he had stared at the mess. Sherlock had brought him into his room so he could help him carry down a few boxes of files that he needed to review, and he had given him a look that clearly told him to shut up when he had opened his mouth to voice his concern. Surprisingly, Sherlock had managed to step over the barricades without much ado and found the boxes without having to search for them. Long legs certainly seemed to be an advantage in his case.
After Mrs Hudson had made John take off his shoes, he was pushed down on his bed with gentle force. "I will bring you some tea and a hot-water bottle. Do lie down and get some rest. I will check on you now and then. Oh, and where is Sherlock? I expected he would be here. He mentioned that he would be in when I told him that I was going to leave for Brighton for two days so he could help me with the …"
"Wait, what do you mean, for two days?" John was confused now, and he wasn't sure whether it was because it now seemed that it must have been Sherlock who had cleaned up and bought the milk or because he had intended to be at home when Mrs Hudson came back and wasn't. She saw his confusion and shook her head. "Never mind, dear, he must have gone out then. Don't you worry."
For one second John expected her to actually tuck him in and press a kiss to his forehead like his mother had done to him when he was sick, because she most certainly behaved like his mother right now. But she left him sitting there, a knot of anxiety forming in his stomach. He wished he could do what Mrs Hudson had suggested; he wished he could just close his eyes and forget what was happening, but then again, he knew that a few things needed to be thought
through, and no matter how strange they were, he could not avoid dealing with the chaos in his head and the potential danger Sherlock might be in.

He took off his jacket and let it drop to the floor. A little disorder couldn't hurt, could it? Lying back he closed his eyes, tucking his arms under his head. This was definitely not a normal day. Normal days were filled with Sherlock pacing the living room, his face lighting up as soon as Lestrade called him, an outrageously happy grin when he knew he was dealing with something new, something he didn't know the answer to right away. Normal was, when he was on his feet in a second, walking over the coffee table, searching for data on the internet on his phone and at the same time throwing on his coat, stopping in the door to turn around to him with that wide smile, not having to say anything, because John would follow him, that was a given. That was normal.

Even Sherlock being bored and ending up being so incredibly stupid for someone so incredibly intelligent that John had to take away his toys, usually a weapon of some sort, or at least an extremely toxic chemical, so he wouldn't kill them both; all of that was normal.

This, all of what was happening now, was not normal. And he suddenly realised that things weren't normal, because Sherlock wasn't with him. He was missing, not only in the literal sense, but his presence was missing, his energy and his excitement, his smile and the spark in his eyes and his soft voice when he said his name, chiding him fondly.

John's eyes flew open. This was definitely not going into a direction that he had intended. But then it must have been Sherlock who cleaned up that mess and who had bought milk. Sherlock had bought milk. The feeling of triumph was for one second overriding the feeling of anxiety, now mixed with confusion.

But why wasn't he here? Why didn't he answer his messages and why had he not turned up for dinner? Had he flown to another country spontaneously, following a trace? Was he so intently focusing on a case that he didn't even notice the incoming texts? Was he dead, lying somewhere in a deserted alleyway? "God, John, stop it." He needed to think of something else. He was driving himself mad and he had no reason to.

Except for all the obvious clues, a little voice said in his head.

He fished for his jacket on the floor and pulled out his phone. He called him, but again his phone was ringing out. He waited, until the voice mail announcement started playing. He was shocked by how comforting he found Sherlock's voice.

"Busy, obviously." The beep that followed sounded too shrill in his ears.

"Sherlock, it's me. Please, please call me back. I need to know you're okay. Just call me, please." He knew he sounded desperate, but he could no longer trick himself into believing that he was okay. Something had gone wrong, something that Sherlock had not anticipated.

He heard Mrs Hudson come back up the stairs and he lay still, pretending to sleep. If he slept she would leave soon and possibly take longer to check on him again, and he needed to look for clues. She sighed as she stopped to look at him. "Poor boy. Completely exhausted." Another sigh and she placed a cup of tea carefully on his nightstand. Then she placed the hot-water bottle that she had promised against his chest, making sure it'd stay there and quietly left the room.

John waited until her footsteps had disappeared. He felt incredibly touched by her action, and decided that she would get flowers after all. He got out of bed, trying to move as quietly as possible. He knew that Mrs Hudson rarely heard Sherlock when he called to her from upstairs, but John also knew that she decided not to hear. He started to understand why their landlady had felt the need to unplug her phone only days after they had moved in. She had said that nobody would call her anyway these days, but it occurred to John that Sherlock had known the real reason, looking at her in a strange inquiring way that she completely ignored. Now he wished for nothing more than for Sherlock to call.

But where could he start? Downstairs, and risk Mrs Hudson hearing his footsteps? No, two floors up he would be relatively safe, and he could hear her and pretend he was just using the bathroom, in case she decided to check on him. Sherlock's room it was, then.

He had the strangest urge to knock before entering his room. It didn't feel right to do it without permission, and there was still the possibility that he might come home any minute. He was desperately clinging to that hope, but deep inside of him he knew that he would not just come
With a silent apology he opened the door. The room looked very much the same as he remembered. Boxes everywhere, books, pictures, newspapers sprawled about the floor and the bed. Something seemed strange about that, and as he stood there, taking in the chaos and trying to make sense of it, he understood that the bed looked like Sherlock hadn't slept in it. John ran his fingers through his hair. What had he been up to?

He entered the room, carefully sidestepping the objects on the floor, trying to make as little noise as possible. If he hadn't slept in his bed, where had he slept? For one second he imagined Sherlock having a girlfriend, a lover, someone who he spent his nights with, sneaking away in the middle of the night only to return in the morning, keeping up appearances. He couldn't help but chuckle. No, he couldn't see Sherlock with a woman.

When he had made his way to the window he looked outside. Everything seemed normal. It was dark and the street lights dipped the street into a dim yellow light that made it almost impossible to see anything, especially since he had turned on the light in Sherlock's room. But he did notice movement down on the street. It was as if a dark form suddenly detached itself from the shadow of the door of the opposite building, moving almost fluidly down the street, disappearing from his view.

What was going on? He could only imagine that Mycroft had sent someone to check on Sherlock, who, seeing light and a person in his room, was satisfied that he was back home. Mycroft: he should ask him about Sherlock. He would surely know what was going on, where he was, and why he did not answer his messages. He dialled the number, but instead of a ring or even Mycroft's voice mail, he only got white noise.

That freaked him out properly. For a few seconds he stood there, by the window, forcing himself to breathe steadily. He could not let himself panic, not now, not ever. He realised that in the past, he had been fearless and strong, as he should be as a soldier, but he was not in Afghanistan anymore, where he had been fearless and strong because he needed to be. Being back in London, he had been fearless and strong because of Sherlock, because he needed him to be. And now he was gone and he felt at a loss of what to do. There had always been a path to follow, a path that Sherlock walked down, making it unnecessary for him to think too deeply about what they were doing. He trusted Sherlock completely, and therefore he could focus on the task at hand. But now that he was alone, he was completely unsure of what to do.

He waited for the familiar adrenaline rush. His body should be alert, his senses expanding, his thoughts clearer; but it did not come. Instead he felt his heart hammer away in his chest and his spirits sinking. Closing the curtains, he decided that the only thing he could do was to move forward and look for clues just like he had intended. Feeling a familiar and unwelcome sting of pain in his leg, he knelt down on the floor and started reading through the papers scattered all around him.

Chapter End Notes

I always pictured Sherlock's bedroom as an extension of the chaos he caused in the living room and kitchen. To me that makes more sense than the meticulous order we see in the series.
Chapter Seven

It felt wrong, but he couldn't imagine any other way of finding out what Sherlock had been up to. After a few minutes he had tried to call Mycroft again, with the same result. The overwhelming feeling that something was critically wrong made his head spin. He tried to disturb the chaos as little as possible, knowing that Sherlock would probably throw a fit if he tempered with the – at least to him – perfectly logical order of things.

Most of the names of cases didn't mean anything to John. Some papers were references to solved cases and he even found a stack of papers that turned out to be a printed version of his blog. The sheet on top showed the entry he had written two days ago before he had gone to work, complaining about and praising Sherlock and his eccentricities and skills. Two days ago, when everything had been as usual, when Sherlock had been brooding over something, fingers tapping against each other, thumbs tucked under his chin in a way that only movie villains would go for, but Sherlock had not even regarded him with an answer when John had pointed that out to him.

Then something else struck him as unusual. Last night in the kitchen he had said that he would tell Mrs Hudson to clean up in the morning, but he had known that she was gone. Why then had he told him that? Had he done it on purpose to distract him from his intention to do it himself? That didn't sound like him. But he couldn't have simply forgotten. Sherlock never forgot anything, well, except for when it seemed unimportant to him. He let out a sigh. He needed to stop to overthink everything; sometimes the answer was just that simple.

John moved to the bed. Why hadn't Sherlock slept in it? There was, however, always the possibility that he had slept in it and then made the bed in the same meticulous manner that he dressed himself, later adding the files and papers, giving it a seemingly chaotic air. John felt himself calming down. He started to see ghosts everywhere, and he couldn't let that happen. He refused to feel lost without Sherlock, who might just as well be off somewhere, having fallen asleep in the mortuary for lack of sleep that he was responsible for.

The files on Sherlock's bed did not help him at all. All of the cases were at least three years old and most of them were solved art theft cases. Then, on the pillow he found a folder that was adorned with a photo of an ape. Something about that seemed important, but he couldn't put his finger on it. John leafed through the sheets of paper inside, printed out newspaper articles, something about an exhibition at the British Library and a reference to *On the Origin of Species*. He sighed and closed the folder.

When he had finished speed-reading through all the papers on the bed he looked at the great number of boxes that were stacked up against the wall next to the door. He would never find anything here.

"Help me, Sherlock," he whispered into the silence of the room. He knew it was ridiculous, but he needed some hints. If there was any chance that Sherlock had known he might get into trouble, he would have left him a clue, and something obvious, too, even though John was not sure if Sherlock had any idea what level of obvious was needed for him to actually find it. One of Sherlock's greatest frustrations was John's inability to understand things at the same pace that he did. John would never even pretend to know a fraction of what Sherlock knew and what he was able to perceive and he was quite aware of it. Nevertheless, Sherlock often told him that he was getting better at reading the signs right and putting clues together to form a greater picture. He had to trust himself to be able to do that now.

He turned back to the folder on the pillow and decided to take it to his room. It was funny to be consciously confronted with Darwin twice within a few hours. And then it dawned on him. The
old lady had given him a clue, she had spoken to him, and she had looked at that plaque on purpose. Something on the plaque must be able to tell him what was happening. But he knew it was impossible for him to go out now, even though he dreaded a night of immobility while Sherlock might be somewhere …

"Stop it." He tried to push the thoughts of his friend injured or dead out of his mind. No, if he was dead, the police would know. Whoever killed Sherlock Holmes would not stay silent about it. It was a small comfort, but it would have to do for now.

He quietly walked back into his room, drinking a bit of the tea that was now long cold. His computer was in the living room, but he needed it. With a sigh he climbed down the stairs, trying to make no noise at all. When he entered the living room he was again surprised by how different it seemed - empty, as if it had changed into a less familiar place. His laptop sat on the coffee table next to Sherlock's violin case. He needed to find him. He needed him. The realisation let him stagger backwards against his chair. He was not simply worried that something might have happened to him; he was worried that he would not come back at all, that he would not sit on the couch anymore, not pace the room, not twirl around when he had an idea, not be there, and he needed him to be there.

"God, Sherlock, what are you doing to me?" He whispered into his fists. For a few minutes he just sat there, staring at the wall above the couch, the bullet holes still visible. He had left him that night, unable to deal with Sherlock's mood, and unable to think too deeply about why it bothered him so much that his friend would go and shoot the wall out of boredom.

He turned and looked at the skull on the mantel piece. It stared back at him. No answers from Sherlock's only other friend. He suddenly felt the urge to take it and throw it against the wall. It was silly, but for a second he felt jealous, because he knew the skull had probably heard more about why Sherlock was gone than he had. Gritting his teeth he stood up and faced the fireplace. There was a small strip of paper tucked underneath the skull. His heart took up speed.

It was a smaller version of the advert for the exhibition on Darwin that he had found in the folder in Sherlock's bedroom. So maybe Sherlock had made sure that the clues were obvious enough for him. As he turned around his eyes fell onto the floor in front of the fridge and his heart sank. Sherlock had always been able to surprise him, usually coming from completely unexpected directions, but always making sense in the end, yet this one act of him washing the floor and buying milk was more surprising to him than any deduction he had ever spelled out for him.

John grabbed his laptop and walked back upstairs, not caring about noises anymore. Back in his bedroom he called Sherlock again, this time anticipating the two worded message.

"Sherlock, call me, text me, send a pigeon, a message in a bottle, a smoke signal, anything. Just let me know you're okay. I need you …" he stopped, silently staring ahead, listening to the words echoing in his mind for a few seconds before he continued. "I need you to be okay."

His room was awfully quiet when he put down the phone. He felt that he was making a fool of himself, and he wasn't sure if Sherlock would understand why he was sounding so freaked out. He had never seen Sherlock panic, he had never seen him react before he had thought things through, he had never let emotions come in the way of his deduction.

Switching on his computer, he racked his brain, trying to remember if Sherlock had ever mentioned the British Library at all and if Darwin had popped up in their conversations lately. No, he couldn't think of anything that might suggest that Sherlock had been thinking about either, but then again, he had the folder lying on his pillow. So in case he had actually slept in his bed, no matter how neatly made it had looked, he must have thought it important.
The British Library was only a few minutes away and in the morning he would go and check if he could find anything suspicious. It was strange, because the Museum of Natural History was much more likely to have an exhibition on Darwin. Why would Sherlock care about the Library? He searched for information on the internet, but it was flooded with endless pages on the scientist's 200th birthday. The library page only mentioned a few books, some original writings, and introduced selected pages from *Species*. It just didn't add up to anything. There was no reported theft, no police reports, nothing that seemed to be out of the order.

With a sigh he got up, walked to the window and dialled Lestrade's number.

"Sherlock?" Lestrade sounded on edge.

"No, it's me, John Watson."

"Dr. Watson. Have you heard from him?"

"No, yes, maybe. I don't know. Have you?"

"No, not a word. I can't believe he's not getting in touch. But what do you mean, you don't know."

"I think I've received a message, but I'm not sure. Today I encountered a woman who was talking to me, completely out of the blue … well, it doesn't matter. She said, 'don't wait for him.' I didn't know what to make of that, but she said that as she was looking at the Darwin plaque down in Gower Street and I just found a folder with information on a Darwin exhibition at the British Library. I'm not sure what to make of that."

"Listen, Dr. Watson. There is something I haven't told you, something confidential." Finally, some answers, he breathed a sigh of relief. "The threat we received, the first one, it concerned you."

"What?" He felt as if he had been punched, trying to make sense of what the DI was telling him.

"What do you mean, it concerned me. Why was I not told?"

Lestrade hesitated. "I shouldn't tell you this, but considering that Sherlock has disappeared I might as well tell you what the reason for that might be."

"Me?" He started to understand that Sherlock was possibly in danger because of him. A burning sensation settled in his stomach and for a second he thought he might be sick. He swallowed against the feeling and cleared his throat, hoping not to sound too affected by Lestrade's words.

"You." Lestrade waited a few seconds before he continued. "Someone sent us a threat, saying they would … eliminate you for interfering with police work. We had no idea who it was or where it might come from. The request, well, order was not to involve you again if we wanted you to live."

"It's not really dangerous." Sherlock had known, and he had tried to protect him. He had made it seem as if everything was fine so he wouldn't follow him. He had known that he was in danger and had managed to pretend that nothing was wrong. He hadn't been bored, and John had not been able to see through that. He had realised that something was off; something about the way Sherlock looked at him, the way he reacted to him, the way he had followed him into the kitchen and surprised him for the first time, when he had made tea, and again at night. He had not slept in his room, but on the couch, knowing he could defend their place better from the living room than from his own bedroom. John was very familiar with that kind of strategic thinking, but it pained him that Sherlock, who wasn’t a soldier, was resorting to such methods. That was why the bed was made and covered in files and that was why he had been there so quickly when he had drank
"Oh God!" John felt his knees give. With his free hand he held on to the window sill and slowly let himself slide down the wall, cowering there with his knees pulled close like a scared child.

"What was the second threat?" He did not want to know, but he needed to.

"Well, that one was directed at Sherlock. It pretty much said that he was to ensure you would not interfere with our work anymore, but that they could not trust for you to do that, so they would make sure by holding him responsible for your action. Essentially, it said the same as the one that was directly intended for you, but the second one was sent to Sherlock."

"Wait, so it was him who told you about the two threats?"

"He phoned me, yes, but after that we lost contact."

"How is that possible? Why would he …? Never mind. Does that mean if I just sit around here and do nothing, we'll all be okay?"

Lestrade sighed audibly. "Possibly, but I'm afraid even this conversation might put you and him in danger. And they obviously don't think that you can stay out of it."

"Why haven't they told him to stop interfering with your work? What good am I to you without him. All I do is help him collect data, so I'm more or less working for him."

"And he's working for us."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Neither do we."
John ran his hand through his hair. How was this happening? How did something that merely confused him at first turn into a matter of life and death? And why had he not received the threat himself. If he had known about it, he could have just refused to help the police. He could have just done what Sarah suggested; concentrate on his work and his own life. But they knew; whoever had sent that threat knew that he couldn't stay away from Sherlock, and he couldn't refuse to help him, just as he now already formed the plan to find the person behind all of this. And Sherlock must have known as well, otherwise he would have said something to him.

Something about that seemed comforting, even though he knew the effect of that realisation should be the opposite.

"John, do you want us to send someone down?"

"No. If your people show up here, it means that I involved you and that's exactly what I can't do. I will go to bed now, I'm knackered. If you hear anything from him, call me."

Lestrade sounded a bit irritated. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Fine, I'm fine." He said it more to himself, trying to sound convinced. "Who should I call, in case something happens?"

"I don't know, John. If you think it's safe to call us, then do, but I cannot guarantee…" The line broke, and white noise replaced Lestrade's voice. John dropped the phone in shock. This was anything but normal. Someone was already here, listening in, knowing that he was actively trying to find Sherlock. They knew he had been trying to reach Mycroft and now Scotland Yard. The feeling of utter loneliness crushed down on him and he found it hard to breathe.

Against his instincts, he stood up and pulled on his jacket. He needed air. He needed to walk and he knew that he would go mad if he stayed in here, letting whoever it was play with him like they did. He left the phone where it had ended up, under the bed. If they decided to trace him, it would not lead them to him. He opened the drawer and took out his gun. He disliked carrying it around, but it had saved both of their lives more than once and his gut feeling told him that he needed at least one thing to make him feel safe, otherwise he would not get far.

John wrote a note for Mrs Hudson and locked the door, just in case. "I'm afraid it's not getting better, don't come in, you might catch it as well. Good night, John." Then, very carefully, he tiptoed down the stairs, feeling ridiculous. But if Mrs Hudson heard him, she would know that he was up to something and that would place her in immediate danger, too. Letting himself out, he closed the door quietly. Instinctively, he took a right and then a left, walking towards the British Library. O'Neill's was just closing across the street, people filing out of the pub and he stopped in front of the heavy iron gate looking up at the looming statue of Newton in the court yard.

He wondered if Sherlock was here, somewhere, close. He felt the urge to call out for him, just yell his name loudly, but he knew it would be silly and attract unwanted attention.

"Can I help you, ma' e?" A young unshaven man in clothes that were too wide for him had stopped next to him. "I's not open at nigh', you know?" John frowned and looked at him. "Would you mind … sorry, could I possibly borrow your phone?" The man looked at him sharply and then whistled through his teeth. "Trouble with the birds, 'ey?" Watson couldn't help but smile sadly. "Something of the sort, yeah."
"Sure ma'e" The man handed him the phone while he dug in his pockets with the other hand to produce a pack of cigarettes, offering them to John. "Thanks," he said, shaking his head. He dialled Sherlock's number and the call went straight to voice mail. Again, hearing Sherlock's voice made him feel strange, like he was really just standing next to him, digging away at a case.

He hung up, deleted the number he had called from the registry and handed the man his phone back. "Thank you." He said, shrugging, walking on towards Kings Cross.

"No trouble. Good luck with the birds."

John couldn't help but smile. London was full of surprises, and he was glad that he had decided to stay. A decision that had put him in the position he was in now in the first place. His life would look completely different had he not moved in with Sherlock. Tracing the red bricks with his eyes as he walked along the outer wall of the library, he found that it was the best decision he had ever made in his life. He hoped he would still be able to say that tomorrow or the day after.

He ended up walking around the whole library building without noticing anything strange. There was no light, so apparently the cleaners had not yet started or were already gone. For a while he considered climbing into the inner court, but he didn't want to be arrested, as that would most certainly put Sherlock and himself in more danger than they were in already.

When he reached the iron gate again he sat down on the stairs leading up towards it. This was getting him nowhere. His eyes fell upon a notice board that was attached to the wall to his left. A poster with the famous drawing of Darwin as an ape caught his attention. It had to be here, he was sure now. Something was going to happen and Sherlock had known about it.

Had he known too much?

He needed to sleep, he could feel his body aching from the tension he had felt all day and he forced himself to relax. His shoulders fell and he breathed deeply. If he walked back home, Mrs Hudson might hear him, but if he stayed out here he would most likely freeze to death. He wondered how the homeless survived winter, apart from those who did indeed die.

The homeless! Sherlock's homeless network. They knew him, and they occasionally worked for him; at least some of them. If he could find someone they would surely be able to help him find Sherlock.

He stood up and turned around himself once, thinking of a place where he could find someone. Kings Cross was unlikely because Sherlock had once pointed out that the police had started to chase them away from train stations. He would try Cartwright Gardens, although he had never seen anyone sleep on the benches there.

He found it empty and moved on to Travistock Square. It was easy enough to climb over the fence that surrounded the garden and he found two figures huddled up in a heap of newspapers and rags under a tree. He now realised that he had nothing but money to give them if they were able to help him. By the look of it, some warm clothes would be much more needed.

"Excuse me," he started, hoping not to startle them, but they had long seen him approach. "I'm so sorry to bother you, but I was wondering if you could help me?"

"You're the Doctor, ain't ye?"

"John Watson, yes." He wondered why he was even surprised by the fact that they knew who he was. Sherlock certainly didn't know everyone, but apparently he had been lucky to find two people who did know exactly who Sherlock was, and him, too, for that matter.
"Ah, where's the Brain?"

John smiled at the title, but at the same time understood that they probably knew as little about Sherlock's whereabouts as he did.

"I was hoping you could tell me," he admitted, being glad that they were at least talking to him after he had intruded on them. "He's been gone for a while and I was wondering if you might know what he was up to?"

"Hmm, last time I saw him was a few days ago and he wanted to know if we had seen anyone with duffle bags, remember?" The other figure was speaking now. "I think he was waiting for something to happen down by Euston Road. But what it was is a mystery."

John chewed on his lip. At least he had been in contact with his spies, and considering he had been speaking to those staying close to the British Library and Euston Station, it might just be possible that Sherlock did indeed anticipate for something to happen in the library. He couldn't be sure, of course, but at this point he was happy to take whatever they were willing to give him.

"Has he said anything else? He doesn't answer his phone, and he left no message, nothing. I can't find him."

One of the figures peeled itself out of the rags and stood up. He realised it was a woman, and despite her deep and tired voice she seemed quite young. "The word on the street is that you put him in danger, Doctor."

"What?" He automatically took a step back.

"See, what we heard was that someone wants your head, and that Holmes is trying to prevent that. Nobody knows who is behind this, but it's certain that you're dealing with people who mean what they say and he might get into a lot of trouble because of that."

"But you know nothing about it?"

"We could ask someone who might know something."

"You could?"

"If you care to buy me and my hubby some dinner …"

John smiled, his stomach in a knot. "Certainly."

She smiled back, or so it seemed in the dim light that filtered through the tree from the street lamp and turned to help the other figure out of the pile of rags. Together they covered it with a large piece of plastic foil, securing the ends with little rocks and turned to go. They did not climb over the fence, but opened the gate with a large key.

"Where did you get this from?"

The woman smiled proudly. "We know people," was all she said.

In the light of the street lamp John got a first good look at the man. He was also much younger than he had thought.

"I'm sorry, but may I ask why you live out here? I mean, how old are you? How did you end up here?"
The woman looked at him from the side, seemingly pitying him for his ignorance. And he felt entirely ignorant in that moment. "Sometimes it's not a choice, you know. Sometimes life simply fucks you over no matter your age or where you come from and you have nowhere left to go. At least we have a home here."

"But aren't you incredibly cold? Why don't you stay in the shelters?"

She smiled again, but it wasn't a happy smile. He could see that there were a few teeth missing. "Me and Jack are together, he's all I need. And the shelters aren't really an option. They steal there and treat you like dirt. No, we're good out here and the fresh air is nice."

They walked until they found a fish and chips shop that was still open. John told them to buy whatever they wanted, and was rewarded with another wide toothless smile, a genuinely happy one this time.

"I'm Connie, by the way. Nice to meet you Doctor."

John smiled, thankful that they did not see him as someone who had put the most important man, or, well, in Connie's case, probably the second most important man in their lives in danger and paid for the food they had ordered. As he picked up the change he noted, more in the back of his mind than consciously, that Sherlock was also the most important man in his life. He felt his throat tighten and he had to swallow down the sudden flare of fear that rose in him.

They sat down by the window. In the bright neon light he could see how dirty they were, and he wondered about their history. So many stories nobody cared to hear. He became intensely aware of his own privileges.

"So, Sherlock Holmes is missing." Connie picked up the thread where John had dropped it. "He must be around somewhere, though. I mean, I don't know anyone who has seen him, but we would have heard if something had happened to him. He has ears and eyes all over the city."

"Who is the person you said who might know something?"

"The night watch," she answered, and just as she took a bite from her burger, a bulky man entered the shop. He waved at the man behind the counter, grumbling "the usual," and sat down next to John.

"'ello."

John looked at him and wondered how he had ended up in this situation.

Connie chuckled and nodded at him. "You haven't seen Holmes around, have you?"

The big man shrugged his shoulders. "He's been in and out, but I haven't seen him today."

"In and out of where?" John couldn't help but ask.

The man looked at him funnily. "The Doctor?" he asked, making John sigh.

"Yes, I'm the Doctor. I'm looking for Sherlock and I need to find him. Can you help me?"

The man looked at him in a way that made him feel uncomfortable. Then he pulled out his walkie talkie and started speaking into it.

"Eleven fifteen, what's up"

"Code delta."

"Delta, you sure?"

"Positive."

"Alright. Over."

The conversation ended.

"What was that? What's code delta?" John stared at the man and then at Connie and Jack. He felt that he knew nothing about their world and he wondered how Sherlock had managed to become part of it.

"Delta is code red."

"Ah." He nodded and then shook his head. "What?"

"Highest stage of alarm. It's an order to keep eyes and ears open for him, that's why you're here, no?"

"I suppose …" He was confused. Had he just triggered a city-wide search of the underworld for Sherlock Holmes? The thought baffled him. "Thank you."

"If anyone sees him or hears of him, we'll let you know. But you should go now, because if the rumours are true, you're putting us in danger by being here."

John nodded and got up. He had spent almost all of the money in his wallet on the dinner he had bought the couple, but he placed the last few notes on the table. At the questioning look, he smiled and shrugged. "Not much, I know, but it's the least I can do …"

Connie took the money and pocketed it. "Thank you, Doctor. It was interesting meeting you personally. I've only ever seen you from a distance, not to sound stalkerish or anything. But you're around. Take care of yourself. Oh, and he meant the library."

John left the shop still a little overwhelmed by the experience. He wondered what exactly Sherlock had been telling them about him as they seemed to know a great deal more about him than he had been aware of.
Chapter Nine

It was now late enough to be sure that Mrs Hudson would be asleep, but somehow going home did not sound too tempting. Someone had been watching their place, and he did not feel comfortable being watched. And yet, he had been entirely unaware that apparently, Sherlock's homeless network kept an eye on him and he barely ever noticed the surveillance that Mycroft kept them under either.

Mycroft. Why had his phone not connected? And why was the conversation interrupted when he was on the phone to Lestrade. It couldn't be a coincidence. The homeless were the only ones he could trust at the moment, he figured.

And they had promised to inform him if they heard anything. He considered getting on a night bus and riding it until sunrise, but realised that if he wanted to function in the morning, he needed to get some proper sleep, preferably in his own bed.

Instead of following his instincts, he walked back home. The streets were deserted. It was as if he was the only human being left on earth and he felt incredibly alone. As he entered Baker Street he prayed to see light in the windows, but everything was dark. The sinking feeling in his stomach was back.

John managed to go upstairs without waking Mrs Hudson and made himself tea. He felt incredibly cold and decided to take a long hot shower. There was no way of telling what the next day might bring and he would not stay at home and twiddle his thumbs. He would go back and spend the day in and around the library, finally finding some answers.

The hot water felt heavenly. He closed his eyes and just shut off his brain for a while, concentrating on the heat that spread through his body, washing away at least some of the tension. His mind travelled back to the homeless couple and he wondered when they had last enjoyed a shower and remembered how he had gone days and days without washing in Afghanistan.

It hadn't really mattered, because there were other things to think about and the hot dry wind was strong enough to carry away any stronger smells and everyone had been in the same boat, so eventually nobody cared. They had lived from second to second, each moment potentially requiring a decision that could mean life or death. Sometimes he was not sure why he had survived. One of his colleagues had been blown to pieces while he had operated on another severely injured soldier. He should have been on tour that day, and not stayed in for a different operation earlier that day. When the attack came, he went down first. He should have died instead of the others. It should have been him and not his men.

Blinking the water out of his eyes he straightened himself up. It had been a year since he had let his mind go back to that place, that day, that guilt. "Fuck." His emotions were all over the place and it was stupid now to blame anything but Sherlock's absence.

He was physically and emotionally exhausted and badly needed to sleep, so he dried himself off, brushed his teeth and went to bed. Forcing himself to close his eyes he tried willing his body to sleep. An hour later he was still awake, his mind was racing even though he tried hard to think of nothing. With a frustrated grunt he sat up, and, knowing that it would probably only make matters worse, he searched for his phone under the bed in the dark and checked if he had any messages. No text, no voicemail, nothing. He hated his phone.

As he sat on his bed, staring into the darkness, he realised that it had only been twenty four hours since all of this had started. It had been around this time when he had gone downstairs for the
drink of milk, the last time he had seen him.

Twenty four hours should mean nothing. The police usually did not file a missing person report under forty eight hours, and yet it felt as if it had been days. His leg started twitching nervously and his left hand trembled lightly. John cursed quietly. He had never felt quite so much out of his depth and out of control; not since he had moved in with Sherlock and his life had taken a turn for the slightly insane. But at least he had been able to stop focussing on himself and his trauma.

Knowing perfectly well that it would not help him to calm down this time, he went downstairs and walked into the kitchen. Feeling the cold tiles burn against his soles, he stopped in front of the fridge. With closed eyes he opened it and took out the milk. He waited a small eternity before he closed the door again, allowing himself a glimpse of hope for just a few seconds.

The silence was almost perfect except for the humming of the fridge. Even the omnipresent noise of the main road that usually filtered in through the closed windows seemed to have gone quiet.

He felt close to crying now and he was gripped by the overwhelming urge to throw the milk bottle against the opposite wall. He had failed Sherlock, just like he had failed his men in Afghanistan. He was the one who was left unharmed, almost, while others took the heat for him. It was just not fair. He didn't need protection. He was the soldier. Sherlock wasn't.

Angry now, John put the milk back in the fridge and walked into the living room. He threw himself onto the couch and stared into nothing.

The next thing he noticed was light around him and the clutter of dishes from the kitchen. His heart leaped and he sat up straight, almost hurting himself as his head shot around.

Mrs Hudson was standing there, an apron around her hips, washing the dishes.

The tears came unbidden. For a moment he just lost it, sinking back against the comfort of the couch, letting the tears stream freely. He could not remember the last time he had cried like this, but he clearly recognised the pain that came with them. Despair and helplessness.

After a minute he forced himself to inhale deeply and wiped his face.

"Now, now. Come sit up and have some breakfast." Mrs Hudson did not comment on the tears or the sniffles that followed. She had made eggs and toast and had chosen the largest mug for his tea. He felt like crying again.

"He didn't come back." It burst out of him. He couldn't help it, he needed her to know why he was in the state he was in.

"Who?" She was almost back in the kitchen when she turned around to him. "Who didn't come back?"

"Sherlock." He swallowed down the tears that threatened to choke him. "He's missing."

She frowned, not quite understanding what he was trying to say.

"He's gone and nobody can find him."

She looked worried for a few seconds, but then shook her head and walked back to him. "John, it's typical for him to disappear now and then. I think even he sometimes needs a break, you know?"

He noticed that this was the first time she hadn't called him Dr. Watson.
"But he was on a case, he told me so, and now the police are looking for him and his brother's phone is dead and he doesn't answer his and . . .," he didn't know what else to say.

Mrs Hudson gently squeezed his hand. "I'm sure he's fine. Now have a bite to eat." With a small smile she felt his forehead, nodding to herself. "You still have a temperature. I'm getting you some paracetamol."

He felt his own head, and he couldn't lie about feeling cold while his skin was hot against his hand. This was the last thing he needed. "I'll be fine. I've just been under a lot of stress."

Of course, Mrs Hudson paid no attention, bringing him a glass of water and a small white pill. "I checked the wrapping," she said, sounding amused. "You never know what Sherlock might have hidden away in his medicine cabinet and I don't want to cause you hallucinations."

He took the pill, finishing the whole glass of water. Maybe it would help to clear his head. He leaned back and watched her while she finished the dishes, taking a bite of the toast. Then his eyes fell upon the violin case. He opened it, carefully. If he broke something Sherlock wouldn't forgive him. A little white jolt pierced his heart. What if he would never notice, because he would never play again?

The violin was lighter than he had expected. He had never held the instrument before and he tried to imagine how difficult it must be to play it. Sherlock certainly was gifted, but he had wondered more than once why the neighbours had never filed a complaint if he manhandled the instrument to a shocking degree, drawing sounds from it that made John's teeth hurt. But sometimes, when he was in the mood, he actually managed to coax the sweetest sounds out of the instrument, playing small little melodies that made him smile unconsciously or grand pieces that made his heart ache just right.

With a sigh he put it back, gently running his fingers over the fragile instrument. Then he saw a tiny white stripe peeking out of the small compartment above the violin, where he kept additional strings and his square of colophony, and, apparently, a small folded version of the exhibition poster of the British Library. John blinked stupidly at it as he unfolded it. This was the last straw.

He jumped up and raced upstairs, taking three steps at a time, jolting through his door. He was dressed within seconds, racing down the stairs again, almost falling over his feet. "I need to go!" he yelled at Mrs Hudson, who looked rather frightened by his sudden departure, but there was no time for explanations.

He jogged towards the library, knowing that if he sprinted, his strength wouldn't last and he would attract too much attention. This way he looked like he was late for a train. He could feel the comforting weight of his gun against the small of his back. And this time he had taken his phone, not caring if anyone wanted to know where he was. He did not have to justify going to the library.

At the gate John stopped to catch his breath. He turned around himself once, but everything seemed normal. When his breath was steady again, he walked into the court and prayed that he would not be stopped at the entrance. Not having a bag with him definitely proved to be an advantage and he walked through the security check unhindered, breathing a sigh of relief. Trying to inconspicuously check whether he was being watched, he slowly made his way up the stairs, watching library staff erect the show cases and presentation boards for the exhibition.

John stopped in front of them, trying to find anything unusual about it. There wasn't. Everything was as it had always been. Students sat in chairs, chatting or working on their computers, the doors to the reading rooms opened and closed soundlessly. What was it that Sherlock had anticipated? He pulled out the small poster and stared at it. There was nothing unusual, just a poster with the rather cynical illustration; nothing out of the ordinary.
The entrance hall was buzzing with people; the bookshop to the left was equally busy. His eyes drifted up, roaming over the remarkable architecture of the library. A staircase to his left led up to the manuscript room, on the far end of the first level, the humanities reading room lay adjacent to the cafeteria. Then, in the centre of the hall, the Kings Library, a tower of ancient books, went up all three floors to the high ceiling. A spiral staircase on the right lead up to the other reading rooms by way of connecting passage ways that bridged the two ends of the main hall on three levels. Certainly magnificent architecture, if that was the focus of one's interest. John, however, wasn't paying attention to that aspect. He was looking for Sherlock.

Darwin - what was special about the scientist, other than that this year marked his two hundredth birthday. There had been multiple exhibitions at the library and he couldn't remember that there had ever been a crime committed in these halls since it was opened in 1998.

In order to not stop and stare for too long and possibly stand out, he made his way to the left into the Sir John Ritblat Gallery. Sherlock had once taken him there to prove that the supposed handwriting of Shakespeare on a manuscript was forged and had hinted at the fact that he knew where genuine samples were kept. John remembered how he had smirked down at the document that made the hearts of scholars beat faster, discharging its magic with a few well chosen words. The library staff had hated him from that day on and he had not come back since, at least not to his knowledge.

And yet, apparently he had returned now, or at least planned on doing so. John walked into the small room that exhibited one of the four surviving copies of the Magna Carta. Looking down on the document that had changed the legislation of the country so many centuries ago, he wondered why they kept it on display in a relatively unsecured room. If Sherlock were present, he would surely point out the weak links and explain how he could take it from its case within one minute without even triggering the alarm, and he wondered if there had ever been an intended theft of the document that was almost impossible to read because of the damage a fire had caused centuries ago.

John leaned against the wall. He was alone, but aware of the security camera in one corner of the small room. He felt slightly nauseous. The dimmed light made him dizzy and he knew he would need some air soon. He checked his pulse again and found that it was fast and strong. He shouldn't feel like he did. The fever must have gotten worse. Tea would do the trick.

He sat down on the balcony outside the cafeteria, trying to ignore the freezing wind that blew into his face. At least he felt better now, holding on to the warm cup. It was time for something to happen, he decided. He couldn't go on feeling so lost and insecure and so intensely lonely. He would start to ask questions. He would find out if anything strange had happened, if a warning or threat had been issued, and whether anyone had seen Sherlock lately.

He finished his tea and went back inside, squaring his shoulders as he walked down the stairs and moved towards the exhibition. By now most of the cases had been put up and two young men were busy plastering a time line that depicted the evolution of humans to the ground.

"Excuse me," He feigned interest. "What exactly is this?"

One of the men straightened up. "It's the reason why you and me are here today, wearing clothes and being able enjoy individualistic thought." The look on John's face screamed unimpressed and so the guy smiled apologetically. "We've just been watched and asked about this all day. It's just a time line."

"Then I think I should rephrase my question." John said, understanding the cynical remark he had received. "The whole Darwin exhibition. Is there anything special about it, I mean, except for the
The man looked at him and shrugged his shoulders. "Not that I know. It's been in planning for a while, they've been digging out originals for months, trying to show people the most important parts of his work."

"But essentially, there is nothing special about them, except for the fact that they are Darwin's own handwriting and some of the most important ideas in human history ever put down on paper …," John had to laugh at his own words. "I'm sorry. I've just … I need to speak to someone who is responsible for the exhibition, the curator. I'm here for a security check up."

The man looked at him carefully. "I'll get her for you."

He nodded at his colleague and disappeared in a door behind one of the showcases. Something seemed odd about that, but he had long learned that almost all public buildings had more or less secret passage ways that made it easy for the staff to move between rooms without having to take the same ways as the visitors. The British Museum was full of them, and Sherlock had once taken him from one end to the other in less than three minutes.

John looked down on the timeline, wondering how someone found the strength to go against everything he had believed in and thought he had known, and admit to himself that he had been wrong and that he had found proof that was so convincing that nothing he tried would be able to make him unsee the truth.

"Are you okay?" The other man had finished his work and looked at him with a worried expression.

"Hmm?" John raised his head, wondering why he would ask such a question.

"You're looking a little …" he waved his hand about as to not say something offending.

"Oh, yeah, just stress, I'm fine." He let his eyes wander up the three levels of the library, and as he reached the top he caught a glimpse of a head full of curly, dark hair. His heart started beating faster immediately. The almost uncontrollable urge to run up the stairs gripped him, but he closed his eyes and forced himself to calm down. He considered shouting, but he would make a fool of himself; and in any case, if it had been him, and he was not in immediate danger now, calling out to him might just be the worst thing he could possibly do.
Chapter Ten

In the end it could have been anyone. It could have been a hallucination, considering the state he was in. He tried to think rationally, but his heart was screaming at him that it had indeed been Sherlock and that he was okay and that they were in the same building and that everything would be fine.

Opening his eyes, he found the staff member looking with plain concern. "Are you sure you're alright?"

John exhaled audibly and then walked over to a bench and sat down. Automatically he checked if his gun was still there and managed to calm himself down. Whether it had been Sherlock or somebody else; something was about to happen. So whatever had happened until now, it all had been leading up to this place and this point in time. Sherlock had managed to bring him here and he would not fail him.

Finally, after all of these long hours of insecurity, confusion and physical discomfort, he felt his mind settle on the task at hand. His knees had stopped twitching and his left hand was entirely still. He looked back up and then followed each level from one side to the other, searching for something unusual. Everything seemed quiet – as far as quiet goes in a building full of people.

The door behind the showcase opened and a middle-aged woman stepped out behind the staff member. She wore an expensive black suit, her hair in a ponytail, with no jewellery to speak of. She was also rather beautiful, John noted.

"I'm Natalia Romanov, the curator. How can I help you?" John had the distinct feeling of having seen her before, but he couldn't place her at all.

"Yes, actually you might be able to help. See, I've been wondering if there are any security holes in your system. I was sent here to ensure that everything in the exhibition is safe." He was completely calm, looking her directly in the eye, silently praying she would not read the lie. The woman relaxed visibly and even regarded him with a smile. "Yes, we've been informed that someone would come for a back-up check. Come along."

It took everything he had to not show his surprise. It was too big of a coincidence, and his senses sharpened as he realised that this might be a trap in which they were trying to lure him. At the same time, the woman seemed genuinely relieved and he wondered whether they had indeed received a warning. She did not bring him in through the hidden door but through the staff entrance next to the humanities reading room. Miss Romanov used her staff ID to open the door and before it closed behind him, he turned once, catching the two staff members looking at them slightly bewildered. He noticed that she hadn't even asked for his name.

After walking through several corridors, passing by bookshelves and rooms filled with computers, scanners and other machines, they ended up in an office. Her name was merely taped to the door and appeared to have been written on with a sharpie. She noticed him frowning.

"You're right to wonder. I've been transferred here from Oxford just two days ago. The original curator fell ill and is in no state to finish the exhibition on time. Poor man, he had been working on this for such a long time."

John watched her closely as she pulled out a folder from under her desk. He was still prepared for someone to walk in and attack him or for her to pull a gun out of a drawer. Instead, she pushed the folder over to his side of the desk. "It's all I got. Apparently there's been a new alarm installed and
tested a month ago. Five teams of security personnel will be present at all time, half of them plain
clothed."

"Why so many?" he inquired. "Do you expect for something to happen?"

She smiled and shook her head. "No, I hope not, but we will showcase an as yet unpublished and
never exhibited page of *Species*. There are always people out there who want to steal such objects
before the public has had the chance to see them."

"Just like the American Constitution in DC?" He asked, making her gasp in surprise.

"How do you know about that?"

"Urban legends. And I have a friend that told me his view on the story and it sounded pretty
convincing."

She shook her head at him. "Have you spotted anything?"

"What?" He was surprised by her question, not quite knowing what she was referring to.

"Have you spotted a security hole?"

"The door." He said automatically. "What will be in front of the door?"

"The birds." Miss Romanov said. "Darwin's finches. Why?"

John stared at her. *Good luck with the birds.* The man last night, in front of the museum, he had
used the plural. He hadn't even noticed then, but now he remembered it clearly. He had not been
speaking of women, he had been speaking of birds. His heart leaped. He had been praying for
signs from Sherlock, feeling alone and desperate for guidance, and he had been too blind and
distracted to see that Sherlock had provided what he had asked for.

His sudden realisation must have been visible on his face as the woman looked a little bewildered,
but not uninterested. "Is there anything I should know?"

John bit back a smile, suddenly comfortable in his position. "Do you know what illness your
predecessor has that makes it impossible for him to work?"

"No." She said, "I've just been called in after the office received a document from his doctor."

John stood up and closed the door, turning around to her. "Okay, listen carefully." For one second
he knew how Sherlock must feel whenever a case suddenly unravelled itself and everything made
sense. "You need to seal off that door behind the bird case. Whoever wants to steal that
manuscript will try to come through that door. And don't tell anyone, just do it. No one must know
that the door is locked. And exchange the showcases, label them wrongly, confuse the thieves.
Make it generally hard for anyone to make sense of the order, just for the opening. You can set it
right once it's properly open."

She looked at him with big eyes. "How do you know that? About the door, I mean."

"Sherlock Holmes." He said, watching her face carefully. He still expected her to suddenly break
out of her innocent behaviour and turn into a villain, but she just stared blankly at him and then
shook her head.

"My colleague. The one who told me about the Constitution," He clarified. "He knows these
things." By admitting that the clue had come from Sherlock, his triumphant feeling of having
solved the riddle by himself dissolved, leaving a strange longing behind. If things were really
go0ing the way they seemed to, Sherlock was around, but unable to act on his own account, so he
had to do it for him. Why couldn't he just show up, unexpected, providing a basic reassurance that
he was doing the right thing, that he was on the right track, and, most importantly, that Sherlock
was okay.

"Could you do me a favour?"

She nodded slowly, unsure now what to make of his proposal. He took a blank sheet of paper and
started writing. "What's the name of the original curator?" he asked while he wrote.

"Mr Chamberlain."

John finished scribbling on the paper and turned it towards her, so she could read it. Then he
pulled the phone towards him and dialled Lestrade's number. "Read this out to this man, please."

She was clearly confused now and John felt a bit sorry as her eyes grew impossibly wide when
Lestrade introduced himself on the other end of the line just as she realised what John had written.
However, she sounded calm as she read out his message.

"Hello, it's not important who I am, but I am fairly sure that Mr Chamberlain, curator of the British
Library Darwin exhibition is dead."

He motioned her to hang up and took her hand as it started shaking. "How do you know that?"
she whispered, clearly understanding that she might be in danger as well. "What happened to him?
Why did they do that?"

John frowned as he looked at her. "I know you don't know me but you need to trust me." He
caught her eye and held it. "Do you trust me? Do you think you can do that?"

She suddenly seemed younger than she had just minutes ago. "They didn't say a word about this
job being dangerous. I was perfectly fine in Oxford and then they invited me here and now I'm in
the middle of …" He squeezed her hand and she caught herself. "I do trust you, Mr …"

"Watson, John Watson."

"Okay, Mr Watson. What else do I need to know?"

He smiled at her courage. "Well, you've clearly been aware of the fact that someone might try to
steal some documents. What made you think that?"

"The telly." She smiled through tears, shrugging. "I've watched too many documentaries on art
theft. My mum always said it would make me paranoid, but I think it's better to be safe than
sorry."

"Okay, I believe that what we are dealing with here is something large scale. It's not just one
person, but organised crime. Nobody would steal a document that has no worth to the public
because it has not been pronounced to be special, do you understand? You didn't advertise it, it's
not the main focus of the exhibit, but it is part of it. So the worth is not materialistic, but it lies in
having it. Whoever wants it, wants it for the sake of owning it. It's a game to them, but sadly, a
dangerous game for everyone who tries to come in between the hunter and its prey." He had just
become a commentator of a bad art theft documentary, he noticed, feeling slightly embarrassed.
Miss Romanov bit her lip, trying not to look amused. Clearly, he needed to stop watching late
night programmes, and he also needed to listen more closely to Sherlock. He always sounded
much more logical and structured, even when he didn't make any sense. John was relieved to find
that his hope was restored. He didn't think of Sherlock as dead or injured anymore. There was no
other possibility than for him to come home after this and everything would be normal again.

"I need for you to act normal. Don't say anything to anyone. Don't act suspiciously, and don't try to find out if any of the staff is involved. But seal off that door, and do it just before the exhibit opens. When is the opening?"

"At five."

"Good, I'll be there. And in case anything happens, don't try to stop them, just run, okay? And don't come back here. Whoever is behind this must have access, so you are not safe down here."

She nodded, her lips a tight line.

"I have one more question, though," John said it to distract her from the visions of horror that probably ran through her mind right now. "Do I know you from somewhere?"

She laughed, tears spilling. It had worked, he noticed relieved. "I have no idea," she said, shaking her head. "I'm barely ever out of Oxford."

Then it hit him. "Anthea!" He exclaimed, and at her thoroughly confused look he added. "Do you have a sister who works for the government?"

"I do have a sister, but she's not working for the government. She's the secretary in a security firm."

"Of course she is," John said, and shaking his head: "I apologise." Miss Romanov looked at him sharply, but asked no further questions.

"Don't worry", he said, feeling the need to steer clear of the topic he had introduced in order to avert from the original problem. "I'm sure everything will be fine."

She didn't look quite convinced, but led him outside again. This time, she brought him out through the secret door. As soon as they stepped outside he started talking about the importance of fire extinguishers and that he would bring experts in to make sure that they had enough. She managed a smile and shook his hand.

"Thank you."

"Anytime."

Then he turned and walked towards the staircase. He needed to go upstairs. He needed to stand where Sherlock - or whoever it had been - had stood.
Of course he wasn't there. In fact, nobody was there. John leaned against the rail, looking down. Deep down below him he could see the time line in its totality. He wondered how it was possible to fit the biological history of mankind onto the floor of a library. With a sigh he turned around again, realising that there was nothing to be seen here. If Sherlock had been here, he had not left a clue. With a grin he checked again, remembering that he had never fully understood that Sherlock had left him clues in the first place. With a sinking feeling of disappointment, John found that there was nothing, no clue, no sign of life from Sherlock.

Then he did what he had not dared to do all day, he thought about the motive behind Sherlock's disappearance. Why would anyone not want him to work with the police? It seemed absurd that someone thought he was playing an important role in their research. The only thing he did was to support Sherlock, usually by asking the wrong questions or failing to see the obvious.

And yet, there was more, he was sure of that. If Sherlock had received a threat in which he was told that they would make him responsible if John did not follow the request to keep himself out of police work, and automatically assumed that it was an impossible task to fulfil, why had the first threat concerned him at all? They could have just as well gotten to Sherlock by inventing a serial killer to lure him into a trap. It just didn't add up.

With a sigh he slowly made his way back down the stairs, watching the last preparations for the opening. He wondered if he was being too conspicuous, and then he remembered that trying not to be obvious gave one away more easily than anything else. So instead of pretending to not observe the preparations, he just sat there for a while and watched them, openly and with interest, and he found that nobody cared. Every now and then he checked his phone, but there were no messages, neither from Lestrade, nor Mycroft, and, which still pained him, none from Sherlock.

He wondered for a second if maybe his own phone had been manipulated. Maybe it wasn't Lestrade's phone that had died on him, and maybe it wasn't a problem with Mycroft's connection, but with his own phone. There was only one way to find out.

Chewing on his lower lip, he dialled Sarah's number. Secretly, he hoped she wouldn't answer, but eventually she did, and he exhaled audibly.

"Hello?"
"Sarah, it's me, John."
"Hello John, are you feeling better?"
"I'm not sure." So it wasn't his phone after all that caused the problems. The hairs on the back of his neck stood at the realisation. This had to be bigger; even bigger than he had imagined. "Listen, I wanted to apologise." He was trying to make up his mind about what he could say to her. Could he tell her the truth? He wasn't ready to confront the truth, and he felt his stomach contract painfully as soon as his mind entered that mine field. No, he had been feeling weird, and he had not been very responsive, and not grateful enough for what she had done for him last night.

"What for?" She sounded strange, distant, as if she had been talking to someone else quietly. He leaped at that chance.
"You're not alone?"
She coughed, nervously. "John, I …"

"You've met someone else?" Even as he said the words he knew they were supposed to hurt, but he wasn't sure whether that would be him or Sarah on the receiving end. A second later he realised that it was hurting her, and that he might have sounded just a tiny bit hopeful.

"What? No! Why would you say such a thing …"

He closed his eyes, cursing himself for his tactless reaction. It would have made things so easy for him. "Jesus," he muttered to himself. Since when had his brain decided to work against him? He loved her … liked her, at least. She was incredibly sweet and funny and extremely supportive and she had taken over his shift today so he could stay in bed and recover from whatever he had caught and now he was insinuating that she had a lover. Not a smooth move, John Watson.

"That's not what I meant to say." He spoke to the silence of the phone. "Sarah, I'm sorry."

More silence.

"Sarah, I don't know what's wrong with me, I shouldn't have said that."

"Well yes, you shouldn't have."

"Who is it then?" Again, the worst thing he could possibly say. Strangely enough he knew that it was, but he didn't mean to hurt her.

"John!"

"I just want to know!" Stubborn now.

"You've never had a reason to be jealous," she said, sounding almost bitter. He felt his heart break for her just a bit, and yet it felt as if he was watching another couple that he sympathised with, but that was not immediately connected to his own life.

"I know."

"But you obviously don't trust me."

He had never taken her for a woman that would react like she did now. She wasn't like that. She was calm and never angry. Occasionally irritated when things got bad. But then again, he had never given her a reason to be truly angry. At first, whenever Sherlock had crashed the party, he had told him off at least half-heartedly, making sure he was sorry about the interruption. Eventually, though, he had stopped caring and almost expected him to show up anyway. Even Sarah had begun to tolerate his presence, and it wasn't like they had been snogging or anything that would seem weird if Sherlock was present. True, sometimes the dates didn't end that well, and more than once he sent her home in a taxi while he went off into the night with Sherlock to solve an urgent case, but she had never really said anything. Now it dawned on him that he had expected her to be okay with it, never truly wanting to accept that maybe she was angry with him for letting it happen. Maybe she had been angry all along and he was projecting her anger back onto her.

"I do trust you."

He started to understand that what had seemed like a perfect solution might not be so perfect after all. She had tolerated Sherlock, at the most, and of course she had been annoyed by going home alone, and she had never really wanted to come around to Baker Street if there was any way of avoiding it, and really, who could blame her? The body parts and other, even less tolerable things
in the kitchen, had long stopped putting him off his appetite, but maybe she wasn't adapting so easily?

He understood that what she had done last night, coming around and bringing him soup, and giving him a day off and asking him to leave Sherlock's work alone, all of these things had been a desperate attempt to bring some normalcy to their relationship.

She had every right to be angry with him. And he was an idiot for trying to lay the blame on her. With a sigh he started again.

"I really am sorry. Look, I've just been confused lately, and I haven't been the best person I could be and I … I really shouldn't have said the things I just said. I don't know where that came from. I'm an idiot." He didn't quite know how to say what made him shy away from her.

"John," she sounded calm now, disappointed, but calm. "I don't think we can do this anymore!"

"What? Do what?"

"John, us. I'm talking about us. I asked you to stay in and take care of yourself, and now the police are here, asking questions about you and your crazy detective flatmate."

"Sherlock." He interrupted her, feeling it necessary to call him by his name.

"John, I asked you to live your life, and just now I'm starting to understand that you are doing exactly that. The thing is," she sighed, defeated, "I'm not part of that life. Not in the way I want to be, and now I'm starting to understand that we were never going to be alone. He would always be there and I know you don't want to hurt me, but if you are honest with yourself, you know that I'm right."

"Sarah." She was saying things he had never thought about more deeply. He had wondered briefly about the fact that their relationship was somewhat different from others because of Sherlock. But he had been there when he had met Sarah, he had already become a part of his life that was exciting, different, and sometimes dangerous, and he wouldn't have it any other way. So Sherlock had always been part of the equation, and he had simply supposed that Sarah would be alright with that.

"I'm going to ask you one simple question, a question that I never thought I would ask a man in my life, ever, because it is just wrong to ask that of anyone, but I can't help myself."

John closed his eyes and ran his hand through his hair. She was making him choose. She was making him take sides. The past year flashed before his eyes, and he remembered all those moments which seemed important to him, moments that had seen him extraordinarily happy, or confused, or astonished, excited, or frightened, and, at points, lost. A few of them included Sarah. All of them included Sherlock.

"Don't say it." He whispered. "Sarah, please don't say it. I know it's my fault, but I don't want to do this over the phone."

"Well, you're not at home, where I thought you would be, and you have an entire police squad searching your flat. Where are you, John?"

"I'm sorry, I can't tell you. This is too important."

"Well, Detective Inspector Lestrade wants to talk to you."

"No, I can't speak to him. It will put me in danger." And him, he thought. "Sarah, I have to go."
He hung up, feeling his head spin. This was far from what he had expected, and he felt slightly sick, but in the end they were bound to have this conversation. And it appeared that for Sarah sooner might be better than later. He had felt the tension in the air last night, and she had told him in no uncertain terms what she expected of him. But of course she had wrapped it in the subtle bubble wrap of words that women use and asked him nicely. He couldn't give her what she wanted.

Only then did he notice the tears in his eyes. Jesus, he never cried. He blamed the fever. He also blamed the fever for the tapping of his finger against the screen of his phone. Lestrade must have found the body of the curator. He wondered whether he had made a mistake in letting him know. He hoped that they would not put one and one together and show up at the British Library, because if the police showed up here, they had clearly lost the game and there was no way of knowing what might happen.

With an unfamiliar pain in his chest he typed three letters into his phone and sent it to Sarah.

_Him_

He knew she would cry, but he also knew that she would not hate him, because she had seen what he had been oblivious of. It felt incredibly bad, and it weighed heavily on his conscience, but he had not been fair to her, and she had obviously reached a point where she could not deal with the pain it caused her anymore. >No, he. He had caused her pain.

*I'm so sorry*

He knew it wouldn't help, but he had to say it. And Lestrade would ask her what he had done and his team would give him a hard time about it, next time they saw each other, but maybe that would divert the attention from Sherlock a bit.

He wiped his eyes, suddenly painfully aware that he sat on a bench in the middle of a hall full of people. And he felt that he was being watched. The feeling came out of nowhere, but he was absolutely sure. Trying not to freak himself out, he slowly turned to his right, but nobody was looking at him. Then, as he turned to the left, he saw a figure standing outside, looking inside through the glass front. It was Connie.

Checking the time, he figured that he could spend a few minutes outside, and Connie would bear news, of that he was sure. As he made his way down the flight of stairs that led down to the ground level, he briefly wondered if she was going to tell him that they had found Sherlock, dead. He found that his mind refused to go to that place and he smiled when he left the building and was greeted by icy winds and an excited looking Connie.

"Coffee?" he offered, making her smile.

"Thanks, Doctor."

He got coffee from the BL kiosk, fishing for his last change in his pockets and they sat down under the statue of Newton, keeping their eyes on the library.

"It's very different here," she remarked.

"Different, how?"

"There's only one kind of people going in there. People who want to know things."

He smiled into his coffee, welcoming the caffeine that slowly made its way through his system.
"But people who walk into a store go there all for one purpose as well, no?"

She actually chuckled and nodded. "I suppose so."

"Connie, why are you here?"

She looked at him, her dirty hair falling into her eyes. "Remember when we told you that we were supposed to watch out for people with duffle bags? I just saw two people go in. The bags were in another bag, but they were clearly duffle bags."

"What kind of people were they?"

"A man and a woman. And they were not the kind of people that go in there." She pointed at the library.

He would have to take her word for that, and she clearly knew how to judge people.

"Have you heard of him?" he sounded ridiculously hopeful.

The look she gave him reminded him of the one he had received by the night watch last night; as if she knew something that he did not. "Not a word," she said, shrugging. "But don't worry too much. No news is good news, right?"

The clock on the library tower told him that it was only half an hour until the exhibition would formally open.

"Connie, can I do anything for you? Do you need anything that I could get you?"

She smiled. "The brain never told us you were so altruistic. I'm starting to understand why you two get along so well."

He chuckled. "He does make it hard sometimes."

"Well, it is very kind of you, but I'm alright. The coffee was lovely, thank you."

John was unsure if he should give her more money, but then he remembered that he had given her the last notes he had had in his wallet yesterday, and the change in his pockets had just been enough for the tea earlier and the coffee now.

But before he could voice his insecurity, she nodded at him and walked away through the gate and out of sight.
Chapter Twelve

John pressed his wrist against his forehead. The fever was still there, but he couldn't tell how bad it was. If the paracetamol had worked, its effect was long gone.

He walked back into the library, being stopped now at the door, but only because the man in front of him had to open his bags so the security team could check it. He forced himself not to check for his gun.

As he walked up the stairs again, his eyes fell on a display. It was a few collected self reflexive phrases by Darwin and as John read over them his breath caught. A scientific man ought to have no wishes, no affections, - a mere heart of stone.

A few lines below he read another quote: I am turned into a sort of machine for observing facts and grinding out conclusions. It was uncanny. It was almost exactly what Sherlock had said about himself the few times that they had talked about where he saw himself in life. The first line made John incredibly sad, but he also knew that it was not entirely true; the second one, however, fit perfectly. When Sherlock was on a case, he was unstoppable. Nothing could drag him away from a case that he had dug his teeth in, no hunger, no exhaustion, no better judgment, not even John.

His heart heavy, he tried to take in his surroundings. The last preparations were finished, everything seemed in order. Then he spotted Miss Romanov wiping the displays with a cotton cloth, all the while reading over the descriptions on the showcases. He could see her swallow nervously, and then, in one fluid movement she passed the door, stuck in a key and locked it. Without breaking her stride, she moved on to the next display.

She's good, John thought. Now that he knew that she was Anthea's sister he understood better why she had kept her cool. Thinking of it, he had never seen Anthea so much as flinch at anything that happened in her presence. Miss Romanov seemed nervous, but considering she was the curator of an exhibition that would open in a few minutes, it was to be expected. Just before she went to take away the cloth, she looked at him and gave a short nod. He inhaled and walked to the spot where he had sat when he had been on the phone to Sarah.

She had not tried to contact him again and he was thankful for that. There was too much going on in his head already. He ran his fingers over his phone, remembering the first day when Sherlock had explained his deduction to him. He had been incredibly impressed, and even though he was much better at guessing by now, it was still beyond him how Sherlock was able to take in so much information in so little time and draw conclusions that were, most of the time, correct. He wondered whether Sherlock knew what he was doing now. This whole episode made no sense to him at all, and he grew weary of trying to find an answer when he didn’t even know what questions to ask. When this was over he would take a break. He would just go away somewhere, leave London behind for a while and catch his breath.

With a grin he shook his head at himself. There was no way he would be leaving Sherlock alone once they returned home. What he needed was normalcy; he needed to be home and watch Sherlock pace the length of the living room, stare at the skull inquiringly, create a mess that John would clean up and that would leave Sherlock giddily happy because then he had room to once more bring in new experiments that would take up most of the space in the kitchen. Yes, that sounded incredibly relaxing.

A headache started to pulse behind his temples. He amused himself with thoughts of Sherlock trying to take care of him. He couldn't remember that Sherlock had ever cooked anything, well, except for severed body parts and chemicals. Somehow the thought of Sherlock looking worried
and bringing him tea to the couch which he was now - but only now - allowed to occupy in its entirety made him feel much better.

As he watched a crowd gathering in a half circle around Miss Romanov, he also saw several people leaving the manuscript reading room. A staff member closed the door behind herself, making sure that the door was locked and walked down the stairs to join the group. Apart from a few photographers some interested visitors, donors and academics were present; John remembered having seem some of them in the press. Among them, a handful of people in expensive clothes looked on calmly. Those were probably the undercover security Miss Romanov had mentioned.

The curator coughed nervously, and then started to speak. She welcomed everyone, explained briefly who she was and that she had only recently taken on the job, and how happy she was to have been given the chance to finish what had been long planned, despite the unhappy circumstances. Then she started talking about the importance of Darwin's work two hundred years after his birth, his influence on the modern way of thinking and his personal struggle with the science that had not only altered the world's perception, but also his own life.

John thought she was doing a fantastic job. There was no trace of anxiety, no nervous hands, no fidgeting. Definitely Anthea's sister. She was now talking about the pride which the library took in being able to present the handwritten documents and thoughts, grouped together with illustrations, either by Darwin himself or his contemporaries, pointing to her left and right, but nowhere in particular. When she thanked everybody for coming and handed the word over to the director of the library who shortly thanked the investors and everyone involved, especially Mr Chamberlain whose absence was according to everyone who had been involved in the planning of the exhibition, deeply lamented. John realised that Miss Romanov did not intend on mentioning the new document.

It seemed a little strange, considering that it would definitely surprise the press and give them something special to write about, but she was being safe, just as she had told him she would be. And there was more. His theory about the criminals stealing the manuscript was wrong. The exhibition was being opened and the page was still there, somewhere, so it was not about owning something before anyone had had the chance to see it. They wanted to own something that people had seen - they needed eye witnesses so it would not only be a myth, but a fact. By not mentioning the paper Miss Romanov was making sure that the existence of the document would remain a rumour– for now.

After the opening speech, the visitors spread out to look at the showcases, and John joined them, trying to figure out which one might be the special case. He noticed that Miss Romanov had not changed the order of the cases as he had suggested, but he had seen her remove some of the descriptions on them to make sure that the new sheet would not stand out. He made his way towards her, where people were congratulating her. She had blushed, obviously embarrassed by the attention she got for something that she barely had any part in. John smiled and took her hand. "Great job, really." He said, looking her straight in the eye, nodding lightly. Only in his hand he could feel a nervous tremor, not unlike his own. "Thank you," she answered, her voice steady.

He turned around and came to stand in front of the showcase that should have shown the finches, and he was surprised to find that it had been exchanged with a page full of handwritten lines explaining Darwin's thoughts on rotting cadavers. He almost laughed out loud as he wondered whether Sherlock was actually a reincarnation of the scientist.

"Congratulations." He flew around, almost knocking himself off his feet. He would have known that voice anywhere. Moriarty! His heart was racing. If he made himself known now, it would be the death of him, he was sure of that. But he must have seen him already, he must have known that he was here, lingering around, watching the exhibition. He turned back towards the case,
trying his hardest to be invisible.

Of course, he should have known right away. Moriarty would be the kind of man to make things complicated. He knew that Sherlock couldn't resist his call. He needed to get out of here. Don't run, he told himself. Don't draw any attention to yourself. He now cursed the locked door in front of him. Maybe he had advised Miss Romanov to do worst thing possible.

_Sherlock, where are you when I need you?_ His mind was racing, but a part of him was glad that Sherlock wasn't here; that he wasn't in immediate danger.

John closed his eyes and counted to ten. Just as he wanted to turn around, he could feel Moriarty's presence next to him. "What do we have here?" His voice was high pitched, brimming with excitement, and yet not the full blown shrill that had possessed his voice back when John had met the real James Moriarty for the first time. "An unpublished manuscript."

John inhaled slowly, and, knowing that it was too late to escape unnoticed, turned towards him.

"Jim."

"John, John, John. Who would have thought that we'd meet again? And here, of all places."

John fought down a shudder. He did not want to be here with this man standing next to him, planning god knows what to torture and kill him; and then Sherlock.

"Why are you here?"

"Why are you here?" The sarcasm in his voice was dripping.

"I'm visiting a friend."

Moriarty turned towards Miss Romanov. "She's really sweet, isn't she? Such a shame."

John spun around, grabbing him by the collar. "Security!" he called, hoping someone would hear him. "Security!"

Two large men walked towards him and towered behind Moriarty. "Is there a problem, boss?" one of them asked, and John's heart sank.

"No, John Watson is just very happy to see me."

John wanted to grab his gun, he wanted to shoot the man that was threatening the life he had, him, Sherlock, and now also Miss Romanov. He let go of the collar, catching movement somewhere in the corner of his eye. Miss Romanov was walking out of the library. The night watch was walking towards her, and, taking her arm, he led her away from the building.

He did not allow himself to relax. He knew that Moriarty had a similar gift for observation as Sherlock had, and he needed for her to be safe. Therefore, he tried to focus his contempt on the man in front of him. "What do you want?"

Jim Moriarty raised one eyebrow in disgust. "I don't want, I take." With that he turned around, taking his two bodyguards with him.

John felt his knees give. He fell against the wall and just struggled with standing for a few seconds until the trusted himself enough to move away. The only safe place was in the crowd, and so he tried to mingle, but Moriarty was always there, watching him, enjoying the panic that his presence triggered in John. Then he saw a woman slowly make her way up the stairs toward the manuscript
room. She opened the door without difficulty and slipped inside. Cursing his inability to take action, he pulled out his phone and started writing a text.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you." Moriarty was standing behind him, close enough that he could feel his breath. John prayed that he would not grab his gun.

"I want to say good bye." He said in all seriousness, turning around. "You will let me do that, at least."

"To whom in the world would you want to say good bye? Do you really think you matter to anyone?" He laughed, and John's urge to hurt him grew.

As if reading his mind, Moriarty continued, his voice mocking. "All you do is hurt people. Your ignorance is disgusting, which delights me greatly."

John exhaled audibly. "I still want to say good bye to Sarah."

Moriarty moved around to face him, staring at him with inquiring dark eyes. "Sarah." It sounded like an insult. "I think we both know that she hates you now, after you so elegantly asked her all the wrong questions. Sometimes it's just so easy." He sounded bored. "Where is all the fun if you go ahead and dig your own grave? What's left for me to do? Nothing. Boring."

John decided that he needed to fight against the disgust that seemed to haul him towards a place that he did not want to go. "I know you don't understand what it means to actually care, but even hating someone means caring." He knew Jim Moriarty was obsessed with Sherlock, and he knew it wasn’t that he felt for him.

Jim Moriarty laughed in his face. He took John's phone from him and started typing a message. Lovely Sarah, what I told you earlier was wrong. I lied to myself. I love you. Always have, always will. John. He pressed send while John looked on, barely managing to not hit him square in the face. The only thought that kept him from doing it was the fact that he would probably enjoy being hit by him.

"There's your good bye," he said, dropping the phone to the floor and stepping on it with his heel, glass and plastic splintering. "Oops." He smiled at John, who started down at his shattered phone, wondering why nobody seemed to be paying attention. For one second he felt transported back to his childhood, to one of the reasons why he couldn't sleep and needed a drink of milk in the middle of the night. He was being mocked for his size, for his home made jumpers, for his quiet character; there was always something the older kids found to mock him for. And they had always found his weak points; new toys that he had gotten for his birthday floating away in the river, biscuits that his mum had made especially for him crumbled in the dirt outside.

And now his phone, the phone his sister had given to him, the phone that Sherlock had used to unravel the case that was John, the phone that had texts by Sherlock on it, asking for him to come home, luring him into a case by promising danger, nagging him about buying milk, cursing randomly, because he knew that John wouldn't mind.

He was still staring at the mess on the ground in front of him when he could see blue lights flashing outside. It was almost completely dark by now and the light reflected on the walls of the entrance hall. Dumbfounded, he stared at the flash of blue light that seemed to calm him down somewhat, but at the same time made him panic. The police could not be involved. How did they know? What had he done? John felt out of control. Everything he had thought he knew about this case was slowly dissolving in that light. He saw dark figures moving towards the building, or maybe it was the fever that made him see things?
When he focused again, Moriarty was gone. He looked around himself, his eyes wide. He and his bodyguards were not to be seen anywhere, but he would not be fooled. His knelt down on the floor, watching people get nervous as they became aware of the police presence outside, and many of them made their way down to the exit, looking around themselves nervously. No panic yet, which was good, he noted. With slightly shaking hands he picked the sim-card out of the mess that had been his phone and pocketed it. Slightly relieved he got up again and moved back to stand between show cases, so we would not be immediately seen by anyone who came up to him from the side.

A single shot exploded close to him and it shook him as if it he had been hit. Within a second, the crowd was screaming, running for the doors, streaming outside. There was a dead man on the ground, close to where his phone lay. The man had John’s hair colour and cut and wore a jacket similar to his. ”No, no, please no.”

He knew he should be in shock. Someone had actually tried to kill him – and succeeded, but it was not him. Again, it had not been him. He did not believe in luck, not after living with Sherlock and his mathematics, but this seemed almost too much of whatever it was for a life-time. And yet his heart was breaking over the fact that somebody else had been shot, somebody who just came to look at some Darwin manuscripts.
He forced himself to breathe evenly. Someone had yelled "bomb", and an alarm went off, causing all the doors to fly open in a sudden rush, people leaving the reading rooms in panic, running towards the exit. The storm lasted a few minutes, but eventually everything seemed quiet, at least inside. It was all a blur to John.

He wondered why there was no security around; no one to check for an actual bomb. The police remained outside, holding their position but not moving closer. He wondered if Moriarty had been the one yelling, or whether he had really threatened to blow up the whole library, ripping a large wound into British history and culture. Whatever the reason, after the doors closed, the great hall was almost silent.

A figure came walking towards him, careful but with purpose. It was the man who had answered him with sarcasm earlier when he had asked him about the timeline on the ground. He stood behind the showcase that was to the right of the hidden door, and John knew that if he was seen, he could not escape. He could feel the gun cold against his hot skin. He should have gotten a proper holster long ago, but it had never seemed important and his belt and waistband had done a well enough job.

The man stopped in front of the showcase that should have held the finches. John hoped his heart was not really beating as loudly as he thought it was. Through half closed eyes and distorted through several layers of glass, he watched frozen how the man opened the case with a key and pulled out the manuscript that had amused John so greatly. Moriarty had been right.

A loud thud to his right made him jump. The curse that followed calmed him down again. It had been a good idea to lock that door after all. As far as he could see, everyone, presumably except for Moriarty and his bodyguards, had left the building, and the man, so close to him, was now trying to open the door from the outside.

He heard a muffled voice. "Is he dead?"

"Yes he is."

"Are you sure?"

"He's right here. I told you I was a good shot."

Another muffled noise followed and the man pressed his ear against the door. "What?"

"Thank you." These words were followed by another shot and John saw the man fall down right next to him. Blood was rapidly streaming from a wound in his head. The manuscript seemed suspended in midair for a second before it sailed a few feet away.

John darted out of his hiding spot and knelt down next to the wounded man. He knew that Moriarty might just shoot down the lock and stand behind him within seconds, but if there was any chance of saving the man's life, he would take it.

He was breathing, but the wound to his head was severe. Closing his eyes, John imagined himself back in Afghanistan. People falling to his left and right; a wounded enemy became a patient on the battle field. He knew it wasn't exactly how politics worked, but it had been the only thing that kept him sane during that time.

Opening his eyes again he pressed his hand against the wound. He was somewhat relieved to
notice that the bones in the man's face seemed to be intact for the most part, but the blood was flowing freely from the wound that covered part of his face and neck. A wild idea entered his head, triggered by the ultimate need to save this man's life. He moved his hands over the floor, fingernails trying to loosen the large plaster of the time line from the ground. Eventually a larger piece came off and he moved back to the man, whose eyes were closed, blood still flowing out of him, and he pressed it against the wound. Seconds seemed drawn out into eternity. With his knee on one side of the head to stabilise him, John used both hands to apply pressure to the wound. He needed something better, something that would stop the flow. Slowly, life slipped out of the man.

It took John a long time to let go. He was covered in blood, tears blurring his vision. He knew he should hate this man, who had thought that he had shot him, but despite it all, he had been a smart, young man who had been full of life just minutes ago. He wondered how Moriarty had managed to draw him into his cruel little game.

Moriarty. The thought of the man sobered him up. He tried to wipe his hands, and ended up using the dead man's shirt. Underneath it, he found the weapon which he must have used to shoot the man who looked like him. He carefully covered it with the soiled shirt again and slowly retreated to his hiding place – and not a minute to soon. The door to the manuscript room opened, and a woman came out, carrying a large duffle bag. Now he understood the relevance of duffle bags. He wondered how many handwritten treasures and unique prints they had stuffed into those bags. For a second he considered shooting her for the sake of the arts, but he dismissed that thought immediately, pushing it back to the place in his mind where he kept his traumas locked away.

The woman made her way down the stairs and as she saw the two dead figures lying on the ground she dropped the bag to cover her mouth as she cried out. It was clear that she had not expected events to take this turn. Turning to see the lights outside she realised that there was no easy way out. She picked up the bag with some difficulty and disappeared through the staff entrance. He now recognised her as the woman that had pretended to lock up after the last readers had left the manuscript reading room. He should have known. Again, his conclusions came much too late.

John tried to think straight. Moriarty was still somewhere behind these doors. He had no idea how the rooms within this building were connected, but he was sure that the secret door wasn't the only one. Trying to calm his pulse he slowly moved away from the wall and towards the stairs on his left. Ducking below the rail, he started to climb up. He needed to see what was happening, and he needed to see the whole room. The police had still not entered the building, as if they were waiting for his call. Well, that call wouldn't come anytime soon.

When he had reached the third floor, he had to sit down on the last step. His head was spinning and he was out of breath and energy. The adrenaline rush that had flooded him when he had tried to save the man's life had left a bitter aftertaste of exhaustion. He heard a curse from below. Moriarty had just found out that the body wasn't his.

"Oh John, Johnny, John. I know you are here. I can smell your fear. You think you outsmarted me." His voice now had the maddening shrill sound it had had back at the pool. "Sherlock is right, you really are an idiot." After a moment of eerie silence, Moriarty loudly ordered, "bring him out and let him watch."

John's heart almost stopped.

He had Sherlock. He had had him all along and John had been thankful all this time that he wasn't with him. He had assumed that he was safe. What had they done to him? He needed to see if they had hurt him. The thought made his stomach clench and he felt very close to being sick on the stairs. He didn’t let himself imagine what they might have done to him.
Breathe, he told himself, just breathe. He kept his head low, trying to listen to the sounds that came from below. Everything seemed strangely loud in the large hall. It was as if the absence of people magnified the few sounds that were made. He heard heavy footsteps and then more of a sliding sound, as if something heavy was dragged along the floor. Sherlock was held and couldn't walk by himself, but he struggled; he could hear it clearly.

John suppressed a whimper. This was not happening. He would wake up in a few seconds, sweating, his heart racing, but he would know that it had been a nightmare. A nightmare of the war combined with Sherlock's silly ideas of exciting activities. He noticed that the blood on his hands started to dry and he wiped them on his jeans. Then he slowly reached for his gun, trying to make no sound.

He was just a little bit too far away to be able to fire, but holding his gun calmed him down. It was something of an automatic focus that set in, blocking his anxiety. The army had conditioned him well. He needed to get closer.

"Get the airlift." Moriarty ordered one of his bodyguards, who immediately started speaking into a walkie talkie.

"Now, John. Don't you want to come out and play? It will just be me and you, and our friend here." There was no sound from Sherlock. John still had not dared to look. He knew that Moriarty would find him immediately.

A loud mechanic groan gave him a start. The lift next to the staircase was being operated. The two bodyguards would be making their way up now. Somewhere, over the grinding of the machine in the wall next to him, he could hear the noise of a helicopter. Airlift. Moriarty planned on getting out of the library by helicopter.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are." Moriarty's voice now had a teasing quality. He tried to unnerve John, make him panic in order to make him give up his hiding place. He slowly crept down the stairs, just half a floor, making sure the two large men would not see him as soon as they stepped out of the lift. It worked. They moved on and made their way towards the back. John caught a glimpse of them. One of the men held the slightly bloodied manuscript in his hand. No duffle bag, though. Maybe Moriarty wanted to carry that himself as soon as he had fulfilled his plan. He doubted that the woman who had disappeared would cause any trouble. She was probably hiding somewhere in the archives deep down underground where she was safe from the police, but even more importantly, safe from Moriarty.

The cruelty of his plan made John feel ill. He wanted him to watch how he killed Sherlock Holmes. That was why he did not dare look. His greatest fear was that as soon as he looked, Moriarty would put a bullet in Sherlock's head and he refused to witness that. He would not watch Sherlock die. Not today, not ever. Knowing he might have a better angle from the second level, he kept on crawling down the stairs. Then he waited with his back pressed against the white wall, trying to steady his breathing.

The silence lasted a few seconds – a lifetime – until Moriarty started speaking again. His voice was dangerously low, almost calm.

"You know, it is pathetic, really. I expected more of you, to be honest. The move with Miss Romanov was very good indeed. I did not think she would make it out of here alive. But now I'm waiting for my favourite part of the evening and you are just refusing to come out and play." The last words he screamed, and John could hear the muffled sound of someone – Sherlock - being hit, hard, but refusing to cry out. He wanted to cry at the bravery of his friend. They both knew how to act according to the situation, but the thought that Moriarty had actually managed to get hold of
Sherlock and put him into a situation where he could easily kill him and was probably planning on actually doing so scared the living daylights out of him.

"Move it." He said those words to Sherlock, John was certain. He used a different tone of voice with him. He could hear them coming down the stairs in the main hall. This might be his chance. He was one level below them now, by the Darwin exhibition and as they moved down, he sneaked along the showcases, edging closer to where they would end up. He could see the window, and he saw that the police was still waiting outside; still waiting for an order. He wondered why it hadn't come yet, but then he realised that they must have been watching Sherlock being held hostage. They wouldn't risk coming in now. Blinking away the tears that blurred his vision yet again, he moved even closer. Moriarty expected him to be somewhere above, he figured from the way he had yelled, so this might be his one chance to get a shot at him. He kept his head down, still not daring to look.

And then he stood there, right above him, on top of the stairs that led down to his level. Twenty feet away. John took aim.

Moriarty had a death grip on Sherlock, whose eyes were wide, his mouth taped, his arms bound. Something seemed strange about that image, but then he considered the possibility that Sherlock had been drugged.

Moriarty used him as a body shield.

John had never hated Moriarty more.

"Now, my friend." He said it into Sherlock's hair. John could see him cringe. "Now you will watch him die."

A hot flash of fear shot through his body. Moriarty had not meant those words for him, he had meant them for Sherlock. And the pieces of the puzzle fell into place.

I will burn the heart out of you. Those words had stayed with Sherlock, but he had assured John more often than had been necessary that there was no way that Moriarty could possibly do that. Well, judging from the pained expression on Sherlock's face, he might just have found the one way to do that.

He wrapped one arm around Sherlock like he would hold a lover, and pulled a gun with the other. His hand was surprisingly steady, considering the trembling in his voice and behaviour. But John couldn't focus on Moriarty. Were those tears in Sherlock's eyes?

Before he could properly tell, Sherlock closed his eyes. The simple act, the decision that he had made about not watching his friend die – the same decision that Sherlock was making right in that moment – ripped his heart in two.

"Good bye," he said. "I need to say good bye."

The grin on Moriarty's face was vulgar, but when John pulled the trigger, that smile vanished. He dropped Sherlock, pressing his hand against his side. John shot again, wanting to kill him more than anything, but his entire being was concentrating on Sherlock, so he only managed to shoot the gun out of his hand.

It all happened in the span of a second, and he saw Sherlock tip forward and fall down the stairs.

Moriarty stared at him, but the noise of crashing glass interrupted him and let him race up the stairs, head down, avoiding the shots that were fired by the police now. John pushed his gun back into his waistband. They couldn't know that it had been him firing those last shots. God, they
probably knew. They must have seen.

Sherlock landed in front of his feet. Somehow he had managed to almost gracefully slide down the stairs after Moriarty's death grip had loosened. John immediately pulled him down from the last step and pressed him flat to the ground, shielding him from any bullets that might be aimed at him.

When he was sure that they were safe, he ripped off the tape from Sherlock's mouth, ignoring the pained grunt and pushed up his shirt. Moriarty had moved, just a tiny bit to stabilise himself. He had put his weight on his left foot so he could get a clear shot. The only way of hitting him and saving his own life as well as Sherlock's had been a straight shot to his side, half hidden behind Sherlock.

Sherlock was bleeding, but not too badly. The wound was external and a few stitches would do.

"John?" John snapped out of his medical mode and focused on Sherlock's face, carefully pressing his hand against the wound.

"Sherlock." It was neither a question, nor did he really want to say much; all he wanted was to say his name while he was still alive to hear him say it.

"You shot me." Sherlock said, and then the pained expression gave way to a smile that brought back the tears that John had been fighting down.

"Yes." He laughed, tears spilling over. "I did."
He had never felt this relieved in his entire life. The noise around him was drowned out. It was only them for that moment, only two exhausted men, happy to be alive.

"Does it hurt much?" He wanted to say so many things, but he knew that this was neither the right time nor the right place. He leaned over Sherlock to check on the wound and found that his skin was impossibly white in contrast to the red blood that was seeping out between his fingers.

"Fuck." He jerked his hands back in shock. He still had the other man's blood on his hands and he was being anything but sanitary right now. But then again, there was dirt and blood in war, and this was an emergency. Nevertheless, he pulled down Sherlock's shirt again to use as a layer between his dirty hands and the wound.

He felt his muscles move under his hands. Sherlock was impossibly lean, and yet, he was surprised to feel such strength under his fingers. But of course his physical control had to come from somewhere, and he had seen Sherlock do things that not even stunt-men would do without being paid extra.

"It's okay." Sherlock tried to calm him down. He was the one bleeding from a wound that he had put in his side and he was trying to calm him down. John bit his tongue to keep his calm.

Finally he was ready to face the world around them, lifting his head to see the whole hall full of police. They had shattered one of the glass fronts and he was pretty sure that they had followed Moriarty up onto the roof. With a sinking heart he understood that Moriarty had managed to get out of this alive. He should have killed him. One more second of his total concentration and he could have killed James Moriarty, who took sadistic pleasure in hurting everyone around him.

"I need some help here," he yelled. "I need a doctor."

Sherlock's hand was on his wrist. He was trying to get his attention. "I want you." He said it, calm and with no shadow of a doubt, and John stared at him in disbelief until something in his head clicked and he understood that Sherlock wanted him as his doctor. He felt his ears burn.

Trying to talk his way out of the embarrassing situation, he started to ask him questions. "Did he drug you? What did he give you? Do you need anything? Water? They'll be here in a minute."

"John!" Demanding.

"You haven't eaten anything in days, have you? Your pulse is weak but still acceptable. And a few stitches should do. I'm so sorry, but I had no choice and …"

"John." Sherlock spoke loudly, cringing with pain. "Just shut up for a second." His eyes seemed dangerously bright and John remembered that he had not been the only one shaken by the prospect of the other dying.

Somehow, his brain did not function properly. He just stared at him, unable to think about anything else than the way he had looked at him. He had never seen Sherlock so sad. Never.

"John?" A different voice. Lestrade. Thank God!

"John, are you alright?"

He looked up at him, meeting his eyes. "John, are you okay?"
"I'm fine. I'm fine." He was far from fine, but Sherlock was the one that needed saving right now.

"God, what happened to you?"

"Never mind, please, we need an ambulance."

Lestrade took one look at Sherlock, whose hands were still bound and whose lips were raw from the tape that John had ripped off in panic, and pulled out his walkie talkie. Then he knelt down and cut the tape that forced Sherlock's hands together by the wrists and walked back towards the entrance, ordering medical staff to come in.

"John?" Sherlock sounded incredibly tired. "John, are you okay?"

John felt the tears come. He did not have the strength to fight them back anymore.

"No," he gasped, "I'm not okay." He leaned down, pressing his forehead against Sherlock's chest, keeping his hands in place against the wound. A sob escaped him, and soon he was crying. He cried like he had not done since he was a child. He did not care about anyone watching him and he did not care what Sherlock might think. All the pain and anxiety and frustration and hatred and love came pouring out, overwhelming him.

He felt a hand on the back of his head. Sherlock's fingers gently curled into his hair. He didn't say anything, and John was thankful for it. Nothing he could have said would have made it better. He took a while to recover, but eventually he lifted his head again, the headache now back full force.

John did not want to look at Sherlock, but then again, he wanted so very much to look at him.

Sherlock had his eyes closed, and for a second John panicked again. Then the hand that was still in his hair tightened its grip and a second later moved around to his face. A long thumb was wiping away his tears. The moment was so intimate that John's could barely take it. Something in him just snapped; something that seemed to have been there all this time and that now bubbled to the surface.

"John, move away." Lestrade had brought in a doctor, and he saw them roll in a stretcher.

"Are you hurt, John?" He only now noticed that Lestrade addressed him by his first name. Why was he doing that, he never called him John.

He adamantly shook his head, feeling it spin. Maybe he needed some water. Water would definitely be good.

The next thing he remembered was the sharp pain of a needle in his arm. His eyes flew open. Relieved he realised that he had only passed out for a short time, seeing Sherlock being hauled onto a stretcher. He needed to get up and follow him.

A doctor held him down with gentle pressure. "Don't move. You were unconscious for a minute and your temperature is pretty worrying. We'll get you something to drink and then take you to the hospital. Are you injured? In pain?"

John looked at him blankly. He could feel the fever now. His whole body ached.

"I'm fine. I need to go with him," he murmured, his arm pointing into the general direction of where Sherlock was being wheeled away.

"I'm sorry, but you are in no state …"
John's look hardened. He might have passed out, but he would not leave Sherlock. For all he knew the doctor might work for Moriarty. He would not let Sherlock out of his sight.

"I have to." He pushed himself up, unstable for a second, but at least he had a goal he could make his way towards. Inhaling deeply, he followed the stretcher.

The cold wind outside shook him out of his dreamlike state. It was freezing, and a few lonely snowflakes drifted down from an orange London sky. He could have cried again. He was alive.

John closed his eyes and enjoyed the cold against his face, but soon he caught himself again and walked straight towards the ambulance that was waiting to take Sherlock to the hospital. "I need to go with him." It was no request but a simple statement that allowed for no objection.

The doctor looked at him, checking his state. "I would rather take you in on a stretcher, but if you think you can sit up …" he waved his hand into the general direction of the ambulance.

"I can," John said, sure that his fever was not bad enough to cloud his judgment.

He climbed in after they had rolled Sherlock in.

"Can I stitch him up in here?" John was serious, but the doctor just regarded him sceptically.

"I mean it." John was starting to feel desperate. His body was working against him and he needed to make sure that Sherlock would be okay.

"You can't. You've got blood all over you and your hands are shaking. You need to go to the hospital just as badly as he does. As a patient!" He sounded resolute.

So instead of asking again, he leaned forward, taking Sherlock's hand, at least trying to pretend he was feeling for his pulse. Sherlock opened his eyes to look at him, no hint of pain. "Did you give him something?" John asked the doctor.

"It appears that he is under the influence of something, so no, we couldn't give him anything."

John looked at him. "Sherlock," he said, scared that whatever Moriarty had given him might still kill him in the long run, "stay awake, okay? I'm here, just stay with me."

Sherlock smiled. "I'm not going anywhere, John." With that he drifted off.

It took everything John had not to panic. He kept his hand on Sherlock’s pulse and after a while he pushed up his shirt again to see if he was still bleeding. They had taped the wound up, but the plaster was already soaked through.

The doctor looked at him, worried. "What happened to you?" he inquired, taking John's hand from Sherlock’s arm, checking his pulse.

John tried to stare him down, but realised that we must look everything but intimidating in the state he was in. Instead of arguing or explaining, he asked for water.

It made him feel better, and eventually he leaned back, trying to force his body to calm down. He knew that they would be separated as soon as they reached the hospital, and no matter how exhausted he was, he could not allow himself to fall asleep.

When they finally reached the hospital he forced his mind to stay clear. The water had helped, but it was obvious that it would not suffice to actually make him better. He envied Sherlock, who slept peacefully now, and not even the rummaging and pulling could wake him up as they moved him
out of the ambulance and into the emergency wing.

John shot up and followed them unasked. "I need to fix him," he said, trying to sound resolute. "I need to be the one who stitches him up."

The nurse that had taken the raw end of the stretcher, pushing carefully, just gave him a doubtful look. John did not let that discourage him.

"Can you tell me where I can clean up, I'll do it right away." The nurse frowned, pushing harder.

"Please!" He knew begging did not work with medical staff. He had enough experience and he knew that she wasn't the one to call the shots anyway.

"Let him." He was astonished, stopped for a second only to fall into a jog to keep up with the stretcher being pushed down a long grey corridor. "I want him to do it."

Sherlock was awake and talking. He had not slipped away in a drug induced coma to never wake again. The rush of adrenaline that he had felt when Sherlock had first talked to him after the shooting was back, giving him the necessary strength.

"Please," he repeated his request, this time more calmly. "I'm his doctor."

The nurse looked him up and down and then nodded. "If you have your license with you and you're up for it," she said, shaking her head at John. To the man on the other end of the stretcher she said, "he needs to clean up, though."

The relief that flooded John was almost too much. Sherlock was wheeled into an op room and his shirt was opened with caution; not the way John had hastily pushed it out of the way. He found himself next to a sink, letting hot water run over his forearms and hands. He took a few seconds to enjoy just that feeling and then he started scrubbing away as if he was infested with a deadly disease. It only registered in the back of his mind that he was actually allowed to operate on someone while he himself was in need of medical care. He did not allow himself to think about this too deeply, focusing on the task at hand. He was given a t-shirt, a lab-coat and a surgical mask and once he was dressed, he felt much more up to the task at hand than he had before.

The doctor told him that Sherlock was clearly under the influence of something and that they had taken blood tests, but that they could not risk giving him anything. He would feel everything. John welcomed the help of the nurse as she handed him the instruments.

"Sherlock?" he tried to wake him up, making sure that he was still there. He knew that he would possibly feel less pain if he was asleep, but he needed to know he was conscious. "Sherlock?"

Sherlock opened his eyes, trying to sit up. John was quick to press his hand to his chest and keep him down. "Don't move," he advised him, finding his voice steady and professional. "I'm going to fix you."

He looked at Sherlock's face to make sure that he was okay and prepared. "I'm going to hurt you, but I'll be quick," he tried to sound reassuring.

"John?" Sherlock's voice was weak.

"Yes?"

"Go ahead." Something told him that Sherlock had wanted to say something else, but he focused on sewing up the wound he had ripped into his skin. With a sigh he started, hearing Sherlock gasp...
when he disinfected the wound and again when the needle pierced his skin, but after a few seconds he was completely quiet. John rested his hand on Sherlock's stomach, trying to apply pressure in order to decrease the pain for him. It took him exactly ten stitches to close the wound.
Chapter Fifteen

As soon as he had cut the thread, his hands started shaking. The shock was finally giving way to complete exhaustion. Trying to keep himself upright, he put away the instruments. The urge to just lie down next to Sherlock was overpowering. He had to smile at that thought, but he knew that he would just drop down where he was standing if he did not sit immediately.

He staggered to the only chair in the room next to the door. "I'm ready to see a doctor now," he said, already half asleep.

John couldn't quite remember what happened after; it was all a blur of noises and faces, closing in and moving away again. He felt another injection but was too out of it to even express his discomfort. Eventually he was pushed down to sit on the side of a bed, a nurse taking off his shoes. Somehow he managed to take the lab coat and t-shirt, not bothering with his blood stained trousers and just lay down. He barely registered the gun which was pressing into his back as he lay on it. After that, everything was calm and dark and comfortable.

With a shock he woke. His heart was racing and he was soaked in cold sweat. The darkness around him did nothing to calm him down. Where was he? What had happened? His hand clung to the sheets, desperately holding on to his sanity.

"John." He nearly jumped off the bed, and then suddenly it all came back. "John, it's alright."

The voice came from the left and he felt a hand on his arm, trying to calm him down.

Within a second his panic shifted to the dark outline next to him. "Sherlock, what are you doing up?" He couldn't see him properly. Why couldn't he see him? It was never really dark in London, but the blinds seemed thick enough to filter out any light.

Sherlock sighed, and John couldn't tell whether it was from pain, exhaustion or annoyance. "John, you were having a bad dream," he explained, but it wasn't with his usual matter-of-fact voice. He sounded honestly concerned.

John tried to calm down, forcing his breathing to slow down, as he had almost been hyperventilating. It was wrong, the picture was wrong. He was supposed to sit by Sherlock's bed and hold his hand. Wait. Sherlock was holding his hand?

John noticed that Sherlock had indeed moved his hand from his arm down to his hand, holding it with gentle pressure, his thumb rubbing the back of his hand. He was making sure that John had something to concentrate on. "It's alright," he said again, "I'm here."

That was when John realised that he must have called out Sherlock's name in his sleep and he was suddenly very glad that Sherlock couldn't see him either. He was sure the blush would have spoken volumes.

"Where are we?" John dared to ask, still hyper-aware of the warm hand on his.

"You operated on me," Sherlock said, pointedly pronouncing 'operated,'" and then your body just shut down. I was worried for a while because there was so much blood on you." His voice still did not sound the way it usually did. Maybe the darkness made him say things that he usually wouldn't.

John chuckled. "I did not operate on you. I merely put some stitches in your side. Does it hurt?"
Sherlock took his time before he answered. "Not as much."

"Not as much as what?" John had the feeling that Sherlock did not say what he wanted to, again. He wondered if they should talk about it now, in the safety of almost complete darkness, being able to blame shock and exhaustion in case they said something that would sound strange or embarrassing for either of them.

Sherlock removed his hand, and John felt cold immediately. "Don't go!"

He could hear the smile in his voice. "Didn't you just order me back to bed?"

And he was right. It was silly to want to keep him there, in his seat by the bed, just because it gave him comfort and kept him from freaking out again. "You're right. I'm sorry. Go back to bed, you need to rest, you lost quite a lot of blood."

Sherlock was still smiling, he could hear it. "No thanks to you."

"Sherlock, I had no …"

"Hush, John, I'm sorry. I know. What you did was incredibly brave. No one has ever …" he trailed off. John could sense him getting up. A pained hiss escaped him as he straightened. "Get some sleep." Then John felt him lean down, feeling for his shoulders in the darkness, pulling him into an awkward hug. John pushed himself up with his hands, leaning into him, being careful not to touch the wound. He felt his cheek press against his own. "Thank you," he whispered, and then he was gone, and he let himself fall back onto the bed.

After a few seconds he could hear Sherlock slip into bed. Only then did it register that he wore no shirt, and neither did Sherlock. The blush was back, he could feel his face burn. "I'm right here, okay?" Sherlock sounded tired.

"Okay."

"Good night, John."

"Good night, Sherlock."

"John?"

"Hmm?"

"Never mind."

John couldn't keep the smile from creeping into his face as he pulled up the cover and closed his eyes. For the first time he consciously relaxed. Sleep came quickly.

He was woken up by a nurse, checking in on them. She was at Sherlock's bed when John opened his eyes against the light. Sherlock was lying on his side, head propped up on his hand, looking at him while the nurse checked the wound. John couldn't help but smile, and Sherlock smiled back. Neither of them looked away, and only when the nurse had replaced the dressing and ordered him to lie on his back, did his focus shift. "Can I leave today?" he asked, sounding as if he was confident that he would. The nurse looked at him, checking his pulse, then his heart and his eye reflexes and nodded. "I believe so, but we will have to wait for the result of your blood tests."

John frowned. How could they do that in a single day? Proper blood tests always took much longer and even if they had a good reason, four days was the quickest they had ever gotten any results back.
"Mycroft," was all Sherlock said, leaving the nurse puzzled but John satisfied with that answer.

"Can I take a shower?" John was suddenly painfully aware of the state his body was in.

The nurse walked over to him. "I'm checking on you first, but I think you'll be fine. You can leave as soon as the doctor signs you out."

He sat up, letting her listen to his heart beat and then his breathing. "The fever is down," she told him, "but you should definitely take a few days off. A shock mixed in with a flu is not something to take lightly."

"You have the flu?" Sherlock seemed genuinely surprised and John remembered his statement that his health was supposedly perfect. Instead of teasing him about being wrong, he just smiled apologetically and shrugged. Sherlock couldn't quite keep the smirk off his face.

"Okay," the nurse said, "take a shower if you want to. Do you have anyone to bring around some clothes?"

"Sarah," Sherlock piped up, but John gave him a look that made it clear that it was a bad idea. Sherlock's right eyebrow arched up so high it disappeared entirely under his hair.

"Lestrade."

"Lestrade." John was sure that he would want to ask questions anyway, and Mrs Hudson had let him in often enough to search for drugs when he needed an excuse to check on them or he was too proud to just ask him for help directly, and he probably knew where their clothes were.

"Good point," Sherlock said, and it sounded as if his thoughts had taken the exact same road.

"Will you call him?"

"I can't. Moriarty destroyed my phone."

Sherlock looked almost physically hurt for a second and then reached over to the nightstand with visible discomfort and picked up the hospital phone. He looked at John as he dialled and John wondered if Sherlock was actually as sad about the loss of the phone as he was. Well, technically speaking, Sherlock had used that phone more often than his own, so it was understandable. However, it was unusual for him to have any sort of emotional attachment to an object that wasn't his coat.

"Lestrade? It's Sherlock Holmes. Yes, yes, oh, not now. We need some clothes, preferably our own. Could you pick something up for us, yes, for me and John. Yes. No. Thank you."

John was amused. He wondered what Lestrade had asked him, apart from inquiring about their health.

The nurse was a bit at a loss as to what to do now, so she turned back to John. "I think you should go ahead, I'll fetch you a towel."

"Thanks." She left them alone, shaking her head lightly as if she was baffled by the entire situation.

"Are you okay?" John asked Sherlock, realising he had not really asked since waking up.

Sherlock regarded him with a strange and unreadable look and then nodded. "I think so, but I want to go home."

"Yeah, me, too."
He pushed the cover aside and stood next to the bed, looking down on himself. Then he froze. "Sherlock, the gun," he said quietly, and then started to frantically look around the room.

"John, calm down. I took it from you last night after you fell asleep. Didn't want you to shoot yourself in the state you were in. I can't believe to took to into surgery with you. And before you ask, it's in your coat in the wardrobe." He nodded towards the wardrobe across the room. "You're not hurt." Again, what should have been a question was a statement. "Where did all the blood come from?"

John looked at Sherlock, noticing him looking him up and down with interest. It was incredibly distracting, and he prayed that the nurse would be back soon, because Sherlock would clearly notice that something was the matter.

"John, are you quite alright?"

He felt the blush creep up his neck and into his face again. He knew he couldn't hide it, but he couldn't mention it either, and diverting from it would be even more obvious. "Sorry," he said, hoping that it would be the safest way of getting out of the situation.

"John?"

"Sherlock, what?" He did not mean to sound so irritated, but he was and he did not want to think about what was happening to him and why Sherlock's eyes made him so self conscious.

"It's okay."

John stared at him, his mind refusing to even interpret the meaning of what he had just said. Thankfully, the door opened and the nurse returned with two large white towels in her hand.

"The results are in, you're all clear," she announced. "So as soon as your clothes are here, you're good to go."

"Thank you," Sherlock said and then looked back at John who was standing awkwardly in the middle of the room.

"I'll be in the shower," he announced, grabbing one of the towels and disappearing behind the bathroom door. Inside, he leaned against the door. What was wrong with him? Inhaling deeply, he stepped in front of the mirror and jumped. His face was still covered in dried blood and dirt. Of course, he had only washed his hands before he had stitched Sherlock up, and he suddenly understood the strange looks he had received after leaving the library. His hair was also pretty messed up and the stains of blood and dirt had reached as far as his chest and his shoulder blades. He looked as if he had stepped right out of a horror film.

He breathed a sigh of relief. Sherlock might not have noticed him blushing after all. He touched his own cheeks, tracing the streaks that his tears and Sherlock's thumb had left on his face. If he had hoped nobody had seen him cry last night, he now knew that everyone could tell with a single glance. He needed to get over being embarrassed by his human reactions and start functioning again. He peeled himself out of his jeans and underwear and stepped into the shower.

With a content sigh he noticed that the last shower had seemed like bliss, but this one was pure heaven. He took his time scrubbing away at the dirt, washing his hair out again and again, trying to get rid of the invisible stains the horror that last night had left on his skin.

Closing his eyes against the water, he let it hit him face first. Somewhere in his mind he realised that he wouldn't have to pay a bill for the water he was using now, so he turned it even hotter and just stood there a little longer, slowly turning back into the man he had been a week ago. Well, not
quite, but he did feel much more like his old self.
Eventually John felt guilty for occupying the bathroom for so long and stepped out of the shower, wrapping the towel around his hips. He found that his strength and especially his self-confidence were restored as he looked at himself in the mirror. There it was, his clean but unshaven face, no traces of blood or dirt or tears. It could have just been another normal morning if it wasn't for the fact that he was in a hospital and that it was almost noon. And that he was a changed man.

It dawned on him that while he had let his emotions run all over the place, he had not asked Sherlock what had happened. Sherlock had been gone for two days and had quite possibly been in Moriarty’s hands all this time. And Sherlock had been the one who had asked him if he was okay, while that should have been his job. Sherlock had comforted him as he had lain there, bleeding from a gunshot wound and wiped away John's tears when he had probably gone through much worse.

He dried himself off, but for lack of proper clothes and his distinct dislike for hospital gowns, no matter how practical, he decided that the towel would have to do. He was worried about Sherlock now, but then again his mind had just not functioned properly until now.

He quietly stepped into the room again, finding Sherlock lying on his bed as he would on the couch, hands behind his head, one leg crossed over the other, staring at the ceiling. He didn't turn his head, and only said "finally." He sounded like himself again, John noticed somewhat relieved, somewhat disappointed.

"Sherlock?"

"Yes, John?" He loved that Sherlock always said his name when he answered, as if to show him that he had his full attention.

"What happened to you?"

He could see about twenty different snarky remarks crossing his friend's mind, but none of them left his lips. "Can we talk about this at home? I dislike this part of the hospital."

"Oh, because this part is for the living, you mean."

"Precisely."

John chuckled. Yes, Sherlock was definitely back to his old self.

"Will you try to take a shower?" He asked, wondering how Sherlock would cope with having to be careful about the wound. Something told him that he wouldn't quite manage. "Without trying to experiment on what water does to a freshly stitched up wound, I mean."

Sherlock turned his head, giving him a look that made it clear that he had anticipated John to say something along the lines of what he just had. John expected him to go back to brooding and staring at the ceiling, but he just kept his head where it was, looking at him from the side. It was clear that he wanted to say something, but that the environment was not the place to do so. John walked over to the window, looking at the sight he only noticed now. "Sherlock, it's been snowing."

"Obviously."

No surprise for him, he probably smelled it or noted by the way the light was different. John didn't
even bother to comment. He kept his eyes on the snow, watching as the snowflakes danced their way towards the ground and wondered how Connie and Jack were coping in this weather. He hoped they were okay.

His breath clouded the window, and for a second he had the silly impulse to draw something on the grey patch of condensed water. With a smile he turned around, only to find Sherlock still looking at him. He decided that it was perfectly normal. He had always done that, he just never had that effect on him; an effect that he chose not to think about too deeply. So he sat down on the bed and looked back. Sherlock seemed relaxed, almost too calm. He figured that he was just waiting to get out of here.

"I won't take a shower here," he said eventually.

"You want to do it at home?"

"Yes."

"Okay."

"John?" He still held his gaze. "Do you think they saw you?"

"Shooting?"

Sherlock nodded his confirmation.

"Don't you think they would have checked for a gun, then? And that I could have come to the hospital with you?" He rubbed his face. Lestrade was probably responsible for leaving him alone for now, but John knew that his authority was not absolute. "Do you think I'd get in trouble?"

"You could go to jail. I can't let that happen." He sounded resolute, but at the same time unsure, knowing that even he would not be able to help John out. "I'm glad you weren't hurt," he added after a while. "I apologise."

John frowned and Sherlock looked away for the first time, seemingly mad at himself. Just as John wanted to ask what he was apologising for, a knock interrupted him.

"Are you boys decent?" Lestrade couldn't hide the relief from his face and voice when he saw them both alive and awake.

John laughed. "It's not like you would have stayed outside." He could see Sherlock's lip twitch.

"Did you bring our clothes?"

Lestrade entered the room and closed the door behind him. "I was so tempted to bring you a set of Mrs Hudson's dresses," he said, grinning happily.

Sherlock sat up with one single fluid movement. "Just because we are hospitalised doesn't mean that ..."


"Dr. Watson." Lestrade held out a bag with his clothes. Sherlock watched. For one second he was tempted to change right where he stood just to see the reaction on their faces. Well, he didn't care much for Lestrade's reaction.

Sherlock looked at him almost challengingly and John wondered whether his ability to read him
had returned. Thinking back it seemed like that was the case. They had had several short conversations without really speaking, with Sherlock reading his mind without much trouble, coming to the same conclusions as John. He wondered why that was.

He excused himself and made his way back into the bathroom. *Let these two talk for a minute,* John thought, Lestrade surely had a full catalogue of questions. When he came out again, Lestrade was indeed scribbling away on his notebook, Sherlock sitting on the edge of the bed, supporting himself with his arms. He looked up when John walked back in, and kept his eyes on him when he sat back down on his bed, listening to what Lestrade asked.

Apparently Sherlock was avoiding giving any real information. He circumnavigated Lestrade's questions, rephrasing them until they had become yet another inquiry for his health. John was fascinated, and he knew that it would take just one more question for Lestrade to give up on him.

John was right. After Sherlock had again avoided a question as to the presence of the man who had held Sherlock hostage and the possible scheme behind things, he put away his notepad and pen and handed Sherlock the bag with his clothes. Sherlock stood up, stretching a bit as if to try if his body was still in working order and then began pulling out the clothes Lestrade had brought him. John watched him. He had never really seen him topless, he mused. He always wore t-shirts at night, and usually his dressing gown, even when he came out of the shower.

He looked tough like this. Older somehow, more mature. John didn't quite know why that was, especially since he did not dress like any thirty year old he knew. His style was elaborate and expensive. But still, seeing him spread out on the couch on bad days or watching him curse happily at a failing experiment, he knew how young he could appear. And now he got a good look at that lean chest, flat stomach, and part of his back, defined muscles moving as he lifted his arms. The wound was dressed nicely, but it reminded him of the desperate action he had had to take in order to save them both. It made him feel both proud and very sorry.

"John, quit staring at me, it won't disappear."

*Says he, of all people,* John though.

Lestrade turned around to him, eyebrow raised. John knew he could either feel embarrassed again or go with it.

"I hope it'll heal quickly," he said, avoiding Lestrade's eyes.

Sherlock just smiled and put on a shirt, covering himself up and causing John to finally look away. "You did not happen to find my coat?" he inquired. Lestrade looked back at him, obviously irritated. "We didn't really look for it, to be honest. There are other things we were focused on, like bombs."

"There are no bombs," Sherlock said dismissively. "In case you find it, I'd like to have it back."

Lestrade shook his head lightly. "I really liked you last night when you didn't say much." He knew he was asking for it, but he apparently did not care enough to swallow the remark.

Sherlock's eyes hardened, but John knew that he was acting. It had become a bit of a hobby of his to watch Sherlock intimidate even the most self-confident people, and Lestrade was no exception. "Alright, I think I better go and get some work done. Could you call me when you feel up for questioning?"

John nodded and Sherlock stared. "And, you're welcome for the clothes." He nodded into John's general direction and walked out.
"Sherlock, he was in such a good mood." He couldn't keep the grin off his face.

"Ah, he'll live." Sherlock answered, grinning back.

"Come on, let's go home."
"They didn't see you shoot." Sherlock said as he signed the papers. He spoke quietly, but said it as if he was completely sure. "They saw you do something, apparently you were holding up your hands, but they didn't see you shoot. They think the guy who bled all over you was the one who did it. They found the bullet which killed him and matched it with those in Moriarty’s gun. They think Moriarty shot him after the man fired at us." He shook his head as if he was actually feeling sorry for their stupidity. "I wonder why Anderson still has his job."

John took the clipboard from him and gave him a single look of disapproval. He waited for Sherlock to say something to strengthen his point, but he stayed silent. After John had signed his release papers and the document that ensured that he would take over Sherlock as his patient, he put down the pen and looked up at Sherlock.

"Ready to go?"

A short nod. "After you."

Sherlock was freezing. Lestrade had brought him a jumper, one that John had never seen before in his life and was sure that Lestrade had only brought it so he would be forced to wear it, but in the end it didn't suffice at all. John had forced him to at least wear his scarf, but other than that he couldn't really help him.

He was shivering, and even though the cab driver turned up the heat, he didn't quite warm up. John saw how annoyed Sherlock was by his physical reaction, staring out of the window, watching a transformed city rush by. It must have been snowing for a long time, because everything was covered several inches deep in snow and there were very few people on the streets. It was funny how London seemed to die out when it was snowing.

When Sherlock started to shiver visibly John couldn't take it anymore. He moved closer and pushed his arm between Sherlock's back and the seat, rubbing up and down. Sherlock turned around to him, surprised. When John reached a certain point near his kidneys, he flinched, hissing in pain.

"Shit, I'm sorry!"

"No, it's nothing. Keep going please."

But John couldn't keep doing something that caused him visible discomfort. He guessed that it must have been where Moriarty had hit him last night. He wanted to kill that man.

"John." Sherlock caught his eye. "It's okay, don't worry about it."

Instead of trying to warm Sherlock up by rubbing his back, John decided on a simpler, but much more intimate gesture. He took his hands into his, gently rubbing warmth into them.

Sherlock looked away, a movement that John was not used to at all. If anything, he would sharply turn towards him, but never away. "Is that okay?" he asked, unsure now. Considering how cold Sherlock's fingers were, and how warm his own, it was definitely the right thing to do.

"Hmm." It was neither here nor there, but it was an affirmation, at least.

When they reached Baker Street, they found that they both had no cash to actually pay the driver. Sherlock hopped out and disappeared through the door, only to emerge with Mrs Hudson in his
trail a few seconds later.

While Sherlock paid the driver, Mrs Hudson came forward and hugged John tightly. "I saw it on the news. I'm so glad that you boys are okay! You cannot imagine how worried I was, especially about you, John." There it was again, apparently people only called him by his first name when they were truly worried about him. "With the fever and all, and then you just disappeared and your girl came by and was looking for you and you were not there and then the police and …" She threw her hands into the air. "Sherlock, why are you not wearing a coat?"

"Don't worry about me, Mrs Hudson." Sherlock said, sounding positively happy. "I'm quite alright." John smiled and ushered her into the house.

"I will make you boys some tea," she announced. "Don't you dare take any phone calls until then." The warning was clearly meant for Sherlock, but he was already hopping up the stairs. She gave John a look that told him that she had no idea what was going on but that someone needed to put some sense into him. "You go on upstairs, love. You look tired. Get some rest, alright?"

"Thank you, Mrs Hudson. And I'm sorry." No flowers again; only a happy Sherlock to present her with.

When he came upstairs he could not quite repress a laugh. Sherlock had gotten rid of the jumper and pulled on his dressing gown and was just about to let himself fall backwards onto the couch when John reminded him of a certain wound that needed a bit of care. "If you open it again it'll be a mess. Come on, a few days should be manageable, even for you."

So Sherlock sat down on the couch instead. "I wouldn't mind so much."

John was irritated by that. He was repeatedly hinting at the fact that he didn't care much about being injured, and apparently the pain it caused him did not distract him at all. He couldn't formulate the question to ask for a reason.

He let himself fall into his chair, exhaling audibly. "It's good to be back."

"I wasn't sure you would find me." Out of nowhere, Sherlock decided to finally talk about what had happened. "I did not want to involve you but I knew I would need you. I could not risk for you to not know."

John wanted to say something, but he was not sure if Sherlock would keep talking if he interrupted him now.

"I thought you might check the skull first. I was stupid enough to think you would just happen to pick it up and talk to it if I was not here." He chuckled. "And then you sent me the text, and I knew I might be able to send someone, so it wouldn't be obvious that it came from me. Good choice of restaurant, by the way, I wouldn't have known how to point you towards Darwin if you had asked to meet somewhere else. Well, and then I thought that you might just be too much of a Londoner to care about strange people doing and saying strange things. I mean, you live with me." A small smile, and John wanted to protest, but Sherlock looked at him in a way that told him that if he was honest with himself, there was no denying that Sherlock definitely ran under the category 'strange'. "When did you know?"

"Why don't you tell me?" A challenge. John wanted to test how far Sherlock could go.

That actually made Sherlock grin widely. He leaned back and pulled up his legs, carefully lying down. "If you had found the scrap under the skull, you wouldn't have asked me out for dinner, you would have come to the library right away."
"Okay." John was not sure if that qualified as a deduction.

"There were several aspects involved. You wanted to get Mrs Hudson flowers, because you thought she had cleaned up your mess." His head turned and he grinned at him sideways.

"Why did you do it?" John inquired. Despite Moriarty and everything else, this was the one question he had wanted to ask him all along.

"Because it was my fault. I surprised you. You were nervous all day and I should have known that even a soldier sometimes jumps when he is being surprised. It was quite amusing, though."

"Thanks."

"And you obviously did not understand why I was there, so you were safe for the moment."

"Why were you downstairs?"

"Well, you figured that out all by yourself already, didn't you? You were in my room."

As if that would answer any questions. John sighed, watching him calmly. "You were sleeping on the couch in case someone would come and try to … do something?"

"Wrong."

"Sherlock!"

"I did not sleep. I was on the couch, yes. I had your gun. Oh, don't look at me like that! I put it back before you woke up. I hoped Moriarty would show up so I could finally end it."

John frowned. "You're an idiot, Sherlock." He meant it.

Sherlock wasn't sure what to answer to that, catching John's drift. John secretly congratulated him for shutting him up, if only for a second. He did not worry about him not talking anymore.

"I wanted to make sure you're safe." He was looking at the ceiling now, and John wondered if he had ever seen him shy away from anything before.

Just when things threatened to get awkward, Mrs Hudson came in, carrying a tray with tea and biscuits. "Here you go. Ah, Sherlock, I see you're back to your old habits."

He glowered up at her, but Mrs Hudson was one of three people who did not care much for his dismissive looks. Mycroft was another, and, unsurprisingly, Moriarty was the third. He even took pleasure in Sherlock's glare. John himself had, thankfully, never been on the receiving end of it, and he was not sure that he could take it. Sherlock constantly looked at him, scrutinising, thinking, deducing; but he never stared him down.

"Thank you, Mrs Hudson," John said, smiling at her apologetically. "That's very kind of you."

"You're most welcome," she answered, pointedly in John's direction. "I will be downstairs, in case you need me."

"Thank you."

When her footsteps had disappeared John turned back to Sherlock. "You know very well that you would have not been able to shoot him. And see, the thing is, he would have shot you."

Sherlock propped himself up on his elbows, eyeing the tea and then his violin case.
John anticipated that Sherlock would take out his violin and play some random tunes to ignore the fact that John was right, and he did open the case, but only to further open the little compartment. He looked at John, surprised.

"What?"

Sherlock slowly closed the case again and dropped back down again, grunting in apparent discomfort.

"Does it hurt?"

"Stop asking me that, of course it does."

"I could give you something."

"No, thank you. It's ... interesting." And, with a glance at John who had already opened his mouth to speak. "And don't call me an idiot."

John let his mouth fall shut.

The next few minutes were spent in silence. John was sipping his tea, trying to think of nothing in particular, and Sherlock left his tea untouched, his mind working furiously.

Then John remembered something that he had momentarily forgotten. "Sherlock, how do you know I was in your room?"

He could almost hear Sherlock's thoughts screeching to a halt. He lifted his left arm and pointed at his dressing gown with his right.

"No," John shook his head, leaning forward. "That is not how you know. You went to your room to get the dressing gown and saw that things were not as you left them. Lestrade was in your room to get clothes, so he could have rearranged something. You couldn't possibly know it was me."

"I couldn't just leave you by yourself." Sherlock looked at him, his face open and honest. "I was worried about you. I knew Moriarty only used you to get to me, and I knew it was a risk to come, but I needed to know you were alright."

"Thank you." John leaned back, thinking that he had been far from okay when he had seen the shadow across the street. "But why didn't you tell me?" he tried to not sound overly accusing.

"Because last time you knew anything about him you ended up with a bomb strapped to your body."

He obviously tried to stay calm, but he could not hide the bitterness in his voice.

"Sherlock, we almost died!"

"No, John, you almost died." He was speaking to the ceiling again and John had the strangest urge to move to the couch and hug him. "I'm sorry that I involved you."

"Don't be." John meant it. He understood where Sherlock was coming from but he obviously did not see the bigger picture.

He wanted to explain to Sherlock that he was not responsible for his actions. It had always been John's choice to come along. He could have said no, Sherlock had never pressured him into following him to a case. He had always had the opportunity to stay at home, or leave as soon as
things became dangerous. Yes, he had always been given a choice. Only when he had come along Sherlock had expected him to work with him; or he had sent him away to collect information, or to ask questions or to get supplies, but it had always been in moments when Sherlock had made sure that John would be out of immediate danger.

Once things got ugly, he always had had the opportunity to leave. Of course he never did. He loved the rush of adrenaline. He loved the cold London air in his face as they raced along deserted alleyways, and he loved the companionship that he had gotten so used to. He just got Sherlock, and Sherlock got him. There was no need for elaborate explanations. In times of need they worked as one. And he had developed a need to be around Sherlock in dangerous situations. He had grown incredibly protective, he just never had thought about it until now.

"I will take a shower now," Sherlock announced, wincing as he stood up. "If you feel like sleeping, go ahead. I'm sure Lestrade will refrain from asking me for any advice in the next few days, so don't worry about that." He left the room and John had to repress the urge to ask if he needed anything. When he heard the bathroom door close, he leaned back again, trying to relax. Sleeping sounded very nice indeed, but he needed to check Sherlock's wound when he returned from the shower. He was sure that he would need a new dressing. He stood up and placed his cup on the kitchen table. His back hurt, and he was sure that within a few hours he would be sore from all the stealth crawling around in the library and the general tension of the last days. Well, he could just as well wait on the couch as long as Sherlock was in the shower.

John picked up Sherlock's cooling tea and took a sip. The couch was still warm from where he had sat, he noticed. So he had managed to warm up again, even without tea. With a content sigh he closed his eyes.
"John?" He felt a hand on his arm. "John, wake up."

For one second John was disoriented, but then he opened his eyes to find Sherlock right in front of him, so close that he could feel his breath on his skin.

"Ah, finally." He moved away again, leaving John confused. He did not want him to go away again, not now that he finally had him back. He rubbed his face and the sleep out of his eyes. This was not what he was supposed to think.

"John, could you look at the wound? I know you said to be careful … ." He looked almost embarrassed, and John couldn't help but smile. "I forgot about it for one second and then the dressing came off and now it's bleeding and … ."

He turned his side to him and lifted his arm as to show him that he was now trying to be a good patient. John pretended not to notice that he only wore his pyjama bottoms, riding low on his narrow hips. He sat up, looking up at him. Sherlock was looking back at him past his arm, waiting for something to happen. The wound hadn't opened again, but it was bleeding slightly.

"It's not bad, you just have to stop fidgeting around."

"I'm not fidgeting, I'm merely walking."

"Yes, and running up the stairs and dropping down on the sofa and doing god knows what in the shower ... ."

He didn't know why he had said that, probably because he wanted to see Sherlock's reaction. He was rewarded with a scrutinising look which he chose to ignore.

"I'm going to get you a dinosaur patch," he said grinning, moving to get up. He was stopped by a hand on his chest. "Wait, John."

Sherlock seemed to be unsure why he had reacted like this, certainly not because he would protest overly much over being plastered up with children's patches. He didn't care for such things, as long as they served their purpose. John could see him think. It was extraordinary. Had it been a different situation, he would have told him that he could actually see his mind work from the look in his eyes, but this was not the time to let him know.

"Could you look at my back? I know he meant to hurt me, and it did hurt, but I want to make sure that it won't be a problem."

John smiled down on the hand that was still splayed across his chest as if Sherlock had forgotten about it when he was immersed in thinking. He hastily pulled it back.

"Turn around," John ordered.

Sherlock did as he was told. It was dark by now, and John didn't know how long he had slept but judging by how wet Sherlock's hair still was, it couldn't have been very long. In the dim light that the single lamp on the desk shed, he could see the outline of a bruise forming on his back. It was not too bad, but it was a sensitive part of the body and it looked strange against his light skin. And yet, against the angry wound on his side, it seemed almost invisible. He reached out and gently pressed against the skin next to the bruise. "Does that hurt?"
"No."

He moved closer, pressing his other hand against his right hip, stabilising him before he carefully tested the skin closer to the dark mark. A gasp.

"Sorry."

For a second he allowed himself to not only see the wound and the bruise, but let his eyes roam over Sherlock's body, decidedly avoiding to look anywhere below his waistline. With a grin he noticed that the two dimples in the small of his back seemed very odd somehow, and yet they fit so well to the private version of Sherlock that probably only he knew. "You should eat more, you know? I can count your ribs and you're not even leaning over."

"John, the bruise?"

He chuckled and traced the dark outline with his finger, very gently now, feeling the texture of the warm skin under his fingers. Then he put his palm against the bruise, testing if he could feel a hardening or anything else that he might have to worry about. Sherlock moved, obviously uncomfortable, but unwilling to voice his pain. John's hand on Sherlock's hip tightened automatically as to hold him in place and a small sound came from above, a sound that sounded strangely erotic in John's ears and he blushed, thankful that Sherlock did not see him.

"It should be okay. It will hurt for a while, but it should heal soon."

"Are you sure?" What was he playing at? It was only a bruise. Sherlock had been hurt much worse than this, and he had had plenty of bruises, black eyes and smaller cuts and he had never been too worried.

"It will heal, yes. It will look worse than it is for a while, but you'll be perfectly alright."

"Good." A relieved sigh. "Your hands are warm, they feel good."

John pulled his hands away as if he had just burned his fingers. Even as he did it he cursed himself for betraying his thoughts so clearly.

To avoid any questions from Sherlock, he stood up and went to get the first-aid kit. He could feel Sherlock's eyes on his back. He felt uncomfortably reminded of the moment when Sherlock had leaned close to him to grab the kettle and his heart had just started to hammer away. This was way out of his comfort zone, and yet, it was still Sherlock there, still his friend, still the man he trusted more than anyone else, who had risked his life to save his. Well, that plan had backfired, but it was more about the fact that he had even gone there and that John was apparently the only weakness in Sherlock's life. He frowned, trying to make sense of his train of thought and the strange flutter of his heart that accompanied it.

He grabbed the kit and made his way back to the living room, finding Sherlock still standing in the same spot, his hand on his right hip - just where his own hand had touched him only a minute ago. When he saw John he let his hand fall down. For a second John considered testing him, just like Sherlock had apparently tested him in the kitchen, but then again this was not the right time to play any games. This was serious, and they still had quite a lot of things to talk about without getting weird about something that just happened to float in the air between the two of them.

John coughed nervously and sat back down, this time on the coffee table so that his face was level with Sherlock's wound. He carefully probed the skin around the wound and found that he hadn't done too bad a job considering the state he had been in. He marvelled at the fact that he had even been allowed in the surgery, never mind touching Sherlock at all.
He carefully wiped away the blood with a disinfected cloth and then dabbed at the wound. This time, Sherlock could not keep quiet. "John!"

"Sorry."

"Your hand, it helped?"

"What do you mean?"

"In the hospital, you put your hand on my stomach. It distracted me from the pain." He said it as if it was a completely neutral observation. Well, to him it probably was.

Well, if he insisted. John carefully pressed his hand to the spot where his hand had held onto him last night. Sherlock gently placed his own hand above his, holding it there. "Okay, keep going."

John decided to not even think about what they did there and focused on the wound again. Now and then Sherlock's hand would press down harder on his, but he was quiet now.

"Why don't you want to take any painkillers?" He knew Sherlock was annoyed by the question, but it caused him discomfort and he did not like to see Sherlock in pain when something could easily be done about it.

"It reminds me of what you did for me." John had not expected an answer, especially not this one. "And I know, you're right, I'm an idiot, but I can't help it. I'm not ready to let it go yet."

"But Sherlock, I'm right here and I'm not going anywhere."

Sherlock looked down on him, gently stoking his thumb over John's hand on his stomach. "I know, and I'm glad. But you almost died. He almost killed you just so he could see me suffer. I mean, he did kill you. For a few minutes I thought you were indeed dead. Moriarty believed you were and he was going on and on about it." He stopped, and John wondered if he would start crying. He wasn't sure whether he would be able to handle that.

The experience had obviously left him shaken, and he had a hard time to come to terms with it. John wondered how Sherlock usually dealt with traumas such as this; how he had when he had not been there to talk it through with him. "I didn't know what to do. I wouldn't know what to do without you."

The silence that followed was unbearable. It reminded John of bad movies when the girl confesses her love and her lover stays silent, unable to say anything, worried to say the wrong thing.

Instead of an answer, he gently stroked his thumb over Sherlock's stomach only to realise that it might not be the best idea to stroke a man's stomach like this to comfort him. But he tried to focus on the wound again, finally finishing what he had started. When he had made sure that the wound was clean he leaned back slightly and smiled up at Sherlock. "I need my hand back."

"Of course."

Sherlock squeezed his hand again and then let go. John's hand was tingling. "You're lucky. We still have plaster without dinosaurs." Sherlock snorted and refused to comment.

John covered the wound with a large cotton padded plaster and gently traced the outline, but really, more of Sherlock's skin. He had decided to not think about it. If Sherlock managed to act on impulse, he could allow himself some impulsive behaviour as well.

Sherlock turned around to him. "Thank you, Doctor Watson." The smile was genuine and warm.
Sherlock turned around to him. "Thank you, Doctor Watson." The smile was genuine and warm.

John smiled back, sitting down on the couch again. "Do you think we should catch some sleep?"

"You might want to take a glass of milk with you to your room, so it saves you the way downstairs at night," Sherlock suggested.

With a chuckle, John patted the spot on the couch next to him. "It's not just the milk, you know. It's the act of getting up in the middle of the night when you can't sleep, sneak into the kitchen and open the fridge. Be blinded by the light for a second and then take the drink of milk. And then, if you don't happen to die of a heart attack because you are being surprised in the middle of your secret enterprise, you allow yourself the silent triumph that you managed to do it without getting caught. Revisited childhood memories, really."

Sherlock was obviously amused, and John saw that he was dying to take say something to mock him, but he stayed silent.

"What I mean is, it would not work with a glass of milk. It's the entire thing; you have to include all aspects to come to a satisfactory conclusion."

"And that would be sleep?"

"Yes."

"You dreamt last night." He did it again; picking up on something John said just to change to topic and talk about something that he might not have touched upon otherwise. "And you talked."

"I'm sorry you couldn't sleep."

Sherlock shook his head dismissively. "I wouldn't have slept anyway. There was still too much to think about."

"Did I say anything in particular?" John was curious, but he was also sure that Sherlock's name had been among the things that he had made out.

"Well, judging from what I understood you thought you were still at the British Library and that I was shot."

John felt himself blush. Not solely because Sherlock had heard him call for him in his sleep, but mostly because he must have sounded desperate, judging by the state he was in when he woke up, and maybe because Sherlock was really very close now, his eyes fluttering over his face.

"I'm sorry I put you through this. I know you think differently, but I really am. In the past, I kept to myself, mostly, and it really wouldn't matter if something happened to me. Certainly, the police would have an incredibly hard time coping, but on a very basic level, I don't matter. And then one day, this man shows up. And he stays, which in itself is a small miracle, and I don't even believe in miracles. And he comes along and turns out to be as involved in cases as I am. Well, differently, but passionately. He might have written some offending notes about me on the internet, but overall, he's become so much a part of this," he waved his hand around, but obviously meaning more than just the living room, which made John smile and forget his blush. "And then I am suddenly confronted with the possibility that it would all end. I've never been so scared. I am never scared. And there you have it. I was scared out of my mind that he would do something to you and take you away from me. And he did. He had you shot, only, luckily, it wasn't you. And I couldn't do anything to stop him." He broke off, obviously finding it hard to talk.

"It's not your fault," John tried to reassure him. Sherlock had never spoken about himself so freely and honestly. Emotions were not things he talked about. Facts, yes, observations, certainly, but not his feelings.
"It's not about whose fault it is, it's about …," he shrugged, seemingly unable to say what he wanted to say.

"It's okay. We're both here, and we're both alive."

Sherlock looked at him for a long time, and John didn't know what it meant, but he did not want him to look away. Then suddenly, he felt the urge to hug him again just like he had earlier, when he felt that words could not console him.

"Sherlock, can I …?" He opened his arms, at a loss for words, silently asking for his permission.

And Sherlock moved closer, leaning into him. At first it was awkward, they were still too far away and it was strange to do it, sitting down. But then John wrapped his arms around him more tightly, leaning against him and pulling him closer at the same time. John could feel his heart beat, and a whimper from Sherlock almost brought tears to his eyes.

"I'm glad you're alive. I don't know what I would do without you" To hear his voice so close made the hair at the back of his neck stand up.

"I'm glad you're alive, too. I was so worried when you didn't answer my texts and Lestrade told me about the threats …" Sherlock's hand moved up to his neck, pulling him even closer.

"We're okay, though, right?"

John smiled against his neck. "Yeah," he breathed, noticing a slight tremor that ran through Sherlock's body. He didn't know whether it was because he had the same effect on Sherlock that he had on him or whether he was just cold because he was still not wearing anything except for his pyjama bottoms.

"Sherlock, we should go and get some sleep." He did not want to move away, but with every second they spent like this, holding onto each other, more doubts and questions started crawling into his mind and he didn't want to think about anything right now, really.

"Okay." Sherlock slowly moved away, locking eyes with him. "Thank you, that was nice." A small smile before he got up, running his hand through his hair as he left the living room.

"Good night, John."

"Night."

For a few minutes, John just sat there, staring into nothing. He felt strangely happy - no, not happy, contented. When he went to bed he looked at his room, wondering why he kept it so neat. He took the gun out of his coat and put it away in the drawer, wondering why he had not woken up when Sherlock had come in to bring it back after keeping it with him for the night.

With a smile he dropped the coat to the ground next to his bed. A little disorder couldn't hurt, could it?
Chapter Nineteen

John woke up, feeling slightly nervous. He rubbed his eyes and got up, immediately leaving his room and knocking on Sherlock's door. No answer. Fear threatened to crawl to the surface but he swallowed it down and carefully opened the door.

Sherlock had removed all the files from his bed and stacked them neatly next to it. He was curled up, lying on his right side, still topless. Despite his position, he seemed very relaxed. John felt tenderness towards the sleeping man, a feeling that suddenly seemed normal. Something had happened to him and the last few days had changed him and his perception of the world, but he started to get used to it. It didn't seem quite so threatening and strange anymore.

He smiled and closed the door again, making sure he would not wake him up yet. Then, finding that he was incredibly hungry, he dressed and made his way down into the kitchen, starting to cook a proper breakfast. Sherlock would eat, he would make sure of that.

When he had finished, John went back upstairs to wake Sherlock. He felt guilty, but he knew that he needed to eat. For all he knew he hadn't eaten anything in three or four days.

John knocked again, and again he did not receive an answer, so he opened the door to find Sherlock still in the position he had left him in. With a smile he sat down on the edge of the bed. Sherlock looked very peaceful, his face relaxed, no sign of the frown that usually adorned his forehead.

"Sherlock," he said quietly, not quite wanting to wake him up. Sherlock sighed and unfolded his body, turning until he lay on his back.

"Sherlock, wake up." A small grunt, like a boy who should get up for school but didn't want to. John waited for Sherlock to ask him for another five minutes. The thought made him chuckle. He gently touched his shoulder, stroking the skin above his collar bone.

With another sigh, Sherlock woke up. He opened his eyes, unfocused and heavy with sleep. His hand came up and John anticipated for him to push how own away, but instead he just placed his hand over his, just like he had done last night when he had cleaned the wound.

"Good morning. I made breakfast, in case you're hungry."

Sherlock inhaled deeply and then smiled. "Hunger is dull."

"Of course."

Sherlock blinked a few times, and then his smile widened as if he only just now remembered that he had worried about him. "Thank you."

"You'll eat."

"Do I have a choice?"

"No." John grinned and pulled his hand back. Sherlock only let him go reluctantly.

"I couldn't sleep. I thought you might be gone when I would wake up."

"I told you, I'm here."
Sherlock nodded. "I'm just not used to worry about anyone."

With a grunt he sat up, now being on eye level with John. "You look much better."

John chuckled, and not quite wanting to, got up. "I'll wait for you downstairs."

But Sherlock didn't wait. He grabbed a shirt from the back of his chair and followed him downstairs. John found that he would have preferred if he had stayed like he was. He could easily get used to Sherlock walking around topless … only to check on the progress of his injuries, of course. But it was chilly in the kitchen, so Sherlock was evidently being much smarter than he was.

"Eggs?" he offered when Sherlock sat down on the table, dragging his hands through his hair.

"Hmm." Deep in his throat and rather appreciative. John tried to remember whether he had ever seen Sherlock eat for pleasure.

He placed a plate with bacon and eggs in front of Sherlock, producing two slices of buttered toast right after.

"Thank you, John."

"No problem."

"John?"

"Yes?"

"Come to the library with me today?" he looked calm, but John was sure he had invested quite a bit of thought into this idea. "Of course. But only if you feel up for it."

"Do you?"

"Only if you come along." He took a bite of toast.

"Okay."

Sherlock seemed honestly surprised, looking at him with wide eyes.

"Alright."

John drank his tea and ate his toast, watching Sherlock eat. He couldn't help but smile as Sherlock finished everything he had put before him. For a second he considered to praise him for it, but he knew it would be a bit much.

"We should get flowers for Mrs Hudson." John was silently adding a bottle of expensive wine to that list.

"We should get her a phone," Sherlock mused. "Much more useful."

"For you, yes, but we want to say thank you."

Sherlock grinned.

"She was being incredibly sweet when she thought I was sick."

"You were sick."
"Worried sick, yes."

Sherlock looked at him almost gently. "The birds were a bit vague, no?"

John chuckled. "I hate your voice mail."

"No you don't."

"Yeah, I don't. For a moment I thought it would be the only thing I'd ever hear you say again. 'Busy, obviously.'" A sigh escaped his lips.

"I liked the message you left me."

"Which one?"

"The one where you admitted that you need me."

John stared at Sherlock, blushing.

Sherlock smiled, but he looked sad. "I was listening to the message when he caught me. I thought it would be the last thing I'd ever hear you say." He tried to keep it light, but again, he could not hide the bitterness.

"Wait! Does that mean you got all my texts and the messages I left you and still you didn't have it in you to let me know you were okay?" John regretted saying this immediately, but he was too angry to stop himself. Sherlock never did anything without thinking it through properly and yet John felt that Sherlock's lack of response had been unfair to him.

Sherlock looked surprised. "I didn't think it would have been helpful." He folded his hands and leaned over the table, getting closer to John.

"Well, it would have been. I could have stopped worrying, at least for a bit."

"You talked to people who were clearly sent by me."

"Clearly, yes, in retrospect! Sherlock, I thought god knows what had happened to you. How was I supposed to understand that you sent me messages through people? And, you just said it yourself, the birds were a bit vague," he got up and walked to the window. "A simple 'I'm alive and okay' would have been nice."

"If I had sent you a message like this, Moriarty would have found both me and you much faster."

"How so?" He turned around, leaning against the window sill, arms crossed defensively.

"I'm not the only one to have the underground working for me. He has spies everywhere, and those spies mostly don't even know that they are spies. He gathers information from them without them ever knowing that they betrayed someone."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"You know how innocent he can pretend to be. He does not even pay for information, he just plays with people until they hand over the information that he needs."

"Sherlock, you're not really paying for information either. You're paying them because they have nothing. They would do it for you without receiving anything in return."
Sherlock's eye narrowed, as if he didn't know why John would say such a thing.

"When I told them you had disappeared they alerted the whole city. Thank god we were apparently on the news so that they know you have resurfaced. Otherwise they'd still be searching."

"You were brilliant by the way."

John was both surprised and confused by the sudden change of topic, but apparently Sherlock had heard his opinion on the matter and was ready to move on. "How do you mean?"

"At the library. You did everything the way I hoped you would."

"I wasn't sure about that either. How did you know I was there?"

"The man that Moriarty killed after he … shot you. He came back to report that you were there and that you wanted to speak to the curator."

"And you were there with them?"

"Moriarty thought he had drugged me enough to keep me unconscious for a while. Of course I let him think I was. I'm surprised that even though I have been clean since … well, since you moved in, really, my body was pretty comfortable with the dose he gave me. So I heard them talking."

"Wait, if he gave you something this strong, how could your blood test be clean?"

Sherlock smiled smugly. "Occasionally my brother happens to be helpful."

"He exchanged the blood samples?"

"Obviously."

"That's why you were so cold yesterday. You were suffering from withdrawal."

Sherlock shrugged. "It was over when we came home. I think your hands helped."

John walked back to the table and sat down, sipping his tea. "Did you tell Anthea's sister that someone would come for a security check up?"

"Yes, well, I sent someone to inform her."

"She was very brave," John mused, hoping she would be at the library so he could clarify a few things.

"She's back in Oxford. Mycroft made sure of that."

"When did you even speak to him?"

"Last night when you slept."

"Of course."

He looked at Sherlock, watching his face. He was just a tiny bit nervous, even though John couldn't say why. He still looked sleepy, and he wondered whether he should have let him sleep for a bit longer, but then again, he had enjoyed waking him up. *Okay, wrong thought again.* It was definitely not good thinking about these things while staring into Sherlock's eyes.
"I'll clean up while you get dressed and then we go?"

Sherlock nodded, his eyes still locked to his. Neither of them moved.

"Thank you," he said eventually, pushing himself up with his arms. "Can you just look at the bruise again? When I woke up it was rather painful."

John smiled, and somewhere in his mind it registered that Sherlock was somehow very eager to take off his shirt when he had the chance. They moved into the living room, closer to the window so he could see better. When Sherlock pulled up his shirt, John gasped. The bruise was now of an angry bluish and red colour, the centre purple and the edges almost yellow.

"Your professional opinion?"

John coughed and leaned back. "It looks bloody awful."

"Ah," Sherlock said, grinning. "It will still go away again, right?"

"Yes, but it'll be a while."

Sherlock turned around to him, his navel level with John's face. Not the best position to be in to make a professional statement. Sherlock smirked down at him, the bastard!

"I'll be getting dressed then," he announced and turned to go.

John stared after him. Yes, his world had definitely changed.
chapter twenty

Sherlock dug out a coat from somewhere, but it just didn't look right. John had never seen him without his usual coat in winter. In summer, he'd still wear his jacket, and, occasionally, when it was really warm, just a shirt. Now he looked slightly different, but just as comfortable with himself as always. John walked next to him, hands buried in his pockets. It was unusually cold for London, far below zero degrees, and their breath curled around them in white clouds.

The snow was still quite thick, covering the ground about three inches high, making everything seem quiet and calm. "I love this," John said.

"It's snow, John."

"Exactly, I love snow."

Sherlock just gave him a look.

"Come on, don't tell me you don't find this beautiful?"

"John, you could just go and stick your head into our freezer. I'm sure you'd find some snow there."

"Sherlock!"

He couldn't help himself. He knew he was being silly, but he couldn't resist the urge. When Sherlock realised John had stopped, he turned around, only to be hit by a snowball that John had aimed directly at his chest. John giggled at the look on his face. He could see that Sherlock was trying to look unimpressed, but he didn't quite succeed.

With a sigh he turned back around, patting away on his chest to remove the snow from his coat. John threw another one, this time at his shoulder. A bit of snow got into his collar and got stuck in his hair.

"John Watson." He sounded dangerous, having stopped in mid step.

John was positively beaming at him, swaying back and forth on his feet, ready to go down and form another snow ball. When Sherlock turned around, he could see the barely hidden smirk.

"How old are you?" He still sounded rather unperturbed, but the glimmer in his eyes gave his amusement away.

"It's snow, for Christ's sake! Come on, don't tell me you never get into snow fights."

"I don't. I have better things to do."

John got down, scooping up another handful of snow.

"Don't you dare!" Sherlock's eyes narrowed and he watched calmly as John formed a ball in his hands, his fingers red, his face flushed with cold and happiness.

When he threw the snowball, nonplussed by Sherlock's threats, Sherlock moved quickly, avoiding being hit again. Instead got down on one knee in one single fluid movement and scooped up some snow himself, half-heartedly forming a ball and throwing it at John.
John couldn’t look away. He had never considered martial arts to be a legal technique in a snow fight. Apparently, Sherlock had never heard of such a rule. Almost calmly he threw the snow straight at John, hitting him above his chest so that most of the snow actually made its way into his clothes. John cursed at the icy cold that spread over his chest. He started to shake his clothes out in order to get rid of the snow. It was rather unsuccessful and just as he leaned down to grab more snow himself, another load hit him so hard on his right shoulder that he lost balance and fell on his arse into the snow.

This time it was Sherlock who was grinning gleefully.

"That's not fair."

"It's perfectly fair. Not only did I warn you, but I also let you know by way of behaviour and eye contact that I would have no mercy on you."

"Your eyes didn't say that," John protested.

Sherlock chuckled and moved closer, eventually extending his gloved hand. "I forgive you."

John pouted but took hold of his hand and let himself be pulled back to his feet.

"Don't you ever do anything just for the sake of doing it?"

Sherlock turned to him, his hand still in his, and he was suddenly impossibly close, his cheeks and nose adorably reddened by the cold, his eyes full of laughter and his mouth set in a small smile. John swallowed hard.

"I do." Sherlock leaned in closer, and for a moment John thought of turning away, but he couldn't bring himself to. His breath caught in his throat and he stared at Sherlock's lips.

Sherlock let go of his hand and gently pulled a bit of snow out of his hair, still looking at him.

"There."

Then he moved away, and John felt it again, the feeling of emptiness that took hold of him when he moved away after being so close. He shook his head and followed him in the safe distance of five feet.

They reached the library rather quickly, and, even though the glass front was not replaced yet but merely covered with a strong plastic foil and guarded by two police officers, it seemed as if it was business as usual. The library was full of people, but getting closer they noticed more policemen standing around, observing the buzz around them.

"You okay?"

John had been lost in thought and had almost forgotten what it would mean to go back in. He looked at Sherlock for confirmation that he was okay with it and then nodded.

They entered the building and Sherlock moved to the first level right away. The floor had been cleaned and the exhibition seemed unchanged, except for the missing piece of the time line. The showcase in front of the secret door held the finches again. John rubbed his hand over his face, forcing down the memories that came flooding back. Then he turned to his right and gasped. The unpublished document was sitting in the case with no trace of blood or misuse. Sherlock stood next to him and smiled. "She's good."

"Hmm?" John looked at him, his face a question mark.
"She made a copy. A good one, but a copy."

"So you mean that Moriarty doesn't have the original?"

"That's exactly what it means. And I'm sure he didn't take any of the others either." He walked away towards the information desk. It was obvious that something had happened and he was sure that the staff would happily inform the readers that no important documents had been stolen.

"Sorry, can I ask you a question?" John watched from a safe distance. "I saw on the telly that a few originals were stolen from here last night when there was a bomb threat. Is that true?"

The lady at the desk looked at him sharply but calmly. "No, that is false information. Nothing was stolen from here last night."

"But someone tried to, am I right?" He leaned in closer, speaking lower as not to attract the attention of other visitors. "They managed to get their hands on quite a collection and just happened to leave it when they found that there was no way of getting out of here with it."

The lady frowned and grabbed the phone. Sherlock merely smiled. "In any case, I already informed the staff a while ago that the security system is not sufficient for the kind of treasures you keep here. I would like to take a look at the system downstairs."

The women dialled a number and leaned back, regarding him with a cold look. "Yes, hello, Sherlock Holmes is back and he wants to come down." She seemed surprised at the answer. "Okay, alright, I'll bring him down." She put down the phone slowly, regarding him with a look of sheer mistrust. Sherlock still smiled at her, but his eyes were much colder now.

John watched as she let herself out of the cubicle and stalked away without saying anything else. Sherlock followed her, and passing John, grinned. "Come on, then."

"Why are we going down there?" John was rather confused and did not feel the immediate need to also become a personal enemy of the entire BL staff.

"My coat, John. I want my coat back."

"You could just buy a new one, you know?"

"My phone is in my coat."

"And?"

"I need my phone."

"You could …"

"John."

"What?"

"Shut up, okay?"

John gave him a look but Sherlock seemed unwilling to take this conversation further. They walked through the staff entrance that Miss Romanov had used when she had taken him to her office. This time, however, they walked down two sets of stairs, ending up in a large room filled with old books. In the middle stood a large square table and on it lay the duffle bag. About ten staff members sat around it, sorting out the manuscripts that had been stuffed in there. When they
approached, all of them leaned over as to cover the documents they were working on, apparently afraid that Sherlock might make an observation that would eradicate the worth of any of the pieces of writing.

John felt suddenly very sorry for Sherlock. It was similar to what he felt when Sherlock was called in for a case and constantly regarded with derogatory terms and contemptuous looks by everyone but Lestrade. Sherlock did not deserve that. Well, sometimes he asked for it, but how else should Sherlock react when he was regarded to be a freak by almost everyone in the police force. He moved closer to him, putting his hand on his back. Sherlock looked at him and he must have read his thoughts on his face because he shook his head lightly, his face softening.

"Here you are." The woman stopped in front of a door. "This is where we found them."

"No, this is where they were left."

"And where we found them." The lady was unwilling to let Sherlock have the last word.

He nodded at her and knocked on the door, more to test its strength than to actually knock, John gathered. They were still called inside and found the director of the British Library sitting on a table that was also covered with manuscripts, which were, however, distinctively older than those outside.

The man looked up when Sherlock and John entered, sighing heavily as if he had been dreading this moment but knew that he had to face it anyway. "Good day, Mr Holmes."

"Hi." Sherlock's greeting seemed out of place, but John understood that he was not particularly welcome here and there was only very little he had to lose.

"As you doubtlessly already know, there was a break in last night."

"Wrong." Sherlock seemed to be in the mood for a game. "All the doors were open and the only thing that was broken was the window in the front, and that was the police. So it's even more embarrassing, because your staff was involved."

The man sighed again, letting Sherlock take over. "Tell me."

"You had several people planning this right under your eyes. One of them works in the manuscript room. Doubtlessly, she handed in her resignation yesterday? The other one was working at the Darwin exhibition, probably also the one who is responsible the death of Mr Chamberlain, the old curator. That was the man who was shot two days ago. He had quite the criminal record."

The director looked only mildly surprised and John wondered if Sherlock had actually helped him before.

"The whole project was put into action by a criminal mastermind who found the prospect of stealing manuscripts from right under your nose rather amusing. He either paid or blackmailed your two employees to work for him, but when one was shot, the other fled. Easy as that! They both had keys and could move completely unnoticed in between rooms. Obviously, your staff members had already taken out quite a few manuscripts for supposed restoration, and all they had to do was put the bundles into the bag and disappear. Luckily enough, the woman did not have the heart to risk being killed, which she doubtlessly would have been, had she not come down here to hide, and then left everything in this room and happened to show up for work yesterday to hand in her resignation due to personal reasons. The stress, you know? Trauma. However, nobody noticed that she had already been here all night."
The director nodded wearily. "I'm afraid you're right. What do you propose?"

"Morale."

"Pardon me?"

"Before you let people work for you, check their background for aspects such as loyalty, passion for their work and personal interest in preservation of national treasures. Actually bother calling their references and double checking their CVs and, you know, find out about any previous records? And finally install some proper cameras and a working alarm system."

"Right." John was sure that all of his suggestions were usual practice anyway, but he was not in the mood to comment. "Mr Holmes," the director continued, "what was your part in all of this? And don't tell me you knew about the plan and tried to prevent it."

John looked carefully at Sherlock, but he did not seem surprised by the fact that the director knew that Sherlock had been involved somehow. Lestrade had probably told him.

"I did not know about the entire plan, but I knew that something would happen and I knew I could prevent it."

*By getting yourself and me killed*, John though, bitterly. Sherlock moved closer to him as if he had heard him speak his mind aloud.

"Things didn't go quite as planned, but nothing ended up being stolen, so the anticipated result was achieved."

"Right." The director seemed slightly annoyed, but John did not understand why. "Thank you."

Sherlock smiled and turned to John. "Ready to go?"

John frowned as he looked at him. What was he playing at?

"Mr Holmes." Sherlock smirked at John before turning around to the director, looking entirely serious again. "I believe we found your coat."

"Did you?" He pretended to be surprised.

"We did, indeed. You can pick it up at the wardrobe."

"Thank you."

They left without a further word and when they walked past the table, the reaction was exactly the same as it had been when they had come in. John forced himself to stay calm.

Then, very quietly and yet audibly, someone whispered: "Freak."

Before Sherlock could stop him, John spun around and walked back to the table. He was furious, his hands shaking. "What do you even know? This man is the sole reason why you still have your job and he is the reason why those manuscripts are not being sold on the black market right now. He knows more about them than you ever will, and you probably spent years at university and you're still blind to the obvious. He is not a freak, he is a genius, and you better sit down and shut the fuck up before he gets you all fired." He was aware that he was red in the face, his blood boiling, but he was used to giving orders and there was still quite a bit of his army attitude left in him. Everyone on the table stared at him white faced. He did take the time to enjoy the small moment triumph but turned around and stomped away, grabbing Sherlock's arm as he passed him,
dragging him along.

Outside, John exhaled, flexing his fingers. "Jesus Christ!" he grunted, "fucking idiots!"

"John?" Sherlock looked surprised and amused at the same time. "John, you didn't need to …"

John looked up at him, shoulders squared. "Yes! Yes, I needed to. They can't do this to you. You don't deserve their contempt. They have no idea what you are capable of and just because you are so much smarter than them, they have no right to speak to you like that just so they can feel better about themselves." He was still mad, still overflowing with emotions, and Sherlock was just there, right there, and nobody was around and it would be so easy to just lean in and …

He stepped back, staring at Sherlock. "I'm sorry." He felt the anger drain out of him and he was left feeling tired. "I just hate when they do that."

"Okay." Sherlock had blushed, lightly, but visibly. He was not used for others to stand up for him. God, how was that possible. How could people not see how vulnerable he sometimes was, and how things people said affected him, even if he did not let it show?

"Let's go and find your coat." John moved away, and Sherlock followed him after a while, staying slightly behind him. John wondered if Sherlock was actually embarrassed by his behaviour, but then again, Sherlock was never really embarrassed.
When they stepped back out into the entrance hall, John was still furious. However, he kept his anger in, trying not to show his annoyance. Maybe it was just this place and everything that had happened here that caused him to overreact because he did not know how else to cope with everything.

"Do you want to get some tea?" Sherlock sounded unsure, as if he didn't know what to do with an upset John. And John shook his head, wanting to kick something. Sherlock did not try again.

They made their way down to the wardrobe and Sherlock asked for his coat. They had stuffed it in a bag with a note to return it to its owner, and Sherlock pulled it out.

For one second his eyes moved over the fabric as if he was looking for invisible traces of something. Apparently satisfied, he smiled to himself and pushed his hand into the right pocket, producing his phone.

Then he checked for messages, deleted those from Mycroft and pushed it into the back pocket of his trousers. John wasn't sure why Sherlock had been so insistent to get his phone back. Well, maybe there were some messages on there that he wanted to keep, that he would occasionally go to re-read just because. No, just because he had felt the urge to do that with old messages he had gotten from Sherlock, it didn't mean that Sherlock would be that sentimental. He looked up at Sherlock. "Can we go?"

"One more thing." Sherlock looked at him, apparently still a little unsure of how to behave around John, and started walking up the stairs.

"Sherlock, we could have taken the lift."

"No, it's fine. The wound doesn't hurt anymore."

"If you say so." With a sigh he followed him.

They were both out of breath when they reached the top floor. John remembered what now seemed to have been a hallucination. He was unsure whether he should tell Sherlock about it, but then again he had heard him scream out his name in his sleep. There wasn't really anything that could bare his soul more than he had already done unconsciously. And Sherlock did not seem to mind particularly, which had a very calming effect on him.

Sherlock leaned against the rail and looked down. "He escaped with a helicopter. We should be able to trace any helicopter flight that went in and out of London that night. Why hasn't Lestrade started working on this case?"

John held onto the rail and leaned over, enjoying the quick rush of vertigo as he looked down. "Because this is more than he can handle; because Moriarty is more than we can handle."

"Do you think?"

"Yes, he knows something is off. Lestrade isn't stupid," Sherlock gave him a look that suggested otherwise, but John ignored it. "He knows that this is personal, and I'm sure he's figured out by now that you are the centre of all of this. He will start asking questions and you can't avoid answering them forever."

Sherlock walked a few paces and then turned back around. "If Moriarty is so smart, why did he
"In killing us, you mean?" John threw his hands in the air. "Sherlock, this is not a game anymore. This is not a puzzle that you can solve by looking hard enough. This is a man who wants to hurt you in every way possible. He's a sadistic pervert who would do anything to see you suffer just to prove a point." He tried not to yell, but Sherlock made it very hard. "You are different. You are smarter than him, yes, and you do things because they personally interest you, but you also care, even if you pretend not to. You care about being alive, you care about knowing things, about finding answers. Your ultimate goal is to know and to understand. His ultimate goal is to destroy you. And while you'd still rely on your brain, he relies on guns and bombs. You play by the rules, and he doesn't. Don't you understand?" John was properly angry again, and he knew he should just leave before his need to destroy something became overpowering.

"John, calm down." It was an order, and somehow it brought him back down to earth. "Don't be angry." Something in the way in which Sherlock said it made his heart ache. "I'll think of something."

"No, Sherlock, don't you see? I don't want you to think of something. I want him gone and I want you to go back to dealing with proper criminals, which is risky enough in itself."

Sherlock looked at him blankly. It was obvious he did not understand what was happening with John. This was uncharted territory and he couldn't quite figure him out.

"Why are we up here?" John asked, suddenly remembering that Sherlock must have brought him up here with a purpose. He turned his back to Sherlock, adamant to calm down. He should not let himself think of the possibilities of how things could have ended. The shock seemed to be worse than he had expected, but he had to deal with it and move on.

"This was where you were, wasn't it?"

"When?"

"When you realised he had me."

"Oh." John closed his eyes, allowing his memory to go back to the moment when his world seemed to tumble and fall.

"It's okay, John." He was close now, close enough to touch him, but he didn't.

"How do you know?"

"You're a soldier. You would chose a strategic point that would serve both the purpose of being able to see as much of the hall as possible, and be far away enough to be safe."

"Talk me through it," John asked. "I didn't dare look. I thought he would shoot you as soon as I'd look."

"He saw right away that it wasn't you. It was the first time that he seemed somewhat surprised, but, of course, he took it as a challenge."

"Did you know?"

"When I saw him, yes. I don't know what would have happened if I hadn't been sure." There is was again, the bitterness, and John felt guilty for letting his emotions get the upper hand when Sherlock had been in an equally awful situation. "And then he sent his apes away to get the helicopter, and I knew you'd be in trouble up there if you didn't move down again. Because of that
I knew that you would probably move down there again, and wait for us. I wasn't certain, but I hoped, and at the same time I wanted you to just stay away. I don't know what he would have done if you hadn't shown up, but I really wanted you to be gone instead of being right there. I'm not even sure if he would have killed me …"

John swallowed. "Do you think he will try again?"

"Most certainly."

"Promise me that you will tell me if you hear anything, anything at all." He was serious, and Sherlock had probably understood that he could not avoid John's involvement. "He tried to kill me more than once, so no matter how personal this is for you, he made it personal for me too."

Sherlock nodded, obviously not quite satisfied with John's request, but ready to accept John's condition.

"And you will answer my texts and messages if you are still able to do it so that I know you're still bloody alive."

"John, I …"

"Sherlock, I can't go through that again. At times I thought I was going mad because I thought I was imagining things and next thing I know is that all my worst fears become reality. Well, you weren't dead, but close."

"Will you still leave me messages?"

John didn't know what to make of Sherlock's question. He stared at him, uncomprehending.

"Your messages were really very …" He was at a loss for words again, and John could almost hear him insert 'nice' in the slot of the term that he apparently couldn't think of. He wished he could guess what he really wanted to say.

"Can we go?" John knew he would not be able to stand around here any longer. The day had started off so lovely, and now he was confused and angry and something he couldn't quite place. Without waiting for Sherlock's answer he started to walk down the stairs. Only when he left the building did he turn around to see if Sherlock had followed him. He had, and he had exchanged his coats, now wearing his usual garment and looking much more like himself.

"John, wait!"

"What?"

"I'm sorry."

John looked up, unhappy. "No, no, I am sorry. I shouldn't have lost it like I did. I apologise."

Sherlock held his gaze but started to smile, confusing John. He didn't say anything else but walked past him and called a cab.

Back home, Sherlock left on his coat, and John smiled to himself when he felt affirmed in his belief that of all things he owned, Sherlock was most of all attached to his coat. He dropped his own coat on the desk and went to make tea. When he came back he found Sherlock on the phone.

"Sherlock, you're not ready to get involved in something new."
Sherlock gave him the strangest look and lowered his phone. "I wasn't talking to Lestrade."

"Who were you talking to?"

"Nobody."

"Sherlock, don't be ridiculous. You were calling someone."

"I was not calling anyone."

John frowned. Why was Sherlock being childish, and why was he bothered so much by the thought that Sherlock was eager to get back to work.

"What then was it that you were doing?"

He crossed his arms, looking down on Sherlock with what he hoped was a disapproving expression.

"I was checking my voice mail," Sherlock said timidly, avoiding his eyes.

He did not need to say anything else. Judging by his behaviour he was uncomfortable with telling John the truth, and that truth involved neither Mycroft nor Lestrade.

"Sherlock, if you want to listen to me talk, I'm right here." He waved his hand at him. Was that a blush creeping up Sherlock's neck? John didn't quite know what to do with himself, so he went back into the kitchen, and this time he was prepared when he turned around and found Sherlock leaning against the table.

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"For what you said in the manuscript room."

John shook his head, exhaling noisily. "I wanted to kill them."

And they both had to laugh, which was nice, because it made the anger he had felt seem a little less real. John navigated his path around Sherlock and carried two mugs into the living room. "But seriously, I really hate when they do that to you."

Sherlock stood behind him, unmoving. When John turned around he saw that he was moved by his words, but in a different way than he had been at the library. Back there he had just been surprised by John's passionate outburst, but now he had said it again, level headed and calm and Sherlock seemed to realise that he truly meant it.

This time it was Sherlock who asked for the hug, shy and eager at the same time, John thought as he pulled him into his arms. And this time the hug was anything but awkward. Even though Sherlock still wore his coat, they seemed to fit together perfectly. He wrapped his arms around his waist, making sure not to apply too much pressure on Sherlock's left side and Sherlock's arms were wrapped around his shoulders. John found that he could tuck his head underneath Sherlock's chin, which he did, pressing his cheek against the warm skin of his throat, and again, he felt one hand coming up to cup the back of his head. He knew this should be weird, but it was too comfortable and calming for him to really worry about it. He inhaled deeply and hugged Sherlock tightly, fighting the urge to slip his hands into Sherlock's coat to be even closer to him.

"Why haven't we done this before?" Sherlock asked, his voice a rumble in his chest. "This is
extraordinarily relaxing."

John smiled against his skin. "I know." He allowed his eyes to fall shut and for a minute he just enjoyed the immediacy to his friend, finally contented that he was still there. Then, with a sigh, he pulled away, catching Sherlock's eye. "You okay?"

Sherlock nodded and then walked to the couch and let himself fall on it, grunting as he realised that John's warning had not just been an empty threat. John shook his head, grinning and handed Sherlock his tea. "Drink!" he ordered.

Sherlock smiled up at him and used his stomach as a makeshift table for his cup and closed his eyes.
Chapter Twenty-Two

Sherlock stayed on the couch, balancing the long cold tea on his stomach for exactly two hours before he got up and walked to the window. John had been typing away on his computer, watching Sherlock from time to time, enjoying the normalcy of things. Now that Sherlock stood by the window, still in his coat, John wondered how he would feel about Sherlock leaving for a new case. He had told him that he wasn't ready yet to get involved in a new case, but he was sure that Sherlock would not be able to say no if anything came up.

When Sherlock turned around, John could see that he was dying to ask him something, but that he was not sure how to do it. He stopped typing and looked at Sherlock over his shoulder.

"What is it?"

"What happened with Sarah?"

"Oh." John remembered that he had not explained himself to Sherlock after it had come up at the hospital. "I think we broke up."

"Why?"

*Because of you, idiot*, John thought, closing his laptop. "It just didn't work."

"What do you mean? You two worked really well."

John smiled sadly. Sherlock must have known that things had not worked well. He might not be very experienced in the realm of romantic relationships, but his factual knowledge probably exceeded that of most people. He must have seen what John only realised after Sarah gave up on him.

"She was not alright with the way things were."

"But she was good for you."

"Well, I wasn't good for her."

John wished he would just let it go. He did not want to tell him the real reason for their breakup, and he did not want to blame him, especially not after what had happened earlier at the library. It was partly Sherlock's fault, because he just never assumed that he could be a negative factor in that equation, but it was mostly John's own fault, because he had been ignorant enough to think that what they were doing was perfectly normal.

"But John, you're ... you're good." Sherlock really seemed surprised by what he was saying and John wondered if he really had not noticed that anything was wrong. He always noticed everything, how could he have missed something like this.

"I wasn't fair to her. And she stayed with me for much longer than she should have. It couldn't work, I see that now."

Sherlock frowned. He obviously had a hard time understanding what John was saying, and was baffled at the prospect that anyone would leave John for reasons that did not seem sensible to him. This thought made John strangely happy.

"Don't worry about it, okay? It's fine. It's sad, but it's good that she finally spoke her mind. I
couldn't give her what she wanted and she moved on. At least I won’t hurt her anymore."

"Do you really think that? She seemed to care about you a great deal. I don't think she will just let you go."

"And since when have you become a relationship expert?"

"I merely observed."

"Well, she obviously does not fit your statistics."

"Fine. What about you? You didn't speak of her at all."

"I had other things to think about."

"Like what?"

"You, me, staying alive." He waved his hand around, hoping Sherlock would stop questioning him.

And Sherlock didn't say anything in answer to that. He sat down on the couch and drank his cold tea until his cup was empty. Then he carefully placed it on the table and leaned back, looking at John.

John thought about taking up writing again, but he knew he would not be able to formulate proper thoughts when Sherlock was watching him.

"Do you fancy lunch?" and with a glance at the clock. "Or dinner, for that matter?"

"Yes, let's go out." He was up again, this time being rather careful. "We still have to get flowers."

"Ah, yes. Thank you for reminding me."

They walked to 'The Jeremy Bentham', a pub that John had frequented whenever Sherlock had been bored. It was strange to step into the stuffy heat with him by his side. Sherlock kept close to him, obviously uncomfortable around so many people he didn't know. John smiled at him and pulled him towards the back where he greeted the bartender and pushed Sherlock down on a chair. "Don't move!" he told Sherlock, who started to immediately analyse his surroundings. When John came back with two pints of beer and let himself fall on the chair opposite to his, Sherlock exhaled, relaxing visibly.

"Sherlock, it's a pub."

His eyes narrowed. "I know it's a pub. You come here often. Your clothes smell of cigarettes sometimes, even though there's no one smoking in here. However, the door is usually open so that the smoke from outside enters the room. You have three pints of beer when you are here, occasionally four. This is your usual table, because most of your jumpers have a small incision in them on your right elbow, where a nail is penetrating the wood of the table and you get caught in it repeatedly. You are on a first name basis with the bartender, and possibly others as well. You usually eat a bacon burger and chips, occasionally you don't eat at all."

John chuckled and picked up his glass. "As your doctor, I shouldn't really allow you to drink alcohol, but as your friend, I think we both need this. Cheers."

Sherlock gave him a disapproving look, most likely disappointed that John didn't praise him for his deduction and picked up his glass as well, but he couldn't really think of anything to say, so he
just drank.

John felt comfortable, Sherlock clearly did not. He kept opening his mouth as to say something but then thought better of it, probably because he did not want to offend John by stating something that might affect his good mood. John had thought about having Sherlock face the wall, but this way he could at least see what was going on and would not feel that he was missing out on anything.

It became incredibly amusing for John to watch his friend observing the other guests. He was probably filing data away right now, sorting people into categories, trying to put them in order so they would not be confusing to him. He wondered what the world looked like through the eyes of Sherlock Holmes.

"Do you want to eat?"

Sherlock took a second to focus his gaze on John and then seemed to push away his thoughts, clearing his head. "I don't know if I'm hungry."

"Sherlock, for all I know you don't even remember what it feels like to be hungry. You’ve gotten rid of it, deleted it because it's unnecessary information."

"Are you mocking me?"

John grinned. "What do you want to eat?"

"I have beer, I'm fine."

John would have none of that. "Because you have beer, you will eat."

"Fine."

"So?"

"Just order something."

"And you will eat it?"

"Yes, sir."

John smiled and squeezed Sherlock's hand, not letting his mind sway far enough as to think of how comforting it was to be able to touch him.

At the bar he ordered a basket of chips and two burgers. When Sherlock ate in public, he was rather careful about his orders, always scrutinising the food before consuming it. John had also noticed that he never did that with the food that he cooked for them. He seemed to trust him completely.

When he presented Sherlock with the food he looked at him with an expression that had John giggling helplessly. Sherlock was not amused. He pulled the basket of chips towards him and looked down in disgust. "John, do you know what …"

John interrupted him. "Shut up, you said you would eat whatever I'd bring you. These are normal chips, nothing wrong with them. I've had them a million times before and I did not die of a strange disease or anything."

"But your liver …"
"Sherlock!" John couldn't stop giggling. "We're drinking beer, that's also not healthy. And I bet that eating burgers and chips is less harmful than you eating nothing at all."

"Fine." He picked up one single chip, balanced it between his fingers for a while until he slowly put it into his mouth. John erupted into another fit of giggles, tears in his eyes now.

"Sherlock, you are impossible!"

And there it was; the stare he had hoped he would never have to deal with. Sherlock's eyes narrowed, his face straight but with an accusing expression that would have made John feel guilty had it been in a different place and under different circumstances. Now he just kept on laughing, wiping his face.

"John!" Sherlock really must have felt irritated, because usually his look sufficed to get his opponent to react appropriately. But John couldn't help it. Sherlock's reaction was absolutely absurd and yet it was so very much like him that he wanted to lean over the table and kiss that expression away.

That though sobered him up. He swallowed and wiped his face again, feeling himself shy away from Sherlock's intense eyes. "I'm sorry." He could feel his hand shaking and he was sure he would spill his beer if he picked up the glass now. So instead he tried to massage the tremor away with his right hand, his eyes darting from Sherlock's eyes to the food on the table and back. He was avoiding looking at his lips, afraid he might not be able to look away again.

"Please eat." His voice didn't sound quite right, and Sherlock's eyebrow quirked. To make it easier for him, he grabbed a handful of chips and put them on his plate and started to eat. Sherlock watched with interest as John took a bite off his burger and chewed. Then, very slowly, Sherlock started to eat as well.

John could barely suppress another laugh when Sherlock carefully took the burger in his hands and tried to take a bite without seeming too awkward, achieving the exact opposite. After a while Sherlock seemed to accommodate to the situation he was in, finishing his burger without dropping it or spilling any sauce on himself. John felt almost triumphant when Sherlock grabbed a napkin and dabbed at his mouth.

"So," he asked. "Was it that bad?"

Sherlock sniffed and pushed his plate away. "It was alright."

John smiled and leaned back, watching Sherlock. He was still not comfortable, sitting up too straight, too serious, too nervous. Why was he nervous?

"Sherlock, are you okay? Do you want to go?"

"No, no, I'm alright, don't worry about me." He drank from his beer, his eyes darting back and forth through the room. John quietly wondered if Sherlock would ever actually get drunk. If he could stand a dose of a strong anaesthetic, he doubted that alcohol would have any effect on him. Still, it could be worth finding out.

"How do you know how much beer I drink when I'm here?"

Finally, something for Sherlock to focus on. "You're drunk. You're only tipsy after two pints, and one pint has no effect on you at all. Three makes it difficult for you to walk up the stairs without holding on to the rail, four makes you miss a step or bump into furniture. You usually make tea when you come home. Three pints only has you clattering around, four makes you curse and drop things."
"Okay."

"Why do you do that?"

John had not expected Sherlock to ask for a reason, and he was sure that he knew more about it than he himself did.

"You mean, why do I come here?"

"Yes."

"Because sometimes I need to be surrounded by people who don't know me." He wondered why his answer came so easily. "Sometimes I need to be able to become someone else, someone nobody cares about and who is just here, laughing and chatting away with strangers, drinking beer."

"Because you can't do that with me." Sherlock looked somewhat hurt - an unusual expression on his face, and John knew that he had been right. Sherlock knew exactly why John came here.

John's face softened. He could have said so many things, but there really was only one answer that mattered: "You're here with me right now, aren't you?"

Sherlock's expression changed completely. His face lit up as if he had just received a message by Lestrade that he needed his help to find a serial killer. But there was also something else, something too private and emotional for John to comprehend. So John grabbed his beer and finished it, feeling his head spin slightly. Maybe he shouldn't drink too much, considering he had been sick with a fever not too long ago.

Sherlock seemed to relax, and John wondered if he had for once managed to say the exact right thing, or maybe Sherlock had read something in between the lines and understood what John could never say out loud.

They both were silent for a while, until John remembered that he still did not know why Mycroft's phone had not connected. He did not want to spoil the moment, but he was now sure that Sherlock had been responsible for that and not Moriarty.

"You tampered with my phone. How did you do it?"

Sherlock smirked, apparently pleasantly surprised that John realised that it had been his doing. "It wasn't really all that hard. I knew you'd call Mycroft eventually, so I blocked his number for you. Usually you will have a voice on the other end, telling you that you can't connect, but I found someone who replaced the message with white noise." He was almost too proud of that, John thought.

"Lestrade was a little harder. I had to divert the signal. Mycroft switched off all radio towers for a while."

"He did what? Are you telling me that your brother interrupted the entire circuit of London just so I could not finish my conversation with Lestrade?"

"Southern England."

John stared, open mouthed. Then he remembered that it must have been easy for Mycroft to do this and that he should not even try to wrap his head around this.
"I'll get more beer."
Chapter Twenty-Three

"You can't possibly know that!" Two hours and four pints later, Sherlock had given John a detailed account of the life of the bartender, including his romantic relationships with three female and one male guest. Sherlock grinned at John, obviously glad to be able to surprise him again.

"He must have a scar on his right ankle. It's the only reason why he is still a bartender in London and not in Rio."

John refused to believe him. He was comfortably drunk and enjoying himself. To hear Sherlock talk for so long had a calming effect on him, no matter how insane his stories sounded, and having him chat away in a pub seemed almost too normal for them; not that John was complaining.

But Sherlock seemed to realise that they should go home soon if he wanted John to be able to carry himself without causing too much embarrassment.

"Come on, time to go home."

"Hmm." John nodded, pushing himself upright. "Home."

Sherlock smiled and led the way. Outside, Sherlock took a deep breath, which made John giggle.

"What?"

"Breathing is boring." John was dangerously close to sounding exactly like Sherlock, and Sherlock had to chuckle. "Do you always remember everything I say to throw it back at me?"

John grinned and pushed his hands into his pockets. "No, only the really silly things."

Sherlock had to laugh and playfully bumped his shoulder against John's. Grinning, they walked back towards Baker Street.

While they walked, John noticed that Sherlock kept looking at him just to turn away again as soon as John's head turned into his direction. It was very unlike him, because usually he would look properly at anything that interested him without flinching. The next time Sherlock did it, John turned his head and looked at his friend. He could see that Sherlock wanted to look away, but having preserved his self control through four pints, he didn't.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Sherlock?"

"I'm just thinking."

"About what?"

"A case."

"What case?"

"The case I was working on before Moriarty turned up."

John frowned. "There was another case?"
Sherlock smiled and looked away. "There's always a case, John."

"Yeah, except for when it's the case that you are bored."

"I'm not really bored that often."

John laughed out loud but refrained from commenting.

They reached the door and Sherlock unlocked it. "Do you want to come up for a cup of tea?" he asked, grinning at John.

John, unable to suppress the giddy feeling in his stomach, nodded. "I'd like that very much."

Inside, they shook the snow out of their coats, and finally Sherlock took his coat off. John walked up the stairs without holding on to the rail and without tripping, but managed to spectacularly throw a cup off the kitchen counter and against the table where it shattered to pieces. However, he wasn't quite sure whether the beer was to blame or something else.

Sherlock sat down on the couch and leaned back, closing his eyes.

"Do you feel any effect at all?" John asked, balancing two mugs toward the coffee table.

"I do." He smiled and opened his eyes again. "It's been a while since I was drunk."

"You're not drunk. I can't even tell that you've been drinking at all." John wanted to sit down in his armchair, but Sherlock motioned for him to sit on the couch.

"Well, I'm not an obvious drunk then."

John looked at him and took his arm, checking his pulse. Strong, regular, stable, and maybe a little bit faster than it should be. He moved closer to look into his eyes and Sherlock had to smile. His pupils were dilated, but not so much as to tell him that alcohol was involved. It could have just been the weak lightening or …

John sat back, picking up his tea, but his hand was shaking and he spilled some of the hot tea on his hand in the process. "Fuck!"

Sherlock chuckled and took the cup from his hand so he could wipe it on his jumper. "You swear a lot."

"Thanks." John felt silly. Maybe drinking this much hadn't been such a good idea after all, especially since he seemed pretty well drunk while Sherlock just sat there quietly, still in control. Why was he always so in control?

Sherlock handed him the cup again, making sure John held on to it and watched him drink with a barely suppressed smirk.

"How are your injuries?" He didn't know why he asked that, it just came to his mind that he should take a look again to be sure that everything was healing nicely. He hoped that the alcohol would not mean a set back in the healing process.

Sherlock's smirk was unnerving. "I think they're fine."

"No, let me see." John insistently tugged at his shirt, too drunk to care about how it must have looked like, or drunk enough to pretend that he didn't care.
Sherlock laughed and carefully pulled up his shirt, exposing his waist. John stared for a while, unable to take his eyes off the patch of skin that he was presented with.

Fighting the urge to touch him, he pulled the shirt up higher with his right hand and used his left to carefully pull away the band aid. It had been bleeding again, probably when Sherlock had let himself fall on the couch, but overall the wound was healing nicely. There was no sign of an infection or any other irregularities. "Does it hurt at all?" He looked up at Sherlock, who was watching him, now completely serious.

"No," Sherlock said, and then, seemingly having to think about his answer more carefully. "I wouldn't call it pain, really. It's uncomfortable and strange. Somewhere close to pain, but not quite. I'm just not used to it."

"Good. Okay, I'll just go and clean it again and patch you up." He yawned.

Sherlock chuckled. John wondered if he had ever experienced Sherlock in such a good mood as he was in this evening. Maybe it was his way of being drunk. "Don't you think I should do it? Just to make sure that it's done properly."

John pouted. "I'm still your doctor."

"My drunk doctor, yes."

He wanted to get up, if only to prove Sherlock wrong, but his friend pulled him back down and he ended up leaning against him, his head resting lightly on Sherlock's shoulder. He closed his eyes.

"John?"

"Hmm?"

"Do you want to sleep?"

John forced his eyes open and looked at him, placing his chin on Sherlock's shoulder. There was no other way to keep his head up, he thought. "The wound," he stated, and even as he said it he felt silly for even suggesting to do anything about it.

Sherlock smiled and John suddenly felt very warm and very shy at the same time, but he also felt too weak to move his head. "I guess sleep sounds really good."

Sherlock moved closer and for one tiny moment, their noses touched before Sherlock gently pushed him away and against the back of the couch. John felt incredibly tired now, but the prospect of being separated from Sherlock kept him awake. His hand rested on his arm, trying to hold him back as he stood up.

"I'll just be a second." Sherlock's voice was low, almost gentle. John could hear him move to the kitchen to get the first aid box and after a bit of fumbling around, he returned.

"Do you want to stay down here?"

John opened his eyes, frowning. With a sudden flash he remembered falling asleep on the couch, exhausted and confused because Sherlock had gone and he hadn't known what to do with himself. God, he was so glad that all of this was over now.

"Yeah."

"Okay, I'll get you a blanket."
"No, I'm fine. Just … stay with me."

Sherlock smiled and sat down again, but realised that it would be difficult for John to sleep if he was just sitting there, so he took off his shoes and did the same with John's and leaned back towards the end of the couch, pulling John with him. This way, they could both pull up their legs on the couch and John was resting comfortably against Sherlock's chest. Sherlock wrapped one arm around him protectively and John held onto his arm as he moved to accommodate to his new position.

John was too tired by now to even think about what was happening, and he felt too comfortable and warm to think that anything they did was strange at all. He inhaled deeply, pressing Sherlock's arm close to his chest and drifted off.
Chapter Twenty-Four

John felt cold when he woke up. He opened his eyes and felt a headache pulsing behind his temples. God, four pints of beer surely couldn't make him feel this horrible. Even the remnants of his flue shouldn't have that effect. What had happened?

He shook his head to clear it a little, but only succeeded in making the headache worse. He discovered that there was a blanket wrapped around him, but he was still incredibly cold. And then he realised that it was the difference between the warmth he had felt when he had fallen asleep in Sherlock's arms and the loneliness he now felt that made him feel like he did.

Wait, he had fallen asleep in Sherlock's arms? Jesus.

And was that a bouquet of flowers on the table? He had forgotten to get any, of course he had, and Sherlock must have somehow managed to find flowers in the middle of the night. Did Sherlock ever sleep?

With a grunt he sat up, rubbed his face and dragged his hands through his hair. What was happening to him? Since when did he feel distinctly lonely when Sherlock was not present? He got up and walked up to the bathroom, almost blinded by pain and he wondered if this was how migraine patients felt. After brushing his teeth, he returned downstairs and walked into the kitchen, downing two glasses of water to clear his head and to hopefully get rid of the blinding pain. He also found the packet of paracetamol that Mrs Hudson must have left in the kitchen when she had tried to make him feel better. Where had Sherlock gone?

Without thinking about what he was doing, he made his way back upstairs, and this time he did not bother to knock. He opened the door to find Sherlock sitting on his bed, knees drawn up to his chin, his arms wrapped around himself protectively. John stood in the door, staring at him as Sherlock stared back.

He couldn't speak, and the headache was still torturing him, and yet he needed to say something; anything.

"Morning, John."

John coughed, nervously, but he could see that Sherlock wasn't really his usual self either.

"Why did you leave?" John was surprised by how calm he sounded. "I asked you to stay if I remember correctly."

Sherlock gave a start and looked genuinely surprised as if he had expected John to say something entirely different.

"John." Just his name, nothing else. Sherlock couldn't explain himself, and John knew that he was asking too much of him. He himself had no idea how to put into words what he felt, all he knew was that Sherlock must have felt the same; he must have felt the change in pace and in the way they were acting around each other. He must have.

"You look tired." Sherlock dropped his hands from around his knees.

"You didn't sleep." John noted, knowing that his face probably showed last night's events and the pain he was in rather evidently, whereas Sherlock merely looked a little paler than usual.

"Are you okay, John? Do you want me to get you some water?"
"No, I'm ... I'm fine, thank you. And thanks for the flowers." He was still standing in the door, and Sherlock was still sitting there, unmoving. John noticed that he didn't wear a t-shirt and that the plaster Sherlock must have applied last night was put on rather sloppily.

"Oh Sherlock, what did you think you were doing?" He couldn't help but smile as he moved forward, automatically, gently pulling the plaster off Sherlock's waist and reapplying it, smoothing it over his skin, noticing the goose bumps that rose under his touch. He swallowed, his mouth suddenly dry.

"John?"

"Yes?" Why was Sherlock so close again all of the sudden? Oh right, he had moved onto the bed. The _bed_. Sherlock's _bed_. Sherlock's voice pulled him out of his thoughts.

"What did you mean when you said I wasn't ready for something new."

John stared at him blankly, trying to remember the context of their conversation. Ah, a new case. The case he thought Sherlock was getting himself involved with when he had been on the phone, listening to his voice mail. Why was he listening to his voice mail? John's mind wasn't quite working the way it was supposed to, but it wasn't just the headache ...

"I thought Lestrade was calling you, asking you for help."

"Yes, but ..." Again, Sherlock seemed surprised. "Did you mean it?"

"Did I mean what?" John was rubbing his temples, trying to get some relief. How could Sherlock possibly not understand that he was worried about him and that he didn't want him to get himself into trouble so soon after they had barely escaped death?

"The message."

"What?"

"The message." He sounded impatient, as if John should know perfectly well what he meant.

"Sherlock, what are you talking about?" John wanted nothing more than to lie down, and why not. Sherlock was right there to comfort him and a few more hours of sleep would certainly help his headache and he was on the bed anyway so he could just lie down and ... 

"Sherlock, can we talk later? I think I'm about to pass out."

Sherlock's face softened and he stretched out his legs. "The message you left me."

John looked at him, uncomprehending and he could read from Sherlock's eyes that he was impatient with him, urging him to see the obvious; to read between the lines and understand what he was trying to say.

"Can I just lie down for a while?" John had long stopped thinking about what he was doing and let his subconscious take over. He was tired, sitting on a bed, next to a warm body that could share some of its warmth with him; a perfectly logical solution.

"John?"

"Please?"

Sherlock moved to the side a bit, making room for John to lie down.
"Hold me?" He did not want to sound so needy, but he was too exhausted to care.

"John, I can't lie on my left side."

"Move, then." Yes, logic was definitely a good thing. John smiled to himself.

Sherlock awkwardly moved over him and came down to lie by John's left side. When John moved to the centre of the bed, Sherlock wrapped an arm around him, and when John didn't object, he moved closer, until most of his body was attached to John's, pulling the blanket over them.

"Thank you."

"Thank you." A whisper.

"Hmm?"

"Never mind, just sleep."

"I do need you, you know?"

"You do?"

"Of course I do." He was close to falling asleep again, and it was so nice to feel Sherlock's body against his own, his warmth seeping through him, wrapping him up in a blanket of comfort and familiarity.

He could swear that he felt Sherlock's lips on his neck as he fell asleep, his headache long gone.
Sherlock was asleep. John could sense it even before he opened his eyes. Judging from the weak light he perceived through his eyelids it was almost 4 o'clock in the afternoon. He opened one eye and took in what he saw. Boxes and boxes of cases stacked up by the window. Sherlock must have moved them from the door to the other side of the room. John wondered if Sherlock had gotten any sleep at all - except for the few hours the night before - since all of this had started. He must have been exhausted, and judging from the deep breaths that tickled his neck, he was clearly in need of sleep.

Slowly he allowed himself to realise what position he was in. Sherlock must have held him without moving the entire time, because his arm was still there, hugging him against his body, his hand splayed on his chest protectively. Had he always felt this protective of him? He knew he would wake him up if he tried to move. And, being honest with himself, he did not want to move. He could feel Sherlock’s chest against his back, a steady heartbeat drumming against him, calming him. And then, somehow, their legs had been tangled, and one of Sherlock’s legs was more or less comfortably resting between his. John could feel his own heart hammer away. He had never imagined to be this close to Sherlock; to be this intimate with him, and yet it felt so right. In all this confusion and fear, he had slowly started to understand what Sherlock really meant to him.

He was his friend, certainly an annoying and helplessly nitpicking one, but a friend nevertheless, and most probably the best he had ever had. And he trusted him, and that was a feeling that John had missed greatly since leaving the army. He had missed someone who would take what he said as a given, no doubts, no second guesses, someone who took him seriously. And Sherlock liked him, he revelled in his compliments, and he never told John to shut up when he said something he found important, always considering his opinion, no matter how wrong he might be. And Sherlock had been worried about him; and he had been worried about Sherlock in ways that he had never experienced before. Just the thought that something could have happened to the man sleeping peacefully behind him now had made him feel physically ill and even now, just thinking about it, he felt pain in his chest, making it difficult to breathe.

John inhaled deeply to defy that restrictive feeling, causing Sherlock’s arm to hold on tighter. He had to smile, and, pushing aside his fears, he focused on what was happening now. Had Sherlock known? Judging by his behaviour he had; and, more importantly, he felt the same about him. Only that Sherlock probably didn’t know how to react appropriately.

John had to chuckle. He hadn't really acted appropriately either. And Sherlock had simply watched him. He had known, he must have know, because he was fearlessly going where John was still internally pacing around, trying to find excuses.

His chuckle woke Sherlock up. A small grunt from him made John smile, and then he could feel the moment when Sherlock realised that he was holding on to John for dear life. He froze for a second before he relaxed again, exhaling slowly.

"Morning." John couldn't keep the smile out of his voice, feeling Sherlock relax even more as he heard him speak.

"John?" His voice was heavy with sleep.

"Yes?"

"Are we okay?" There it was again, the insecurity, and yet there was more, there was hope in that
little phrase and John wanted to kick himself for not realising that sooner.

He lifted Sherlock's arm and disentangled his legs from Sherlock's and he could feel his body tense against his, but when he turned around to face Sherlock, he relaxed yet again. John noticed that it was extraordinary that he should have such a strong physical effect on Sherlock, as if he was still afraid he might just get up and leave. Didn't he remember that it had been him who had come to him for comfort; didn't he remember that he had admitted to needing him before falling asleep?

Sherlock's face was right there, only inches away, his eyes wide.

"Yes, of course we're okay."

Sherlock's lips stretched into a small smile.

"I'm sorry I woke you up." John's eyes moved over Sherlock's face and then back to his eyes. Sherlock was calmly watching him.

"It's okay."

John couldn't resist the urge to push his face against Sherlock's chest, keeping it there for a while, hiding from the world. He had had no idea that there was a place on earth where he could completely let go and still feel safe, but apparently, of all possible places, it was Sherlock's chest. His arm slid over Sherlock's stomach and wormed its way under his arm so he could hold him. In turn, Sherlock wrapped his arm around John again. John's left hand came to rest on Sherlock's chest, under his own chin, feeling Sherlock's skin and heartbeat against his palm. For a moment he wished that he didn't wear a t-shirt either, so he could feel Sherlock's skin against his, but he ignored the urge to remove his t-shirt and settled on feeling happy and safe in the state he was in.

"John?" Why did he still sound so unsure? "John, you said I wasn't ready."

"What?"

"You said I wasn't ready for something new."

John looked at him with wide eyes, pushing himself up to be on the same level as Sherlock's face.

"Sherlock," he tried to sound as affectionate as he felt towards the man who seemed to see through everything, who could figure out anyone and anything within seconds, but who seemed unable to understand John. "I meant a new case. I didn't want you to get dragged into another case while you were still hurt and you hadn't slept and I wanted to make sure that you're safe and … and I wanted you to stay."

"With you?"

"Yes, with me."

"So you didn't mean us?"

How in the world could Sherlock misunderstand something that couldn't have been clearer?

"Of course not, idiot." And John smiled and moved closer, placing a single gentle kiss on Sherlock's lips, something, he figured, he should have done a long time ago.

It was just a chaste kiss, but he could feel Sherlock respond immediately. He pulled him closer with a small whimper that touched something deep down inside of John. He looked at Sherlock's
face and there were tears in his eyes, real tears.

Sherlock never cried, unless it was a method to get someone to talk. No, these were the first real tears he had ever seen in Sherlock’s eyes. They made his eyes impossibly bright.

"John?" More hope.

"Yes?" Another smile.

"Can I kiss you back?"

John laughed and so did Sherlock, tears spilling over as they both moved in, at first only testing, their lips barely touching, but then Sherlock’s hand came up to grab John’s head and he pulled him in and kissed him open-mouthed and hot and sweet and John thought that no kiss had ever felt so right. He could taste the salt of Sherlock’s tears and his smile and he felt the light scratch of stubble and the hand tugging at his hair was incredibly distracting in a way that he wanted him to keep it there forever.

This was definitely new, and yet it felt so good and so right that it also seemed as if they had done this all their lives. When they broke the kiss, John gently wiped away the tears that were glistening on Sherlock’s cheeks.

"I was the case, wasn't I?" he asked, shyly.

Sherlock smiled, licking his lips. "Of course you were."

"And?"

Sherlock grinned and moved in for another kiss.

"Case solved."

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