

## Nightfall

**Author:** CK

**Rating:** R

**Summary:** Awoken by nightmares, John and Sherlock seek each other's company at night. They find more than either of them knew they were missing.

**Warnings:** Graphic descriptions of violence (in memories), hence the rating.

**Disclaimer:** Leave it all to the BBC, Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat. I'm actually quite happy with them having it - even if the BBC could be a bit quicker with passing it on to us.

**Author's Notes:** Prompt fill for LJ Kink Meme. The request was that both John and Sherlock jerk awake after a nightmare, and both are so terrified that they want to check up on the other to see if he's okay, end up meeting in the middle and spend the rest of the night curled up together on the sofa. No est. relationship.

I hope I got the military aspects/fact right, tried to read up on it a bit, but couldn't find the answer to some things, so some of it had to come from logic...

Set shortly after Sherlock's return (after TRF); this story assumes that Sherlock and John live together again then, so it is also set before S3E2 (trying to avoid spoilers here, that's why I'm so cryptic ;) - story is spoiler-free though).

Basically you can assume they've just solved their first case since Sherlock's return. I don't know how and when this turned into a "dealing with Sherlock's absence and return" story, but it did at some point, so I went with it ^^

It had been a dreary day, in every sense. Their latest case had just been closed, one of a serial killer who had sadistically tortured his victims and then left them to die, and when they had finally caught him this afternoon, he hadn't shown anything even close to remorse; instead he had laughed them into their faces, boasting with what he had done. Everyone working on the case had been visibly affected by the man's, this *monster's* demeanor, even ever so self-controlled and seemingly emotionless Sherlock Holmes.

Like in a bad horror movie, even the weather had fitted the general mood of the day; dark clouds hung over London, bringing occasional rain, icy wind, even menacing thunder further away, like a nightmare looming in the distance.

By the time Sherlock Holmes and his friend and flatmate John Watson got home, the storm had reached the city's center, keeping streets empty and, out of an irrational fear, homes securely locked for what appeared to turn into a very long night.

Neither man was in the mood to talk as they settled into their living room to drink a cup of tea, to sooth body and soul at least a bit; to warm up after spending most of the day in the autumn cold. John was the first to say his good night, the prospect of a shower and some sleep more appealing than ever. Sherlock's reply that he'd try and do the same, catching a night's rest, surprised John for a moment, but he was too tired to address it with a comment as he usually did when his friend decided to retreat to his bedroom for its actual purpose.

Not half an hour later, John lay down, falling asleep immediately the moment his head hit the pillow. His mind, however, was wide awake.

*"Mama, when I grow up I want to be a soldier," the boy, not older than nine, exclaimed when he walked into the kitchen, pose taut and childishly innocent features frozen to a serious frown, like he'd seen the men on the telly do it so often. His mother only smiled, a kind, loving expression that gave away her thoughts.*

*"Oh darling, you should only decide that when you're old enough."*

*"But I want to fight for Queen and country," he recited and did his best to salute, earning himself a gentle laugh from his mother.*

*"You will, John, but for now I want you to be my little boy who doesn't think about fighting," she told him as she crouched down and hugged her son, a gesture he returned fiercely, small arms clutching her tight...*

*...and he held on to his friend and comrade, begged him not to die. The sounds of battle, of victory and loss, of pain and death surrounded them as they sat in the bushes, hidden from the enemy. John tried in vain to still the bleeding of his friend's wound, but it was as if the red fuel of life found its way through every crease John couldn't cover. His friend would die; die on a battlefield somewhere in the heat of the desert, and he couldn't do anything about it.*

*He'd always been proud to have become a soldier; had wanted to serve Queen and country ever since he'd been a boy. He remembered how once his mom had told him that while being faithful to your own people was a good thing, fighting and war weren't. Nothing was good about people dying. His naive self, the young man he'd been when he'd signed up for the British Army, had believed that as long as death was only on the enemy's side, everything would be fine. Sooner than he had expected or wanted to he found out that death was never a good thing - period. And that it was rarely limited to the "right" side.*

*"I'm so sorry," he whispered to his comrade when he felt the other man's life slip through his fingers; how his breathing slowed, how his painful moaning stopped... and then his heart. He gave his friend he'd known ever since his basic training days one last fierce hug, angry at himself for the tears he couldn't stop from rolling down his cheeks.*

*The adventure, the thrill, the sense of doing the right thing, of being part of something bigger - it was what had once drawn him to military service. The adrenaline was what he needed, when it came from being on the winning side. Even now, even after knowing all the horrors of war, after he had faced death more often than he dared to count or admit, there were moments when he almost enjoyed this thrill, this feeling of power it gave him when he knew he was playing his part in righting the wrongs in this world.*

*Seeing comrades die, seeing friends die, had never been part of the thrill though. It never should have been. Despite everything John knew, his trust in good triumphing never really subsided. That was until he saw the first soldiers of his side fall; until he witnessed the death of people he'd known for years.*

*The man in his arms had been at his side for so long; they'd shared so much. Whatever they went through, they were there for each other, helped and advised each other on so many things, professionally and personally. Rick had already been part of the division when John was assigned to it, their paths finally meeting again after John had decided to study medicine, after years of rarely seeing each other and mostly communicating via email and phone, and he made it his task to take John under his wing; help him get to know everybody, feel welcome and as part of the group.*

*And now, too soon, he had to say his final goodbye. One last look he allowed himself at his friend he wouldn't even be able to bury...*

*...and stumbled backwards when not Rick, but suddenly another familiar figure lay on the ground before him. Sherlock. Battered, beaten, bloody, a broken heap of body on pavement amidst bushes and desert heat, a gruesome personification of so many memories he kept locked away. It didn't make sense to him what he was seeing, what was happening; there was panic, unspeakable terror, engulfing him, a force wrapping itself around him, strangling him almost.*

*"John... help me," Sherlock whispered, trying and failing to lift a hand and reach for his friend. John heard the enemy close in, foreign voices surrounding their hideaway that would soon be spotted. Instinct made him reach for his firearm, but his hands were met by emptiness, a nothing where he expected their sole chance of survival. The voices were only a few meters away now, and John - John couldn't do anything. In vain he looked for his rifle, the weapons in form of knives hidden in his clothes. It was all gone. And when he wanted to ready himself to at least defend his helpless friend with his bare hands, he was unable to move.*

*Then blurred faces appeared all around them, weapons poised, and all John could think of was that he was unable to act.*

*That he was unable to save his friend.*

With a gasp, an almost-scream, John jerked awake, sweaty and panting hard, entangled in his sheets, mind not yet fully awake, eyes still seeing the faces, ears still hearing threatening voices, scuffling footsteps - and the pleading whisper of a friend.

Desperately the doctor shook his head; he needed to clear his head, get rid of the nightmare. *This is not real, this is not happening*, he repeated to himself over and over again, face buried in his hands, willing himself to forget the pictures, forget the past, the pain of lives lost; forget his fear of losing another friend.

The memory of the horrors of war soon vanished; he'd long since learned to leave that behind, at least in his waking hours. But the image of Sherlock Holmes, the man he by now called his best friend, of his broken body as he'd seen it in his dream, as he'd seen it more than three years ago on the street, stayed with him. Three years the picture waited, buried in his mind, to his own surprise never much bothering him - until now, now that his friend was back, now that, in some twisted way, pain and loss were much more present than they had been since the other man's assumed death.

Sherlock was all right, he was just on the floor below. Or was he?

The weeks after Sherlock's suicide had him often walk through the flat at night, in search of his friend, his *best friend*, hoping against hope that he'd find him, that the consulting detective would just be back. Like he always was. Understanding, acknowledging even that Sherlock wasn't there anymore, that he'd never come back, was something he couldn't do. He rather wanted to live with the thought that his friend was just out, venturing across the city in search of clues for their latest case.

But every time he wandered through the rooms, all he was met by was emptiness. When he finally couldn't take it anymore, the harsh reality of another friend lost, he moved out and swore to never look back. And yet here he was, back in this flat where everything had begun, where he'd made a friend on whose presence and companionship he sometimes had thought his life and sanity depended, something that had proved to be true after Sherlock had been gone.

Sighing, John pushed back the covers and let his feet search the floor for his slippers, while he rubbed his eyes and face, chasing away the remnants of sleep and the nightmare. Just this once, he wanted to go and find Sherlock. Just this once, he needed his mind and heart to know that *this* nightmare of his waking hours had truly ended.

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The experiment Sherlock sat up in the kitchen after John had left was more to occupy his mind a little while longer than anything else. He was counting on it to tire him; to support his reasonable desire for sleep his brain didn't seem to share. Or want to share.

Every gift men possessed came with a curse of its equal. Sherlock was a master of deduction, of memory and details; but those who saw so much rarely were able to leave behind what had once entered their mind. Facts, yes, they were easy to dispose of, but vivid manifestations of the horrors this world held? They fed off the desperation one tried to get rid of them with. Sherlock had long since given up trying. He just let them stay, accepting them as the price he paid for his gift.

A price that included many sleepless nights, and restless slumbers. Rationality dictated him to visit his bed once in a while, succumb to his body's demand for a break. But even though he would never have admitted it, to himself or anyone else, deep inside he feared those moments of loneliness in his room, when his mental superiority was of no use to him, nor was any skill he possessed to fight the solitude and emptiness surrounding him. During cases he would do his best to exhaust himself, drain himself of energy by denying his body food and sleep, secretly hoping that it would force him into a dreamless unconsciousness once he allowed himself to lie down.

The few times this had worked were hardly worth the effort, and yet he took every moment of rest he got.

Their most recent case, just closed earlier this day, was likely to give him another nightmare - as tired as he ever was. He had felt his limbs become heavier during the day, how temporary malnutrition gained the upper hand over his usually due to the lack of digestion increased brainwork; how it became harder to think. He may still have been the Yard's most valuable asset, but his own beginning lack of concentration, not having one hundred per cent work capability anymore, had irritated him nonetheless.

Sherlock hadn't yet gotten used to sleeping in his old bedroom in 221B again. He'd been away for so long, his mind occupied with solving mysteries while staying hidden from the public for three years, that just being home without the need of pretense was the strangest of feelings.

*Home.*

Before he had met John a good five years ago there hadn't really been a sense of home in his life. But settling down in their shared flat, living with a proper friend, someone who Sherlock could trust, who liked him despite his not very easy personality - and certainly was he aware that other people had their problems with his exceptional intellect - allowed him a feeling of being in the right place.

The disadvantage of the situation, however, was that the moment he started to care about someone, they were in danger. His line of work came with enemies, and not few of them. What had happened with Moriarty had made him painfully aware of how he endangered people when he allowed them to get close to him. And as much as he claimed to have divorced himself from feelings - some things even he couldn't suppress, no matter how well he ignored them.

To his surprise, Sherlock found himself sighing in relief when he laid down on his bed; the difference to lying on the sofa for a quick nap he felt in every single muscle. Tension left his bones and muscles as he relaxed against the soft mattress, and some recess of his mind noticed how quickly his wakefulness slipped away to give room to sleep and rest, before every conscious thought shut down.

*The last victim they found was covered in probably hundreds of little cuts. None of them were fatal on their own, but in their sum they had made the young woman bleed to death - very slowly. The cuts were precisely set to not only cause most damage before the heart gave out; they also would have hurt significantly, many of them crossing sensitive body parts rich with nerve endings.*

*While being fascinated as usual, Sherlock also felt a curious relief in knowing that the victim had probably passed out long before the blood loss caused her death. Still, the agony and the terror she must have felt, knowing what would happen to her, shocked even him. He'd seen many deaths, many murders, and quite a number of them had been violent and disgusting in their idea; but this exceeded everything he knew.*

*He couldn't claim the killer wasn't creative; no, indeed he came up with many different ways to torture his victims; each got their very personal and own death experience. Severed limbs, removed organs, stabs with a very fine knife; as much as Sherlock knew about murders, here he was confronted by ways he'd never heard of or seen in any other crime he was familiar with. Especially if one considered the fact that the victims had been kept awake with drugs. The fight of their consciousness against stimulants and pain must have been worse than the actual torture.*

*Now he looked at the woman on the table in front of him, her brown hair streaked with blood just like the rest of her body, her face frozen to a mask of torment. She was not older than twenty; maybe twenty-two. They didn't know yet, no ID has been found; but then, they hadn't expected to. Carefully he examined the body; as randomly as the killer seemed to choose his victims and the method of torture, his actions nevertheless gave something away, even though Sherlock was still in the progress of finding out what exactly it was he saw. As soon as he found the answer, finding this inhuman creature of a man would be easy.*

*"John, have a look at this," he called out, not once looking up from studying the woman's injuries. Only when the sounds of a familiar walk and the appearance of addressed person failed to happen, Sherlock raised his head - to find everyone gone. Just seconds ago, the place had been crowded with police officers from Scotland Yard; but now no one was around.*

*Confused he took a few steps towards the nearest archway; in the blink of an eye the floodlights police had placed at the crime scene that was located in the city's sewer system were gone, and he was covered in semi-darkness. Sherlock's confusion grew; an unpleasant feeling of not being in control anymore arose inside of him. When he turned back and saw the body of the young woman gone as well, the feeling manifested itself in a the most disturbing of ways.*

*"John?" he called out again; without success at first. Another few steps he took, walking through the archway, and let his voice ring through the underground tunnels when he asked for his friend once more. This time there was a faint reply, strangely muffled. Frowning, he followed where he believed the voice came from, passing another archway and turning into a narrow tunnel when the voice became louder.*

*But upon entering the next room, he stopped dead in his tracks.*

*John was hanging there, inside a doorless cage, strapped to the wall, naked save for his pants; his eyes pleading and full of fear.*

*"I've changed my mind. I won't burn the heart out of you," a too-familiar voice filled the room, and Sherlock swirled around, scanning the whole room with his eyes. He saw no one. Still, the voice closed in, its bodiless sound nearing him, while it continued its psychological torture, "I rather have it explode with feelings."*

*Sherlock didn't get the chance to consider what those words possible meant - other than the obvious, but then he hadn't seen any explosive device on or near John. An unidentifiable sound and a scream made him turn back to his friend. What he saw made his mind reel - a small wound had formed on John's left leg, ripped apart skin making it look like a bullet exit wound. But John was strapped to the wall, so how...?*

*His question was answered when he witnessed how the next wound came into existence - it was as if a tiny explosion inside his friend's body caused it, this time on his right arm. John panted; tears sprang into his eyes. He whimpered, even though Sherlock saw he did his best to remain strong. And he saw the trust in John's eyes, the hope and faith he put into his friend to save him.*

*If only Sherlock had known how.*

*"Isn't it fun? I never knew your friend had such a spark in him." The laughter was demonic, made his blood freeze in his veins.*

*"You're not real! You are dead," he screamed, and started to frantically look for any way to get inside that cage. Moriarty had gotten John in there, so there had to be a door. Panic rose inside him when he couldn't find any entrance, any way to get past the bars.*

*The next explosion ripped a hole into John's side, probably affecting one kidney, although with the amount of blood that flew from the wound, the organ seemed to become the smaller one of their problems. John yelled in agony and it wrenched Sherlock's heart, made him sick. Two pairs of eyes met, a silent apology in one, understanding forgiveness in the other.*

*Sherlock fell to his knees then; he felt incredibly exhausted, unable to keep upright anymore, as much as he fought against his weakness and his inability to save his best friend.*

*For a moment he closed his eyes, heard himself scream in frustration. Another explosion, but no sound from John this time. Though he didn't dare, he heaved his lids up - and was taken aback by the sight. The cage was gone, and*

*John lay on the ground - a hole in his chest where his heart was supposed to be. He didn't lose any thought on logic this time; it didn't matter.*

*Barely able to control his arms and legs, Sherlock crawled over and tried to cover the wounds, stop the bleeding. His shawl on the wound on John's side was soon soaked with blood, as were Sherlock's hands that pressed onto his friend's chest. The heart was still faintly beating; there was a chance.*

*"Come on, John, you can do it," he whispered in despair as he pulled his mobile from his pocket... No signal. He dialed nonetheless, but the line remained dead. And then the weak pumping beneath his fingers stopped.*

*"Such a pity... I actually liked the good doctor." This time, Sherlock saw Moriarty. Only a few meters away, standing in the shadows, grinning manically. With every last bit of strength he had left the detective rose to his feet and leapt forward to--*

Sherlock almost fell out of the bed when he finally managed to free himself of his sleeping state and the nightmare it came with. Breathing heavily, he sat on the edge of the mattress that just earlier that night had felt so good against his tired muscles; now he had the shockingly irrational urge to accuse it of being a traitor. Just as his mind was.

Nightmares, they were nothing new. He was used to them, and most of the times he'd go back to sleep - if the bad dream woke him at all. But then had his dreams never included John.

Over the course of the three years he'd been gone, Sherlock didn't have many chances to check on John. He tried to as often as he could, just to make sure he was all right - at least physically. As much as sentiment was a mystery to him, he understood, even *felt*, what it meant to lose a friend. John had been on his side for two years; he'd been the first to make him understand what true, unconditional friendship meant. He's been his heart and his conscience, someone he could rely on to stop him, guide him into the right direction, let him know when things got out of hand. Before he met John, he hadn't known that acquaintances with strangers could exist without insult and rejection, but with acceptance and kindness. And that this thing they called friendship was possible even for him, Sherlock Holmes, the man people were impressed by and yet avoided like a plague.

Sherlock had had many nightmares fueled by his encounters with Moriarty. The maniac never left his mind, asleep or awake; even now he could still hear whispered threats, disguised as casual conversation. The voice reverberated through the room, words like *heart* and *bomb* and *burn* and *explode* bouncing off the walls in a thousand echoes with the obvious intention to drive him mad. And they came quite close to being successful.

Jumping up, Sherlock began to pace the room, back and forth, again and again, faster with every turn. He needed to clear his mind; it had never been this bad before. His hands still felt sticky and warm from the blood, *John's* blood, that had covered them in their dream; he rubbed them over his clothes, vainly so, knowing that it would be of no use, but still needing to try.

John was safe, he told himself, he was just upstairs, not in danger, never in danger again, at least not from Moriarty. But wasn't that the point? May one of their enemies have been gone; out there lurked many more. Their work, *his* work came with adversaries, people who'd want to harm them, in one way or another. And he would never be able to prevent it, unless he left again. He knew that he couldn't, though. Three years without John had made him realize how much he needed his friend, the only person he truly trusted; the one and only person who made him a better detective, a better man, a better *human being*.

How often after he'd left had he expected John's advice, his approval, in situations when he reached his limits in dealing with other people, with emotions and etiquette? He had never cared about it, not much; a petted ego was worth and of use far less than the truth. Nevertheless had John's guidance helped him; when he had started living with John and made him part of his work, people suddenly weren't resenting him that much anymore, which in turn made his work easier.

A wave of exhaustion similar to what he had felt in his dream all of a sudden rolled over him, and he came to an abrupt halt, resting his head against the cool window glass, arms stemmed against the pane, strain and effort on his muscles that were expected to hold him upright. He breathed in deeply and then slowly released the air, did it again, and another time.

No matter what John did, how he improved his work and social skills - most of all, Sherlock understood, he had filled his life with a purpose beyond crime solving. It was out of question for him to ever leave again, be separated from John. He'd come to rely on the man he called his best friend, even though he had never even really grasped the meaning friendship till the day he met the former army doctor, and where it ought to have worried him, this feeling of dependence, it had settled inside of him, like it belonged there and had simply taken longer to come to him before.

All he had to worry about now was to keep John save. Because he needed him, more than anything else.

Sherlock was out of his bedroom before he could give it any further thought. His nightmare-ridden mind demanded proof that his best friend was well; that they'd not been ripped apart, and wouldn't ever again either.

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There were many things uniquely Sherlock John had gotten used to around the flat; things that assured him his best friend was still there, still home.

Overnight experiments were one part of it; sometimes Sherlock would start something in the evening, and let it get its needed rest period during the night so he could finish it in the morning.

Then there was his mobile lying around; Sherlock would never leave the house without it, but he sure left it somewhere, anywhere, in the flat when he was at home. It amazed John time and again that his friend found his phone, no matter how much clutter was covering it.

What always reassured him Sherlock was at home - had given it away even before that fateful day at St. Bart's and had always been used by John to find out whether he'd have expect some surprise appearance by his friend - were his coat and shawl. The coat, the same he'd been wearing all those years back - or maybe it was just a lookalike, who knew - was there, at the rack right next to the living room door, and nothing was more comforting to John than to see it hanging there. And then there was--

"John. I thought you were tired."

--the man himself. John could only do so much to keep himself from jumping into a defensive position, the impulse clearly there, when he suddenly heard the familiar voice from his right where Sherlock must have entered the kitchen through the door leading from his hallway.

"Jeez, Sherlock, would you mind not tiptoeing through the flat?!"

"I wasn't, John. Although the fact that I am barefoot may just have the same effect." John merely raised an eyebrow, then slumped onto the sofa and looked at Sherlock who meanwhile had followed his flatmate into the living room.

"What are you even doing here," the older man gestured to nowhere in particular, "I thought you wanted to go to bed." A strange expression crossed over Sherlock's features; he looked almost haunted, but just for the fracture of a second.

"My experiment. I wanted to check on it." There was a moment of silence in which neither of them moved; they just stared at each other. John continued to keep quiet even when Sherlock, without having taken so much as a fleeting look at the kitchen table with mentioned experiment, hesitantly walked towards the couch and sat down

next to John, leaving enough distance between them to not touch the other man however. "You haven't answered my question," he stated matter-of-factly, throwing a side-glance at his friend.

"Last case left me a bit restless." It was at least half the truth. Unfortunately, it didn't convince Sherlock, judging by the look he gave him. "Makes me wonder what other nutcases are running around out there. You know, because there are people we... care about," John so added, deliberately turning away his head and taking great interest in looking around the room. His answer was as close to the true reasons of being awake as he allowed himself to reveal.

"I see." To say his friend's reaction surprised him was an understatement. Whenever something was up, anything, Sherlock would only refrain from switching to his deduction mode - or at least switching out of it again - when John stopped him. *Loudly*. But then, the consulting detective had more than once amazed him by being sensible in unexpected moments. Although, if he carefully eyed the man beside him now, it looked more like Sherlock was exhausted by the burden of his own problems. In fact, he appeared to be more exhausted than John had ever witnessed.

"Are you all right?"

"Sure, fine. Perfect," Sherlock's too-quick answer betrayed his words, as did his sudden almost hectic activity when he jumped up and strolled through the room. "You mind if I turn on the telly?" John came barely as far as to shake his head before his friend had the remote in hand and the TV running; face in a deep frown, he wondered about his flatmate's antics where he had thought nothing could still irritate or surprise him about Sherlock Holmes.

Now the man who was irritated at most by television was switching through the channels, and unnerving whirr of noises filling the room, and John considered going back to bed; maybe his mind was done with nightmares for now, after he'd seen and talked to Sherlock, and would let him sleep. But if he was honest to himself, sitting here where he could be assured his friend was alive and well and *still there*, sounded much more appealing than being alone in his room.

So he stayed, didn't even complain when the younger man fell back onto the sofa next to him, this time so close their shoulders and knees touched and personal space turned into a faint and faraway idea.

A rare occurrence as it was, Sherlock, on his part, was very aware of how close he had sat down next to John. To him, closeness in general served as a way to better deduce situations, objects and persons - he knew that some people considered it rude to invade what John had explained to him as personal space, but if it fulfilled a purpose, he saw no necessity to heed any complaints.

Right now it was different, though; this wasn't about deductions - it was the only way to convince his mind that his friend was all right. The blood that had been on his hands in his dream clung to him despite his now wakeful state, and the warm body of the man beside him was the only thing that held the capability of convincing his deeply rooted anxiety that the owner of the imagined blood hadn't lost any of the same.

He had stopped switching through the programs at some point, not really paying attention to what he had turned on; only now he realized that it was some late night quiz show, a dull pastime with stupid questions and even more imbecile callers attempting to answer them. Every other time, he would have complained, corrected participants and host, and then soon lost patience, turning off the TV in frustration. Now, he just watched on, barely registering what was talked about, his brain automatically solving riddles that really weren't any, all the while it progressed his nightmare over and over, trying to make sense of it, rationalize it, and store it away.

It didn't work.

He glanced to his side, taking in his friend's features, undamaged, at peace, painless, and alive, and wondered what it would mean to him, really mean to him, to lose John. Only that there wasn't much to wonder about. He'd been there; he'd faced the possibility. More than once. And he'd decided that it was unacceptable. Hadn't there been any

other way, hadn't he come up with a scenario that kept both him and John alive - and, consequently, also Mrs. Hudson and Lestrade - he'd rather have died that day at the roof of St. Bart's than live with the knowledge that their untimely deaths were his responsibility, and their loss his burden to carry.

They were the very few people he cared about. Several years back he hadn't even known what that meant; not in a deeper sense. In general, of course; he'd always felt a certain fondness for Mrs. Hudson, and he respected Lestrade, as much as an idiot he was, most of the times. He didn't mind having Mike Stamford around in the lab, and Molly Hooper sure was a useful, even valuable asset when it came to his work. And his mother and Mycroft - well, he couldn't claim he *loved* them like people said it was normal, but they were part of his life and he accepted them as such.

But then John Watson came into his life and things changed. How he looked at people, how he felt about them. What he *could* feel about them. How feelings, emotions and affections could influence his life without turning it upside down, or distracting him too much. Had it made him weaker? Most certainly. He was now willing to give his own life to save those who were important to him, even though they hardly were of greater importance to the public than Sherlock himself, due to his mind and skills. Even so a sense of error in this particular assessment remained absent. All of a sudden he found himself ruled by emotions. Not all the time, not with everyone. Every now and then however, when it mattered, he did listen to his gut, and had been proven right to do so more than once.

And it was all thanks to that man next to him.

John felt Sherlock's stare on him, burning into his skin. He decided to say nothing, not react to it; but something was off, something had happened, and for all he knew, his friend's reasons for being awake weren't all that different from his own. Knowing that the man he'd seen die in his dream, he'd seen die three years ago and believed dead and lost for just as long, now sat next to him, was enough to placate his distress; and if Sherlock needed to rest a stare on him that would have been unsettling in any other situation, but now didn't bother him in the slightest, to calm his own mind, John was more than fine with it.

The body heat radiating from his friend and the monotone sounds from the TV soon lulled his mind back to sleep. His consciousness had already slipped away when his head dipped to the side and came to rest on Sherlock's shoulder, while his right hand wound itself around the other man's thigh.

The only reason Sherlock didn't jump up right away was that he'd seen it coming. He'd watched John's eyelids become heavier; he knew his friend would fall asleep at any moment. He had considered telling him to go back to bed, but for some reason the words never left his mouth.

Proximity he initiated for reasons of deduction and recognition were one thing; without his prior knowledge or approval though he loathed it. He didn't want physical contact, with anyone, as long as it didn't serve a case-related and relevant purpose, and much less did he want it when he couldn't control it. He deemed it unnecessary and distracting at most, an element humans relied on far too much and too often, made themselves dependant on for reasons he couldn't fathom.

Or hadn't been until now.

At first, he wanted to leave. It would have been easy to arrange John's sleeping body on the couch, put a blanket over him, and go back to his own room. John would never have known that he had unconsciously fallen into a typical human habit of seeking the nearest person to share their most vulnerable moments with. John would have gotten up in the morning, and Sherlock would have left his bedroom as if nothing out of the ordinary had ever happened.

He couldn't. There was an amount of comfort, more than what he'd felt previously due to his self-initiated lack of distance, that came with John's closeness and touch he'd never known, much less experienced before; it felt *right*, even though rationality protested against this notion. Was that what it felt like?

But what was *it*?

Sighing, he rubbed his free hand - the one not trapped between his and John's body - over his face. Emotionally comfortable or not, this was no position they could stay in the whole night; *physically* they would definitely regret it in the morning. As careful as possible he so used his right hand to try and loosen John's on his thigh - only to seconds later have his friend's fingers laced through his own when the hand reacted to Sherlock's touch. The grip was tight; had he tried to free his hand now, especially without the help of his other, he would have woken John. And something inside him demanded him very fiercely not to do it.

There weren't really many options left; and ultimately, Sherlock decided for the most pragmatic one. Being close to John, he realized, didn't bother him, so there was no reason to not spend the night at his friend's and flatmate's side. And falling to his left, taking John with him so that he came to lie behind him, while his friend automatically raised his legs to the couch and snuggled into the warm body behind him, was easier and less sleep-disturbing than leaving.

In the end Sherlock found himself on his side between the sofa's cushions and John, his cheek resting against the other man's soft short hair. One arm was wrapped around his friend since their hands were still locked firmly together, the back of John's hand cradled into the palm of Sherlock's, their fingers entwined in quite an intimate embrace.

It was possibly the oddest sleeping arrangement he'd ever found himself in; safe for a very few nights back when he was a child and overwhelmed by an irrational fear of the dark that had Mycroft stay with him, he had always slept alone. Never once had he felt a necessity to seek company, and what for anyways? He wouldn't notice if someone was around when he fell into the unconsciousness a nightly rest came with.

That his theory was now proven wrong shocked, almost disturbed him. Because there *was* a difference, and he couldn't be oblivious to it. John's warmth, the gentle rise and fall of his chest, even the pulse of his heart thrumming softly in his friend's veins, were calming his mind and body steadily until his eyes closed on their own accord. He couldn't have resisted sleep claiming him even if he had wanted to.

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It was the sun streaming into the room that woke John. And though he was still half asleep, the remainders of his military training put him in a kind-of alert mode immediately - his bedroom was facing to the west; there shouldn't have been any direct sunlight able to shine into his room. Cracking one eye open, relief washed over him when he recognized his surroundings - he was in 221B's living room, on the couch.

Apparently he had fallen asleep during his and Sherlock's nightly TV watching that really had just been an excuse to have some company, at least as far as he was concerned. Thankfully, the idea had served its purpose; he couldn't remember to have had another nightmares in the past hours. He only wondered why Sherlock hadn't woken him to send him back to--

*Oh.*

Only now he noticed that there was something very *not normal*. An arm around his waist. A body pressed against his back. Soft breathing grazing his ear now and then.

And an utter feeling of comfort.

He felt secure, and he felt relieved - the latter in general just because Sherlock was there. With him. Their right hands held on to each other, fingers laced together in a tight knot, as if they never wanted to let go again, no matter what their owners decided. As if they belonged like this.

John would have expected to feel and think a lot if he found himself in the embrace of another man when waking up in the morning. Whenever he had spared a thought to this option - and having been in the military for so long, it had been bound to occur to him at some point, like it did to every other of his comrades - he had always rejected it. He knew that sharing a bed, for purely non-sexual purposes, helped to calm and relax body and soul, as the warmth and presence of another human being usually gave one's subconscious an impression of being protected and cared for, thus preventing bad dreams and restless slumber. Still, the thought of sharing this yet to him rather intimate arrangement with a man had never appealed to John.

Right in that moment, however, he couldn't bring himself to even remotely worry about his present situation. Sherlock was his friend, his best friend, and spending the night together, on the sofa, *in each other's arms*, for some reason seemed... natural. Perhaps because he hadn't felt this safe in years - if ever. His friend's tall, lean frame came with a curious impression of hard- and at the same time softness; Sherlock felt just as sinewy as he looked, but it wasn't unpleasant. John imagined that this was what it felt like for women, usually the ones on the front end of *spooning*, although he had had the experience the other way around and the difference because of the lack of soft curves and instead a compact, sharp-edged physique was significant.

... and did he really compare the situation to those with his former girlfriends? John rolled his eyes at himself and then began to carefully move in a helpless attempt to loosen not only Sherlock's arm, but also his leg that had come to lie across his own, without disturbing his friend.

"Good morning, John." The words were spoken in a low rumble, Sherlock's voice even deeper and more resonating than usual, if that was possible. But then was he lying against the body of the man possessing this voice, and thus *felt* the words more than he heard them, despite the lack of distance between his ear and Sherlock's mouth, as his head was still resting partly on John's.

"Good morning," he replied, sitting up when Sherlock finally let him, and both men came to sit side by side like they had the night before.

"Slept well?"

"Very, actually."

Silence stretched between them then, heavy with thoughts and questions and ideas and doubts; the lack of conversation rang louder in their ears than any spoken word ever could have. And among all those things that weren't said an inaudible commando eventually made them turn their heads towards each other in exact the same second.

For John it was a moment in which he had to remind himself to not gasp at what was revealed to him. There was openness in Sherlock's eyes, so many things he had never before seen in them, a never-ending stream of emotions pouring out for countless minutes. Neither of them was sure what to make of their shared night; a night that had shown them something they had never given a thought to before.

Or had they?

John was taken aback when he realized that he couldn't claim to have not at least once or twice thought about it. Just like with his comrades in the army, this was about the need for a warm body next to him in times of dreadfulness; the need of solace when solitude became unbearable. He had never given in to this need then; and he wouldn't have with Sherlock either, had fate not taken matter in its own hands. What he now read in Sherlock's eyes mirrored what showed in his own, John realized. *It* had been right, *it* had been desperately needed, for so many reasons, and *it* now left behind was the silent request to not let it end for good, whatever *it* was.

So they stared at each other for at least half an eternity, conversing wordlessly about what they weren't able to put into verbal expressions. Only after a long while Sherlock caught himself and schooled his expression; it was then that John, too, put an end of his stream of thoughts. At least for the moment.

"Right. I'll make tea then. You want some, too?" Sherlock coughed slightly before answering.

"Yes, please."

John busied himself in the kitchen, filling the kettle and preparing two cups with teabags, all the while his mind resumed its for this early morning hour far too complex work. Unusual long it seemed to take the water to boil - and John took it as a sign. Walking back to the archway that led to the living room, he stood there for a moment, watching Sherlock who was still sitting on the sofa.

"Thank you," he said after a short while, and when his friend looked up, they held each other's gaze again for what must have been minutes - despite the fact that water didn't need as long to reach its highest temperature as the moment felt it did. Sherlock regarded John with a thoughtful expression on his face; the doctor could actually see it working in this genius mind of his. Finally, the detective spoke.

"And you." There was the hint of a smile tugging on one side of his mouth, John noticed; he almost missed it, but it was as if Sherlock held it in place long enough to be noticeable for his friend. Then he turned away and busied himself with his mobile. There was nothing more that needed to be said.

-I-I-

For the following few weeks, John and Sherlock happened to stumble upon the other every once in a while, at night and in the darkness of their flat. In the beginning it was once a week maybe; after another particularly gruesome case they shared what had meanwhile moved to Sherlock's bed two nights in a row. Soon, however, the rate of their chance encounters grew, and it became easier to count the occasions on which they didn't spend the night together. Neither of them ever commented on it.

After a month, John gave up his bedroom and moved into Sherlock's after they, in a casual conversation that could very well have concerned the weather, agreed that it would make things easier.

Not even a week later the bed in Sherlock's room was replaced by a bigger one both men would easily find room in - not that it had been necessary since most of the times they snuggled together on one side of the bed anyways.

Neither of them suffered from a sleep-robbing nightmare or insomnia again.

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