How to Build a Heart out of Ashes

by Teumessian

Summary

In an AU where a small number of the population become Changelings at a young age, at 17 John Watson believes he's destined for Normal life but then the Change takes him and he is sent to the Baker Institute. There he meets Sherlock Holmes.

AN: Some common trigger warnings apply, but aren't listed due to spoilers. If you need a full list of warnings/triggers, they can be found in through the link in the first author's notes.

Notes

This will be a full length AU fic and will be posted up here as I finish and my lovely, amazing beta kathecello cleans them up! FULL LIST OF WARNINGS: CLICK HERE
John changed for the first time in the middle of his sixth form literature class, taking everyone, including himself, by surprise. There was thought to be some genetic influence, but he was the only one in his immediate family who had made the Change. His mum said that his granddad had been an ermine, but there hadn’t been any Changelings in the family since, until John, who was at sixth form, a sixth former in his last spring term, and honestly that just didn’t happen. Children almost always made the Change between ages nine and fourteen. John was seventeen. Nobody had even taken into consideration the possibility of him being a Changeling, albeit a late blooming one.

Yet here he was, in Mrs. Hardin’s Introduction to Classic Literature, desks and chairs scattered around him, his classmates looking at him with shock, with awe, with fear and some with hate. Here he crouched, bristling and confused, as he felt fur rise on his hackles and a whine leak from his throat. His ears were flattened back and his tail was tucked; John was scared, too. What was happening to him?

It would later be explained to John that this first Change was one of the biggest causes of prejudice against Changelings. Normally the human mind is completely and totally dominant over the animal instincts, and even in shifted form Changelings retain composure and awareness. However, the first time is different—with the shock and the sudden radical shift in... well, everything, children tended to react instinctively. Very, very rarely was anyone ever injured when a child Changed, but there
was often a lot a growling, fanfare, barking, chirping, flying, fleeing, or hiding.

John Watson, for his part, cowered in confusion until the class could be cleared away, a standard process when a student changed during school. Then he paced on four paws, sense of smell becoming overpowering, and he waited, telling himself that the school councillor would soon come to collect him. That was how it worked. He'd seen it before, once in primary and twice in secondary school. It took longer than it did in primary or secondary schools, though, where it was expected, and faculty were well prepared. The teachers at colleges were only really aware of this process in theory, but finally Mrs. Caulking came shuffling into the room with a bright orange blanket and began to talk John through the process of shifting back—reading from cue cards, she explained how it could take some time, but if John focused he would shift back soon enough. She was right. It took no more than a minute for him to change back, and the poor woman gave him the garish blanket to cover himself with. John thought this process must be so much less awkward with ten-year-olds than with a boy about to come of age—it had to be, because this was nearly unbearable.

Then came the worst, most uncomfortable walk down a hallway that John ever had to endure in the entirety of his admittedly short life. He’d tried to salvage his trousers, tee-shirt, or even his shoes, for Christ’s sake, but the first Change was certainly violent and explosive. There were only shreds of cloth and rubber soles left. So instead John walked down the hall of his respectable college with nothing but that garish, orange blanket covering his naked body. He avoided eye contact with everyone he’d ever known, and with each step he forced himself to accept the fact that they were lost to him now; that nice girl, Daisy, in his biology class, his rugby mates, and even a few childhood friends that had grown distant over the years—he always assumed they’d reconnect at some point...

He would write to them, his closest friends at least, but life at an Institute hardly made nurturing old ties easy. John knew it would never be the same, as did they. His peers silently said their goodbyes to the Normal that was John Watson, waving away the Changeling that took his place. In the councillor’s office more procedure was to be followed. He sat in a scratchy chair, all the more prickly against his bare calves where the blanket didn’t cover, and he waited as Mrs. Caulking called his parents. He stared at her shiny brass name plate without really reading it while she explained to his parents what happened. He wasn’t really worried about them. He may be the only Changeling in his family, but his parents weren’t the sort of prejudiced folk that got away with far too much in this supposedly civilised age. They were simple, down to earth. They would accept John for what he was, fur, fangs, and all. His sister might give him more grief, maliciously or not, and it would push the boundaries of what he could handle right now, but when weren’t he and Harry at each other’s throats?

Then Mrs. Caulking made one other call, to a hotline created so schools could report Changes. John nervously tried to trace one line of wood grain on the woman’s polished desk, but he kept losing the thing in the exposed knots. After a conversation about John’s student record and a number of other things that went in one of John’s ears and out the other, Mrs. Caulking set the receiver down with a click that seemed to echo around the room. Finally, John worked up the courage to look up and meet his fate.

“So…” his voice was rough. John cleared his throat before trying again. “So, where am I…?”

He held her eyes, determined not to look away.

“The Baker Institute,” she said.

She said more, about how the school had an amazing science program, about the gorgeous
campus, the well funded facilities, and that there was a rugby team there. He forced each comment into his mind, anchoring them there, replacing details of his old life one by one. There was no use in regret, or in rejecting the inevitabilities that awaited him. It was out of his control. All he could do now was look ahead, so John Watson closed his eyes and pictured a beautiful school in the countryside.

There were parts of the Baker Institute that matched John’s expectations. It was indeed in the countryside. Most of Institutes were. Young Changelings needed space to shift and to move. If they didn’t shift semi-frequently they got… uncomfortable, or worse.

The biggest building was at the very centre of the campus, and was indeed old and impressive. It was massive and its walls were made of heavy stone bricks, often perforated by elaborate stained glass windows that glinted dimly under the overcast sky, colourful patches on greyscale. The corbels under the hulking parapets were carved into the growling shapes of multitudes of beasts—lions, eagles, wolves, serpents and more. They must have been detailed but they were too high up for John to make out more than their basic forms. Spires rose from both the parapets as well as the towers that rose from the major corners of the building. There were other buildings scattered around it with simpler styling, still classic but far less grandiose. There was another very large building that John could see far to his right, still stonework but slightly more modern. From the little John had to go on, the rows of small windows, the students milling about with footballs in the yard near it, he guessed that those must be dormitories.

However, John wasn’t completely unsurprised by the Baker Institute. On the opposite side of the campus, only just visible behind the grand main hall, were buildings that looked much more modern. They were all glass, white and concrete, the kind meant to take advantage of natural lighting.

A car had picked John, along with most of his worldly possessions, up late that morning from the train station. Luckily John was never much of a hoarder of useless things, so it wasn’t too hard to pack efficiently. Currently, John stood awkwardly on the edge of a large roundabout that allowed cars to pull up close to the centre building. He glanced up at the big silver sign above the enormous black double doors that led into the building. It read ‘The Baker Institute’ and then underneath in smaller letters ‘Baker Grand Hall’. There was a plaque underneath that read, *Iuncti mutatimus iuncti crescimus.* He made a mental note to ask what it meant. It was just one more question added to an impossibly long list.

There were other students rushing around and a few people that looked like they must be teachers. The students all wore surprisingly nice uniforms—much better than the misshapen things that John and his schoolmates wore at all of his previous schools. The jackets were well structured, black, and had thin silver trim. The girls wore knee length skirts and knee high socks. Both boys and girls wore shirts that were crisp and white, and their ties were black with stripes of silver and another color—either yellow, purple, red or blue. John wasn’t quite sure what it meant.

Nobody seemed to notice one boy, lost and new. John wondered if it was because newcomers were so common—they’d have to be with numbers like this; John had never seen so many Changelings in his life… not that he would know the difference in adults he supposed—or perhaps it was just that nobody thought John was new at all, not at his age.

However, a moment later John was finally noticed. Well, spotted was more accurate, as it seemed these people had come to meet him. A man with dark hair and a blazer led the group. Following him was a young man, close to John’s own age, but with unusual silver-grey hair. It wasn’t odd for
some characteristics of a Changeling’s shift form to be reflected in their human form, and John wondered what his shift form looked like to make his hair go prematurely silver like that. A few other students lingered curiously behind the pair in front.

When they got close enough, the dark-haired man greeted him.

“John H. Watson, I presume?” he asked with a friendly smile, extending his hand.

John nodded and shook his hand.

“My name is Dr. Mortimer. We spoke on the phone,” he introduced himself. 

John lightly returned his smile, still too nervous to put his whole heart into it. A few days ago John had indeed spoken to Dr. Mortimer, a psychiatrist and the Institute’s councilor, over the phone. He had called to explain the process of transferring into the Baker Institute and to give him an overview of what to expect from the process.

“How was the trip?” Dr. Mortimer asked, obviously trying to make John feel comfortable and welcome, something John didn’t mind in the slightest.

“It was good. I thought I was going to have to take a taxi from the station with all of my things, so the car was great,” John answered with a polite smile.

Dr. Mortimer nodded and smiled.

“We try and make the transition as easy as possible,” he said as he waved the silver haired boy forward.

John noted that his tie had red stripes.

“This is Greg Lestrade, sixth form. He is a key member in our student guard,” Dr. Mortimer said.

At John’s questioning glance Greg spoke up.

“It’s a sort of… a student police force on campus, like they have at some universities. We stop bullying, track down vandals, you know, escort students across campus at night if they call a hotline,” Greg explained, hands casually in his pockets, pushing his unbuttoned jacket back.

John nodded, digesting his answer.

“Anyway,” Dr. Mortimer cut in before John had to think of what to say to that, “Greg here is going to show you the campus and, later this evening, the forest. Due to your… atypical circumstances I would like it if you would come and see me within the next week so we can talk about how you’re settling in.”

“Okay,” John said, “Thank you.”

“I’ll leave him in your capable hands, Greg,” Dr. Mortimer said just before he turned and went back into the large building they’d just emerged from.

“Right then,” Greg said, clapping his hands together, “Where to start?”

John awkwardly glanced back at the boxes and duffles stacked on the side of the road behind him.

“What about my things?” John asked, and Greg smiled.
He nodded his head towards the small group of students that had trailed behind him and Dr. Mortimer.

“That’s what these lads are here for. They’ll take your stuff up to your room, and it’ll be there for you when we finish,” Greg explained, and then he looked around as if trying to make a decision. “Let’s just pick a direction and go.”

“Oh,” John said. “Right then.”

He found himself smiling. He liked Greg, and while it was obvious by his lack of practice as a tour guide that they were making special arrangements for John’s special circumstances, the silver haired boy wasn’t making John feel awkward in the slightest.

“So, this is the main building, Baker Hall. This is where all the primary and secondary kids have school, as well as most of the sixth form,” Greg explained, looking back at the hulking building. “The organisation in there is rubbish; expect to be lost for at least the first week in there.”

John laughed.

“Noted, leave early for classes. So what’s the motto?” John asked.

Greg stuck his hands into his pockets again and looked up at the shiny plaque.

“Ah, Iuncti mutatimus, iuncti crescimus… It means, ‘Together we change, together we grow,’” he explained.

“Fitting,” John said.

“That it is,” Greg laughed. “So what’s your shift?”

Shift was the casual term for a Changeling’s animal form, the shape they shifted to—the beast in their heart.

“Umm… Timber wolf,” John said after a brief hesitation.

He wasn’t used to saying it yet. He knew he would get there, but right now it was crazy to think that he could change into a sharp toothed predator at will. Plus, he knew it was a part of him, a part of him he could never deny. A pleased grin split over Greg’s face.

“That’s great!” he said. “German Shepherd myself. Was worried I’d have to show another little skittish thing around the woods, but you’ll keep up just fine.”

Greg walked him all over campus. He showed him the primary student dorms and the other class buildings. There was even a tiny student hospital on campus, as the Baker Institute was famous for its medical programmes. When they approached the modern-looking buildings that John had spotted behind Baker Hall earlier Greg explained that they were the science buildings, put in only in the last year or so in attempt to be more eco-friendly.

As Greg talked, a girl with mousy hair and an awkward rush to her steps exited the building. When Greg spotted her he stopped and called her name.

She glanced up, taking a moment to recognise Greg before changing her course to meet them. She wore the same red accented tie that Greg did.

“John, this is Molly Hooper,” Greg said, indicating the young woman. “She’s in the same year as
us and a biology student, medical focus, just like you. Molly, this is John Watson. You’ll probably see each other in classes.”

Back home they filled out questionnaires at the beginning of every school year that took into account their student records as well as their intended plans. They were used for many things, one of which was potential Institute placement. John had decided years ago that he wanted to be a doctor—and accepted the fact that he would probably have to promise himself to the military to pay for school, but now that he was at an Institute... Well, they were miraculously funded. John had no idea why, but he wouldn’t have to worry about managing to pay for medical school now. There were certainly benefits to making the Change, John had to admit.

“Hello,” Molly said politely, dropping her eyes shyly.

“Hi,” John said.

“John’s new,” Greg explained, and even timid Molly glanced up at him questioningly.

He was so old to be a new change. He wondered how long he would be subjected to those looks. Not that he could do anything about it. John just smiled, trying to pretend it wasn’t as big a deal as everyone knew it was.

They said goodbye to Molly and continued on their tour, making their way in the general direction of the forest that seemed to back up to the campus. They passed a set of apartment style dorms that pressed up against the woods on their way. Greg called it “B Wing” and explained these were mostly used by the older university students and even by a few junior teachers and professors.

“So what do those colours on all your ties mean?” John asked as he saw a younger girl with purple stripes pass them by.

“Oh!” Greg said, as though he was already have supposed to tell him but forgot. “They indicate what level of schooling you’re in. There’s yellow for primary, purple for secondary, red for sixth form, and blue for the Uni kids.”

John nodded, and now that he was paying attention he easily saw the age collections within the colours.

Greg began to loop back towards the main buildings, and as they turned around one of the forest-side corners of Baker Hall John almost ran smack into another student. The young man had his nose buried in a heavy volume and hadn’t been looking where he was going. As he dodged, John’s elbow clipped the corner of the thick book, and it began to tumble from the boy’s hands. John had always been gifted with good reflexes, so he caught the book without much effort.

“Sorry,” John said automatically as he went to hand the book back to its owner.

The boy was tall and pale-skinned, with curly, dark brown hair and piercing blue, almond-shaped eyes that now regarded John carefully. There was... something there, something gleaming in his eyes like thousands of silver, miniature cogs on the inside of the finest, most complex clock, locked and turning at light speed. John’s breath caught in his throat.

The boy wasn’t wearing any tie at all. He cautiously reached out to take the book back, and cocked his head lightly to the side, eyes settled on John.

“New,” he stated, his voice low and dark, the finality of a complete assessment ringing in his tone as he stared.
Then the boy took the proffered text and swept past.

John stood, a little shell-shocked for a second. What the hell was all that?

“Who was that?” John amended his question.

Greg shook his head, watching the boy go.

“That… is Sherlock Holmes,” he explained, but John could tell there was more to say on the subject.

Greg indicated with a nod that they should keep walking, and continued.

“He’s an odd one. He’s a sixth form, but he’s been here longer than any of us. He came to the Baker Institute when he was only five years old,” Greg said, brows furrowed.

Shifting at five years was just as unheard of as John’s seventeen. John smiled.

“So he’s as strange as me then,” John said.

Greg just laughed.

“Oh, you are completely, one hundred percent normal in comparison to Sherlock Holmes,” Greg said before his smile slipped away into a more thoughtful expression.

“What does that mean?” John asked as they approached the dormitories John noticed on the way in.

“Like I said, he’s been here so long… Yet not a single person knows what his shift is. Not anybody I’ve talked to at least. He is really clever; anyone who’s ever had a class with him would know—I mean honestly he’s a genius, but he doesn’t talk to people if he can help it, and he never slip-shifts. And he doesn’t have friends,” Greg finished.

John was new to Changeling culture, but even he knew that you learned someone’s shifted form almost as a kind of greeting, as already shown by Greg less than an hour ago. Most of the Changelings John had ever had a conversation with supplied the information willingly, even to Normals, and he assumed they would be even more free with their own kind. So for someone to have never revealed it… And to never slip-shift?

Slip-shifting was the occurrence of a Changeling unintentionally shifting, and it was very common among new or young Changelings as Dr. Mortimer had explained to John over the phone. It could even happen to adult Changelings if they didn’t get a chance to exercise their shift forms for long enough or if they were under sufficient duress.

“Huh…” John said as he twisted his neck to see if he could catch another glimpse of the boy who was even stranger than himself, but he was long gone.

“This is A Wing!” Greg said as they stopped in front of the dormitory. “This is the home of most secondary and sixth form students. I live on the third floor.”

Greg led them inside the building and paused, glancing around before he spotted two people walking in their direction. One was a young woman with frizzy, curled brown hair and the other was a boy who looked like he smelled something sour.
“Sally! Anderson!” Greg called to get their attention. “Have you seen Mrs. Hudson?”

“Probably in her office around this time,” the girl, Sally, said coolly.

Greg thanked them and turned down the corridor on his right, John in tow.

“Sally and Anderson are on the Student Guard with me,” Greg explained without John having to ask.

The building was rather nice, John noted, as they walked past rooms and lounges. Some of the doors to rooms were left open, and John could see that they were small but not unbearably so. Also, every room he’d seen so far had been a single. That was unusual. Any of the dormitories he’d seen at the universities he’d visited last Autumn were primarily two to a room. John thought perhaps they could just afford it at the Institutes.

Once or twice he even caught sight of what he assumed to be a shifted Changeling; a cat and a weasel streaking through the hallways, a cheetah lounging on a bed. It was all very strange.

They reached a windowed door at the end of the hallway, and Greg knocked lightly before entering.

“Mrs. Hudson? I’ve brought someone to see you,” Greg said with a fondness in his voice that told John he liked the woman they were about to meet.

A little lady looked up from behind a desk, and at the sight of John and Greg she smiled warmly.

“Oh, hello, darling. You must be John?” she asked as she rose stiffly.

“Yes,” John said.

“Well, I’ll leave you in Mrs. Hudson’s capable hands,” Greg said, flashing a smile in her direction.

“Oh, shoo, you,” she said good naturedly.

“John, I’ll come by sometime after dinner, and we can go into the forest. How are you feeling?” he asked, and John knew what he meant.

“I’m okay. I shifted last night,” John says.

“Good, good,” Greg said before he disappeared around the doorframe.

“Greg’s a good boy,” Mrs. Hudson said warmly when he was gone.

John just nodded, not really knowing how to add to that.

“Right now, first we’ll take your measurements, and then we’ll show you to your room. Some of the folks with the Student Guard brought up your things a while ago so they’re already there,” she explained.

“Measurements?” John asked.

“For your uniform, darling,” Mrs. Hudson explained.

Oh, so that’s why the Baker Institute uniforms didn’t look like absolute rubbish—measuring.

“You can pick up your uniforms at the student shop in Baker Hall tomorrow. If you grow out of it
at any time just go down there, and they’ll fix you up. I’ll give you directions,” she said helpfully.

That hit John a little bit like a low blow. He wished he was going to get taller, but if his family history had anything to say about the subject, it was unlikely at best.

As Mrs. Hudson measured she prattled on, and by the time she finished John learned that she was the housing coordinator of both A and B Wings. Also, she was highly grateful she wasn’t running the primary dorms anymore—trying to keep primary schoolers with the ability to change into animals at will in line was akin to herding cats… Sometimes it was actually herding cats.

“Ready to see your room?” Mrs. Hudson asked when she was finished, and John nodded.

She led him up the stair after stair until they finally reached the top floor, floor six. John did not envy the members of the Student Guard who had to carry all his things up those stairs. Once in the hallway, Mrs. Hudson only led him past a couple of doors before stopping in front of a door marked 614A. She fiddled with some keys before turning the lock and allowing him to walk in.

It wasn’t anything special. A good sized window was set into the far wall; out of it he could see Baker Grand Hall. There was a writing desk, a large wardrobe on the right wall, and a simple twin bed, where his boxes and bags were currently stacked. It wasn’t huge, definitely smaller than his room at home, but it wasn’t cramped. He could be more than comfortable here.

“Why are they all singles?” the question slipped out of its own accord.

“Well… Changelings often shift in their sleep or just find it more comfortable to sleep shifted, and, well, you can’t exactly wear pajamas if…” she said, attempting subtlety.

John got the message. They all had singles so it wouldn’t be awkward for Changelings to sleep in the nude if they chose to shift. The thought almost made John giggle. In fact, it did.

“That’s enough, dearest,” Mrs. Hudson chastised, but there was a smile on her face.

“Hello, Mrs. Hudson,” John heard a voice behind him say.

When he turned he saw a boy, who must have been close to his age. He had glasses and a plump frame. He was even shorter than John was, he couldn’t help but notice.

“Oh, hello, dear,” Mrs. Hudson greeted. “How are you?”

“Good, good,” he said, jovially. “And you?”

“Fine, darling,” she said. “Oh, Mike, this is John, John Watson. He’s just moving in.”

Mike looked him over once before smiling and extending his hand.

“Nice to meet you,” he said. “I’m down at the end of the hall, second to last on the right. I hope you have better luck with your next door neighbors than I have.”

John cocked his head to the side in question.

“What?”

He didn’t miss the way Mrs. Hudson’s lip twitched at Mike’s words.

“Mike’s next door neighbor has interesting sleep habits, that’s all,” she said.
“Plays that violin at all hours of the night, he does…” Mike said, looking wary. “And where do the explosions keep coming from?”

John was totally lost, but Mrs. Hudson just chuckled.

“I’ll see what I can do about the violin,” Mrs. Hudson assured Mike. “Oh, and John, here are your keys. The ridged one is for the dorm and the other is for the building.”

“Thanks,” John said sincerely.

“Do you need anything else, darling? A cup of tea to help you settle in?” she asked.

“A cuppa would be lovely,” John said.

“Well, just this once… I’m not your housekeeper,” she rambled on as she turned to go back the way they’d come, and John disappeared into his new room.

He shut the door and took a deep breath through his nose. This was going well. He was doing well. He let himself rest against the door for a moment. Then, deliberately, he pushed himself into the room and towards the boxes, and John Watson began to unpack his life.

People were dull—horribly so. Every day people woke up, went about their business, interacted with other dreadfully boring people, went home, and went to sleep, only to get up the next morning and do it all over again. Even Changelings, for all their mystery and inexplicable uniqueness, were basically uninteresting. They followed the same routines and interacted in the same disgustingly unexciting ways.

The irritated shrieking of a violin split the evening air. A bow flexed in frustration. Why were they all so dull?

Only once in a blue moon was there a spark, something new, something different, something interesting. But even those were no more than fleeting distractions from the monotony. The origin of the flame was always quickly deduced, and without the fuel of mystery it stuttered and flickered out, leaving only the tedious darkness once again. This is why Sherlock Holmes dedicated his life to tracking down those little sparks of the unknown, of brilliance, and taming each one…because what else did life have to offer him?

His frustration came to a—very loud—crescendo before an agonised wail cut into his musings.

“Jesus CHRIST. I’m begging you, Holmes!” a desperate voice pressed through the wall. “I have coursework due tomorrow!”

With a sigh that would have made anyone believe that he was the one being inconvenienced, the dark haired youth set his well-cared-for violin on his bedspread. Sherlock’s mood was only further reduced by his growing awareness of the tugging sensation in is stomach—a little twist, an itch. He hadn’t changed in a few days, not even in sleep. Well, he hadn’t exactly slept much in those past couple days either.

With one more heavy sigh, Sherlock resigned himself to the inevitability of a trip into the forest
that evening. It’s not that Sherlock disliked being a Changeling, quite the contrary, actually. It was one more thing that set him apart from the blundering masses, and sometimes there was a soothing clarity that came from the predatory mind of his shift, comforting when his brain was always swirling so frantically. It also provided heightened senses that had been useful to Sherlock on more than one occasion. His annoyance came from the fact that it was simply another inconvenience to cater to in addition to his other bodily needs. Less inconvenient than sleep though…

When Sherlock reached the field that separated the inner campus and the forest, he beelined towards the changing room at the very end of the long line of booths that allowed Changelings to store their clothes and shift before entering the woods. Each one was about the size of a large powder room so that those with larger shift forms could change comfortably. One side had a door with a sliding sign that marked the booth as vacant or in use. Inside were coat hooks, a low bench, and a bin to put clothes in. There were also a series of rigged hangers, like little hooks suspended at different levels on the wall with a pressure-release that allowed students to slip into their markers, the collars that distinguished the students from wild animals to avoid accidents once they were shifted, but Sherlock couldn’t be bothered with those.

Sherlock claimed the very last booth in the row, just as he always did; it was only a few dozen meters away from the treeline. He slid the sign over to read “in use.” Inside he undid his scarf, removed his jacket, and hung them both up on the coathook before undressing completely and placing his neatly folded garments into the storage bin.

Then the lanky, pale adolescent disappeared, and in his place stood a lithe beast with fur like midnight and eyes like ice. He padded smoothly forward, cautiously nosing through the curtain that separated him from the forest. Nobody noticed the shadow that was Sherlock Holmes as he slipped out into the twilight and under the shading trees.

Chapter End Notes

Art by anathemarmotqueen.tumblr.com
Greg came by to get John near dusk when the light was draining out of the sky. From the dorms they made their way across the Baker Institute’s main campus and towards the field that separated it from the forest. John could see the changing booths Greg pointed out earlier in the distance. As they walked Greg continued to dump new information into John’s already over filled brain.

“So what do you know about shift-speech?” Greg asked him.

Shift-speech, from what John understood, was the method that allowed Changelings to speak to one another while in shifted form, almost like a form of telepathy. Other than that though, John didn’t know much, so that’s what he told Greg.

“That’s a good way of describing it,” Greg said in hearing John’s description. “But it’s a little more complex… it’s not something we can all just do effortlessly. Lots of factors influence the clarity of the communication, distance, visibility, etc… especially when it comes to the familiarity of the parties speaking.”

They were closing in on a pair of booths now. The grass was lush beneath John’s feet and he caught sight of a Shetland pony, a zebra and a buzzard chasing each other around the open field.

“Okay, you can go in there. There’s a bin for your clothes on the bench and once you’re shifted just meet me out here. Then we’ll go into the forest,” Greg said. “Oh, and take this, too.”

Greg pulled something red out of his pocket and tossed it to John. He caught it and then looked at what appeared to be a collar, like for a dog or a cat. It was about an inch thick and made of red leather. There was a bowed silver plate affixed to it that read ‘The Baker Institute’. He shot Greg a questioning glance, raising an eyebrow. Greg just laughed.

“Think of it as school uniform,” Greg explained. “Every Changeling who can wears a marker to distinguish themselves from wild animals and to show what year we’re in, since primary students aren’t allowed into the deep forest without supervision.”

Greg pulled out a second collar that looked the same as the one in John’s hands, albeit quite a bit more worn. The buzzard flew overhead and John caught a flash of yellow around its left foot.

“Okay, makes enough sense,” John chuckled.

John entered the booth and undressed quickly, finding himself eager to make the change. John measured the collar for a second before buckling it loosely around his neck. Then he took a deep breath and looked inside himself for that hidden part that he’d only uncovered recently, and he unlocked the cage. There was a rush, like wind was running all over his body, and when he opened his eyes everything looked taller than before and a waterfall of smells assaulted him. He could
smell *everything*.

John pushed his way through the heavy curtain and onto the grass, where a white German shepherd waited. So that’s where Greg’s hair colour came from. His tongue was lolling out and he leaned back on his rump to scratch his ruffed neck with his hind leg. When he saw John he rose up and stretched. When he was done he looked up at John.


The shift speech slipped into John’s mind as a mix of mostly feelings and a few words. When the feelings were put together into a concept it was obvious to John that Greg meant for them to go into the forest now.

John attempted to broadcast a feeling of affirmation but whether or not Greg received it, he began to lope towards the tree line. John followed close behind.

John decided very quickly that he rather liked the woods. They were cool and soothing and he began to understand even better the feelings Greg had used to identify it. The ground was a little mushy in places, and the musty smell of rotting leaves filled John’s muzzle. There were many other smells, too, the smell of wild animals, the smell of other Changelings. For some reason that John couldn’t explain, it was impossible to not tell the difference between the two.

John and Greg mostly just traipsed through the woods without any real aim. They occasionally encountered another Changeling or group, but due to communication barriers the forest wasn’t often a good place to meet or get to know people, so mostly people continued to do their own thing. If John had a question he found he could ask it by trying to throw his feelings of confusion towards Greg and point to a subject using body language. Greg would answer simply if he could through a set of feelings and a few words.

John was pleased. He honestly enjoyed being in his shift form. There was a power and awareness he would never be able to fathom in his human form. If being a Changeling was always like this, then maybe the prejudice Normals had against Changelings was just jealousy, because this was fantastic.

It was only when they finally slowed to a walk, ribs heaving a bit from the running, did John feel the prickling in his hackles—the feeling of being watched. He scanned the woods calmly but saw nothing. However, the forest was full of sentient Changelings. There could be watching eyes anywhere.

John skipped a few steps forward to catch up with Greg, moss springy beneath his paws. John looked up at his guide to try and ask a question.

What John wanted to ask was how long they would be staying out but the feelings got all jumbled up and he knew all that got through to Greg was a vague sense of weariness and time.

Greg looked back towards him, question in his eyes.
John easily recognized the feelings associated with ‘home’ as the dorms were to Greg. He hoped he’d feel the same about them soon enough.

He was just about to reply when something soft, yet electric, danced over the surface of his being. It was like the brush of a bird’s wings that sent static, gold sparks across the skin of his mind. His head whipped to the side and he focused on the trees at the edge of the clearing, looking for something… but he saw nothing in the shadows.

Sherlock wandered in the silence, weaving in and out of the trees and the brush. It was spring and the green was returning to the forest. The dampness under his sensitive paw pads told him the temperature had not risen high enough today for any real evaporation to occur. Sherlock moved nearly aimlessly but took inventory of the forest, and his fellow Changelings through it, as he went.

Sherlock could tell from the swooping gouges in the moss of the south meadow that the secondary students had been holding races again, and, upon opening his mouth to draw the forest air over the vomeronasal gland in the roof of his mouth, could tell the races were sexually motivated.

Unlike many psychologists, Sherlock did not believe that, at their roots, all things were sexually motivated. There were many motives—greed, hunger, anger… entertainment. However, among the age group Sherlock spent the majority of his time around, he conceded that sexual motivation was by far the most common.

The silent leopard continued on his way and he was considering taking the long way around to one of the small lakes on the Baker Institute’s property. He worked out that by the time he reached it and made his way back, he would have satisfied the basic requirements of the animal inside of him, and it would allow him to abstain from changing for at least another three days; but then he heard the whispers—the muffled thoughts bouncing against the walls of his mind. Where was that coming from?

It was like a flutter against his consciousness, then perhaps a word or two. It sounded like someone was trying to talk to him from too far away—but he didn’t speak with anyone here.

Shift speech took practice, and while Sherlock elected not to speak to his school mates, having come from a completely changed household, as well as the sheer amount of time he’d been able to shift, meant that Sherlock could, when necessary, speak fluently to most Changelings he knew and even some strangers, even though it didn’t necessarily go both ways. This wasn’t Sherlock speaking, though. This was someone speaking to him, and it was not the voice of a teacher. But there weren’t many students on campus adept enough at shift speech to talk to him… but none of them would bother trying to speak to him because nobody knew him.

So then whose words floated faintly but effortlessly into his mind now?

Sherlock followed the whispers, mind crackling with excitement. There was something new! His carefully controlled brain was on a loop, begging whatever this thing was not to be boring.

As he grew closer, the bursts of thought became clearer, ‘louder’. Sherlock stayed silent as he approached the sound of two figures walking through a clearing in the trees. With a burst of speed, Sherlock overtook them and bolted up a tree to get a proper look.

Two canines—that was Sherlock’s snap assessment and then thousands of details assaulted him as
they always did, the things no one else saw. There was a white German shepherd padding just ahead of what appeared to be a sand-blond wolf. Sherlock recognized the shepherd as Greg Lestrade—member of the student guard, friendly, well-liked by his teachers, intelligence level moderate when compared to his peers and pathetically dim in comparison to his own—but then so were most people’s mental capacities. It took Sherlock no more than two seconds to come to the conclusion that he wasn’t the one who had called Sherlock here.

So then he moved on to the wolf. It walked a few steps behind Greg, by his left flank, and the way he kept looking at the shepherd indicated to Sherlock that it was following Greg. Sherlock’s mind pulled up a parallel from earlier that day. A blonde boy who must have been about seventeen? Eighteen? Probably seventeen—he’d been following Greg… he was a new Changeling! It was the only explanation, even if the boy was preposterously old for a first shift but oh, that was good. That was fascinating. It was the only conclusion that fit within the constraints of the evidence. Looking for it now, Sherlock noticed the extra attention the wolf had been giving to smelling the air, to the use of four legs. Yes, he was perfectly new.

The wolf looked over to Greg as if getting ready to ask a question. Another thought burst into his mind, surprising him.


The clarity of not just the words but the feelings surrounding them was mind blowing. Sherlock could understand this new Changeling as if they were having a conversation in human form! No, even better than a human conversation. Sherlock heard this Changeling’s soul in the shift speech.

On top of that, the question was obviously aimed at Greg, who Sherlock could tell hadn’t heard more than the flash of fuzzy, wordless emotions that characterised new Changelings’ shift speech. Yet Sherlock could hear him as clear as he could see the moon in the sky.

There it was. That wonderful, beautiful spark. His excitement was palpable and his thrill rose to a peak as a lupine head whipped towards him in the dark—as if it heard his pleasure. Sherlock knew the shadows hid him but clear eyes seemed to stare straight into him. It sent a shiver up his spine, the mystery.

This most certainly was new.

This was interesting.
In the next few days John continued to venture into the forest with Greg, and occasionally Mike Stamford, the shorter boy from his floor. Mike’s shift, however, was a raccoon, and therefore often had trouble keeping up with the wolf and shepherd. So on those days they usually stuck to shorter visits into the forest. John often felt like he was being watched when he ventured under the trees. Sometimes there was a pressure on his mind, or a crackle like on that first night, and once he swore he heard his name called clear as a bell, but Greg swore he hadn’t said a word. Though, with John’s minimal shift speaking abilities, perhaps Greg had just misunderstood his questioning.

John started classes at the Baker Institute. He wasn’t going to kid himself; his timing had been absolutely rubbish—he was barely a sixth former anymore, but he still had to complete his A-levels and yet he had made the Change at the least opportune moment. His only consolation was that spring term had just started so it wasn’t taking too much effort to catch up with the Institute coursework and the teachers were more than accommodating.

Molly Hooper, the girl Greg introduced him to on his first day, was in his biology class and had chemistry just before John, so they spoke regularly in class, and in the short break between their chemistry classes. Molly had a certain lack of a way with words but she was as nice as a girl could be, and didn’t treat John any differently because of his late Change.

John noticed she was especially awkward after chemistry each day and it wasn’t until his third day of class that he found out why. Molly was so distracted coming out of chemistry that day that she almost passed right by John where he stood in front of an information table in the corridor. She seemed to be trying to engage a tall, dark haired boy in conversation—almost completely unsuccessfully.

“Molly?” he said when she passed him by.

Her head snapped around.

“Oh! John!” she said in surprise.

The boy’s head turned as well. John recognized him now. It was the student he ran on Greg’s tour. The way he looked at John now was strange—almost like he was surprised to see him there. His eyes focused sharply for a second, like he was assessing the shorter boy. Then he spun on his heel and continued down the hallway, leaving Molly looking a little lost.

“Ah… I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt,” John apologized.

Molly just looked down at the floor and smiled in her personal defence.

“Oh, no, it’s absolutely fine… he’s always like that… always,” she finished.

She didn’t meet John’s eyes but he could hear it in her voice—Molly had a crush, though, sadly an unrequited one apparently. For his own part, John gazed curiously down the hall but there was no sign of the boy anymore.

“That was Sherlock Holmes, right?” John asked.

Molly looked up quickly.
“You know Sherlock Holmes?” she asked.

“Not really. We just bumped into each other a few days ago when I was on my tour,” John explained.

“Oh… he’s my lab partner,” Molly said.

“Oh, yeah? Is he really as clever as Greg says?” John asked, interested in the validity of everything Greg said about the boy, but had thought it rude to ask.

Molly was just looking at him like he’d said something silly—Molly, the most docile person he’d ever met. Perhaps Greg wasn’t that much of a gossip after all.

“Yes… he’s that clever,” Molly said, as she was talking about something dangerous.

John didn’t know how exactly to respond to that.

About a week after John arrived at the Baker Institute he lay awake in his twin bed, staring sleeplessly at the ceiling. He hadn’t gone into the forest or shifted much at all in the past forty eight hours and now there was a twisting, tugging sensation just below his heart. He figured he might be able to shift in the room and try and sleep like that, and while that was the most comfortable way to sleep on any given night, right now the wolf in him wanted to run, to breathe fresh air.

That was how John ended up crossing the damp grass of the field between A Wing and the forest. He had pulled on a thick jumper but he still had his fisted hands stuffed firmly under his arms to ward off the cold.

John had to admit once again that it felt fantastic to shift into his wolf form. The experience of changing was like you had been tied up with restraints around your chest and then all of them just fell away at once. Once John stood on four legs, he took a moment to stretch, hard nails curling into the soft ground with pleasure. He shook his head once, moving his marker into the most comfortable place beneath his ruff. Then John started to run.

It wasn’t exactly a slow run but it was a leisurely pace for John’s fit, canine body. He could sustain it for hours if need be. This body was built for endurance. If only he could draw from that during rugby matches…

John ran and ran, reveling in the simplicity of speed and scent, but then he felt it—the tickle in his mind. He stopped suddenly, paws digging little ruts in the malleable earth.

Finally alone, John’s curiosity got the best of him and he wandered in the direction he thought the feeling came from. His nose worked madly. There was definitely something alive and breathing nearby.


John knew it was probably pointless to call with his shift-speech abilities, but he tried anyway. The smell was surely the scent of a Changeling.
<I can really hear you. I’ve been hearing you since you arrived… Fascination. And you can hear me, too…>

John spun in place, ears back and entire body snapping with tension. His muzzle pointed up a tree and he met a pair of steel blue eyes. They tilted, considering.

<Surprise. Even the direction is obvious to you, as if I spoke aloud.>

A multitude of vague, shadowed feelings flickered on the edge of John’s consciousness, all connected to the intense eyes above. Then, in a single fluid motion, the speaker dropped from the tree and landed on the soft ground.

<A panther…>

John thought it had been a private musing, but apparently not. The heavy black head rose up aristocratically.

<A melanistic leopard, actually. Panther is a dreadfully nonspecific term that is used to refer to many melanistic felines—jaguars, cougars, bobcats and even black wild cats, of which I am none.>

So a pretentious panther. John was fairly sure he’d kept that comment in his own head but the light narrowing of the Changeling’s eyes made him uncertain.

<If you care I’m a timber wolf,> John supplied.

<I know, Canis lupus lupus. Grey wolf, probably Eurasian by your size, and most likely of a central European persuasion from your colouring. Your name is John Watson.>

John’s ears twisted forward and his head jerked slightly back in surprise.

<What? I mean… yes, but how did you know that? Who I am, I mean.>

Not that John had been super secretive, but he’d kept a fairly low profile in his classes so far, and hadn’t told more than a few people what his shift was.

The panther rose up and began to circle him, making John feel a little uncomfortable, ears dropping back into a more defensive position.

<I told you that I have been hearing you. So I followed and have seen you in the forest. To start, the way you move in this place is still unsure. You use your own scent trail to get back to the field, plus your collar is brand new. So obviously you are a new student, and the way you move your head when you are smelling shows how unused to having such heightened senses you are, so you aren’t a transfer student but a new Changeling altogether, but your shift is fully mature. The only new Changeling on campus who would be old enough for their shift to look like yours is John Watson.>

John was about to reply when the panther flipped the direction of his contemplating circle, his left side now visible to John. If he hadn’t been a wolf with an inability to make such a noise, John may have gasped softly.

The full moon lit the forest well enough but even without the light it would have been hard to miss the raking black scars marring the panther’s beautiful pelt, all the way from his shoulder to his
stomach. On a human it would have run from a shoulder blade to all the way to a point between navel and hip.

It was clear that the panther had noticed his scrutiny and in response its ears flattened and its eyes narrowed for just a second before he abruptly switched directions again, hiding the scars from view. And then John’s mind was nearly assaulted.

<When did you injure your right knee?>

If the panther had been trying to distract him he had been wildly successful.

<Confusion. What?>

<Impatience. Your right knee, when did it get injured? I know it was from rugby but when did occur? Pride.>

John was floored.

<Seven months ago.>

The panther’s eyes closed and his head dipped to the side as if John’s answer had confirmed a theory.

<How could you possibly know that? Disbelief.>

<I’ve seen you around campus, was all he said at first but when John narrowed his eyes, the panther’s tail waved in apparent pleasure. <Your bag, you were wearing it over your left shoulder so it hung on the right, but you are left handed, so it would be more natural to have your bag on the side where you could more easily access it with your dominant hand, but no, it was on the right. This means that you most likely suffered a relatively recent injury to your dominant side, but you still completely favour your right hand. So, it was most likely a leg injury and you moved your bag to take the weight of your bag away from your injured leg. I also noticed you had a large number of rugby pins on that bag and with your build I would assume you play, not just a fan—probably play either hooker or scrum-half but since we started this conversation I am leaning towards scrum-half. Anyway, due to the fact that you play such a violent sport I would believe that your leg injury was most likely a knee injury. They have statistically high rates in contact sports. This is all confirmed by the fact that when you stand still you still habitually favour your left leg, rarely leaning on it. Even in your shifted form you do this, but you are totally unhindered when you walk or run, which tells me the injury is older and for the most part fully healed. It’s no longer causing you pain. From the amount of habits that were formed I would say that the injury was fairly serious ligament damage and considering the amount of time an injury like that takes to heal and the fact that the habits haven’t faded yet, I would guess the injury occurred at least five months ago but no more than nine. So in conclusion, rugby induced injury to the left knee occurring five to nine months ago.>

John knew that his mouth was parted. He leaned back on his haunches.

<Wow… that was… absolutely brilliant.>

The panther stopped and sat down abruptly, looking at John intently.
<So are you a scrum-half or hooker?>

John would have chuckled.

<Scrum-half, substitute hooker... at least I was. I’m trying out for Baker’s team tomorrow.>

The steel eyes warmed to pale blue.

<So... brilliant...? Really?>

John’s mouth curled into a wolfy smile and he looked out into the forest, away from the baffling creature.

<Definitely. Completely bloody brilliant.>

The mysterious Changeling paused and then stood suddenly. John held fast as the big cat thoroughly invaded his personal space. John’s ears were twisted forward as two clear blue eyes studied him through a sideways glance. He was close enough that all John would have to do was turn his head to stick his cold, wet nose into his fluffy, erect ear. John wondered idly how the jumpy cat would react. John met his eyes evenly.

<Hmm... interesting...>

Then the panther was gone, disappearing into the protection of the trees. It should have bothered John that he didn’t know who the strange Changeling was, or frustrated him that he had been too distracted to even remember to ask his name, but there would be time for that tomorrow. Right now John only felt the pulse against his mind. He could tell that the Changeling had tried to cover his feelings but when he had spoken it slipped through the gap. The panther had been flattered… flooded with prideful pleasure.

A wheezing noise and a little bark escaped John’s throat, the wolf equivalent of laughter.

So a pretentious, vain panther then.

Chapter End Notes

Art by anathemarmotqueen.tumblr.com
That night, once John made it back to his room, he spent even more time staring sleeplessly at the ceiling, imagining arctic eyes staring back. His sheets were tangled around his legs and his duvet was tossed aside. He’d pulled off his shirt a while ago. Why did they keep this place so hot? John kept glancing at the clock, ticking away the minutes, like a countdown until he wouldn’t have time to get enough sleep to be *functional* tomorrow, let alone make a rugby team.

Finally fed up, John hopped out of bed and shoved the window open as wide as it could go. The cold air hit him, making him shudder. He shed his pajama trousers and they fell to the floor, joining his discarded tee-shirt. Then he dropped from two legs to four and jumped back on the bed. He dug himself a little nest of blankets and collapsed; burying his nose under his pillow, thick fur protecting him from the chilling draft. John would find out who the panther was tomorrow. He’d ask Greg—Greg might know.

It wasn’t long before John finally lost consciousness and slipped into strange dreams of black cats, green woods and piercing eyes.

. . .

The next morning John felt much more rested than anyone who had slept so little had a right to. He sat, thinking, across the table from Greg, who also seemed fully awake and was focusing intently on shoveling as much bacon, eggs and toast down his throat as he possibly could. The dining hall was located on the first floor of A Wing and was relatively quiet, as most students were still asleep or too lazy to do more than grab a slice of toast on their way to classes.

For his part John was more focused on his tea than the mediocre breakfast that was provided by the school.

“Do you know anyone with a panther shift?” John asked, breaking into the sound of cutlery on plates.

Greg glanced up at him, pausing in his shoveling.

“A panther shift?”

John nodded and Greg cocked his head to the side and looked up as he chewed a mouthful of toast, obviously scanning his memory bank.

“I don’t think so,” he finally said. “What colour was its marker?”

“Wasn’t wearing one,” John said.

At that, Greg nodded and looked back to his food as if the mystery had been solved without John knowing it.
“Probably a Wanderer then,” he said around a mouthful of eggs. “It’s not uncommon for them to drift through Baker’s forest. They smell just like us so it wouldn’t be hard to mix it up.”

Greg tapped his nose as he said this and John knew what he meant. They were both canine shifts so identified many things by scent alone.

John had heard about Wanderers. They were Changelings who permanently shifted, and then did as their name implied—they wandered. As far as John knew, there was no rhyme or reason to it. A Changeling would get this fever, and then it would go away. They’d be fine, but in the next few days the Changeling would shift, wander into the wilderness and never return. Once it started it couldn’t be stopped. It was an accepted fact among Changelings.

John wasn’t sure if his panther fit into the stories he’d heard about Wanderers and he was about to ask more but was distracted.

“So you’re going to try out for Baker’s rugby team today, right?” Greg asked as he picked a powdered donut off his plate.

When John visited Dr. Mortimer the other day as the man had requested, the councillor had helped him connect with the rugby team—after he had been sure John was adjusting okay. Actually, they had both been surprised with how well John was getting along. It’s not that John had been unhappy with his old life—it had just been… nothing. Nothing ever happened to the Normal that was John Watson. It was almost like he’d been waiting for something, and now he knew what that something had been, at least a part of it. John was still looking for a true purpose of course, but it was like his Change was him finally receiving the first piece of that puzzle. He supposed he should be missing his family, and though it wasn’t like he was happy to be gone, it felt right. His parents hadn’t been distant but John had never been very emotionally or socially dependent on them. Plus, he was a sixth former, who had full well planned to go somewhere far away from his personal nothing-town—off to find himself as they said. He hadn’t expected or wanted the Change but it had inadvertently supplied John with many things he had wanted.

“Umm… yeah,” John replied, dropping out of his reverie. “At three.”

Greg bobbed his head and took another bite of his donut.

“Well, good luck,” Greg said, returning his focus to the last remnants of his breakfast.

John drained the last of his tea.

“Thanks, but let’s hope I don’t need it…”

At three o’clock on the dot, John found himself at the edge of the Institute’s practice pitch in his old training gear. As he approached, a big boy in Baker’s black and silvers came to meet him. He loped over and smiled easily as he came close.

“John Watson?” he asked and John nodded, returning the smile. “Bill Murray, not the actor.”

John laughed and took the offered hand, clasping back with equal strength, knowing now was the time to make a good impression.
When Bill took his hand back, he gave John a once over with his eyes, and he could easily see what Bill was thinking—he’d have to make sure he proved that size wasn’t all that mattered by the end of this tryout.

“So what positions do you play?” Bill asked him, at least having the tact not to comment on John’s lack of height verbally.

The question immediately brought up images from the forest, of the elusive panther and his seemingly psychic abilities. He gave the same answer.

“I played scrum-half and subbed for hooker more than once.”

“Yeah?” Bill asked, looking pleased. “Our scrum-half is graduating this year so let’s hope you turn out to be good enough to replace him!”

Bill was straightforward—honest. John liked that. He identified.

“Shift?” Bill asked.

“Hm?” John looked up. “Oh, Eurasian wolf. You?”

John didn’t miss the fact that he had used the word the panther had for his shift. Bill’s face lit up, though, and he clapped his hand down on John’s shoulder.

“Ah, brilliant! That’s what I like to hear. I wonder what other fierce things you are hiding inside, Watson. I’m an elk myself, and don’t make a rack joke, but yes, mine is quite nice.”

He winked and John couldn’t help but laugh, even if he did think him the worst perpetrator of inappropriate rack jokes.

John had no trouble noticing Bill’s excitement when he said he had a wolf shift. While there wasn’t a whole lot of scientific evidence on the subject, most Changelings believed there was a lot to be said about a person from their shift. John didn’t have enough personal experience in the area to have much of an opinion on the subject himself but he hadn’t seen any evidence against the generally accepted theory either.

“So ready to get started?”

“I don’t see any reason why not,” John said; all of John’s nervousness had been diffused by Bill’s relaxed personality and easy joking.

“Oy! Seb! Sebastian!” Bill called towards the group of blokes warming up on the pitch.

A taller boy with dark hair separated from the group and trotted over. He was well muscled and his eyes were sharp.

“What’s up, Bill?” the boy asked.

“This is John Watson. He’s our new potential scrum-half,” Bill explained. “John this is Seb Moran.”

His dark eyes ran up and down John as Bill’s had, sizing him up, quite literally. There was only a fraction of hesitation before Sebastian smiled and offered his hand.

“Nice to meet you. Is he any good?” Sebastian added to Bill.
“That’s for us to find out! Let’s get going.”

John’s tryout wasn’t so much a one on one evaluation as a trial practise. John ran drills with the team, Bill and Seb, as well as the coach, an eagle shift by the name of Hills, who watched him play and interact with the team. John pushed himself. His injury had forced him to stop playing for a while and he was worried he’d be too rusty but as always, a strange, hostile calm came over John when he was faced with the challenge of this brutal game.

By the end of practise John was bruised, sweaty, exhausted, and completely elated. Oh, how he’d missed this. Bill and Sebastian approached him. Everyone was still trying to catch their breath.

“How’d I do?” John huffed.

“Impressively, mate,” Seb smiled, his own chest rising and falling quickly.

“Fantastic,” Bill added. “Never seen someone so calm in the face of getting trampled. You’ve got hunter’s eyes is what you have, John Watson.”

John felt the back of his neck go even redder than it already was under the praise.

“So am I in?” John had to ask.

“’Course you’re in!” Bill said enthusiastically. “Practises are on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Don’t be late!”

Bill and Sebastian then turned and left John basking in the pleasure of making a team. It’s not that John had been particularly worried, but being chosen always felt brilliant.

. . .

John didn’t really have time to go into the forest on his own for the next few days. He had rugby and the first big essay for school to finish before Friday. The few times he had gone into the woods it was either with Greg or Mike and John saw no sign of the elusive panther. This nagged him more than he would have thought. John would have assumed the creature had moved on if not for the sporadic flicker at the edge of his mind.

Occasionally it was stronger than a flicker and very occasionally John would accidentally think aloud and the air would think back. John might comment on the brook, or on a certain flower and if he ever, ever said anything that was not the absolute truth there was inevitably a whisper of correction in his mind.

<That’s not actually the trillium’s flower. The parts that look like petals are actually bracts, specialized leaves with different pigmentation than the rest of the plant.>

Every time John had to try very hard not to bark out in laughter and he often failed. For a Changeling that was hiding from people he was rather noisy.
This was a tentative question from Mike when a wheezy bark slipped out unprompted. John was studied through the masked eyes of his raccoon shift.

‘It’s nothing,’ the message meant. The raccoon just shrugged his furry shoulders and they continued on. John’s eyes scanned the trees for a condescending presence.

Sherlock Holmes was a terrible student. One would expect him to be a perfect example of a brilliant pupil—he was quiet, and an absolute genius, but no, he was the absolute worst of students. If he thought the assignment or content of a class was valid or useful he would do his work, he might even pay attention in class if it was a lucky day for his teachers, but if Sherlock thought an assignment was pointless, or the topic was useless, you could kiss any hope of receiving coursework on it goodbye.

He always got top marks on the coursework he did do and on any exams he sat, which meant he never failed the course, but that only infuriated his teachers more because it validated his actions. Usually they wondered why he even bothered to continue courses at all. What his teachers and professors did not know was that ‘the hands that be’ had threatened to cut his access to cold Scotland Yard cases completely if he didn’t finish school—through university.

Currently the arrogant child sat at the back of a second year University bio-chem class. He’d long ago gained permission to take the university courses at Baker. He’d already read, absorbed, and stored all the information that the course had to offer, but taking it gave Sherlock access to uni labs and, even better, uni chemicals.

Now though, the professor was just droning on and on and Sherlock was so bored that he wanted to run his head through a wall. The only thing that stopped him from doing just that were the thoughts of his wolf—the anomaly that was John Watson. By event John was interesting. He was a late Change, a timing almost as rare as Sherlock’s own. Then, also by event, there was the shift-speech—they could speak as easily as if they were in human form—an open bond. Sherlock couldn’t mistake the symptoms; the diagnosis was easy. But those things only defined what John was, and who the young Changeling was… that was a whole other matter of an entirely more fascinating nature. His personality, the way he reacted to Sherlock, to life, was like nobody else he’d ever met. He was easily impressed but not easily won over; he was cautious but not easily startled, and he was smart—not a genius, not brilliant, but surely a cut above most of the dullards that Sherlock usually found it unbearable to interact with.

But John hadn’t been out to the woods alone in days, which certainly didn’t ease his mounting irritation. He’d only been out with those stupid friends of his and he’s been exhausted even then. Sherlock could tell. He felt that he barely had a hope of seeing him for a number of days more on top of the last three. So currently he was running on just the lightest slips of thoughts, which he was of course able to learn much from, but not nearly as much as he wanted. It was agonizing and
unfair.

Sherlock was distracted from his musing—pouting—by the sound of a door opening to his right. By now they were working on practise equations so the entry of one student shouldn’t have been noticed by the masses, but this student was Irene Adler, a young fox-shift with the Baker Institute firmly situated under her stiletto heel. Sherlock knew it was mostly because she regularly slept with professors, teachers and anyone else she needed something from. One would assume that information would have been valuable, that it would give Sherlock power over the woman if he ever had an interest, but it wouldn’t. Irene never hid her abilities or her methods and it rarely made them any less effective.

Now, Sherlock was certainly not friends with Irene Adler, but she was different from the majority of the population in that she was one of the few students at the Baker Institute who never hesitated to speak directly to him—whether his disapproval of this habit got through to her or not was another matter entirely.

The young woman swayed down the aisle, hips swinging confidently, as they always did. She approached the professor. She then leaned upon the desk and put on a highly convincing apologetic mask. It set Sherlock’s teeth on edge that he couldn’t help but feel a grudging admiration of the woman. He saw how she opened her eyes wide and leaned in close. She was speaking and as she did her hand moved forward and then… contact—just the lightest brush of fingers over knuckles, but it achieved the intended goal with graceful ease. It was amazing what contact could do. Even from his seat, Sherlock could see Dr. Ebert’s neck go red around his collar and he would bet money on noticeable pupil dilation. The man nodded and stuttered a few words and then Irene smiled. She reintroduced the touch—reward—and then she moved away.

Sherlock rolled his eyes and idly wrote an answer to a chemistry problem just for something to do.

“Needed an extension on a paper?” Sherlock couldn’t help but toss out as she passed.

He sighed internally. He was going to pay for his lack of self-control.

She stopped and smiled down at him. Three steps and she was leaning on his desk just as she had Dr. Ebert’s.

“I’m just so busy,” she said with a so-obviously-faked troubled expression that could only make Sherlock roll his eyes again and go back to his practise work, determined to ignore her.

Unfortunately he was wildly unsuccessful and his unbearable need to have the last word got the best of him.

“Your intellect is wasted on you,” he spat.

Irene only laughed, irritating him further as she leaned off his desk.

“Oh, quite the contrary,” she said, leaning in close to whisper in his ear. “I believe it is you who could learn a thing or two about application.”

Sherlock leaned away from her intrusion of his personal space, which was probably hypocritical but he really didn’t care.

Then she was gone, leaving Sherlock scowling and still definitely not pouting.
Four whole days passed before John was finally able to make it out to the woods alone. Coach Hills had been working him to the bone to get him back up to match standard. He was more out of shape than he had been in a long while, his knee having prevented him from playing for far too long—seven months he corrected himself, though he would be lying if he didn’t hear it in the panther’s voice. In direct response to all of this renewed athleticism, John was falling directly into bed as soon as he finished his coursework for the night and then he slept like the dead, but today there hadn’t been practise and he was itching for a run in the moonlight. He considered asking Greg to join him but he was secretly hoping to encounter the panther and he’d sensed the Changeling’s disapproval of his usual company whenever he’d inadvertently touched minds with him in the past few days.

John sprinted up the bank of the creek and reveled in the speed. There was mist hanging in the air and the tendrils threaded through his long guard hairs as he ran. There was really no comparison to the freedom he felt just going like this.

He kept his mind open, feeling for any trace of the panther. For a while there was nothing. Then, that familiar static struck him. He slowed gracefully, no longer surprised by the feeling.

Now where was that smug shadow?

John wandered through the mist, towards where he thought the spark had originated. It had been small though, and indistinct, which made it difficult to tell.

<Where are you?> he called into the night.

There was no distinct response.

<Challenge. Curiosity.>

For some reason John couldn’t put into words, John understood that the panther wanted to… test him. To see if John could find him? By voice? By smell? He couldn’t be sure.

<I know you can hear me.>

John wasn’t particularly in the mood for hunting a black leopard in the dark even if he probably could do so if he applied himself. So perhaps it was his instincts trying to help him avoid such a prospect that caused him to say what he said next.

<Oh, come on, now… This is ridiculous… Here kitty-kitty—>

<Indignation! Surprise. Disapproval.>

Then John heard something heavy drop to the damp forest floor only a dozen or so metres ahead of
him. He didn’t hesitate to trot towards it.

*I am a melantistic leopard. Not—a—kitty.* the panther said crossly as John came close enough to see him.

His claws dug into the loam and his strong shoulders were rolled back proudly and John smiled with his eyes. If he’d been human at the moment he may have giggled.

*Yes, yes, I’m sorry. My bad.*

The panther’s grey-blue eyes narrowed, skepticism flowing off him in waves. He seemed to decide to let it go when John began to walk again. He still felt too restless to sit still and, as he’d hoped, the panther followed him. John thought the panther was deliberately staying on his left, so only his unmarred, right side was visible to John.

John would notice this become a habit whenever they’d walk in this fashion in the coming weeks.

Currently, they padded forward in silence, but after no more than a minute before John spoke.

*Are you a Wanderer?* he asked.

The panther’s tail lashed and a light huff of a hiss slipped from his lungs.

*Of course not. Don’t be purposefully obtuse. If I was, how would we even be talking?*

John glanced back at the large creature. The fur on his shoulders stuck up in irritation at John’s apparently stupid question. John wondered, now and many times later, why the panther followed him at all if he so often annoyed him, but then… the world as a whole seemed to annoy the Changeling so perhaps it wasn’t a variable.

*Wanderers can’t talk?* John asked, ignoring the insult that had been paired with the rhetorical inquiry.

*Of course not. All Changelings know Wanderers are little more than true animals after their last shift. Some say brand new Wanderers may be able to convey something, but Wanderers are completely gone to the civilized world,* the panther quickly explained.

Since John arrived at the Baker Institute he realized just how little the general public understood about Changelings beyond the basic symptoms of their condition, and having been part of that ‘general public’ up until a few weeks ago, John’s knowledge was rather lacking. He thought he’d been taking his ignorance in good grace at least, and was attempting to abate it sooner rather than later. ‘Wait, what?’ was currently John Watson’s favourite phrase.

*Oh… so you must be a student then. You sound too young to be a teacher.*

John had the urge to just cut straight to the point and ask ‘who are you?’ but for some reason it felt like cheating.

*Brilliant deduction.*

The tone was dry and condescending and John had to resist the urge to swat the big cat upside the head with his tail.

*If you’re a student, then why don’t you wear a marker?* John asked, aware of the red leather
strap around his own neck.

They were approaching the creek again. John liked the creek and his aimless wanderings often aimed him there.

*The markers’ primary role after stopping primary students from going into the forest, whatever the school claims, is to stop Changelings who enjoy hunting in their shift forms from accidentally eating other Changelings who may be unable to shift-speak effectively enough to communicate that they aren’t food in the heat of the moment, but nobody is going to accidentally hunt a *leopard* in the British woodlands.*

*Fair enough. Amusement.*

John couldn’t help but believe that the lack of necessity was only part of the feline’s motivation for abstaining from the mandatory practice. John was sure there was some amount of vanity involved.

John glanced over his shoulder and in response the panther’s furry ears swivelled forward attentively. John smiled, as much as he possibly could in this form, and then something he never expected came to pass. The panther smiled, too, wholeheartedly. John wouldn’t have been able to tell anyone exactly how he knew, as it wasn’t as if the panther’s mouth moved at all—but perhaps it was the light shift in his eyes, the way they warmed from cloudy grey to blue, or maybe he just felt it on the edge of his mind, but whatever it was, the panther was smiling at John. It was new, and John liked it. There was more than cold brilliance and arrogant disdain in this Changeling then, John thought.

After that night John made a point of coming to the forest alone as often as he could. The panther wasn’t always there but much more often than not, the shadow would appear. He was highly fickle though and John quickly learned the rules of engagement.

Rule one, do not ask, talk about, or more than glance at the strange Changeling’s scars. Any encounter would immediately be aborted if John broke this rule. John had learned this the hard way on one occasion.

That evening the two Changelings were relaxing in a copse of thickly trunked trees when the panther seemed to forget himself and stretched luxuriously, left side completely in view, scars exposed. John couldn’t help it, he looked and before he even had a chance to realize his slip, as he often failed to keep his words properly inside his head where they belonged, the words escaped into the air.

*What are they from?*

It was hushed and tentative but he really hadn’t meant to ask. John wasn’t stupid and he knew better, as looking alone had the Changeling up a tree and refusing to come down more than once before. But he’d been so relaxed and the inquiry slipped into the open. It was too late, though. The skittish creature tensed and then stalked away, head low, until he reached the closest, densely leaved tree and climbed up and out of sight.

John apologized repeatedly, and even called him childish once, but nothing he said would convince the great cat to descend from his hidden perch that day.

Fortunately though, no matter what pitfall John fell into on any given night, with each new moon he seemed to be given a clean slate.

Rule two was more self-inflicted than laid upon him. John was not allowed to ask who the panther
was. It may have been John’s own rule but it still counted and seemed to be mutually agreed upon. The panther hadn’t asked who John was, but found out on his own, and John wouldn’t ask either. His eyes were always open though, in class, in the corridors, in the dining halls, for any sign that would give the Changeling away. But he found nothing. The panther was much better at this than John could expect and sometimes he wondered if the Changeling was even real at all, and not just some psychic phantom that appeared in Baker Forest.

And yet, each day John still looked. Every day John listened, and each day that passed, the part of his mind that was weighed down by the mystery of the sharp eyed panther grew a little larger.

Chapter End Notes

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Eyes

It was his eyes that gave him away in the end. Every logical clue John had tried to apply, trying to estimate his age, eavesdropping for that arrogant tone, the condescending sentence structure—he’d even tried to guess what his human form would look like, for all the good that did—all these attempts had been absolute failures, and in the end it was a pair of eyes that had ended the game.

This time it was John who didn’t see Molly as she came out of her chemistry class. He was checking over his chemistry homework. He heard the students coming out of class, and normally he would have begun to pick Molly out of the crowd, but he was second guessing his answer to question six, brow furrowed in concentration.

“John?” Molly’s voice cut into his stream of thought on oxidation reactions.

John looked up. Molly stood smiling in front of him. Her hair was down today and a yellow clip pulled her fringe away from her face. John noticed all this in the half second it took for him to begin to open his mouth to greet his friend and then to feel the greeting die in his throat as a tall shape moved behind her.

It was the boy he’d crashed into on his first day at the Baker Institute, the boy who looked at him strangely when he was waiting for Molly the other day—Sherlock Holmes. Maybe it was the way his dark brown hair shone like ebony in the fluorescent lighting, though John was pretty sure its true colour was a shade of brown, that snagged his attention or maybe it was the way his head twitched to the side when Molly said John’s name, but whatever it was, it caused John’s gaze to flick upwards for the second it took to lock eyes with a strangely familiar stare.

Like a flash bulb bursting in front of his eyes, John saw black fur across hunched shoulders, curved claws digging into tree bark, whiskers twitching in surprise.

They both seemed frozen for a moment. Sherlock recovered first and his eyes closed, releasing John before he turned away, school jacket flaring dramatically. It only brought another image of a tail swishing in agitation as an irritated feline made an exit.

“Ah—it’s him!” John’s throat finally unstuck.

John’s lips were parted lightly as his head mechanically tracked the Changeling all the way down the corridor and around a corner, seemingly the only part of John that wasn’t still mostly paralyzed. Then he was out of sight and John’s body caught up with his mind. He lurched forward suddenly.

“I... I’m sorry,” John tripped over an apology thrown in Molly’s direction and began moving down the corridor. “I’ll catch up with you later, Molly.”

The last comment was hastily tossed over his shoulder.

“Ah… ah, okay,” he heard Molly utter in confusion as he rushed away.

John was slowed by the large numbers of students that were now pouring out of every door in front of him, and the heavy chemistry book under his arm seemed to catch its corners on an inexplicable amount of knapsacks and messenger bags. John dodged a secondary student to turn down the small corridor he thought the Changeling had disappeared into.

At first John thought he’d been mistaken and the odd boy known as Sherlock Holmes had disappeared completely, but he judged the short length of the hallway and the very few doors that
marked its walls and decided that it was most reasonable to assume Holmes could have vanished into any one of them before John caught up. He hesitated now though, and in his pause he was ever more aware of the fact that he had just chased—still was chasing—a fellow student through Baker Hall. What was he doing? He should really be getting back to the chemistry room; classes would be starting soon.

Instead, John compromised. There was a study hall at the end of the corridor. It wouldn’t seem crazy to walk into a public study hall, so he would just check there and if he didn’t find what he was looking for there he would go straight back to class.

John was late for chemistry that day.

John stopped again in the doorway to the study hall, head up and scanning, heavy text book still under his arm. The students in the seats closest to the door looked up at him questioningly but they barely registered in John’s mind. John was about to give up when he finally saw him, tucked in a corner with his nose buried it a book at least twice as thick as John’s chemistry text.

John smiled and made a beeline for the back table. The curly haired Changeling didn’t look up when John came to a stop beside him. It may have been an off putting response to a stranger, but each terse action made by Sherlock only solidified John’s belief that Sherlock Holmes wasn’t a stranger at all.

“You’re the leopard, aren’t you?” John blurted when he was close.

Sherlock finally looked up at him. It made John think that if he’d tried a little harder he may have indeed been able to match the Changeling to his shift on looks. The cheekbones, the ice blue eyes, the intensity that shrouded him, now that John knew who he was, the two images became inseparable in his mind.

“ Took you long enough to figure it out,” he said dryly.

John only smiled wider.

“Well not all of us are psychic,” John teased.

In response, Sherlock let out an offended huff.

“I am not psychic. What I do is a science,” Sherlock spat.

“What kind of science?” John asked, honestly curious.

Sherlock’s disdain softened to a more subtle pride.

“The science of deduction,” he explained. “The science of noticing all the little details that everyone misses and understanding what they mean. I can tell a professor by the chalk on his collar or a primary teacher by the finger paint on her wrist. I can tell a business man from a con man by the cut of his suit and I can tell that you are a good student and don’t take any milk in your tea.”

John’s heart beat strongly—he was excited. Everything Sherlock said resonated with the already present reservoir of memories John had of the panther.

“How?” John asked, knowing he was meant to ask.

“Tea stains on your chemistry book. You study during your breakfast and occasionally spill tea on your book. The stains are too dark for tea with any milk in it, and the stains are at different levels of
aging, which means you’ve done this more than once—as you aren’t particularly clumsy, you must study at breakfast regularly. You’d have to have the book out a lot for it to get spilled on more than once.”

John thought his grin might split his face.

“Amazing,” John said, half at what he said, half at how he said it.

Sherlock’s eyebrows shot up in surprise and John’s mouth was open to say more when a bell rang. Passing period was over.

“Oh, bloody hell,” John swore. “I’m supposed to be in chemistry.”

John readjusted his bag on his shoulder and began to move away.

“We’ll talk later, okay?” he said, looking over his shoulder to make sure Sherlock knew he was serious.

Sherlock, who normally had the upper hand in any conversation, had the rug pulled out from under him by John’s relaxed words. Nobody had spoken to him like that in human form before, and without the shield of anonymity and mystery that his shifted form provided, his mind was adjusting much slower than he was used to. He nodded in response and John smiled again before turning away completely and rushing towards the door. Sherlock watched him go. Neither student noticed the raised eyebrows of their fellow Changelings.

John kept his eyes open for Sherlock Holmes for the rest of the day, but he didn’t see hide nor hair of the antisocial Changeling.

At dinner John made his apologies to Molly.

“I’m sorry about earlier, Molly,” John said over the clatter of cutlery.

She looked up and smiled after a second

“Oh, no, it’s okay,” she said, and she opened her mouth to continue but she was interrupted.

“What did you do to Molly?”

Two dinner trays clacked against the table as Greg and Mike joined John and Molly. Mike was still in his uniform but Greg had a sweater pulled on over his half unbuttoned school shirt, both sleeves pushed up.

“Yeah, what have you done this time?” Mike teased as he sat.

John hesitated for a moment but decided it couldn’t hurt to tell his friends. In the short meeting he had with Sherlock Holmes their game had ended. It was time to step out of the shadows of the forest.

“I found out who the panther shift is… and then I may have chased him down the hallway,” John giggled, knowing how absolutely ridiculous it must sound.
The reactions were about what one would expect from such a preposterous, unhelpful explanation. Molly just looked completely lost, and Greg’s eyebrows were threatening to disappear under his hairline.

“Wait… backup. What’s this about a panther?” Mike asked, fork of mashed potatoes hanging in the air.

“Good question!” Greg said and stabbed the air with his fork for punctuation. “You never really explained that.”

Molly just watched him with patient but poignant curiosity. John just shrugged.

“I met a panther shift in Baker Forest not long after I arrived here,” John explained, pushing some peas across his plate. “And then ran into him many more times after that. We talked and he was strange but…”

John shrugged once more, unsure how to put it into words.

“You spoke?” Mike asked.

“Well, shift speech,” John amended, even if he could speak to the panther far more extensively than any other shifted Changeling.

“So, who was it?” Molly finally spoke up, obviously enticed by the more mysterious aspect of John’s story.

John snagged a piece of roast pork with his fork and, without the bat of an eyelid, he responded to the question with an answer he saw no problem with.

“Sherlock Holmes.”

Simultaneously, Molly’s lips popped apart in surprise, Mike spluttered into his drink, and Greg nearly choked on steamed peas. John, oblivious as ever, continued to eat his dinner.

John awoke to the sound of his phone buzzing obnoxiously on his bedside table. He absently rolled over and groped in the general direction of the offending noise, smacking at it until it stopped. He then fisted his hands in his duvet and pulled it tightly around him. It was a Saturday and far too early to be disturbed.

Unfortunately, a peaceful morning was not in the cards for John, and he never slipped back into restful oblivion. After a moment or so, his phone buzzed again, cut out and then buzzed again, the way it did when he received texts in quick succession. With a grunt, John reached for his phone and opened his eyes, still sticky with sleep. He brought the phone up in front of his face to read the messages, but the light was too bright and he had to squeeze his eyes tightly shut and open them again a number of times before he could focus on any of the characters on the screen. The first text was from an unknown number.

Fancy a trip to London? Please come if convenient.-SH
Even John’s sleep addled brain was quick to work out just who SH must be. John thumbed the down button and the next message popped up on screen.

If inconvenient, come anyway.-SH

This should have irritated John, and if he still wasn’t so pleased about figuring out that the panther was none other than Sherlock Holmes, he may have been , but right now he just clicked the down button one last time, to the last unopened message.

There could be trouble.-SH

A sleepy bubble of laughter escaped John’s throat and he selected the reply option.

Why the hell not?

John hit send and rolled onto his back, drowsy smile still on his face.

He lay like that for a few moments before he worked up the motivation to pull himself from his bed. No sooner had his foot touched the floor than was there a swift rapping of knuckles on his door. John’s eyebrows furrowed and he quickly slid on his pajama bottoms and tripped towards the door. He cursed as he stubbed his toe on a hard backed text book.

When he finally reached the door he twisted the cold knob and wrenched it open. The sight he was met with made him blink blearily another few times.

Sherlock Holmes stood impatiently at his door, rocking back and forth from his heels to the balls of his feet. He wasn’t wearing his school uniform, as it was a Saturday. Instead he was wearing a long, trim, black coat that should have made someone his age look silly, but it suited him so well it was as if the coat was made for him. A blue scarf tucked around his neck drew John’s attention to his eyes, so familiar from his panther shift.

John stared in confusion as Sherlock took in John’s unprepared state, a small frown tugging at the corners of his mouth.

“Wh… what are you doing here?” John mumbled.

Sherlock just seemed more impatient.

“London. We have a train to catch. If we don’t hurry we’ll miss it.”

It was in that moment, standing in his open doorway, shirtless and lousy with sleep, with a demanding boy in a blue scarf determined to drag him to London without warning before eight o’clock on a Saturday morning, that John realized he may have gotten himself into something that was a bit more than he bargained for.

... 

Somehow John convinced Sherlock to wait for him in the dining hall for the five minutes he needed to get ready. John dragged himself over to his wardrobe, avoiding the clutter in his room that had gathered since he arrived at the Baker Institute. The dorm was no longer an empty room. It hadn’t taken long for John’s books to make their way into stacks in the corners and on the floor, or
for his rugby jersey to slouch over the back of his desk chair. John pulled a blue and white striped sweater and a pair of dark jeans out of his closet. He glanced out of his window at the lightening sky before he pulled a light hooded jacket on as well.

John had hoped to grab a cup of tea and at least a little something to eat, but the second he passed under the doorway on the first floor he was ushered out into the morning mist, without even a spare second to grab a piece of toast.

It wasn’t until John was sitting on a plush train seat, watching the countryside speed past, that he finally looked over at the young man across from him, who was currently fiddling with a smartphone, and he asked some key questions.

“So… where are we going?” John asked.

Irritated eyes glanced up at him.

“I told you, London,” he said shortly.

John gave him a tight, unimpressed grin—to be fair John had every right to be in a mood, as the boy had dragged him out of bed before eight on a Saturday.

“No, I—I mean why are we going to London?” John clarified.

John had to admit he probably would have agreed to this trip no matter what its purpose for the sheer fact that John loved London. It had been his intention to go to Uni there and perhaps never leave. Now that he thought about it, the latter part of this was still well within the scope of the future John saw for himself. London had always been there, somewhere ahead of him, and there it still was, a beacon in the dark unknown that was the path ahead.

At John’s revised question Sherlock gave him a small smirk. He carefully set his mobile on the arm of the seat.

“There’s this book.” Sherlock began, theatrically. “A very old, very rare book that was written by and about Changelings. A history, so to speak, it contains one of the most detailed firsthand accounts of the Hunts.”

Even John knew about the Changeling Hunts. It was taught in school along with all the other historic human atrocities—the witch burnings, the crusades, the holocaust… the hunts occurred during the Middle Ages. During this time Changelings were often tracked and killed like animals, burned on the basis of harboring demons in their flesh, and some were even captured and kept by nobles as ‘pets’ or in the Royal Menagerie. However, it was said that many Changelings became more than adept at hiding their natures, as well as their children’s, so it was never tied to bloodlines, and for this reason there were even a few remarkable nobles who were said to be Changelings, even at the height of the hunts. Still, it was not a good time to be a Changeling, no matter what class you belonged to.

“Up until a few months ago, this book was on display in Baker’s Library,” Sherlock continued. “Then it disappeared without a trace—well mostly. I was able to track the disappearance back to a third year university student, Tracy Williams, whose uncle just so happens to be a collector of rare books. It wasn’t so hard to figure out. The uncle, Canton Williams, lives in London.”

John just shook his head. He had been sure things like this didn’t happen in real life. Well, he’d been wrong about plenty of things before.

“So, where going to his place to…?” John prompted.
“To confirm my deductions,” Sherlock said simply.

Sherlock had gone back to doing god knows what on his iPhone, but he did glance up questioningly at John when he finished, to see his reaction perhaps.

“Allright,” was all John said.

“Yeah?”

“Mhmm…” John gave a nod and then turned back to the window.

There was a smile on his face, and out of the corner of his eye he thought he saw Sherlock smile, too.

Canton Williams lived in a nice flat in a large building. It wasn’t very old but it certainly wasn’t very modern, and still had a very classic feel to it. John followed behind Sherlock, hands stuffed in the pockets of his jacket.

“So… what are we going to do? Just knock on his door and hope he lets us in?” John asked.

“Don’t be stupid, John,” Sherlock said as he began to scan the name plates next to the intercom. “Williams is at work.”

“So what are we going to do?”

Sherlock didn’t miss a beat.

“We’re breaking in of course.”

Before John could begin to come up with an appropriate response, Sherlock made a pleased noise.

“Ah! Perfect!” he said and jabbed a button next to a handwritten nameplate.

There was a pause.

“Sherlock, what are you doing!?” John said a hushed but urgent whisper.

Sherlock shushed him and then turned back to the intercom as a young woman’s voice answered.

“Hello?”

“Hello, I—I’m so sorry to bother you,” Sherlock said, but his voice was strange. “I’m supposed to be looking after my uncle’s fish—they’re exotic, you see… and I—I seem to have locked the keys in his flat and if I can’t get in to feed them and check the water they could die and—and he lives right below you, and I was wondering if I could use your balcony to get to the fire escape…?”

Sherlock’s voice was utterly sincere—it even shook, and it seemed to raise an octave. It contradicted everything John had compiled on Sherlock Holmes, so to him it was obviously an act—the fact that John was regularly exposed directly to Sherlock’s pride an arrogance, via shift-speech, didn’t hurt his perception of the falsehood, but if he’d been a stranger he would have
believed every word. Apparently so did the lady in the flat above Canton Williams’

“Oh! Umm… yes, yes of course;” she said and there was a loud buzz as she opened the door for them.

“Oh, thank you, thank you so much;” Sherlock said before opening the door and motioning for John to join him.

“Yes…” he hissed when he got close enough to be sure.
Every curve in his posture, every line in his face, seemed to scream, ‘I was right.’ He beamed back at John and motioned for him to come take a look at the heavy tome.

It was obviously old, very, very old. Its pages were yellowed and stained. The brown leather cover was lightly damaged but all things considered it was in remarkable condition. Sherlock ever so gently opened the creaking cover to reveal the faded but stunningly detailed title page. *A History of the Shifted Souls* it read, but it was like a piece of art, with flowers blooming within the *a*, a rearing war horse in the *h*, a whole flock of birds within the *S* in ‘Souls’, the impossibly complex knotwork encompassing the whole piece… Even John, who would admit he had little affinity for the arts, could appreciate the extreme value in the bound pages.

“Wow…” John murmured.

They were both leaned over the priceless artifact, heads close.

“Oh, indeed,” Sherlock breathed.

John glanced up at the intense-eyed boy; his pale face was still flickering with elation.

“So what do we do now?” John smiled. “Call the police? Get the guy arrested?”

Sherlock leaned back and swung the backpack he’d brought off his shoulder.

“Oh of course not,” Sherlock said as he unbuckled his knapsack and pulled out a silk cloth and a thick linen towel. “We just broke into somebody’s house. Besides, arrests are boring.”

“So what then?” John asked.

“We’re going to steal it back, of course,” Sherlock said with a self satisfied smirk.

He draped the cloth over the book and then picked it up, deftly spinning it in his hands to fold the soft material over it entirely. John could only grin and shake his head as Sherlock wrapped the plush towel over the whole bundle before slipping it carefully into the rucksack.

“Oh of course…. Of course we are,” John said. “Did you know that you are a little bit insane?”

Sherlock looked up at him as his nimble fingers buckled the book inside the backpack. He smirked once more.

“Might I point out that you are also standing in a flat we both broke into?” Sherlock pointed out, and then eyed him carefully.


Sherlock took John on the scenic route back to the Euston Station as it was easy to tell that the new Changeling was infatuated with the city. He didn’t walk like an awestruck child or anything, quite the contrary in fact. John seemed to be more confident in his movements here than Sherlock had ever seen, shoulders rolled back, steps strong and sure. It was easy to conclude that John could be completely comfortable in the sprawling city. After all, he was striding down the streets of London, relaxed as you please, having just aided Sherlock in stealing an invaluable work of art.
from a very wealthy man’s home. The average person would be fidgeting, casting furtive glances over their shoulders, no matter how sure they were of their clean escape, but then the evidence all seemed to be pointing to the theory that John Watson was far less ordinary then his unassuming exterior and, until recently, absolutely boring, normal life, would have suggested.

“Jesus,” John’s voice cut into Sherlock’s lightning musings and he glanced back at his companion whose hand was clutched over their stomach. “I’m starving.”

They’d just robbed a man and John wanted to stop for a late lunch. Sherlock quirked his brow.

“What?” he prompted for more details.

John gave him that look that said Sherlock was asking an odd question. He was missing something. He passionately hated missing things, however rare the occurrence.

“I haven’t had a chance to have a bite to eat all day. You dragged me out to Oxenholme Station before I could get any breakfast; I’m famished,” John said.

Ah. Right. Normal people ate constantly. Terribly inconvenient. That was why Sherlock had broken that habit years ago. It had been a while since he’d been around anyone else long enough to be hampered by regular consumption of food.

“Oh, right,” Sherlock said and changed their course to aim them in the direction of an Italian place that he knew of nearby.

It wasn’t until John had taken the first bite of his mushroom ravioli that he gave Sherlock another questioning look.

“You aren’t going to order anything?” he asked.

“Digestion lessens blood flow to the brain and therefore slows it. I avoid the activity when there are more interesting things to do,” he finished.

John paused in his chewing as he absorbed this new information. Then he swallowed and looked back at his plate.

“So that’s why you’re so skinny,” was all he said before scooping up another piece of pasta and sticking it in his mouth.

Sherlock just smirked, and a small huff of air that almost could have been a laugh escaped his nostrils.

After their lunch they continued to wander in the general direction of the train station, in no rush as their train wasn’t due to depart until 5:30. Sherlock led them past a number of interesting locations that wouldn’t be part of your basic London tour and didn’t hesitate to supply John with any knowledge he had on the subjects. If Sherlock had been on his own he probably would have just switched their train to an earlier one. Breaking into Williams’ flat had taken far less time and effort than Sherlock had expected, but currently, Sherlock’s eagerness to get this book back and bask in the satisfaction was outweighed by his interest in this opportunity to add to his growing inventory of observations on John Watson.

By five the sun had begun to sink and draw ever closer to the hungry building tops, setting a dim orange glow over the city. John had his hands in his pockets but pulled out his mobile to check the time and then looked up at Sherlock.
“About time to get back, yeah?” he asked a little regretfully.

Sherlock checked his own watch as they passed a pair of poorly dressed teens.

“Mm, time to get back to the Institute,” Sherlock agreed and approved of John’s lingering look up at the buildings surrounding them—as if to say, ‘Farwell, but I’ll be back.’

Sherlock was not a supporter of sentimentality for the most part, but this was a connection he had to admit he shared.

He steered them down an alley that Sherlock knew would drop them out on the street where the station was located. It was there that Sherlock first heard the footsteps. John didn’t seem to be aware of them yet. It seemed, though, that they would be getting a bit more excitement from London before they had to go.

“Oh! Hey! You two!”

Oh, this was going to be positively enriching, Sherlock thought sarcastically, as he turned to face the owners of the inarticulate shouts that had been thrown in his and John’s direction.

It was the two teenagers they’d passed before entering the alleyway. While their clothes were indeed poorly chosen, they were clean and fairly new. So they were middle class at least, probably sixth formers—with delusions of street credit.

“Institute, did you say?” the taller of the two, the one whose voice had stopped them, said with a sneer.

So they’d heard Sherlock mention an Institute. That’s what this was going to be about.

“I… I believe so,” Sherlock said with mocking uncertainty and then turned to John, whose shoulders were a rigid line. “Was that what I said, John?”

“I believe you did…” John said without taking his eyes off the aggressive, would-be thugs. “But Sherlock…”

“Told you they were from one of those filthy mutt schools, innit!” the shorter boy snarled. “They’re mongrels.”

There were many colorful names the closed minded and bigoted had for Changelings, many of which Sherlock was sure they would hear before the end of this enlightening conversation.

“Oh, very solid conclusion,” Sherlock mocked. “And I take it you are idiots.”

“Sherlock,” John warned, but Sherlock ignored him.

“You shut the hell up!” the taller one snapped. “I won’t be talked down to by a son of a beastfucker.”

Vulgar. That particular slur came from the old belief that Changeling’s were a product of a woman lying with an animal. The belief was long discarded but it left some lovely little remnants.

“Well, I wish I didn’t have to talk to the son of dullards, but if your intelligence is anything to go by, then I guess we’ll both have to accommodate the disappointment,” Sherlock said scathingly.

Then something changed. He’d been wrong—he’d misjudged something. He’d deduced these teens were loud, bigoted, hateful, but not dangerous. But now there was—
“Sherlock,” John’s voice cut in a half second after Sherlock finished his insult.

Finally Sherlock looked at his schoolmate. John had somehow realized before him. In John’s eyes he saw what he missed, but it wasn’t fear there that tipped Sherlock off. It was an acute focus, and an absolute and solid calm settled over his features. His gaze was laser trained on the glinting, steel object in the shorter boy’s hand that had caused the complete shift in the atmosphere. Then, unfortunately, Sherlock’s observation was cut short as he looked away, for John had shouted for a clear reason.

Sherlock hadn’t stood still during his ill-conceived mocking of the Normals, so now he was a few steps in front of John and a few steps closer to the, now armed, teenagers and it was obvious who their target was. Adrenaline pumped through his veins and he knew his chances against two attackers, one armed, were bleak, but his odds went up dramatically when a compact figure moved past him at high speed. John.

It was all the distraction they needed. Sherlock felt another rush of chemicals flood his system, paired with an odd flutter in his chest that he couldn’t name when John collided with the young man who held a tiny spark of death in his inept fist. John was faster than that spark, though, and his hands closed around arms and clothes; a knife arced through the air, clattered to the ground. The unrecognizable tremble was replaced by a swoop of elation and Sherlock dodged a wide punch towards his gut by the bigger boy.

The sounds of scuffling reached his ears and he deduced that John was faring well against his opponent, and truly so was Sherlock, until he got cocky and risked another look to see how John was handling. He wanted to see if that sure, set clarity was still present. And it was, as was so much more. There was now a fierce euphoric current rushing just under the new Changeling’s skin.

Half a smile reached Sherlock’s face before he paid dearly for his own lack of focus. Another foot had woven between his two and there were harsh hands in his jacket and then he was approaching the ground very quickly. He threw out his hands and his left hit the pavement, hard, sending shooting streams of pain up through his arm.

“Aaah!!” Sherlock gasped involuntarily.

Sherlock didn’t miss the way John’s head snapped around, eyes wide, when he’d cried out. Sherlock returned his focus to his own attacker as he cradled his ruined arm to his chest. There was a smile on his mean face. So he was going to gloat, was he? Sherlock smirked and it was true that usually he knew lots of things others didn’t, but currently, he found a certain piece of exclusive knowledge particularly amusing—the knowledge that John wasn’t wasting any more time.

In the seconds the tall boy wasted gloating, there was the solid smack of a fist against flesh and then there was the sound of someone falling to the ground. Before the superior boy could react, a sure hand gripped his shoulder and spun him around roughly, so he was already off balance when knuckles collided explosively with his cheek. Another body fell to the ground and Sherlock looked up at John Watson, who was breathing heavily above him.

“All right?” John huffed in the short pause in the chaos.

Sherlock was about to respond when a bottle smashed a few meters away from them, sending broken glass flying.

“Oy! You punks better get out of here!” a slurring voice shouted from an open window. “I’ll call the police!”
John and Sherlock’s attackers were stirring and jarred into action by the crash. Sherlock saw the shorter one’s head snap up towards the sound and swear. So that one at least had priorities. By the time the second bottle hit the ground, everyone was scrambling. John grabbed Sherlock’s good hand and pulled him to his feet. There was a moment of intensity, and time slowed as the two opposing groups passed by each other, heading in opposite directions.

“Beastfuckers,” the taller one spat, and Sherlock snarled but kept moving.

Sherlock dutifully followed John down the alleyway. They stopped running as soon as they got to the main road and then they leaned up against the building, gasping for breath. Sherlock felt his heart thudding against his ribs and the pain in his wrist had been reduced to an almost pleasant sort of ache by the adrenaline coursing through his body. His knapsack was still safely hanging from his shoulders.

Sherlock glanced sideways towards his companion, who was in quite the same state. His hair was mussed, sticking up on one side, and his face was flushed. His chest rose and fell vigorously. His eyes were clear and bright. He looked absolutely and completely alive.

John noticed Sherlock’s scrutiny and looked over. There was a second where they held each other’s gazes and then, like waiting for the last grains of sand falling in an hour glass, they burst out laughing. John leaned forward, unable to catch his breath but smiling wide. Sherlock let his head fall back against the bricks and felt himself laugh wholeheartedly for the first time in as long as he could remember, and the sun continued to sink into the arms of London.
“It’s not broken, John. It’s just sprained,” Sherlock complained as John made another attempt to force Sherlock to let him look at his wrist.

“Look, even if it’s just sprained it still needs to be looked at and taken care of,” John said. “We need to stop and get a bandage and some ice. If you keep up like this you won’t be able to shift for days. You’ll have to take shift suppressors and I’ve heard they’re rather unpleasant.”

Even as a new Changeling, John was aware of how injuries affected Changelings. Their need to shift often was troublesome when it came to serious injuries. Tissue damage and minor wounds were usually unaffected by a shift and the same treatment could be applied in either form. However more serious injuries, broken bones and surgeries could be complicated by shifting between forms. In the past, Changelings would have to remain in their shifted form until the injuries were healed, sometimes for weeks or months. In the present day, however, modern medicine had overcome this problem and drugs that suppressed the shift urge could be taken after surgeries or if a Changeling experienced a severe bone break. They had side effects, though, and no Changeling enjoyed spending so much time stuck in human form.

Not for the first time, John realized that Sherlock was infuriatingly stubborn, but at John’s reminder of the possible consequences of not treating a sprain he slowed and glanced back, irritated.

“We’ll miss the train,” Sherlock said.

“No we won’t,” John said, determined. “It won’t take but a minute.”

Sherlock’s eyes narrowed skeptically.

“Fine,” he finally said.

Even though he’d agreed and let John run into a Tesco’s near the station and buy first aid supplies, he wouldn’t let John even look at his wrist until they were both comfortably seated on a moving, high-speed train. He tried to make Sherlock let him bind it but he kept dodging John’s hands. Because of this John had to endure a painful few moments of watching Sherlock struggle with an ace bandage on his own before he snapped with a heavy sigh.

“Give it here,” John said as he broke the seal in the two instant ice packs he’d procured. “Put your wrist between these for a few minutes while I sort out the mess you’ve made. And for the love of Christ stop moving it.”

Sherlock finally responded to the commanding tone with light surprise.

“You’re first aid trained,” Sherlock stated as he handed over the lightly tacky, tangled mass that was once a neatly rolled bandage.

He took the ice packs and Sherlock set one on his thigh, laid his wrist across it and pressed the other over it, effectively encasing it in the soothing cold.

“Yeah, I am. Learned in Scouts,” John said, remembering the smell of mountain air though his hazy human nose.

John began to untangle the wrappings and ignored Sherlock’s new wave of scrutiny.
“Most people forget any first aid training they learn almost immediately,” Sherlock said.

John had gotten most of the kinks out of the bandage and glanced up at the boy who was sitting in the seat across from him.

“Well, I never did. I like it. I’m good at it,” John said, somehow not coming off arrogantly. “My troop used to call me Dr. Watson, always patching them up. Here, let me see your wrist…”

John smiled fondly at the memories as he reached out to take Sherlock’s wrist. The Changeling flinched away in surprise but when John stayed steady he relented, offering his wrist forward hesitantly. It was now chilled, and John held it with a surprisingly warm and gentle grip for hands that had very recently knocked the bloody daylights out of a couple of blokes. Shadows of bruises already could be seen blooming on his knuckles.

“Dr. Watson…” Sherlock repeated as practiced hands began to firmly but delicately wrap the bandage around his inflamed wrist, unrolling the strip as he went.

“Mhmm,” John murmured as he wrapped. “Hopefully it’ll be more than just a nickname someday.”

John had faded out of the present, floating through both the past and future, and with his eyes focused on his task he didn’t see the contemplating gaze looking over him. There was a pause and then Sherlock turned and watched the horizon. John just smiled contentedly and continued to bind Sherlock’s sprained wrist.

. . .

The next day a very old book was found where it used to sit in the Baker Institute library. With it, there was a note from one Canton Williams apologizing for being a conniving wanker and taking such a nice book—in those exact words. When the gossip got back to John he had nearly spit his tea out onto the table. Sherlock had more of a sense of humour than John gave him credit for.

From that day forward Sherlock was no longer a lone shadow on campus. Now he was frequently accompanied by someone else, and that someone was known by the name John Watson. John was often awoken by demanding texts or knocks on his door, and though it was often with complaints and scowls, he somehow always found himself complying to the strange Changeling’s requests.

This was expertly highlighted one night a few days after the London Heist, as he secretly called it in his mind, while John was hunched over his chemistry book. He was about to give up and go to bed as the bright desk lamp was starting to exhaust his eyes, when he heard the buzz of his mobile. He looked away from a passage on precipitation reactions, and unlocked his mobile. The words on the screen made him sigh.

**Come to 631A-SH**

He should have gone to bed; he had rugby practice tomorrow, but even as he was thinking this he found himself rising from his chair and readjusting his jumper.

It didn’t take long to find 631A, as it was on his floor, but as John passed the second to last door on the right, 629A, Mike’s room, he began to smile. A few pieces of a puzzle fell into place. A comment from his first day at the Institute floated back to him.
Hope you have better luck with your next door neighbors than I have.

It was the first thing Mike ever said to him. He’d been complaining about a very specific next door neighbor.

Plays that violin at all hours of the night he does, and where do those explosions keep coming from…?

By the time his knuckles rapped on the door of 631A, John’s suspicions had progressed to near certainty.

“Come in,” a low voice drawled from within.

John turned the knob and opened the door. The room within obviously belonged to his genius friend. It was larger than any of the rooms John had seen in the dorms so far. It was unsurprising, though. John knew that students were allowed to switch rooms between the school years, so the older and longest Changed students often occupied the best rooms. Since Sherlock had been at the Institute since the age of five, it stood to reason he would have obtained such a large space. He’d also probably been in this room a while, as the space had been overrun by the Changeling.

There was a desk and a wardrobe, just like John’s, and while the small area around the wardrobe was meticulous, it was the only area that could in any way shape or form be called tidy. There were books strewn everywhere, some open, some stacked in apparently random piles. There was a microscope on the desk and a large number of test tubes and petri dishes accompanied it. The desk beneath had seen better days. It was burned, scratched, and blackened by what appeared to be chemical burns. There was a pocket knife stabbed through a letter into the pockmarked wood beside a stack of files, and there was a mini fridge under the desk that John rather strongly suspected didn’t contain anything remotely edible.

The walls weren’t spared from the clutter either. One wall was covered in photographs, articles and string. One had various foliage pinned to it with accompanying post-it notes documenting something John couldn’t decipher. Above the desk there was a small bird pinned up by its wings and John would have thought this the most morbid thing in the room if not for what appeared to be a human skull on the bedside table.

The room’s occupant currently lay stretched out on a deep, navy blue duvet, head propped up on an off-white pillow. One hand lay on his chest and the other, still wrapped to protect his sprained wrist, lay across his stomach. John would have thought him to be asleep if he hadn’t just been called in by him.

The bed wasn’t spared the clutter. There were a few books, a petri dish, and most notably a beautiful, polished violin, accompanied by a smooth bow, and a little block of rosin.

“You are the neighbor that drives poor Mike up the wall, aren’t you?” John said, barely holding back laughter.

“Playing the violin helps me think,” was all Sherlock said, utterly unapologetic.

John just shook his head and closed the door behind him.

“So, why did you call me over?” John asked. “It’s late.”

“Would you pass me that file from the top of the stack on the desk,” Sherlock said, one hand lifting up to receive the file.
Something throbbed dangerously in John’s tired mind as he processed the request.

“You… called me over… to hand you a file—that was on your desk,” John repeated it back slowly, making sure he wasn’t confused.

Sherlock opened one eye at John’s obviously irritated tone.

“I think I’ve figured out how Abigail James was poisoned. I need the file to make sure,” Sherlock defended.

John was still tied up in the fact that he’d come all the way down the hall for this.

“The file that’s on your desk… that you called me down to get at a quarter to one to fetch for you, from your desk that is not two meters from your bed, where you are currently,” John clarified once more.

Now both of Sherlock’s frustrated eyes were watching John.

“Yes…” he said, obviously not seeing a problem. “The Scotland Yard case file on Abigail James.”

John closed his eyes and tried to formulate a sentence that didn’t consist primarily of words his mother wouldn’t smack him for saying.

“I—you—Who is Abigail James?” was the question that finally made it out of his mouth.

Now, John was berating himself. That was hardly discouraging this sort of behavior, but John’s curiosity always got the best of him.

“Ms. James is a girl who was murdered 15 years ago. I believe I’ve figured out how. I could be sure if you would just hand me her file.”

This tone of voice would have had you believe that John was the one who was being unreasonable. He opened his mouth to spit an acidic response at the entitled boy but his jaw snapped shut and he stalked over to the desk and picked up the top file, labeled Abigail James, and then resisted the urge to chuck it at Sherlock. When it made it to his hands, he flipped it open and scanned for a few seconds before a satisfied smirk curved his pink lips.

“Brilliant…” he murmured.

He closed the file and grabbed his phone, thumbs tapping madly on the touch screen, eyes bright and focused. John realized he was no longer necessary and sighed tiredly, turning towards the door. He made it to close his hand around the cool doorknob before a voice stopped him.

“Don’t you want to hear how I figured it out?”

John couldn’t help the small smile that tugged the corners of his lips up at the tone in the clever Changeling’s voice, confusion mixed with a dash of disappointment. John let go of the doorknob and resigned himself to getting very little sleep that night.

The new shift in the social expectations of the Baker Institute did not go unnoticed. Surprised
double takes often followed the pair through the corridors or past the table where they sat for breakfast—John eating and Sherlock sipping a cup of tea. Usually the looks were merely curious or bewildered but sometimes they were less than friendly.

“You should really stay away from Sherlock Holmes,” a voice stopped John one evening as he rose from a table of friends and acquaintances when Sherlock entered the dining hall.

The voice belonged to Sally Donovan, a fellow member of the Campus Guard with Greg. Anderson also joined them today. John didn’t particularly like either of them, but they were friends of Greg’s so he always remained cordial.

“Why do you say that?” John said, pleased when his voice came out clear of barbs.

“He’s a freak,” Sally said, as if it was obvious. “Everybody knows that.”

“There’s just something off about him,” Anderson added before John could respond. “There’s something wrong with him.”

An image of deep, shiny black scars flashed though John’s mind and a surge of anger welled up in his gut.

“He won’t stay with you,” Sally said.

“Psychopaths don’t have friends,” Anderson added.

With that John decided they weren’t even worth his anger. The rest of John’s friends had become aware of the exchange and shifted awkwardly. Greg had frozen with a fork full of past half way to his open mouth.

“You know, I’ll take my chances,” was all John said before turning and striding purposefully across the hall to meet up with Sherlock.

“Something wrong?” Sherlock asked, noticing John’s tension when he came close.

At that his anger dissipated and he didn’t have to try hard to smile up at the dark haired student.

“It’s nothing,” John said.

John often went into the woods with Sherlock, their ease of communication making him an ideal companion, however, every once in a while John enjoyed going into the woods with Greg or even all alone, just so he could run free, without having to stop for the less enduring feline.

Normally, John would run at a quick but easy lope until the restlessness drained out of him, but this night the itch for speed crawled all over his fur. The night was unusually clear and John sprinted through the trees, paws throwing up clots of dirt and grass as his nails dug for purchase. Only when his overlarge lungs began to burn and his swollen tongue lolled out of his mouth to try and cool his overheated blood did he slow and let his heartbeat stop pounding so hard against his ribs.

John sniffed the night air to make sure he was heading back in the general direction of the school, as he had run further than he normally did and wasn’t particularly familiar with this part of Baker
Forest. It was through this nasal survey that John first became aware that he wasn’t alone under the trees.

John froze as the underbrush rustled ahead of him. Just in sight in the gloom, a small, lithe form slithered into view and then propped itself up on short hinds legs ahead of him. It was glossy and sleek. Sharp, slanted eyes glinted in the moonlight—a mink.

<Calm. Beneath your paws is a viper. It would be in your best interest if you would elect not to move, as one drop of his venom will kill you stone dead. Amusement.>

It was the voice of a woman, slow and sultry, and absolutely clear. That was the practiced shift-speech of a fully mature Changeling. Then John processed the meaning of the words. He was being threatened—and there was something in the way the mink said the words so smoothly, almost pleasant, as if she were offering him a cup of tea, that made John more than sure she wasn’t lying.

She wasn’t going to force John to just take her word for it, however. The leaves below John rustled and he didn’t dare look down when he felt a smooth strip of body slither up his hind leg and over his back until it coiled around his neck like a second marker. He didn’t move but it didn’t stop him from trying to question his captor.

<Irate. Confusion.>

If his question got through it was for the most part ignored. The mink dropped onto all fours.

<You’re to follow.>

Left with no other viable options, John padded after the slinking creature as she turned and led him into the forest. There was just silence for a good while as they passed under hovering moon. Unable to stay quiet in the tense situation, John attempted to question the unfamiliar Changeling again.


The mink gave him a strange look.

<My name?>

She interpreted the question correctly.

<Amusement…Anthea.>

She said it with an odd undertone, almost like she was telling a joke, and with an easy clarity, John realized she was probably lying to him. He didn’t bother trying to get her to give him any more information.

They reached the edge of a small but secluded clearing surrounded by brambles. There was a clear opening between the trees and the mink, who called herself Anthea, veered off to the side of it and perched on a stump where she proceeded to begin grooming herself. When John paused she looked up at him, waiting. When he still didn’t move he heard her voice in his mind.

<Deprecation. Well… go on then.>

Right then.
John felt small under her dismissive attitude. As he strode into the clearing he felt the viper slip from his neck and he relaxed, releasing some tension he didn’t realize he’d been fostering.

John slowed to a stop when he reached the center of the clearing, absolutely clueless as to what to expect now. This did not fall into the category of things John was conditioned to handle on your average night. Then a shape moved in the shadows. It was familiar and for a second John thought it was Sherlock, but as it moved out into the moonlight John could see the colors were all wrong. The shapes were a bit off, too. The head was heavier, the shoulders larger, and while Sherlock moved with a slinking arrogance, this creature moved with an all-consuming, aristocratic power.

It was a jaguar, John finally realized as he noticed the rosettes blooming on the golden pelt. The jaguar stopped and sat a few meters away, head held high and calculating.

<Please sit.>

A cool, commanding tone that John instinctively rebelled against met his mind. He remained standing.

<Alright then.,> the voice continued, seeming to accept that John had no intention of sitting. <I chose to meet with you today as it has come to my attention that you have been spending a certain amount of time with Sherlock Holmes.>

Sherlock? John thought. This was about Sherlock? Of course it was. This sort of insanity could only concern him. Obviously aware that John didn’t possess the skill to respond verbally, the jaguar continued.

<As I’m sure you know, Sherlock isn’t like most people you will meet in your lifetime and because of this I personally foster certain concerns about him.>

He certainly wasn’t, but why did this have anything to do with this clear-spoken Changeling?


Who are you? John had tried to ask.

<If you ask Sherlock, he would tell you that I am his archenemy. Truthfully, I am merely a worried party.>

Archenemy? Really? Normal people didn’t have archenemies. What had John gotten himself into this time?

<Because of this, and you recent… closeness, with Sherlock Holmes, I would be most grateful if you could… report to me on his statuses. You would be well compensated for your troubles.>

Was this man, Changeling, bribing him to spy on Sherlock? A rebellious fury flashed through
John’s veins and he felt his hackles rise aggressively.

<Shock! Indignation! Defiance!>

The jaguar’s eyes widened lightly at the strength of John’s response. While John was observing this, he felt the lightest, familiar flutter against his mind.

<Don’t think I don’t understand why you follow Sherlock Holmes. I can see it in the way you stand now. You are utterly at my mercy, you could die now, before you come of age, and you are not stupid. You know this, and yet, you not only show no fear, but you feel none—here in the face of danger,> he said, eyes narrowing and head tilting just a fraction to the side. <You will be a man of war, it’s there in your eyes. The danger, you love it, don’t you, John Watson?>

As interesting or concerning the Changeling’s assessment of him was, now John was distracted. There was another crackle, sparking faintly against his conscious.

<Sherlock!>

He tried to call quietly, hide it from the jaguar, but the creature could at least tell he’d called out.

<There’s no point. Your ability in the realm of shift-speech is limited at best. Nobody is close enough to hear you. Now back to point, you may love the danger, the adventure, but there are things you don’t know about Sherlock. There are things you should know. They shape him. Things that he will not even accept in himself…>

Even as John became much more acutely aware of the strange Changeling’s words a fizzle of pointed thought brushed against him. Despite the jaguar’s assurance, someone had heard him. Even so, John couldn’t help but pay mind to the turn the conversation had taken.

<There are dark parts of Sherlock, John. You may be able to handle the danger, the rush, but can you handle Sherlock himself? If you can’t then you must—>

The electricity was bouncing so forcefully against his brain now that John could barely focus. His gaze had wandered to the ground.

<The scars, John, do you know—>

John’s ears pricked forward in attention but the aristocratic Changeling never got a chance to finish as a splitting yowl cut the night.

<Mycroft!!!>

The jaguar’s head snapped around in the direction of the howl, out into the black forest, eyes wide. There wasn’t a two second pause before a panther flew like an arrow over the brambles and into the clearing. A heavy body touched down to the ground with a soft thud. The second he landed, he was hissing and spitting madly. John had never seen him react to anything so strongly before—let the beast in him free. All of his fur rose up, making him look twice as large as he truly was, his tail lashed and his bared fangs glinted in the moonlight.

<Sherlock! What the hell is going on?> John asked quickly.

<Sherlock!?> the jaguar said in surprise.
Sherlock glanced back at John, giving him a once over.

<Sherlock, there was this mink called Anthea and this viper—they could be here now. You have to be careful!>

The familiar voice resonated in his mind.

<It’s fine, John. Don’t worry.>

The shocked jaguar was looking from Sherlock to John and back again. Golden eyes were wide and analyzing.

<How did you find us? I made sure it was too far for you to track and far beyond your playmate’s shift-speaking abilities. How could you…>

Sherlock was stiff and frozen, eyes fierce and glaring at the jaguar. John swiveled his furry head back towards his friend.

<Sherlock, would you kindly tell me what the hell—>

<Shhh!>

The voice in his mind was accompanied by an involuntary glance in his direction. John head jerked back in surprise. Did Sherlock seriously just shush him? After all he’d gotten him into! John was preparing a biting response when he noticed the jaguar’s jaw had dropped slightly.

<Ohhh…>

The smooth voice whispered in his mind. Sherlock’s head whipped back in the direction of the Changeling he’d called Mycroft. Sherlock looked like an elastic band stretched to just before its snapping point—tight as a wire.

<So that’s how you found him. You could hear him. You have an open bond…>

Sherlock just snarled in response and John was absolutely lost. Mycroft only stood and continued.

<Sherlock, if this is true, don’t you see how important this could be? Don’t you know what that means? You can’t just erase it, Sherlock. It must—>

A snarling, hissing yowl cut the jaguar off. Sherlock’s tail lashed madly and John didn’t miss the way his claws extended into the earth.

<That’s none of your business! Leave now!>

The jaguar’s tail lashed once, giving away his agitation.

<Sherlock, you know it’s quite the contrary. Stop acting so childishly. You—>

Then Sherlock roared. John both head and felt it in his bones. Then the great beast went utterly still and John swore he could feel ice crystallizing on the borders of his consciousness.
<Now,> the voice commanded.

Mycroft’s eyes narrowed and there was tense silence for a moment.

<As you wish…>

The cool voice finally conceded, and then without another word he turned and slid back into the shadows.

There was absolutely no movement for a long while and John watched Sherlock watch the retreating Changeling disappear into the darkness. Finally John padded over to stand beside his frozen friend. He still hadn’t moved but some of his muscles were beginning to relax and John could feel his mind thawing.

<He said he was your archenemy…>

John said this quietly with some skepticism and Sherlock’s whiskers twitched in amusement and a little more tension drained out of them both. Sherlock huffed, a sound John recognized as a scoff, and turned in the opposite direction from where the jaguar had stalked off, passing John in the process. John turned to follow.

<He would say that…> Sherlock said as they passed the brambles.

John glanced over to the stump where the mink who was certainly not named Anthea had stopped to groom herself, but now there was nobody around.

<Well then, who is he actually?>

Without so much as a pause for dramatic effect, Sherlock stated quiet clearly:

<He’s my brother.>

In shock, John tripped over a fallen branch and narrowly avoided plowing his muzzle into the ground.

<He’s your what!?>

John nearly shouted.

He had to give them some credit, though. The Holmes brothers certainly knew how to make an impression.
In the aftermath of meeting Mycroft Holmes, John had tried to question Sherlock about what had happened that night in the forest—about the words that had caught his attention, the parts that had lightly concerned even the level headed John, but all Sherlock would say was that his brother was just ridiculously meddlesome—one had to be by nature if they ran the British government. John had been so distracted by getting Sherlock to explain that little comment that the younger Holmes brother effectively evaded John's real questions for another day.

When it got right down to it, John didn't try as hard as he could, or probably should, have considering the apparent gravity of Mycroft's 'warnings'. There were any number of reasons that could effectively explain this lapse in effort but John had a sneaking suspicion that it was truthfully due to the simple fact that John liked and trusted Sherlock and instinctively fostered less than pleasant feelings towards his elder brother—a fact that Sherlock himself delighted in. Whatever it was, the events and the questions raised that night quickly fell into the list of things that were not to be discussed. John would have to bide his time in this game.

Even with this hiccup, life began to pass more quickly at the Baker Institute. John no longer followed everything anyone told him with a clarifying question that gave away his inexperience in the world of Changelings. He no longer got lost while navigating the corridors of Baker Hall. A few of his socks had disappeared under his bed and a pen or two had slipped behind his desk. As much as any place had ever been, the Baker Institute had become his home.

People also stopped turning their heads when Sherlock entered a room less than alone. Nobody was surprised to see John Watson at Sherlock's side, even more, it was expected. Because of this, John was probably the only one truly surprised when Sherlock showed up at one of his rugby matches for the first time.

He'd been standing reviewing his opponents, aware of his teammates' attention on him. This was his play, his call, and it was brilliant, but then John's voice had cut out half way through shouting the direction for a play when he saw a familiar, dark haired shape on the sidelines wearing that long hemmed coat that Sherlock loved to wear on the weekends. His blue scarf was tied around his neck. They was too far away to be sure, but John swore he made eye contact as Sherlock stared at him levelly.

"Watson!" John heard Bill shout to get his attention.

John's attention whipped back to his teammates and their blue shirted opponents from the Alabaster Institute. While John didn't really have any focus to spare on his friend, he couldn't help but cast a few sidelong glances towards the edge of the pitch between plays.

After that day it was not an uncommon sight to see Sherlock in the spectators’ seats at rugby matches. He most definitely didn't come to all of them, and he often seemed to get bored in the middle and leave, but still, John developed a habit of scanning the stands for a blue scarf before each match.

When John asked why he came to matches Sherlock simply stated that he found the combination of physical trials and strategy coming together to form a pseudo-war experience stimulating.
"Basically… you like rugby?" John had asked, having become adept at translating Sherlockian into what he called normal-people-speak.

"I like rugby," Sherlock confirmed, dolling out one of his rare true smiles that had become much more common in the past months. John could only laugh in response at the simple admission.

The first word of the Wandering of Lucy Heart reached Sherlock in the stands of the Baker Institute's rugby pitch, as he sat in the middle of a crowd to watch one of John's rugby matches. Surprisingly enough, Sherlock hadn't lied to John when he said he liked rugby. He enjoyed the contest of strength juxtaposed to the surprisingly complex strategies employed by the players. What he hadn't told John was that there was another reason he came to the matches. It provided Sherlock with consistent access to studying John's unique response to pressure—that strange steely calm that was hidden under the soft, jumper covered exterior.

Plus, if Sherlock got bored of the game he could just observe the crowd and systematically deduce everything there was to be gleaned from that observation about the individuals. It was a good exercise.

Currently, Sherlock sat on a cold metal bench about halfway up the stands debating whether or not to stay through the second half of the match. It was early but still unusually chilly for a late spring morning. The mist clung to the pitch, so the players on the opposite side were lightly shrouded. Sherlock could still clearly pick out John where he crouched, ready in his black and silver jersey. He couldn't see his eyes from here but Sherlock knew the way they'd be shining clear and fierce. Sherlock could tell his shoulder was bothering him from where he succumbed to a hard tackle near the beginning of the game but he was hiding the weakness well. It was rather impressive. Baker Institute was so far ahead of their opponents that there was little or no chance of them making a comeback.

There were two girls sitting close together for warmth on the bench directly in front on him. He'd easily identified them as Talia Hansen and Sophia Tam when he'd sat down, two first year university students. He'd tuned them out a while ago, but his mind had of course been monitoring without his direction and alerted him when the conversation took a more interesting turn.

"I wonder how Sebastian is doing," Talia said to her friend, curly brown hair bobbing as she turned her head.

Her friend, who wore a red scarf, turned towards her with a look of confusion on her face.

"What?" Sophia asked. "What happened to Sebastian?"

Talia raised her eyebrows in surprise before ducking her head and speaking low. Sherlock was lucky he was right behind them or he may have missed the next words. He watched John push his full body weight into a scrum but his true focus was to the conversation passing between the girls in front of him.

"Didn't you hear?" she whispered. "Lucy Heart got the fever a few days back and hasn't been seen since yesterday. Sebastian was seeing her."

Sherlock took half a second to scroll through his memory to pick out everything he knew about the
name Lucy Heart. She was a first year university student as well. She was fairly popular, average intelligence, and had a snow leopard shift if he remembered correctly—which of course he did.

Then Sherlock moved on to the topic of the statement. There had been a wandering? 'The Fever' only ever meant that fever, the Wander Fever. It wasn't uncommon. Usually happened once or twice a year. Sherlock thought it was pointless to discuss the subject. When wanderers disappeared there was nothing to be done. It was just a fact of Changeling life, and it was supposed to be a good way to go. Life went on.

Sherlock tuned them out again and went back to watching the pitch. He stayed for another two plays before slipping out of the stands and making his exit.

... Sherlock didn't give the wandering a second thought until forty-eight hours later when he was walking through the corridors of Baker Hall towards the Grand Entryway, John following behind him.

"You know, just because you brought back an invaluable book from the dark ages doesn't mean you have the right to destroy any other book from the library," John's voice admonished from behind him.

Sherlock rolled his eyes.

"I'm not destroying them, John. I just need to check the effects that sulphuric acid has on the paper used by different printing companies," Sherlock corrected him.

John had his hands stuffed in the pockets of his uniform trousers, pushing back his jacket. Sherlock heard his schoolmate giggle.

"That sounds suspiciously like it might destroy them," John pointed out.

"In the name of science!" Sherlock defended as they turned into the Grand Entry, passing the start of the Wanderer's Wall.

All the Institutes in Great Britain had a wall like this one. It was a wall meant to remember and honor the 'truest' of Changelings—those who wandered. After the school was sure of the wandering, a picture of the student in human and shifted form, as well as a plaque, was put up in their honor, and the Institute hung their respective markers beneath it to symbolize their shedding of restraints and taking of freedom. It was a rather silly tradition in Sherlock's opinion. He didn't see the point.

"Yes, you are destroying books in the name of science," John's quip bringing his focus back to the present.

Sherlock shot a glare over his shoulder.

"Well turn me in then," Sherlock bated.

John didn't take it and just laughed, holding his hands up.
"I'll have nothing to do with it," John said. "If the school really kicks you out this time it'll be nobody's fault but your own. Don't expect me to cover for you."

It was strange, though. Despite John's words, Sherlock didn't hold a single doubt that if it came to such a situation, his companion would defend him without hesitation. He wondered when that had happened. When had he come to depend on another human being? He certainly hadn't meant to do that. Such things made Sherlock vulnerable, but somehow, in a relatively short amount of time, John Watson had simply sidestepped the defenses Sherlock had spent nearly his whole life creating, seemingly without a single pointed effort to do so. Yet here Sherlock was with an associate, someone who listened to his words and had heard his mind. He found himself desiring the Changeling's company, craving his praise and effortlessly tolerating his stupidity—that might sound like an insult to an outsider but considering Sherlock's less than savory views on the rest of the population, it was a winning endorsement. However, it was troubling. He should probably do something about it.

Mycroft's intervention had been a reality check for Sherlock. That night he lay pensively in bed and convinced himself that he should set a few boundaries for himself when it came to John Watson. It was only a matter of time until he slipped in a way he couldn't cover and he couldn't take back. But the next day John had made him tea and his pride told him he could handle it. He would be absolutely fine. Plus, Sherlock had found that his deductive abilities were greatly enhanced when he spoke aloud and even more when those words were responded to. Sherlock had come to the solid conclusion that the cost benefit balance was sound.

The two sixth formers passed Mr. Thatcher as he added a new member to the Wanderer's Wall. Sherlock was about to continue his banter with John when something flashed like a billboard in his mind, as things that others missed so often did. It was like a beacon. Something was off. What was it?

"Oh!" Sherlock said as it hit him like a mallet on a gong.

John dodged as Sherlock spun in place.

"Christ! Watch it, Sherlock," John chastised. "What is it?"

Sherlock merely ignored him and wove around him to approach Mr. Thatcher.

"This is Lucy Heart's memorial, yes?" Sherlock asked immediately, to draw the man's attention.

He recognized the smiling blonde as well as her exotic shift before Mr. Thatcher could have answered but let him do so anyway.

"Well, yes, why?" he asked.

John had followed him over and now watched with a confused set to his mouth. Why did everyone miss everything?

"Is that her marker?" Sherlock asked, ignoring Mr. Thatcher's question.

Sherlock nodded towards the hook he'd just hung a blue leather collar on. Mr. Thatcher's brow furrowed.

"Um… yes," he said.

Sherlock looked it over once more to be sure before responding. *Stupid!*
"No, it's not. That marker is brand new. It's never been worn before," Sherlock spat.

Mr. Thatcher looked taken aback and glanced at the marker and then back at Sherlock.

"Oh, well, yes. It's not the same one she had before. We couldn't find her marker with her things," he explained.

Odd. When wanderers go to make their final shift they usually bring their markers to the changing booth out of habit. It was said that they themselves don't even realized they will never shift back again until their final moments. So usually their markers are left with their shed clothing. If they were like Sherlock and neglected to wear any marker it was recovered from their dorms and then hung.

"You didn't find it in her dorm?" Sherlock asked as he didn't know if Lucy Heart had followed the rules or not.

Mr. Thatcher just looked more confused, as did John. Sherlock's impatience grew.

"Umm… no. They looked all through her room when they cleared it and it wasn't anywhere. We think she must have wandered with it. Doesn't really matter now, though, does it? She's free," Mr. Thatcher said solemnly, repeating a sentiment commonly voiced by older Changelings—freedom.

Sherlock thought it was all a rather silly and a pathetic defense mechanism used to deal with the loss. It was idealised until it became a positive thing, succumbing to the beast inside, or whatever it was that caused a Changeling to wander.

Having finished his duties and paying his respects, Mr. Thatcher excused himself, leaving Sherlock staring intensely at the memorial of Lucy Heart. After a moment of silence John finally spoke up.

"Sherlock, what's wrong?" he asked, taking a step closer.

Sherlock's gaze didn't waver.

"There's something off about this," he said. "Wanderer's never shift with their markers."

John shrugged.

"Maybe she just didn't wear one, like you, and lost it or something," John supplied, trying—and failing—to be helpful.

"No… that's not it," Sherlock said, breathing certainty. "There's something else. I don't know what it is yet but I'm going to find out."

John's eyebrows rose.

"What do you mean?"

Finally, Sherlock's lips curved into a slow smile as he looked into the frozen eyes of Lucy Heart, excitement prickling in his veins.

"John, I believe this could be something far more interesting than a simple wandering."
Unfortunately, not a single member of the faculty had agreed with Sherlock’s assessment of the situation. And after a week of watching Sherlock shout at people, from resident directors to professors to councilors, and then awkwardly apologizing for Sherlock's constant disrespect, which they took surprisingly well due to their experience with the Changeling, John was exhausted and Sherlock was buried deep in an absolute sulk-fest. None of the faculty thought the discrepancy was anything to be concerned about and instructed Sherlock to let it go—something he resisted vehemently.

The term was nearing an end and John had already turned in most of his coursework. Because of this, John was feeling particularly relaxed on a Friday evening as he read over a random medical text he'd found shoved into a corner of Sherlock's room. For his part, Sherlock glowered in silence after he'd been sent away by the primary school art teacher. John had no idea why he'd bothered to go to her, or what Mrs. Avery would have done if she had agreed with him but all he knew was that a good number of the primary students were now afraid of the 'mad Sherlock Holmes.' He was getting desperate, John guessed.

John wasn't sure what he believed but he just knew that Sherlock knew more on the subject than he did so, in the interest of diplomacy, had kept his personal thoughts on the subject quiet. He did feel genuinely bad for the young genius as he grew ever more frustrated with each dismissal.

John turned to a page on arrhythmias and glanced up as Sherlock bolted upright on his bed, snatching his violin from the foot of his bed. John sighed. This didn't bode well.

Sherlock was a very talented musician, which was not under contest, but how he chose to play was completely dependent upon his mood. And with the dark mood that currently possessed him, this was not going to pretty.

John was not disappointed—well, perhaps his ears were, but that was neither here nor there. He cringed as the first screeching notes blasted into the room. He tried to tune it out and continue to read, but this proved difficult as the raucous sounds pounded down his ear canals and bounced harshly against his ear drums.

John gave up entirely as Sherlock fired off into some bastardisation of a rapid number, notes flying off the strings in every which way, unharmonious and unpredictable.

This went on for three whole minutes before Sherlock paused, bow snapping away from the strings.

John who had been watching since he lost focus, smiled tightly, trying to bite back his irritation.

"Feel any better?" he asked.

Sherlock didn't even turn around.

"No," he spat and promptly threw himself back onto the bed.

John rolled his eyes. He stood and stretched.

"Come on, it's about time for dinner and you haven't eaten anything today… or yesterday, for that matter," John said.

For a moment John thought he was going to be ignored entirely, but with a frustrated scowl, Sherlock finally rolled over and plucked his school jacket off the floor.
"Fine."

"Great," John said with a smile.

Sherlock stalked after him.

"Fantastic," he said acerbically.

Little did either Changeling know that the mystery of Lucy Heart's wandering was about to plummet to near meaninglessness on their list of priorities.

John had been very lucky when it came to slip-shifting, the tendency for new Changelings to accidentally shift from human form. In young Changelings there was usually no provocation at all, though in lightly more experienced Changelings, a slip-shift could be brought on by an overly emotional event. When John arrived, Dr. Mortimer had warned him that Changeling's whose first shift was unusually old or young were often found somewhere on the extremes for slip-shifting tendencies. They either were particularly prone to it or exceptionally resilient against it. John thanked his lucky stars that it seemed he had fallen into the latter category.

John had only slip-shifted once since arriving at the Institute and it had been only a few weeks after he arrived, during a rugby practice. This was also a good fortune. He'd burst his uniform to shreds but that was easily replaceable and instead of knocking over any furniture in the vicinity he'd only knocked over a few blokes he'd been planning on knocking over anyway. This was far better than slip-shifting in a classroom.

When John realized what happened he first felt embarrassed, but before almost anyone could react properly, Bill Murray, who had already been rushing him, shouted wildly and proceeded to tackle him to the ground and pin him. John had flailed his paws in the air and growled playfully but Bill was a big boy and had John in an awkward angle for a quadruped. Then everyone was laughing, even John in his own barking, canine laugh. From there it was a simple matter of Bill handing him his spare change of clothes from his practice bag and John trotting over to the changing booths across the field. It could have been much worse.

From then on it hadn't happened and John cautiously hoped to keep that record, no matter how well the Institute was prepared for it.

However, the first time that John witnessed another person slip-shift was that Friday night in the dining hall.

John had quickly spotted his friends at a table next to the far wall upon entering the hall, and when he was sure he didn't see Donovan or Anderson anywhere near them, he led Sherlock over to join them. He figured Sherlock's mood couldn't get much worse so it wouldn't hurt to subject him the friends he seemed to have very little tolerance for, and it would give John some other people to talk to, as he doubted Sherlock would say a word through the length of this meal.

The first half of the dinner went as well as John had allowed himself to expect. Sherlock even was picking at a bowl of spaghetti, albeit rather sullenly from where he sat to John's left. John and Greg talked rugby and football, his sport of choice, and Molly and Mike pleasantly added to the conversation. They had become used to Sherlock joining them for meals sometimes and it didn't seem to bother them anymore that he very, very rarely contributed to the small talk.

There was a group of secondary school students at the table to the right of theirs. It was a large
group, probably seven or eight kids, and they were talking and laughing so loudly it took John a second to grasp the change in the cacophony.

There was an angry clatter as both plates and silverware crashed to the ground. A loud snarl ripped through the domestic sounds, unbecoming of humans. Then there was more clattering, but not just from the secondary student's table as it was rocked violently; there were sounds of falling dishes behind him, too, as he'd turned to his right instinctively to watch the chaos unfold.

John felt sorry for the boy who had just been a fairly average sized teen and now had exploded into a nearly fully mature and full sized, roaring lion, golden mane flaring out wildly. Confused and lost, it gave a short growl through an open mouth as his heavy head snapped from side to side trying to figure out what the hell had happened.

Soon, the chaos died down, as a slip-shift was not an uncommon occurrence, however momentarily unsettling it was.

John had risen a few inches out of his seat to see better and now turned to look behind him, wondering if he'd accidentally knocked something of Sherlock's off the table, causing the sounds he'd heard a moment ago.

When he turned, he indeed found all of Sherlock's dinnerware and food splattered across the floor, but it was not John who put it there, and what he saw now rocked the rules and guidelines of John's world.

Sherlock had fallen out of his seat, now nearly sitting on the floor and leaning all his weight on the wall. His eyes were wide and locked onto the unfortunate Changeling who had slip-shifted into a large beast. Sherlock's chest rose and fell rapidly, almost as if he was hyperventilating. Where his arms had pulled his school shirt taught against his chest, John could swear he could see Sherlock's heart trying to burst out of his chest. Even seeing all of these symptoms together it took John an oddly long time to come to the only conclusion that made sense—Sherlock looked absolutely terrified.

Something about the scenario just didn't add up. This was strange—it was wrong. But there the genius sat, hands fisted so tightly that his knuckles had gone white, mouth open and breathing raggedly. Almost of its own accord, as John's mind was still completely shocked, his body moved instinctively towards Sherlock. He lowered himself down but when Sherlock still made no indication that he saw anything other than the confused big cat being led out of the dining hall, he paused. His hand rose up and reached out.

"Sherlock…?" he finally prompted.

The response was instantaneous. His head whipped around to John's face then to John's outstretched hand and his eyes widened even more for just a second before he closed them and detonated.

"Don't touch me!" he shouted venomously and regained mobility, shoving John away.

He stood and hesitated, eyes locked on John, who was now sprawled out on his arse. He looked frightened once more. John rubbed his backside and Sherlock took a few steps back, head shaking in what seemed to be denial, and then, before John could recover, he turned and bolted, leaving John in a very confused, undignified heap on the floor.

In the aftermath of the secondary student's slip-shift, most people didn’t notice the small amount of chaos that had been caused by Sherlock Holmes. John's friends, however, could not be included in
that category. They looked as flabbergasted as John felt. Greg came over to help John up, offering his hand.

"Now, what the hell was that?" he asked, looking towards the door Sherlock had disappeared through.

John stared, too.

"I have… absolutely no idea," he breathed.

John didn't see Sherlock for the rest of the weekend. He tried knocking on his door and he tried texting but he didn't hear from, nor see, the Changeling once. It wasn't until Monday that John really started to worry though.

His habit of waiting for Molly, and then Sherlock, after chemistry had held fast through the term and today he was particularly eager for the bell to ring and the students to pour out. He'd looked for Sherlock that morning at breakfast and knocked on his door for three straight minutes to no avail. He had no idea what he'd done to make Sherlock so upset with him but he was tired of how it was driving him to distraction. He would corner Sherlock and make him explain why he was so angry with him—or at least why he'd acted the way he had.

While it was a brilliant plan in theory, it was destined to never come to fruition as Molly exited the classroom last, without John catching a single glimpse of Sherlock. Had he missed him? John thought, looking wildly down the hallway as Molly approached him.

"He wasn't in class," she said, clearly understanding what John was looking for.

John's head snapped back to meet her eyes.

"What?" he said.

Molly's fingers tightened around her text book.

"He wasn't there," she repeated. "I asked Lindsey and she said that he wasn't in Advanced Literature either."

John's brow furrowed and a troubled feeling settled over him. This wasn't right. Sherlock skipped classes regularly but usually it was because he was doing something more important, something he usually informed John of in great detail. And with the events of the last few days, a newer, more concerning picture was forming. John didn't know what it meant but it made his stomach twist uncomfortably. A foul taste persisted on his tongue until the bell that chimed the end of his chemistry class finally released him. By the time he made it through the doorway into the corridor, he wouldn't have been able to tell anyone what his teacher had taught that day.

John heaved his bag over his shoulder and with quick footsteps he made his way directly towards A Wing. His breathing had thickened by the time he reached the top of the sixth flight of stairs as he had taken them two at a time. He didn't bother taking the time to drop his school bag and instead passed straight by, bee-lining for 631A.

He didn't knock politely this time and instead banged his fist against the door solidly, aiming to startle. He heard something fall to the floor inside. Just what he'd wanted.

"Damnit, Sherlock! I know you're in there! Let me in!"
There was no response. John slammed his fist against the door once more, knowing he was making a little bit of a scene and not caring much at all.

"If you don't stop being a childish twat and open this door I'm going to break it," John shouted through the wood.

Whether or not John would have actually done so remains to be seen, as when he raised his fist to pound on the door once more, it swung open to reveal a very unhealthy, very angry Sherlock Holmes.

"What, John?! What?!" he shouted back.

He made to turn around and slam the door as he realized he'd breached his own defenses but John threw a hand out and caught it, pushing his way in. The door swung shut behind him and Sherlock stomped away. John let his school bag fall to the floor.

"Where the hell have you been?" John asked angrily.

Sherlock shot a glare over his shoulder as he made to go back to his bed where John suspected, by the look of it, he had been for the past three days. Sherlock looked a bit like hell now that John actually looked. His cheeks were pale and his eyes had dark, heavy rings beneath them.

Sherlock threw himself back onto the bed and curled into an unresponsive ball.

"I don't know what I did that was so terrible, to piss you off so badly, but I would highly appreciate if you could give me a sodding clue!" John shouted, his worry translating into anger somewhere along the way.

Sherlock twisted to glare venomously in his direction, the effect was lessened, though, when John saw he was shaking, very lightly trembling. He counted back the days before the slip-shift event to the last time he knew Sherlock had gone into the forest. Last Monday, he finally calculated. No wonder he looked like hell.

"Sherlock, when was the last time you Changed?" John asked, forcing his voice to calm slightly.

John knew that tremble was a side effect of repressing the shift instinct. It was unpleasant and never led to anything good. Sherlock's eyes narrowed and he rolled back over, blocking John out.

"None of your business!" he threw over his shoulder.

"Of course not! Of course it's not!" John shouted, utterly exasperated. "Why should it be?! I'm only your friend!"

At those words Sherlock rolled, off the bed and to his feet, face reddening. His stance was wide and would have been strong except for that damned shake that kept capturing John's attention. That wasn't good. Why was he doing this to himself? What was wrong?

"I don't have friends!" he hissed, the last word spit like it was disgusting.

That struck John somewhere he hadn't even though to defend. His eyes widened and he lost ground for a moment, but then he saw the way Sherlock was shaking like a leaf now and the way his chest rose and fell rapidly like it had the last evening they'd been together. Fear. Why did he keep forgetting that Sherlock was human, too? He could feel fear.

John sighed tiredly and took a step towards the person he'd moments ago thought to be a friend.
Maybe he'd been wrong. It didn't matter. He ignored the wounds for now, ignored how much it really did hurt.

"Look, let's get you out to the woods. You'll feel better after you Change," John said, reaching out.

Sherlock's eyes snapped open and he opened his mouth to protest, or shout, and began to jump backwards. Then something happened that nobody at the Baker Institute had ever witnessed, all in response to an outstretched hand.

The beast in Sherlock exploded. Maybe it was that he'd resisted changing for too long. Perhaps it was a defense mechanism in the face of feelings he'd forgotten how to cope with, but whatever it was Sherlock Holmes was slip-shifting.

It was over in a second. There were shredded clothes scattered about the room, barely noticeable in the preexisting clutter, and Sherlock stood on all fours, ribcage heaving and powerful jaw hanging open, head hung low.

John was speechless. His mouth was open, he knew, and he couldn't remember how to shut it. The panther stood frozen for a few moments and then, wide, shocked blue eyes narrowed, still staring at the floor, and a sound escaped the Changeling that, if it had come from anyone but Sherlock, could have been called a sob.

"Sherlock..." John breathed and the head snapped up to meet his eyes, muzzle wrinkled, exposing teeth in a way that wasn't aggressive but... sad.

The Changeling began to back slowly away but this time John knew he couldn't give in. In a daze he followed. The sounds of heavy, soft paws sliding backwards across the floor were matched by human footfalls, and they finally stopped as Sherlock had backed himself into the corner between his bed and nightstand. There he seemed to curl back and away from the approaching shape that was John. Finally close enough, John dropped to his knees, eyelevel with the panther's narrowed, fearful gaze.

He tried to speak but was still unable. Instead he reached out, and when Sherlock pulled his head back John forced himself not to flinch away. Sherlock's whiskers quivered and breath escaped through his open maw. Still John didn't stop. Not this time.

He hesitated for just a fraction of a second when he was no more than a hair's breadth away from touching Sherlock's dark ruff. Then, ever so gently, sliding forward, he slid his fingers deep into the midnight fur on Sherlock's neck. John heard him hiss and felt him tense, eyes locked on the place where his hand met fur.

Then the spell was broken and the panther shift seemed to collapse forward, forehead plowing into John's shoulder. He was heavy and John had to brace himself to stop them both from tumbling to the ground. He leaned back against the bed for support.

If they had both been in human form then it could have been a sort of hug, but in these forms it was an awkwardly comfortable half embrace, John inclining against the bed and Sherlock leaning his full weight into his shoulder, John's body and arms holding him up.

John didn't know how long they stayed like that. He still didn't have any of the answers he came for and really he no longer cared in the slightest. Sherlock was in pain and John didn't know why, but he didn't need to know why to know what he had to do to help.
All he was responsible for was making sure Sherlock didn't fall to the ground. That was all that mattered right now—as long as it took.

The light was draining out of the sky now. John could see that through the window, and his arm had fallen asleep hours ago. The heat of Sherlock's feline breath had created a damp patch on John's shirt that was hidden beneath the heavy, black head and still John didn't move. He wouldn't move. As darkness fell over the Institute John stayed, and Sherlock made no move to force him out.

Chapter End Notes

Art by annathemarmotqueen.tumblr.com
Scars

John woke late that night with a crick in his neck and a sore spot in his back from where he'd somehow managed to fall asleep sitting against the bed frame. He was freezing, arms limp at his sides. After a moment of sorting through his memories, and recalling exactly where he was and why he was there, he immediately, albeit groggily, lolled his head from side to side, trying to figure out where Sherlock was.

He wasn't far. The Changeling had slipped down and was now curled into a tight ball in the corner created by his bed and nightstand. He was still resting in the shape of a great cat and his black, sleek back mostly hid his head from view, but from the steady rise and fall of his ribcage, John could only assume he was asleep.

From where John sat he could just see the tapering tips of Sherlock's scars curling over his shoulder blade. They were black like the rest of his melanistic skin, but even masked by his midnight pelt, they were too large to go unnoticed. While John had never seen them himself, he knew they were present on the human body as well. Just beneath his clothes the scars disfigured his otherwise near flawless skin. They were old, those scars, that John could tell. They had grown larger as Sherlock had. He was so used to seeing them there, just lightly marring the black coat, that he usually overlooked them at this point. John overlooked so much these days.

Mycroft's words floated back to him. He knew he probably should have considered the elder Holmes' words with more care. Sherlock certainly provided him with no evidence to disprove anything Mycroft had claimed, in fact in some ways he continually supported his brothers concerns. John really didn't know a damned thing about Sherlock. He knew something about his personality, his moods, and his abilities, but other than what he'd heard through school gossip, Sherlock hadn't provided John with a single scrap of information.

Don't touch me!

The acid soaked words echoed around in his head. John could still see Sherlock's face in his mind. John's expectations had been clouding his perception of the event. He'd seen only vicious anger in Sherlock's face, but tonight had officially and completely shattered that delusion and left something much more awful in its place, because where John had once seen a cocktail of anger and fright was now an image of unquenchable terror—terror and something… broken.

Something had been broken. John had seen it in the eyes of the panther, when Sherlock pushed it too far and lost control. Something that was usually carefully guarded and shut away had escaped.

One of Sherlock's fluffy ears twitched in his sleep. John brought both of his hands up to rub his face sleepily. He sighed. He was way out of his depth.

But can you handle Sherlock, himself?

Was this what Mycroft had been talking about? The shadows that had allegedly shaped him? John didn't know, but his insides were finally settling. The wrongness he'd felt, guts twisting into knots, was gone now. This felt right in a way. So he wouldn't give up just yet. It was always a long game when it came to Sherlock, but he always played it out. He'd ask Sherlock tomorrow, about everything, and it would be okay, because, no matter what Sherlock thought or felt, they were friends.

John carefully rose to his feet, and as he moved away, a bushy tail that had wound around his ankle
loosened and then curled around Sherlock's coiled body.

The next morning John knocked on Sherlock's door, fully prepared to ask a multitude of questions and get at least one answer from the elusive genius, but then the door flew open and John was surprised and utterly derailed. Sherlock was in his school uniform, all of it, from the jacket to shined black shoes. He was even wearing his tie, red stripes indicating he was indeed still a sixth former. And then there was his face. He was smiling, and his eyes were wide and bright.

"Good morning, John!" he said animatedly. "Time for a bit of breakfast, don't you think? I'm starving!"

This was only getting stranger. Had John dreamt up the last few days? What the hell was going on? Before John even had a chance to respond, Sherlock was whipping past him into the hallway.

John opened his mouth to ask what Sherlock thought he was doing, but he was interrupted before he could start.

"What do you think about a nice cup of tea, John? Doesn't that sound absolutely lovely?" Sherlock asked him as he whisked down the hallway, leaving John with no choice but to follow.

No, no, no, this was ridiculous!

"Sh-Sherlock!" John stammered and his friend stopped abruptly, turning towards him with a winning smile.

"Yes, John?" he asked, high cheeks flushed.

John shook his head, lips lightly parted. Sherlock's eyes were open and waiting. John paused for a moment, letting his brain catch up. Sherlock had to know John would see through this strange show he was putting on. John wasn't stupid. He wasn't seriously going to just pretend the last seventy two hours hadn't happened.

But in that short pause John noticed something. There was something else behind the cheerful shine in Sherlock's eyes—absolute desperation. It was as clear in John's mind as when Sherlock spoke to him in Baker Forest.

Sherlock's eyes were begging him not to ask all the questions just waiting to jump off his tongue. John would have told anyone who said Sherlock possessed the ability to beg that they were a liar… but right now, just under the skin of pleasantries that were also ridiculously uncharacteristic, Sherlock's whole being begged one sentiment: Please. Please, don't ask, John, please...

So John did the only thing he could possibly do in such a situation.

"You're right," he said with a small smile. "Tea sounds brilliant."

Sherlock blinked once in surprise, faltering, before he smiled again, noticeably less forced. Then, together, the pair made their way down to the dining hall.
The last few days of spring term passed quickly. It was a flurry of last minute coursework, packing, and arrangements, though only about half of the population of the Institute was preparing to return to their families.

Unlike most boarding schools, Institutes were open all year round. This was for many reasons, but the two primary reasons were that the Institutes were much better equipped to handle the needs of young Changelings, which often made city living very difficult, especially for those with shifts of great size or any special needs. Because of this, the Institute highly recommended Changelings within a year or two of their first Change, depending on their age, stay on campus through the majority of the summer months.

The other reason was less discussed but equally—if not more—important. Sometimes Changelings were born into primarily Normal households, as John was. The recessive gene was frequently buried in a family's bloodline, but some families were not so accepting as John's. It wasn't as common these days, but it still happened, newly shifted Changelings being rejected by their Normal kin. It was a sad thing, but the Institute always made sure that those children had a welcoming home.

Other than the two large logistical reasons young Changelings stayed through the summer, many older Changelings also stayed for a multitude of reasons. The university students were often independent and worked in the nearby towns, and the sixth formers often chose to get summer jobs. For others the Institute was just home now.

Due to John's seemingly stable tendencies against slip-shifting and the ease at which he settled, he'd faced no opposition when he'd decided to return home at the end of term. His mother had been very persistent in her pursuit to have John home as soon as possible, at least for a visit. While he was looking forward to visiting his family—his mum and dad at least—he couldn't completely suppress the light reluctance as well as the worming discomfort that the thought of leaving inspired.

John wasn't in the dark about why either. Sherlock had seemed much better since Tuesday morning. He seemed to be eating more than normal, which was still less than anyone else, but it was something. He'd even turned in all his final coursework. He'd gone into the woods almost every day with John since then. They were both going more than normal. Sherlock, to make up for his self neglect and John, because he wanted to get as much time under the trees before being cooped up in a suburb for weeks.

Most people would have taken this as a good sign, and indeed it had made Sherlock look the healthiest John had seen him since he'd known him, but it wasn't the health of his body that worried John at the present. He'd catch little visions of it behind Sherlock's carefully constructed mask, and even more he couldn't help but feel it brushing against his mind when they were in the forest—a brokenemptiness, something wrong. Nor could he forget the way he looked on Monday, no matter how far away it seemed under the gaze of the sun. At night it felt far too real.

Then, before John could seem to get a handle on a single thing, he was locking his door, 614A, with a heavy duffle slung over his shoulder. He was worried he wouldn't catch most of his friends before he left. Molly had taken off the previous evening and said goodbye at dinner, and then he ran into Mike before he reached the sixth floor stairwell.

John found Greg in the cafeteria with Sally and Anderson, along with a few others. Greg hopped up from the bench seat and then came over to meet John. He and Mike both weren't going home right away. Sherlock was staying as well.

"You headed off, mate?" he asked as he approached.
"Yup, I'll be eating a home cooked mean before sundown," John said cheekily.

Sure enough a wistful look crossed Greg's face.

"I envy you," he said. "Bring leftovers when you come back."

John laughed and then an awkward twist hit his stomach as he prepared himself for what he wanted to say next.

"Ah, um, let me know if Sherlock does anything too crazy, will you?" John forced a chuckle, trying to play it off as a joke.

Greg pursed his lips and John realized he probably hadn't been very successful with his façade. Greg took it well.

"You'll be the first to know, mate," he smiled, and John inwardly sighed with relief.

John almost gave up on catching Sherlock before he left. He swallowed his distaste as he put his duffle in the back of the cab that would take him to Oxenholme Station.

"John?" the voice made his head turn, and he smiled.

Sherlock had obviously just come from the library as there were several thick volumes in his arms.

"You aren't going to destroy these ones are you?" John laughed softly.

Sherlock scowled lightly.

"I've told you, I didn't destroy the others. I even returned them," Sherlock defended himself.

John just giggled.

"Sherlock, they all had numerous pages missing, pages you poured acid on if I recall," John laughed, but then sobered. "The cabbie is waiting…"

John nodded up towards the driver's side of the cab.

"Of course," Sherlock said, stepping back so John could get around the bumper.

"Don't get into too much trouble without me, okay?" John said, trying not to sound legitimately worried. "And let me know if you figure out that double homicide."

Huh, John wouldn't have seen those words falling casually from his mouth six months ago. So much had changed.

Sherlock nodded and John hesitated for just a moment before he climbed into the cab. He leaned back in his seat and felt the engine come alive beneath him. As he began to roll away he risked a glance back to see Sherlock still standing there, looking thin and fragile in front of Baker Hall, and John fought very hard the instinct that said things were about to shift irreversibly once more.
Sherlock had fallen asleep sometime just before sunrise. There were many reasons why Sherlock
normally avoided sleep. He would tell people the chief reason for his blood pact with insomnia
was that he found sleep an utterly dull waste of time—which was completely true, however, it was
not the reason the habit began. It had started as a way to avoid the nightmares. Even as a child his
mind could figure out nothing was hiding in the dark, while he was awake, but when he slept, his
own mind turned against him. The only thing that could beat him. He mostly grew out of the
nightmares. They'd faded, but then there would be a trigger, and they would return with a harsh
vengeance—as they did now.

Sherlock was in his childhood bedroom, with a tiny body to match, same striped pajamas he grew
out of so quickly. But it wasn't quite his bedroom… it was arranged like it, the little four post bed,
the large stuffed cat in the corner, what his mother had thought to be a befitting gift, given the
Holmes' feline tendencies, but there were no walls, just a shadowed forest. The dark trees and
bushes spread in all directions and there was nothing but night above and earth below. For
someone so utterly logical, his brain came up with some rather creative settings.

Then he heard a growl and his heart stuttered in his tiny chest before restarting and madly trying to
escape his ribcage. Chemicals were amazing. It was all chemical—the fear rushing through his too
small body. No matter how many times he repeated that simple fact… even when he was this
small, he was always astonished when it didn't make him any less terrified.

The brain releases Epinephrine… Norepinephrine… The pituitary gland releases Corticotropin-
releasing factor… Adrenocorticotropic hormone… They all work to trigger dozens of other
hormones… this creates the emotional response known as fear… The brain releases Epinephrine…

He repeated it over and over but his heart still pounded and his tiny hands still shook.

A branch snapped somewhere behind him and he turned, wanting so badly to run to his bed and
bury himself beneath the blankets, but he was frozen and unable to move an inch.

It was so dark. Why was it so dark?! No moon looked down, it couldn't see him. It never saw.

There was that growl again, part man part beast.

He had had to escape. He had to protect himself—somehow—someway. He had to change. Stop
this. Stop it!

Then he was no longer a child but a cub, paws too big for his body and claws too small to do
anything. No, it was never enough to stop it but sometimes it slowed it. He was shaking so hard on
his short bowed legs, tail curled around him.

It was close now. Sherlock could hear the breathing, harsh and rough. Cold, horrible eyes glinted
in the freezing starlight. The ripping growls were so loud now, consuming. Sherlock was aware he
was mewling pathetically, a sad sound only befitting of the helpless cub he was… so helpless. Why
did no one save him?

The snarling was eating at his insides and the monster was so close now.

Nobody could stop this.

Nobody could save him.

He curled in on himself.

<Come now, that's enough!> the beast snarled impatiently.
Sherlock knew what was expected but he just couldn't move.

<Look at me!>

He tried, but he couldn't.

There was a violent roar and finally Sherlock's head snapped up but it was too late. A blood golden haze consumed him. There were flashing eyes, sharp teeth, razor claws raised, and then pain.

<NO…!> cried the voice of a cub, sad snarl hitting the air in time.

Sherlock gasped awake, back arching against fabricated pain that was now long gone. He was shivering and sweaty. Of its own accord his hand came up to clench over his ribcage where he could feel the raised knotted tissue even through his now damp and wrinkled button up. His face contorted before he forced his muscles to relax completely. Then he lay still.

He would have been content to stay like that, a statue, for the rest of the day, if not for the knock on his door a few hours later. It was dark in the room but Sherlock could see it was still completely light outside. Sherlock fully planned to ignore the knock but the knob turned and Sherlock cursed internally for two reasons. First, for forgetting to lock the bloody door and second, according to a nanosecond's deduction, based upon the fact that Sherlock only knew two people who would barge into his room, and one of those two people was at his family home very far away from the prodigious Baker Institute, the only person who could be walking into his room now was…

"Hello, my dear brother."

Sherlock rolled his eyes and flipped onto his side so he wouldn't have to look at his pretentious kin. Unfortunately, he hadn't plugged his ears.

"I didn't come here to start a fight with you, Sherlock," Mycroft said, something far worse than inflammatory in his voice. "I heard about what happened just before the end of term."

The words hung in the air and Sherlock determinedly didn't respond. He could picture Mycroft, though, gazing down at him with that absolutely hateful mix of pity, irritation and guilt. So much for not seeing him—he remembered it clearly enough.

"He's not stupid, Sherlock. He's already guessing. What you have with young Mr. Watson... if you remain in his presence you have to know it's inevitable that you won't be able to hide it forever. It's simply not feasible. And, Sherlock, would it really be so bad if he knew…?"

Sherlock stared at the wall and tried to pretend he was somewhere else but logic was getting in the way. Yes! It would be so bad he wanted to say. But for some reason he couldn't.

"I believe you are unable to do what's best… what you want," Mycroft's voice was hardening. "I'm going to see him today. I came here because I thought you might want to know."

He should be moving, reacting, shouting, but he didn't. He lay there paralyzed as he heard that bloody umbrella his brother seemed to carry everywhere click against the floor, and as he heard footsteps—the turn of a knob, the squeak of the hinges, a door closing—and still he wasn't moving.

Did Mycroft just ask Sherlock his permission to... to...

With a sudden intake of breath, Sherlock bolted upright, hands fisting in the bed clothes, as a more important question struck him.

Had he just given him that permission?!
A little part of him wanted to chase after Mycroft, demand, \textit{beg}, that he stop. He felt sick as he thought of John's face, and then that face marred with disgust. He would leave, most likely. In his place Sherlock might. Maybe that was better—after all. He was used to being alone. Alone was safe.

Sherlock pulled the old numbness in, let it drown him. He sat against the wall, drew his knees up and slowly laid his cheek upon them. His blue eyes were open but empty.

It was for the best...

Two weeks after he arrived home, John lay on his back on his simple bed in his old room. The room was small, as their home was situated behind and above his mother's bakery. John didn't mind as it meant he was just a stairway away from town, which had been quite an asset over the years.

He could faintly hear the chime of the bell on the door that said someone was entering the shop. John wondered when his father would be home.

His father had been both a military man and a doctor. This had influenced many of John's life goals and all of his values. He'd been a successful surgeon in London, after the army, when he met John's mother. They moved out of the city when they decided to have children, thus allowing his mum to pursue her dream of owning a bakery. His father now worked as a family practitioner in town and when John asked him if he missed the excitement he said he didn't usually, and was glad to have put a little distance between himself and the reaper, as they'd become disturbingly close of the years.

However, there was something in the lines of his face when he said it that made John suspected that if he didn't miss it he at least remembered it fondly.

"So, do I have to take you on walks now?"

John hadn't bothered to unpack properly so his things were scattered around his room in a way that was seriously irking his father. Harry Watson currently leaned against his open door, eyes locked onto John's marker hanging from his desk chair. John didn't know why he'd brought it, an accident really, as he obviously wouldn't need it.

"I can walk myself, thank you very much," John said, tone sour.

Harry just laughed and secretly John had to admit it had sounded better in his head. Determined not to give Harry any more satisfaction, John reached for his mobile and checked his inbox, ignoring her.

"Still texting your boyfriend?"

Dear \textit{god}, she was insufferable.

Since John had arrived back, his parents had, of course, wanted to hear all about his first term at Baker. Due to the sheer amount of time he and Sherlock spent together it was inevitable that he came up often in conversation. Harry had noticed, and since had latched on to the boyfriend joke,
not that it was meant as an insult exactly—obviously, as Harry was as gay as they come—but it got under John's skin to have to correct her and it was wearing on him. It was particularly annoying this time because she'd been right.

Not about the boyfriend part, but the Sherlock part was correct. Sherlock had texted him a lot since he'd been home. Usually they were a simple statement of boredom, to which John had taken to looking up obscure riddles on the internet and sending them to Sherlock to see how long it would take him to solve them—usually no time at all. Sherlock also texted him if he figured out one of the Scotland Yard files, or finished an experiment. He'd solved two cases and a number of experiments since John had been home. However, John hadn't heard from Sherlock once today and that strange instinct was pricking at his mind again.

He was really in no mood to handle Harry's instigating.

Without a word he rolled off his bed and grabbed his jacket.

"Where are you going?" Harry asked, as he donned the garment.

"For a walk," John said shortly.

Before she could figure out another way to bait him, John stepped around her hand headed for the stairs, not for the first time wishing it was Baker Forest he was headed towards.

His mother was busy with a customer so John's slipped out without a word. The roads weren't very busy at this time of evening and the silvered sky was just dimming as the sun started to sink. John turned right, heading past Mrs. Harrison's flower shop. There weren't many other people walking around on the sidewalks and there was a strange quiet about.

A car drove by and then John saw a man standing on the street corner ahead of him. He was tall, well dressed, and looked more than out of place in John's sleepy town. One foot was crossed over the other and balanced on the toe of his shoe. He leaned on a black umbrella, though the sky showed no signs of rain. He was watching him, the young Changeling realized. It was a little unsettling, almost like he was waiting for him, and John tried to ignore it at first but he realized there was something distinctly familiar about the unfitting man.

He glanced up to meet the level gaze and they weren't so far away from one another now, and with an uncomfortable certainty, John suddenly had no doubt about the identity of the strange man.

"Mycroft," he said as he came to a stop in front of him, almost like he knew he was coming.

The man's lips twitched.

"Very good, John. I didn't expect you to recognize me in this form," he said conversationally.

John wasn't having it. People who ran the entirety of the British Government didn't just drop by to chat with teenagers.

"Why are you here? Is Sherlock okay?" John asked tersely.

Mycroft immediately dropped the pretense of pleasantries.

"Would you come inside?" Mycroft asked, nodding towards the tiny café on the corner—it looked closed.

John stiffened and glanced towards the ground.
"What? No viper this time?" John asked bitterly.

To his credit, Mycroft did look at least slightly chagrined.

"I misjudged your character and I do not believe it is necessary," he said, notably excluding an apology. "This, however, is indeed about my brother. So, if you would…"

His head inclined towards the café once more and an internal war raged inside John as he knew intuitively what Mycroft's intentions must be. He tired futilely to balance his irritation and mistrust in Mycroft, and his desperation to know the truth and his compromised loyalty. He decided the last was the most important.

"No, I… it's not for you to say," John said, staring at the sidewalk and loathing his parents for raising him with such high moral standards. "I can't just… let you do this behind his back. If he doesn't want me to know…"

Mycroft folded his hands over the handle of his umbrella.

"Very noble, John Watson, but are you sure that's the truth of the matter?" Mycroft asked archly. "Are you sure it's not that he doesn't want you to know, but that he can't bring himself to tell you?"

John rocked back on his heels and brought up all the memories of Sherlock. His denial of questions, his begging eyes, and then a thought occurred to John that he hadn't entertained before. Perhaps when he'd begged it wasn't a plea of, 'Please, don't ask because I don't want you to know' but, 'Please, don't ask because I cannot tell you.'

While the thought was intriguing it wasn't enough to shake John's misgivings.

"Why wouldn't he just tell me?"

"You are not an idiot, John. Don't pretend you are completely blind to Sherlock's circumstances."

John's chest puffed out defensively at that, though the barb went straight to his heart where his terrible suspicions had bloomed.

"How could you possibly know that he wants me to know?" John said, looking up defiantly at Mycroft and wishing he wasn't so damned short.

Mycroft sighed, obviously tired of this game. His eyes narrowed.

"Because I told him I was coming here today, and he didn't try to stop me," he said it simply, and without another word began moving towards the empty café.

John hesitated for a moment, feeling his stomach unsettle. His hand clenched around his mobile, the one that had been concerningly silent all day. He saw Sherlock alone in the dark and his panther hissing in pain and then John followed Mycroft into the café.

The lights were on inside but no one was visible. John wouldn't run. He followed Mycroft to a small table. They sat, Mycroft overly controlled and John stiffly.

Mycroft looked far away and they sat in awkward silence for a while. John didn't complain.

"Where to begin…" Mycroft finally murmured, not wanting to begin at all.

John stared at him, determined to hold composure, as the tale of betrayal began.
"When I was a child I was considered a prodigy—clever, capable… I was talented and ambitious and there was no doubt that I was going to be very successful in my lifetime. So, when I tell you Sherlock was special from birth… well you already know about his cleverness, his abilities… but when he was young there was something about him. There was a light in his eyes, so brilliant and so curious he was, always got into the strangest things as a toddler…” Mycroft trailed off, voice a strange mix of fondness and emptiness. "But around the time of Sherlock's third birthday something was different in him. Then Sherlock made the first Change."

The surprise knocked John out of his stoicism.

"What! At age three…? But that's—can that happen?" John asked.

Mycroft's mouth curled and for an odd second John thought he was jealous of his unique younger brother but then he noticed the pallor in his face and John knew he wasn't green with envy but with suppressed nausea.

"Yes, it happens… very rarely. The latest research has shown that if a young Changeling is repeatedly exposed to extremely high levels of stress or hopelessness… desperation can manifest in the Change…"

Oh god. Oh god. The thoughts pounded around like elephants in John's head as his brain was figuring it out far faster than his mind was able to cope with.

*Don't touch me!*

The memory was so clear.

"We should have realized then… but I was too young… and Mummy was so blinded. My father, Sigur Holmes, was a successful man. He was at the center of the social sphere, influential and intelligent. His shift was a lion, staying true to the tendency that the Holmes bloodline had towards feline forms. Oh, he was always a fearsome man and I remember I used to so badly want to be like him—Mummy always said I possessed his finer qualities, but he never showed more than a passing interest in me. My father only had children to fulfill what he believed to be a duty to the family line, but he took a special interest in my younger brother. I remember I used to be so bitter about it, too," Mycroft chuckled but there wasn't a trace of humor in his voice, only a sickly self-deprecation.

"We were both brilliant, but Sherlock was so much more special, and he had this innocent glow about him… but as I said, that changed when turned three. He no longer ran about the mansion giggling and screaming, asking me to play with him when I was home. He still played some games, but mostly he spent an exorbitant amount of time as a black cub, or hidden in nooks and crannies of the estate, reading books far too serious for a child. Mummy thought it was just a phase. I was too busy with myself to have an opinion…"

John's knuckles were white where his clenched fists pressed harshly against the tops of his thighs. It sounded so horribly lonely, the picture Mycroft was painting.

"Two years passed and nobody suspected a thing," Mycroft said, and John swore the room tilted because gravity, along with all that was good and right with the world, had obviously failed. "While Sherlock's originally gentle nature came from my mother, his addictive personality certainly came from our father, whose other addictions finally triggered his undoing… it happened late one night when my father returned drunk from one of his many social functions. I was home from Overfield and everyone was sleeping… so he—he did what he always did on such nights… when nobody was there to see—to stop him… excuse me…"

Distantly John could tell Mycroft was having trouble with his own composure. He was completely
green. John thought he might vomit.

"But he was so intoxicated he wasn't as in control as he usually was… Sherlock had shifted. We later learned he—Sherlock, he'd change sometimes, on accident or not, trying to… to stop it… protect himself in some way."

John could see the panther hiding in the shadows of the forest, eyes guarded, and now he knew why. John was sure he was going to be sick as well. The words washed around him, and he could barely absorb them, but they wormed their way into his being somehow.

"This night, when Sherlock changed, our father became enraged. He—he couldn't… couldn't do anything… while Sherlock was in that form," Mycroft faltered, unable to say the worst. "He began screaming at Sherlock… apparently he wouldn't shift back that night for some reason. That's what woke Mummy and I… the shouting. I ran to Sherlock's room… mine wasn't far away."

Mycroft had closed his eyes now and his hand was trembling—some detached part of John realized that such a powerful man shaking like this is something few would ever bear witness to. It didn't make him feel special, though. It was awful.

"I will never forget what I saw when I pushed open the door…" Mycroft's voice slipped out as no more than a breath now, lost to the dark past. "I remember that my brother's pajama trousers were thrown on the floor… his pants, too… I remember wondering why. For all the other things, I remember that the most. But then I did see my father. He'd already shifted by the time I arrived… then there was the blood—he'd gone too far. I believe I screamed… it was chaos… my baby brother was bleeding on the floor from where my father had lashed out… with inborn weapons… but the physical damage was nothing at the end of that day… I… I should have seen… we were just so young…"

Mycroft's coherency was failing him and though he couldn't move, John's entire being screamed against the horror. The rebellion against reality was making him ill.

_Sherlock…!_

Images flooded his head, feelings remembered, too. All the shadows John felt brushing against his mind were brought into harsh, devastating context… he'd suspected something horrible, but —_Jesus Christ_—not this. He saw Sherlock's face in his mind's eye, studying, deducing, scowling, smiling… he felt like dry heaving but instead he just froze more completely—tried to become a statue. Stone couldn't feel like this.

Unable to make himself say the rest of the words, the man before John lowered his head. He took a deep breath and then looked up at the statue boy.

"My mother banished my father…" Mycroft started once more, and John's head snapped up, coming to life, revealing the light sheen of sweat that had gathered on his skin.

"What?!" John blurted. "The—the _bastard_ isn't in prison?!"

Mycroft's face had hardened once more.

"He is not. My mother thought it was bad enough already and it would just make it worse to put Sherlock through the damaging ordeal of a trial. And Sherlock begged my mother not to make him do it. So she sent our father far, far away…"

"He deserves to rot in a prison cell!" John found himself shouting.
He deserves to die. The thought surprised him—not in its wording but in the fact that John realized he'd have no qualms about making it reality himself.

"It wouldn't have helped Sherlock. Although, I will say I would have handled the situation... differently than our mother had I been in her place as I am now... but she was so soft, and I was but a child."

Their gazes held one another for a moment and John realized Mycroft may well have felt exactly the same way as John did on the subject.

"Then what," John forced out, needing to see this through now.

"We tried to send Sherlock to therapy, but he just flat out refused. Wouldn't even say a word to a one of them. He was never the same. All he asked was to go to the Baker Institute, where he'd always wanted to attend when our parents decided he was old enough. We tried to get him to come to Overfield were I attended, but he insisted on Baker, and in the end my mother relented. He came home sometimes... but to this day he avoids coming back. The rest of the story you know."

Yes... John did. He floated back to his first day at Baker, Greg's words ringing in his ears.

*He doesn't talk to people if he can help it and he never slip-shifts. And he doesn't have friends.*

John knew his eyes were glassed over but no tears fell. This was too horrible for that.

The moments dragged by as John stared unseeing. Mycroft watched, waiting to see how the first person who had gotten anywhere near Sherlock reacted to the truth of him.

"John?" he finally prompted.

The world lurched again, but then John realized it wasn't the world that had moved but his body. He heard the chair he'd been previously occupying clatter loudly against the floor as he stood violently, though it all sounded so far away. When his hand grasped the doorknob he heard Mycroft calling after him but he had to go.

He had to go.

He stumbled into the street, out into the fading light. He tripped, but he managed to stop his fall by throwing out a hand to brace against a lamp post. He pulled himself forward, breath huffing out in unsteady puffs. Still he kept moving. He had to.

He ran down the empty street, in and out of pools of lamplight. Before he knew it he was on the stairs of his family's home, his father's voice following him. His mother asked what was wrong. Harry called him a freak, but none of that mattered. It didn't bloody matter. John had no idea what he was doing, but his hands were frantically shoving his possessions into his duffle. His hand closed around his marker, cold metal buckle shocking his skin. The zipper of his bag screamed as he ripped it shut.

He really didn't know what he was doing.

He counted his breaths, in and out through his nose, eyes tightly shut in the back of a cab. Then he listened to the whistling rumble of a high speed train flying across the skin of the world, and still he had no idea what he thought he was doing.

He wasn't even sure when his foot finally hit the top step of the sixth flight of stairs in the A Wing dorms at the Baker Institute. It was late and his breathing was loud in the empty hallway. He carelessly dropped his bag on the doorstep of 614A without even slowing or checking to see where
it fell. He was running and the urgency he couldn't explain was clawing so unbearably at his chest that it was painful. He had to go.

He definitely didn't know what he was doing when, without a second's pause, his hand reached out and twisted the knob of the door marked 631A and flung it open. Light poured into the dark room and a head whipped around instinctually at the burst of noise. He sat on his bed, leaning against the wall, knees tucked up to his chest. Blue eyes were currently snapped wide open in utter shock, pink lips parted in surprise.

"Sherlock," John breathed, lungs easing.

Sherlock opened his mouth to say something, but then it was as if he suddenly remembered the only reason why John would be here, now, and then his face contorted for a moment, and John not only saw but felt the pain, the shame.

Christ, what now? What could he possibly say?

When John couldn't speak, Sherlock managed to compose himself, life seeming to drain out of him. He looked away and rested his head against the wall, eyes open but unfocused.

Lucky for John his heart and body were smarter than his poor, useless mind and he very deliberately walked forward, closing the door behind him. Then he continued and without a word sat down on the firm mattress, and pushed himself backwards until he sat mimicking Sherlock's position, at his side.

They didn't speak, but John's shoulder pressed against Sherlock's upper arm. John's chin rested on his own knees. There was no sounds except for the near imperceptible sounds of four lungs breathing, and two hearts beating.

John leaned a little more solidly into Sherlock and, though it was impossible to tell, he thought he felt Sherlock return some of the pressure.

Neither boy moved until the sun began to slip through the curtains, burning away the dark, and the way of it was perfectly clear.

*I'm not going anywhere.*
John was lucky to get a summer job volunteering at the surgery on Baker’s campus. It wasn’t much, just cleaning floors, sterilizing exam tables and rooms and such, but his parents were understanding when he explained that he couldn’t come home for more than a few days at a time for the rest of the summer. Plus Bill and Sebastian wanted to have practices at least weekly so the team didn’t get out of shape, so he really couldn’t go home. It had nothing to do with the Changeling who was nearly constantly in his presence.

After that horrible, frantic night, John had been worried that things were irreparably changed between them. He was afraid Sherlock would avoid him, or lash out like before, but not much had shifted at all. Well that wasn’t exactly true. At first there was a clear rise in awareness. Both students had their own lives, their own interests, and once they would have kept them for the most part to themselves, the pieces of their lives strung together side by side, John’s rugby, Sherlock’s violin, John’s friends, Sherlock’s experiments, John’s work, and Sherlock’s case files, and in between was their friendship. However, it was as if those in between bits in between had bled out and then snapped back, throwing the neatly organized spheres of their lives into a jumbled mess where everything overlapped.

Sherlock would follow John to rugby, to document the effects of high velocity impact, or for a full week it was to study the spread of grass stains depended upon the relative saturation of the earth. John went to Sherlock’s room with his supplementary coursework and Sherlock played the violin, notably softer if John was studying. Despite the fact that it was probably against the rules, many evenings Sherlock could be found leaning against an exam room doorframe with an ancient Scotland Yard file in his hands, firing off facts and deductions as John purged the room of viruses and bacteria.

Sherlock still didn’t enjoy spending much time with John’s friends, but he was getting much more tolerant. He didn’t always eat, but he did quite often join John in the dining hall, especially if a bribe of tea was on the table. Where he was once silent and off-putting, he now seemed to listen in on John and Greg’s various sport related conversations, even commenting at times, especially when it came to tactics. Sometimes when the topic of sports news bored him he would actually discuss sciences with Molly and Mike, often without constant scathing deprecation. His politeness didn’t extend to Donovan or Anderson but their presence no longer ensured his absence from a meal.

On that note, he also began helping Greg with some of his Campus Guard work. If you could call over hearing Greg discussing vandalism, bullying, and the like with Anderson and Donovan and then offhandedly telling them who the culprit was while rudely insulting each of their intelligences ‘helping.’ Anyway, the issues got solved.

In the weeks after the slip shift and then John’s return, Sherlock began to return to himself. The old scars had been irritated but surely they began to close up once more and John knew nothing was going to snap and shatter at a moment’s notice anymore. Before John realized, they had passed out of the danger zone and in the summer haze it was easy to fight off the storm that had gathered.

It was all of these factors combined that finally led John to ask something of Sherlock that had never been asked of him before.
They were sitting in the stands of the football pitch. It was a beautiful day. The sun was high in the sky. There was a group of primary students playing out on the field between them and the forest, overlooked by a heron shift perched on one of the changing booths.

John lay out with a novel he’d borrowed from Mike, and his companion sat on the lowest bench, placing tufts of grass into test tubes filled with what he assumed to be various solutions. He wasn’t exactly sure what this experiment was about. John glanced over at him. This was a good a time as any.

“Hey, um, Sherlock,” John said to get his attention.

“Hmm?” he responded, without looking away from his clippings.

John swallowed and wet his lips before continuing.

“So, Greg and I have been talking about making a trip out to Hawkes Reservoir with Molly and Mike sometime this week. Molly said she’d pack a picnic…” John trailed off, as Sherlock was watching him carefully now. “I was… ah… I was thing maybe you could join us.”

Sherlock said nothing for a moment.

“I assume you’ll be travelling in shifted form,” he said, which wasn’t quite a question, as that was the usual method for trips out to the lakes.

While Sherlock had indeed grown much more tolerant of John’s friends he still had yet to join them in the forest. John marked his page and closed the book.

“Ah, yes… that’s the plan,” John said.

“Absolutely not,” Sherlock said simply and went back to his test tubes.

John sighed heavily.

He made the choice to not give up so easily this time, though, and despite Sherlock’s initial flat out refusal, with time, reasoning and a fair bit of persistence, the young Changeling finally agreed. John’s ears had suffered when Sherlock brought out his violin that evening but overall he thought it went rather well. In the end Sherlock claimed he needed water samples from the lake anyway.

True to his grudging word, Sherlock could be found trailing after John and his friends a few days later. The group bee-lined towards the changing booths.

The school had a good supply of specialised gear that could be loaned out when older Changelings wanted them for expeditions off campus. Having large enough shift forms to carry weight, John and Greg volunteered to carry the food and a change of clothes for each for them so they could change back at the lake.

Greg and John shifted and then Molly and Bill slipped the specially made harness-packs over their bodies. Both Changelings’ tails were wagging lightly in anticipation, especially Greg whose big ears were perked up and tail slapped against the ground.
John was immediately aware the moment that Sherlock shifted, the familiar presence of his mind brushing against John’s. He swore he felt a flicker of anxiety but he knew better than to comment. While the knowledge of Sherlock’s shift form had spread throughout many social circles at the Institute, Sherlock had knack for avoiding people in the forest that was unparalleled, probably because he had years of practice in the area. John knew he was worried about his scars, but their friends were good people. He knew they were intrigued though. Honestly, he didn’t blame them. If anyone understood the mystery of Sherlock Holmes it was John.

“Oh!” Molly gasped as she stood, looking towards the booths.

John looked over his furry shoulder to see Sherlock sauntering towards them. He looked cool and collected but the words in his head and the lash of his tail told John a slightly different story.

<John, they’re all looking at me. Make them stop it.>

John couldn’t help the wheezy bark that was his giggle in this form.

<Oh, you’re fine. They’re just curious and interested. Like I was about your human form.>

This seemed to sufficiently distract him for a moment and his focus latched onto John.

<What? You were? Interest.>

John’s ears flicked in amusement.

<Course I was. You were being all mysterious and stuff.>

John felt the flush of egotistical pleasure and couldn’t help but take the opportunity to tease the panther.

<That was before I knew how much of a prat you actually are,> he added, with mock disappointment.

He fought back another laugh as the arrogant Changeling’s tail lashed in offence and he felt the flash of irritation before Sherlock was able to formulate a response. Sherlock was about to say something when he noticed Greg was staring curiously at the marring in Sherlock’s pelt. Molly and Mike were both following his gaze, but looked away in an effort not to be rude. Sherlock hissed softly through his teeth and when he sat, he positioned himself so that his scars were blocked from view by John’s body.

While Mike and Molly changed, John and Sherlock chatted about lake water and at first John felt bad about not being able to include Greg in the conversation but then he realized Greg was used to the quiet, as none of their shift speaking abilities were extensive enough for a normal conversation. Greg did, however, glance over at them a number of times when they would respond physically to something the other said, a turn of the head, a flick of the ears.

John was glad when Molly hopped out of her booth, soft brown cottontail shift visible against the dark grass. Mike wasn’t far behind, masked raccoon looking eager.
There was a chorus of positive responses and the white shepherd turned and led them into the forest.

The trip to the lake took the better part of the morning and the sun was just reaching its highest point in the sky as they approached. John and Greg smelled it before they saw it and their exclamations of excitement spread through the group, quickly turning the last leg of their journey into a race to the water’s edge. All it took was a moment of eye contact between John and Greg and they were off, leaving their friends to try to sprint after them.

John! Why are we running??

John’s tongue lolled out of his muzzle and he just barked back at Sherlock.

Because it’s a race, Sherlock!

What! Why?

John could only bark once more, this time in laughter. By this point, and honestly since the beginning, it was truly just a race between the athletic and competitive John and Greg. Molly and Mike had long since trailed behind and even if Sherlock had not been too confused to compete; his form was made for stealth, not sustained speed.

Because it’s fun, Sherlock!

Lightly distracted by Sherlock, John had slipped back a few meters behind Greg. That wouldn’t do.

Then an urge took him, and John threw his furry head back and howled with euphoria. It was enough to get Greg’s attention and allow John to catch up. He copied and howled as well, albeit slightly less impressively.
The water was close now and John and Greg quickly bent their heads to pull the quick release that allowed them to take the packs off in shifted form. There was an awkward tumble of limbs and straps and then they were free of them, sprinting again. Dry dirt was thrown up behind their paws and neither canine stopped when they reached the bank. There was one more bound and then John felt his muscles coil tight and then snap back, launching him high into the air. John felt a flash of alarm that was not his own just before he plunged into the cold water. Bubbles erupted around him and he heard the muted concussion as Greg hit the water a second after him. John didn’t move for a moment, letting himself be suspended in the lake. The air that was trapped in his thick pelt escaped in the form of tiny bubbles floating towards the sky.

<John?>

Sherlock actually sounded worried and that made John want to smile. Reanimated, John bobbed to the surface. Greg’s white head and water logged ears were already moving towards land. John saw Sherlock on the bank and began to swim toward the water’s edge. Mike and Molly were emerging from the trees.

<What? No cooling bath for you? Black fur like that, you must be sweltering.> John commented.

Sherlock’s muzzle wrinkled and his ears swivelled back in disapproval.

<Despite my escalated body temperature, I’d rather not.>

When John climbed back onto dry land, sopping wet, he got an idea and though he tried to clamp down on the thought before it got free it seemed he was unsuccessful as Sherlock’s eyes widened.

>No, John! he complained but it was far too late.

John shook his body, hard, spraying water everywhere, and all over Sherlock, who snarled and recoiled. John looked pleased with himself as he used his back foot to knock the water out of his ears. Sherlock just stared at him murderously for a moment before going to drag one of the packs behind a tree.

They all took turns changing, putting on their clothes, and once they were done they gathered on the bluff to eat their lunches. They all wore shorts and tee shirts, as they didn’t take up much room in the bag, and John had seen what Sherlock packed but it still was a bit of a surprise to see him in khaki shorts and simple blue tee shirt. This far north it very rarely became so hot that Sherlock couldn’t get away with jeans or his regular trousers and his usual button ups, rolled to the elbow during the summer. In the simple attire he wore now, he looked at least three years younger and far more vulnerable—less prickly. It wasn’t a bad look for him at all. No, not bad at all. If they had been alone John would have teased but decided to spare his friend.

But then he wished he had, if only to stop the next topic from arising.

“So,” Greg said around a mouthful of sandwich, “Those are some pretty intense scars, Sherlock. Did you get into a big fight?”

Molly looked a little mortified but Mike couldn’t help but look highly interested. John was balking and Sherlock had frozen. Damnit, Greg! He had to cover for Sherlock. John forced himself to swallow, though his throat felt dry as a desert.

“Sort of, right, Sherlock?” John said, and Sherlock was look at him like he had two heads. “Ran into a rogue Wanderer when you were a kid going into the forest, yeah? So I guess it wasn’t much
of a fight.”

Sherlock’s eyes were wide and with all his might John tried to convey the idea—I’m helping you lie! Figure it out! Finally the so-called-genius got it.

“Oh, yeah,” Sherlock said, glancing down at his sandwich. “I was in the forest near our estate with my elder brother and we encountered a Wanderer—lion shift. There was some confusion and I ended up with this.”

He indicated the general area of the scar that was hidden beneath his clothing and John was shocked with how good his performance was for starting off so lost. He’d seen Sherlock act before and knew he was brilliant. Unfortunately John swore he could feel the flickering of pain, and hated it—hated that it wasn’t the truth. He was glad his friends weren’t looking at him as he slowly counted backwards from ten, convincing himself that it was absolutely illogical and irrational to hunt down and kill Sigur Holmes. He would admit he’d had dreams about it.

“Wow… that sounds terrifying,” Molly said softly.

“Seriously, mate,” Greg added and Mike nodded in agreement with them. Sherlock shrugged and focused an unusual amount on his sandwich, but it was something only John would notice.

When the knot in his chest released he wasn’t sure if it was just his relief or both his and Sherlock’s he was feeling.

After lunch Sherlock collected samples from various parts of the lake and John and his friends talked and laughed by the bank. John even drew Molly into a splash fight, and he was glad to see her relax a little, as shy as she was.

On the way back, John and Sherlock chatted as they usually did, today’s topic being the murder of an elderly woman. By most people’s standards it wasn’t a particularly pleasant topic but John and Sherlock didn’t really fit most standards anyway. Greg was in front once more and John and Sherlock walked abreast, Molly and Mike behind them. This time it was Molly he was receiving the strange looks from whenever he would turn his head to respond to something Sherlock said. It was beginning to concern him.

It wasn’t until they were walking across campus, fully clothed and fully human that John found out why she’d been showing so much interest. They were all tired from the active day so it was relatively quiet in the dusky air.

“Uhmm…” Molly began. “It might be a strange question but on the way back it seemed like you two were talking… I mean were you… talking?”

Then she blushed and looked down as she often did when something she said came out unlike she intended it to at all.

“Oh, ah, yeah. Sorry,” John apologized, thinking he’d been ruder than he intended.

“I knew it!” Greg said.

“Yeah, thought there was something I was missing,” Mike agreed, nodding.

He looked between his friends.
“What?” he asked, confused.

“It’s just odd because you’re new and none of our abilities really allow for more than simple messages... but it just seemed like you two were actually... conversing,” Molly explained, and then looked a little excited. “How much can you talk to each other?”

John glanced up at Sherlock for support but he seemed to be absorbed in checking over his lake water.

“Oh, um, it’s not really any different from now, if that’s what you mean. I mean we just had a knack for it, right, Sherlock?” John called him in.

At least that’s the impression Sherlock had given him. I mean, Sherlock would have said if there was something particularly strange about it, but then John remembered even Sherlock’s shock when they first met. Also, who was he kidding? Sherlock wouldn’t say a damned thing. Jesus, John thought.

Sherlock still didn’t look up from the water, but made a noise of agreement.

Greg was smiling and Molly and Mike both looked shocked. All of their reactions, especially Sherlock’s, were making John uncomfortable.

“Oh, god! That explains a lot!” Greg said, looking gleeful.

“What?!” John said, absolutely lost for the first time a good while.

“It’s just... you never mentioned you had an open bond,” Molly said. “Though, well I guess it makes a lot of sense...”

Molly trailed off, looking from John to Sherlock and back. There was that term again! So it wasn’t just something Mycroft said. John was about to ask for an explanation when Sherlock made a distressed noise and John immediately turned to see what caused it. The brilliant Changeling, however, was already moving at double speed towards the dorm.

“The samples are settling, John! They’ll be useless!”

John rolled his eyes, knowing such a comment could only mean he was expected to follow. He idly wondered if he should be worried about the fact that he also knew it mean he would follow. Oh, well. No matter.

John apologized and sped off after Sherlock, leaving his friends with odd expressions on their faces ranging from surprise to victorious amusement.

Sherlock’s lake water experiment was about the residue left by the organisms within it on various surfaces—for example, human skin. This was how John could be found with his palm exposed under Sherlock’s microscope about twenty minutes after they returned from Baker Forest. When he’d realized Sherlock wanted him to come with him he hadn’t known that it was so he could be a manipulating variable. He did, however, tolerate it with a practiced grace.
While one hand was under the microscope the other was propping up his head as he leaned on Sherlock’s desk.

“Almost done?” John asked, actually the one getting bored this time.

“Stop moving,” was Sherlock’s only response.

John sighed before he remembered the question he’d meant to ask before Sherlock had run off.

“Sherlock, what’s an open bond?” John asked, pausing but continuing when Sherlock didn’t immediately answer. “Your brother mentioned it but, well, I thought it was just more of his cryptic nonsense at the time.”

That earned John a small smirk and a sideways glance from Sherlock before he went back to studying the tiny traces of lake water and organic life left on John’s palm. 

“An open bond,” Sherlock began, “From a scientific view point, describes, basically, what we can do. Sometimes a pair of Changelings may have an inherent ability to communicate with each other while in shifted form, without any practice, as well as possessing a light empathetic link.”

“Oh,” John said. “That’s it? Then why is everyone all out of sorts?”

That didn’t seem like such a big deal at all. Not so different than what most mature Changelings did. Sherlock still didn’t look up.

“Because it doesn’t happen very often,” he explained. “And because they are idiots.”

John shouldn’t have laughed, but he did.

“That’s not very nice, Sherlock,” John giggled.

“Oh, don’t worry, nearly everyone is,” he said dryly. “Stop moving.”

John stilled but kept smiling.

“Even you?”

“On occasion,” Sherlock said, and he smiled as he stared through the eye pieces of his microscope at the amoebas crawling around on John’s hand.

John really wanted to wash that now…

On that day, all seemed good. John had absolutely no reason to believe Sherlock left out any information that John may have found invaluable, though, to be fair, at that time, John Watson and Sherlock Holmes often had very different opinions on what was valuable. Plus, it was difficult to see yourself as in the dark when the sun was shining so brightly and even the air was warm.

Chapter End Notes

Art by noestothewind94.tumblr.com and anathemarmotqueen.tumblr.com
In what seemed like no time at all, the summer days had slipped away from them and before John even had a chance to get accustomed to the idea, he was standing in front of the mirror, slipping a tie with blue stripes around his neck. He’d become used to the red. It wasn’t bad, the blue, but it was certainly different, a reminder of the fact that he was entering a whole new stage of his life.

Sherlock, however, was born to wear the colour, and since he’d so rarely worn his sixth form tie, it wasn’t so strange to see him in the Uni-blue. John had noticed all this on the first day of autumn term, at the all school meeting, when even Sherlock would have been scolded for not wearing his full uniform. Though he still in no way wore it every day, John noticed he did wear it far more than he’d worn the red tie. Knowing Sherlock, it had probably been pure vanity the whole time.

John was taking a good course load autumn term, including a higher mathematics course and biochemistry. The latter he was lucky to share with Molly.

It was also in that class that John met Sarah Sawyer. She was funny; she was pretty, and John was certainly interested. They could easily discuss school and had a lot in common there, as Sarah was a perspective medical student like John, Molly and Mike. Plus, she laughed his bad jokes and didn’t look at John like he was crazy when he told her about each of Sherlock’s recent social infractions or bursts of genius. Sarah was always interested.

John was very busy once school started. He now only worked one night a week at the clinic, but on top of that he had classes, coursework, revising, rugby and, as always, Sherlock’s constant demand for his presence. He’d honestly given up on anything resembling a normal sleep schedule, inadvertently taking a leaf out of Sherlock’s book. Though, a habit of forced insomnia hardly set him apart from many if not most University students. However, it didn’t mean he had any interest in going up to Hawke Lake in the middle of the night.

“Sherlock, even if we keep a good pace it will take no less than four hours to get there and back,” John complained when Sherlock asked him to do just such a thing. “I don’t see why we can’t just go right after I get out of class tomorrow.”

Sherlock sighed dramatically as they walked through a hallway in the math department.

“That would defeat the whole point! I told you, the entire goal of taking more samples is to see how the oxygen and other chemical levels fluctuate between night and day. Doing it any earlier than 2 am would be absolutely meaningless,” he reiterated, rather viciously. “Weren’t you listening?”

Honestly, John’s attention had been a little divided by the fact that he had been texting Sarah throughout the conversation and he may have missed the logistics of this particular experiment.

“Ah, right,” John amended, glancing down to see the blinking light on his phone that meant he had a new message. “Even so, Sherlock, its Tuesday. I have to sit an exam and go to rugby practice tomorrow.”

Sherlock’s face twisted with scorn and he was about to say some choice words to reflect these feelings but now he was faced with the top of John’s head. He’d looked back down at his phone. John laughed once at the joke Sarah had sent him.

“Well—I—who are you texting?” Sherlock asked, irritated.
John once may have rolled his eyes at the double standard, as Sherlock never put down his phone, but he was used to such things by now. He hit send on his response and looked back up.

“Sarah,” John told him.

Sherlock’s eyebrows dipped.

“Sarah who?” he asked, something odd in his voice.

John pocketed his phone.

“Sarah Sawyer,” John said, a little confused as to why Sherlock was being so hostile. “She is in the same biochemistry class as Molly and I.”

Sherlock’s expression didn’t soften and John realized it was going to be one of those days. The young Changeling sometimes would just be determined to sulk. Sherlock opened his mouth to say something that promised to be only unpleasant, but he was cut off.

“Hey, John, Sherlock!”

Both boys turned in the direction of the sound to see Greg coming over to them quickly.

“Greg,” John greeted, cordially.

Sherlock just stared levelly, but nobody expected anything warmer. Greg looked absolutely overjoyed.

“What’s up?” John asked.

Greg’s face looked like it might split in half.

“I got the position,” Greg said, excitedly. “You are currently speaking to the Captain of the Student Guard!”

“Congratulations!” John said wholeheartedly.

“You’re very young to hold that position. Usually it’s given to a third or fourth year university student,” Sherlock said, with a notable lack of sarcasm that turned a fact into the Sherlockian equivalent of a complement.

Both John and Greg glanced up at him for some telling sign of falseness but he seemed genuine.

“Thank you, both!” Greg said, stuffing his hands in his pockets.

“So what does such a position offer in the way of perks?” John asked with a smile.

Greg laughed.

“Well besides looking fantastic on a resume, it also comes with a small paycheck,” Greg said happily.

“You get keys, as well, right?” Sherlock asked. “To the buildings and things?”

John shot Sherlock a suspicious glance but Greg didn’t look phased.

“You are correct, sir,” Greg said, pulling a set of jingling keys out of his pocket and spun them
around his pointer finger.

Greg looked so pleased, and so did Sherlock… John had no idea why but his instincts were flaring violently. A happy Sherlock on a sulk-day never boded well.

“So how do you plan to use your power first?” John asked.

Greg leaned back on his heels and stuck the keys back in his pocket.

“Oh, I thought I’d just strut about for a few days, maybe scare the pants off a few obnoxious secondary students,” Greg shrugged, but with the splitting grin back on his face.

John laughed, knowing full well Greg would never abuse his power—harmfully at least. Then the bell rang, indicating the end of passing period.

“Well, congratulations again,” John said.

Greg was about to thank John when Sherlock did something that made his jaw drop. Sherlock stepped forward and clapped his hand down on Greg’s shoulder.

“Indeed, congratulations. That’s highly admirable,” he said, oh so very seriously, pausing before turning down the hallway.

John was frozen in shock for a moment before lurching away with a hasty goodbye to Greg.

He caught up to Sherlock and looked over at him.

“What the hell was that?” John asked.

Sherlock’s hands were in his pockets and he looked disturbingly smug.

“What?” he said, with a pathetic attempt at fabricated innocence.

John shook his head.

“No, stop that. You know exactly what I’m talking about,” John said.

They turned around the corner into the main hallway, passing a number of posters advertising the Autumn Ball. Sherlock looked down at him, unhidden glee dancing in his eyes, just behind the composed mask.

“I have no idea what you mean, John,” Sherlock said. “I am simply happy our friend has been chosen for a position with such pleasant perks.”

Then John saw them as they were pulled from Sherlock’s pocket and suddenly it all made sense—the complement, the gesture—because currently, a set of keys were spinning around Sherlock’s index finger, a mock of their true owner’s earlier motions.

“Oh, Sherlock, you didn’t,” John groaned.

Sherlock just kept smirking and sauntering down the crowded corridor.

“Why do I feel like this is going to be a reoccurring issue?” John said wearily.

Sherlock rolled his eyes.
“Don’t be so melodramatic, John,” Sherlock said, which John thought was a bit rich, coming from him. “Only when he is annoying.”

John couldn’t fight off the little smirk that worked itself onto his face at his friend’s last comment.

“Sherlock, you always thing Greg is annoying,” John pointed out.

There was a quiet pause. Sherlock glanced sidelong at John; John glanced up at Sherlock. Their eyes met and they broke, slipping into matching fits of giggles. It was probably indecent. It was a good thing neither of them put a whole lot of stock in propriety.

. . .

<Dear god, please tell me that is not the sunrise.>

John and Sherlock stood atop a grassy knoll about a half kilometre into Baker Forest. The fur on their paws was soaked with morning dew and there was a light chill in the air that made their breath visible as thin clouds that disappeared in an instant. It was still early autumn but the leaves were already starting to morph into fire. The woods would soon be ablaze with them.

Sherlock turned his head towards the horizon and observed the glow spreading over it.

<It would appear so,> he said, casually.

A groaning whine leaked from between John’s sharp teeth.

<Christ, I have to work at the clinic tonight and I told Sarah I’d show her the gully.>

John started moving towards the Institute, harness shifting as he moved. The pouches attached to it contained the objects of tonight’s excursion—some tubers and at least 12 separate species of mushrooms that Sherlock said he needed to use for an experiment on fungal growth. The fast approaching sun meant that they’d now been out the entire night, and John wasn’t going to have a lick of sleep to get him through the day. The thought of it alone exhausted him. Sherlock padded behind him, quiet as a ghost, but John was completely aware of his presence.

<You promised to take who where?>

John glanced back over his shoulder at his friend, whose irritation betrayed him in the form of a particularly vigorous swish of his tale. He’d been so tetchy since classes started. John was fairly sure he was only pretending to forget her name as well.

<Sarah—Sarah Sawyer. I promised to take her to the gully with the creek at the bottom, the one with those red flowers we found.>

Honestly, John thought it was rather smooth of him and was proud of himself for coming up with such a good idea. It was a gorgeous place and Sarah was sure to be impressed.

John thought he felt a rise in the irritation but Sherlock had been keeping a clamp on his thoughts recently.

<That’s all the way past Tidwell Hill. It will take over an hour to get there with most shifts.>
Sherlock spat, as if John was just being ridiculous.

The edge of the sun was visible now, bathing the forest in yellow and orange light, turning John’s fur gold and Sherlock into a muted shadow.

<Her shift is a Caspian horse. We’ll be fine.>

Sherlock said nothing until they broke through the tree line, preferring to sulk in silence. John might have to warn Mike to plan to study elsewhere today.

Only when they were pushing their way into their respective changing booths did Sherlock’s voice reassert itself.

<Caspian pony.>

<What?> John asked as he pulled the quick release on the harness and with a shake it fell to the floor with a soft thump.

Sherlock’s annoyed consciousness flickered wildly.

<Her shift is a Caspian pony. Caspian ‘horses’ are classified as ponies, and the term is inaccurate. Their true name is Caspian pony.>

Then the presence of his mind disappeared as it was hidden inside a human body. John sighed heavily and wondered what he did in a past life to deserve such an abrasive individual for a best friend.

....

“John.”

It was dark and warm. It felt so nice.

“John!”

John started into wakefulness. When his eyes snapped open it wasn’t dark at all and the fluorescent lights hurt his eyes. Nor was it comfortable. His shoulders were cramped from lying on the desk at such an odd angle and he became acutely aware of the small amount of wetness that was plastering his face to the tabletop.

“Uhg…” he mumbled as he rose and wiped his face clean of drool.

Then he realized someone had been trying to wake him and that they were now watching him with a highly amused expression on their face.

“Ah, sorry, Sarah,” John apologized, rubbing his hands forcefully over his eyes. “Sorry I’m such a crap lab partner.”

Sarah just smiled and John was glad they were working on a lab now so nobody besides Sarah noticed he’d completely fallen asleep in class.

“Are you okay?” she asked. “This is the second time you’ve fallen asleep in class this week.”
John arched his back stretching the cramped muscles, both from falling asleep on his desk and having his nose forced to the ground in search of mushrooms all night.

“I’m fine. Sherlock just had me up all night,” he said mid-stretch, so it came out half as a groan.

At this Sarah gave an unusual giggle and when John looked for a reason, he found that a faint blush was dusting her cheeks.

“What?” he prompted, dropping his arms and checking his face for more drool.

She giggled once more and tucked her hair behind her ear. If John didn’t know any better he’d say she looked embarrassed.

“Oh, nothing, you two are just the strangest, most adorable couple,” Sarah explained.

What?

What!?

The statement made John’s brain shut down for at least a whole two seconds before it roared frantically back to life.

“I’m sorry, but what? Sherlock and I—you thought—we’re not—we were just collecting mushrooms!”

Oh god. If that didn’t sound like a euphemism in his own ears… he took a deep breath and tried to sound less like an illiterate buffoon. Sarah looked a little startled.

“Look, what I mean was, we were out in the forest collecting mushrooms for an experiment Sherlock is doing on fungal growth… and we’re… we’re not a couple,” John said warily, coming to the horrible realization that the girl he’d been chatting up for weeks now thought he was gay—gay with Sherlock.

Sarah wasn’t the first one, certainly not, hence John’s weariness, but this was a particularly poignant blow for obvious reasons.

“Oh… oh!” Sarah said, blushing once again. “I’m sorry… I just thought… with the way you two are…”

She did look severely apologetic and it was in that moment that John fully committed to the decision to ask Sarah Sawyer to the Autumn Ball.

. . .

The Autumn Ball was a highly celebrated event at the Baker Institute, as it was the only formal ball that allowed all the students, except primary students, to attend. It also only occurred every other year. The girls all gossiped about it tirelessly, who was taking who, who wasn’t taking who, and eagerly awaited the chance to dress up like a princess for a night. The boys debated about who and how to ask. While most weren’t thrilled about dressing up, they all fostered the hope to get at least a good snogging at the end of the night. There were posters and decorations everywhere and the school was absolutely buzzing with excitement. Even John was getting caught up in the hype.
As the date of the Ball grew closer, and after he was sure that Sarah knew he was not sleeping with his best friend, John asked her to the dance. He asked her one day when they were finishing a lab. He’d been flirting and working for this for a good while now and was truly happy when she agreed to go with him—rather enthusiastically if he could say so himself.

John told Molly on their way to the dining hall after biochemistry.

“I asked Sarah to the Autumn Ball and she said yes!” John said victoriously.

Molly’s eyes widened, and her mouth opened slightly. She looked as if she was going to say one thing but caught herself mid-sentence. She didn’t look nearly as happy for him as he thought she would.

“What? But what about—” she started. “I mean… who is Sherlock going with?”

John paused and looked down at her odd surprised expression. He wondered why she looked that way. She was in a class with Sarah and John. She had to have noticed him flirting with her. And yet… John stuffed his hands in his pockets, giving up on understanding.

“I… ah, highly doubt Sherlock is willing to go,” John said, pursing his lips. “The one time I’ve brought it up with him he didn’t even answer—well he just started firing off about the history of balls and the sociological functions of such occasions—then it got graphic and I sort of tuned it out…”

John looked down when Molly giggled, and he smiled himself, recalling the lightly disturbing event. Then she sobered and glanced up at John, thoughtful expression on his face.

“A little sad, though, don’t you think?” she said. “I mean everyone’s going to be there and… well, since you’ve been around it’s even strange for him to be alone on a night like that.”

John’s chest tightened a little at that. He hated the thought of Sherlock alone. It brought up to many of the painful recollections and images that would never be forgotten in the mind of John Watson. Then what initially seemed like a brilliant idea popped into his head.

“I know! Why don’t you ask him, Molly? I mean between the both of us maybe we can get him to go,” John suggested.

Molly smiled shyly and cast he gaze towards the floor, shaking her head.

“Oh, I don’t believe I could be much use there,” she said. “Besides… um… Greg already asked me. We’re going as friends.”

John was surprised but extremely pleased. Greg had been his strongest ally in an mission they were calling “Operation Frightened Rabbit” that aimed to get their friend out of her shell. Obviously Greg was achieving far more than he was.

“That’s fantastic! How did I miss this?”

Molly gave him a genuine smile at this.

“Oh, it only happened yesterday so…” she said with a little shrug of her shoulders.

John adjusted his bag when it slipped down his shoulder.

“Well,” John said, hitching it up. “I’ll just have to come up with another plan.”
Sherlock would never have joined this class if criminals weren’t so unimaginative. Both those who thought they had any intelligence at all or those who saw themselves as artists all seemed to share a love of Shakespeare. He decided it would be valuable to become intimately acquainted with his entire body of work as criminals, especially the passionate, seemed to draw upon his work shamelessly. If Sherlock was going to try and be poetic while murdering he would at least be original.

He fought off a smirk as he realized that was the kind of thought that got him highly disapproving looks from John. Not that John had been around enough to judge such thoughts lately, not with his current infatuation with that girl.

“If you scowl so much you are going to get wrinkles,” a sultry voice chastised him from the seat to his right. “What are you thinking about?”

Irene Adler leaned forward in her seat, looking over at him with perfectly made up eyes.

“I am trying to deduce what John sees in Sarah,” Sherlock said, brows still furrowed.

He was too preoccupied to sustain the past level of hostility he used to turn on Irene. These days he hadn’t felt the urge to. It’s not like she ever left as he intended when he flung the acid in her direction, and she was not quite as boring as any other silly Changeling child that wandered the halls of the Institute.

And that was the thing about Sarah. If she irritated him more, as Irene did, incessantly, he’d probably have had more respect for her, but she was just so dull. There was not a single interesting thing about her—average beauty, average intellect, average history, average shift... So the fact that something so boring could remove the presence of the one human being that Sherlock could stand to be around—had become used to being around—absolutely irked him to no end. Now John had asked her to that bloody ball which promised her continued presence and distraction. Sherlock was not pleased.

“Is your boyfriend neglecting you?” Irene asked, lips pushed out in a sympathetic pout.

Sherlock scoffed and pressed his fingers into steeples.

“John is not my boyfriend,” Sherlock spat at the pedestrian suggestion.

Irene merely smiled and they both continued to ignore the professor who was sending them disapproving glares for not paying attention.

“Surely you understand his motivation,” Irene sighed, leaning back. “It’s really quite simple.”

Sherlock shot her a sidelong glare and yes, he understood. It had never really been a mystery. He had just been rejecting the answer because he didn’t like it.

“Sex,” Sherlock sneered around the word. “Ridiculous. Dull and idiotic in comparison to the exploits of the mind.”

Irene just laughed softly and Sherlock looked over at her, and in his irritation his eyes locked onto
a very faint smudge of lipstick below Irene’s ear.

“Was she any good?” Sherlock asked archly.

Sherlock knew Irene didn’t discriminate but she definitely preferred women. He knew this because she rarely let the men kiss her.

Currently, Irene’s eyes widened for just a second before she tracked his gaze and raised her finger tips to her smooth neck to brush the marked spot. Then she smiled, looking more than pleased.

“Very good, Sherlock,” she said. “You know, sometimes your brilliance makes me want to take you right here on the desks. I would have you begging for mercy.”

A girl with curly, red hair glanced back with a concerned expression on her face but neither clever Changeling paid her any mind.

“I don’t beg,” Sherlock said, voice low.

She leaned forward again.

“Is that a challenge, Sherlock?” she purred.

Sherlock snorted and turned away.

“Hardly,” he said, leaning his cheek into his palm.

“Sherlock, go to the ball with me,” Irene said.

It was a request he’d heard countless times.

*Sherlock, that tie looks nice on you; go to the ball with me.*

*Sherlock, how was your weekend? Go to the ball with me.*

*Sherlock, I heard you caught the kids putting super glue in the school locks; go to the ball with me.*

Since they’d first entered secondary school. Every year they held the ball, she’d launched a new campaign, and every year she’d ended up going with someone else while Sherlock had refused to attend.

Always, Sherlock had ignored her. He was not interested. However, today something changed. A response strummed from his vocal chords and he would go to his grave before he admitted it was said with the image of John Watson dancing with Sarah Sawyer in his mind.

“Fine.”

Molly was not present at lunch so naturally the all male company shifted their conversation accordingly. Greg was currently congratulating John on his success in asking Sarah to the ball and from there it had continued with ball related conversation. Honestly, it was getting so close that people were talking of little else.
“And you!” John tried to shift the focus off himself, as it was embarrassing and Sherlock was glaring at him murderously—probably for subjecting him to such an annoyingly loud and boring conversation. “I heard you and Molly are going together.”

Greg’s face split into another wide grin and he leaned back in his seat.

“Well, someone has to show that girl how to loosen up and have a good time,” Greg said.

“Good on you, mate,” Mike offered.

“What about you? Asked anyone?” Greg said to Mike who chuckled and nodded.

“Yup! Suzie from psychology. Got her a whole bunch of flowers but they were all wilted before I could even get them to her,” Mike chortled.

Both John and Greg burst out laughing.

“Mike, you’re such a clod!” Greg laughed.

“Hey, she said yes! That’s what counts!” Mike defended.

John was still giggling when Greg turned towards Sherlock.

“What about you? Any pretty ladies catch your eye or are dances not in your repertoire?” Greg asked.

Oh, not good. Oh, poor choice. John braced himself for the inevitable tide of condescension that was surely coming their way.

But none came. Sherlock merely continued to cut his food into reasonably sized bites as he answered.

“I actually can dance rather well, if you must know. And as to this particular ball, I’m going with Irene Adler.”

Mike dropped his fork onto the floor, and in Greg’s prone position he almost fell out of his seat, having to flail his arms and catch the edge of the table to stop his fall. John’s jaw just dropped and he stared, open mouthed, at his antisocial friend, who was apparently taking the most famous, or infamous, woman to walk the halls of the Baker Institute in probably its entire history to the Autumn Ball.
Sparks

For a dance that was being held in a gymnasium, the student council and staff had really outdone themselves. The walls were covered in black and grey draperies. Gorgeous arrangements of silver were scattered all about the room. A large buffet table sat along one wall; platters of sweets and snacks sat on a black table top. The DJ and his tables were perched on a raised platform at the back of the gym. There were already a number of couples on the dance floor. A few sparkling disco balls, that would most likely be put to full use later in the night when they turned down the lights, hung from the ceiling. There was obviously a large range of ages in the attending students. There were numerous awkward secondary school couples, groups of girls, dateless but seemingly enjoying themselves all the more, twittering about on the edge of the dance floor. Relaxed university couples seemed to be taking pleasure in the scene and the food and there were even a few blokes who decided to go stag leaning against the far wall, apparently trying to influence the DJ.

Having arrived together only a few minutes previously, John Watson stood with his friends next to a pillar close to the entrance of the gym. He wore a simple black suit with very faint pinstripes that he had bought for the wedding of his uncle last winter. Harry had made fun of him for accidentally getting pinstripes but his measurements had already been taken for the suit and the thought of going through the process again had made him balk. In the end they looked rather good on him anyway, he thought, and the suit contrasted nicely with the pale blue shirt he was wearing to match Sarah’s periwinkle dress. With the addition of a simple charcoal grey tie and a touch of product in his hair, for once John actually felt he did a fine job of making himself more than presentable.

Molly looked lovely in a yellow satin dress, sweetheart neckline and floral stitching climbing up from the hem. John was not the only one to do a double take at ‘unassuming’ Molly Hooper that evening. Greg was being a great date and looked rather dashing himself. Mike was accompanied by a sweet girl with curly red hair and dimples, Suzie from his psychology lecture.

John scanned the crowd and regularly glanced over at the wide open doors and the constant influx of arriving couples. Sarah glanced up at him.

“Sherlock is coming separately, right?” she asked.

“Yeah, with that Adler woman,” John murmured.

If he hadn’t been glancing at the door once more he would have seen the little smile pass over Sarah’s face at his phrasing.

Even before a few weeks ago when Sherlock announced her as his date, John had heard about Irene Adler. There were very, very few who hadn’t, but for whatever reason the rumours and school legends seemed to be reaching John at a surprising rate in the recent days. He had no idea how much of it was true, but if one tenth of the stories were true then Irene Adler was a more fearsome woman than any John had, or probably ever would, meet. There was a reason she was called ‘the Vixen’ in the whispers of story tellers… and her fox shift was not the biggest reason.

He’d known that Sherlock and Irene had an odd sort of relationship. It wasn’t exactly a friendship. As far as John could tell, Sherlock only ever seemed irritated by her presence but he had to admit Sherlock didn’t dismiss her like he did to everyone else, besides John himself at least. From what he’d heard, Irene had been an extremely young change herself. She’d been at the Institute since she was seven and since she was a year older than Sherlock, that meant she’d been at the Institute almost as long as Sherlock had. Apparently even Sherlock could be won over to some degree with
John was watching a couple of sixth formers compete to see how many biscuits they could fit in their mouths at one time, so he wasn’t looking at the door when the conversation of his friends trailed to a stop. John glanced at them to see them all staring in the same direction. Sarah followed their gaze first.

“Oh… wow…” she breathed, and John’s head twisted towards the door.

Then he had to admit some of his own breath slipped through his lips because Sherlock Holmes and Irene Adler had arrived and that was certainly a sight to see.

Irene was encased in a silken, purple, formfitting number with an asymmetrical hem and strappy black heels that could easily put your eye out. She wore a beaded necklace that looked like lace from across the room, and even from there, John could see her eyes were painted into wickedness. She looked more beautiful and dangerous than anyone John had seen in his short life. The Vixen, indeed.

Then there was Sherlock, and here was the strange part, he wasn’t outshone by her in the slightest. He not only was recognizable but he was in balance with her, in his tailored black suit, beautifully cut, buttons gleaming and wrapped in a silk shirt that matched the shade of Irene’s dress perfectly, his glossy curls paired with the lace curling around her neck and chest.

Irene was smiling smoothly and Sherlock looked like ice and with a strange hot swoop in John’s stomach he realized they were perfect—so goddamn perfect. Where was his dorky, socially inept best friend? Where was Sherlock, hands covered in vegetation in the name of science, smiling at John’s praise? But no this was truly Sherlock, in every way. Sherlock perfected...

Then eyes found him, steel grey and piercing. They held for a moment across the crowd but then for some reason John found himself looking away, insides doing strange, almost painful things. What the hell? Sarah glanced up at him.

“Do you want to dance now? The floor is filling out,” she nodded towards the rapidly filling dance floor.

John swallowed and forced a smile.

“Yeah, sounds great,” he said.

Irene had stopped by earlier that evening to drop off the shirt she’d wanted him to wear. It was the same colour as a shirt he already owned, he pointed out, but Irene had said that this material was better, so he’d agreed to wear it if only to get her to leave him alone. The woman had commented on his particularly foul mood today, but he’d elected not to indulge her with a response. Sherlock was lucky to have the suit already, a relic from the few birthday and garden parties that he had been convinced—blackmailed—into attending over the past few years. It fit him well and he like it in all honestly, but today he had just been feeling a distinct lack of motivation to put any effort into the evening at all. He had certainly second guessed the reasons why he’d agreed to go in the first place, if he could even put a finger on what those reasons were. But then the image of John twirling a pretty blonde girl around would enter his mind unannounced and by coincidence the urge
to attend the silly school function returned as well.

So this was how Sherlock could be found leaning against the far wall of the decorated school gymnasium, behind the speakers so his eardrums weren’t permanently destroyed. Irene leaned in beside him.

“Come now, Sherlock,” she purred. “What have I told you about scowling?”

Sherlock just scoffed and rolled his eyes, continuing to watch the pulsing crowd, trying to convince himself he could learn something here but there was nothing he didn’t already know.

Except for a brief greeting in passing, Sherlock hadn’t talked to John. He had however caught glimpses of him dancing with Sarah in the crowd. He seemed to be having a fine time. Sherlock even saw him laughing as he danced a song with Molly. It was sickeningly mundane.

It was so loud, voices, bad music and incessant laughter clanging against his mind. He wished he was out in the forest, in the quiet shadows, only one voice ever reaching him there.

A hand slipping into his broke his focus on his fantasy and his fingers spasmed in surprise and his head snapped down.

“What are you doing?” he asked, annoyed, as Irene started to pull him towards the chaos.

Irene sent him a half lidded glance over her shoulder.

“It’s a dance, Sherlock. I hardly asked you here for enlightening conversation,” she chastised teasingly, making Sherlock bristle.

But then the crowd parted a bit and Sherlock saw John spinning Sarah around in a cheesy twirl that made him want to be sick and he found himself snaking his arm around Irene’s curved waist. Then they danced.

Secretly, Sherlock loved dancing. And though he was still dragged into a foul mood by all the other factors surrounding him, he did feel a sort of calm settle over him as he took the lead, mostly ignoring the more ridiculous and flamboyant displays put on by his fellow students.

“Well, well, Sherlock, dearest. Always good for a surprise aren’t you?” Irene murmured into his ear as he led her into a waltz that only just fit into the rhythm of the song the DJ had elected to play.

Sherlock wasn’t sure how long this had been going on when the attention light flickered on in his brain and he immediately began to look for what had set it off. Two and a half seconds later he figured it out. It was the small boy standing pointedly next to the open doors. Primary students weren’t allowed at the ball, plus Sherlock recognized the boy but he was staring straight at him. With his next heart’s beat, a chemical dose known as excitement flooded his body. Oh, yes, this could only mean one thing.

Irene had noticed the shift in him and was watching Sherlock closely now, especially at the gleeful smile that had broken onto his face and then he leaned in close to whisper in her ear.

“I apologize but it seems I am going to be otherwise engaged for the rest of the night.”
John forced himself to at least seem like he was having fun. Despite his old friends’ jokes, John’s past luck with women had not been because he simply ‘had game.’ Even if deep down he did really hope to get a glimpse of their knickers at some point, John was raised to treat women properly. So even though John was having far less fun than he expected, he did his best to make sure Sarah and his friends got the most out of the night, and he had genuinely enjoyed dancing with both Sarah and Molly, who he and Greg seemed to be reaching some success in getting to cut loose.

The DJ had started a slow dance and currently Sarah’s arms were wrapped completely around his neck, his around her lower back. They were very close as they swayed back and forth. This should have made John feel elated. On another night, in his old life, he would have taken this as a positive sign that this night could end in some very satisfying snogging if he played his cards right, but he would be damned if there wasn’t something wrong with the way Sherlock Holmes swayed with an absolutely gorgeous, highly experienced woman plastered all up his front.

I mean how did she even do that? It had to be impossible to wrap yourself so completely around someone, outside of the bedroom at least. That brought on a whole wave of related images that turned John’s cheeks pink. He wasn’t so inexperienced himself but he was not thinking about Sherlock in Irene Adler’s bed. His brain couldn’t handle it.

That was it! That had to be why it was bothering him so much. This wasn’t Sherlock. It just didn’t fit. Irene would just be using Sherlock and that was not tolerable. Not with the knowledge of Sherlock’s past firmly resident in John’s mind. In his head John carefully labelled these facts as ‘reasons’ and justifications for his feelings as he decidedly spun Sarah and himself so his back was to the figures he couldn’t divert his attention from.

After a long stretch of dancing John gave in and craned his head to catch sight of Sherlock again, to make sure Irene wasn’t taking advantage of him of course. He caught sight of the Vixen, leaning against the wall with a glass of punch in her hand, but there was no sight of Sherlock. Strange. He started to grow concerned but then a popular song came on and the whole group’s excitement rose palpably. Greg whooped and pulled Molly into a twirl and Mike and Suzie were doing some odd dance that apparently went with the song. John couldn’t help but laugh. Only when the song was almost over did John become aware of Sherlock’s presence. This was because the Changeling was right behind him.

“John!” a voice cut through the music and John spun around to see his best friend not a metre away.

His eyes were crackling with excitement. John’s concern flared again.

“What is it, Sherlock? Everything okay?” John said, voice almost drowned out in the thudding bass of the pop song.

“It’s happened again—maybe! We have to go now,” Sherlock said, visibly rocking onto is toes in eagerness.

His friends were watching now.

“What?” John asked, confused as usual.

Sherlock looked highly impatient and his hands fluttered around.
“Another Wandering, John! Come on!”

John was still lost and it was hard to explain anything in the din.

“What?” John asked and Sherlock’s patience visibly expired.

“Oh, I’ll just explain on the way! Come on!”

Then Sherlock reached forward and grabbed his wrist with long, thin fingers and began to pull him towards the exit.

“Wh-what are you doing? Wait—Sherlock!”

John protested but Sherlock ignored him and didn’t let go. He only managed one glance back at his friends who, unlike John, didn’t even look that surprised at all.

A moment later Molly came to stand next to Sarah.

“I’m sorry,” she apologized for Sarah’s absent date.

Sarah just laughed and shrugged.

“It’s okay. Who is surprised? Just out of curiosity, though… I know you’re friends with them, do you know what is… up with those two?” she asked, not sure how to phrase the question but Molly knew exactly what she was asking.

“I’m not really sure, exactly. Nobody really is, them probably least of all, but… they do have an open bond,” Molly said, explaining at least a part of it.

Sarah’s head snapped around at Molly’s last words, hair brushing against her bare shoulders.

“You’re joking,” she said, eyes wide.

Molly just smiled softly and shook her head. Sarah giggled.

“Well, I had even less of a chance than I thought,” Sarah laughed. “How do you compete with that?”

The look on Molly’s face said she understood the feeling perfectly.

With a sigh and a smile Sarah stretched her neck and glanced over at Molly.

“Well, the night’s not over yet, is it?” Sarah said, nodding towards the moving bodies.

At that Molly’s smile returned as well.

“Oh, I hope not.”

Across the ball, another young woman watched the exchange and departure of Sherlock Holmes and John Watson. Once they were surely gone a vulpine smile bloomed on her face. This night hadn’t gone exactly as it had been planned but oh, it had gone somewhere and that was something —somewhere interesting and surely important. With graceful, polished fingers, Irene Adler
extracted her phone from her recovered clutch, and then she began to send a text.

“Seriously, Sherlock, what is going on?” John asked as Sherlock led them into the hallway.

“Another student has Wandered. If there’s something strange about this one I want to find it before the evidence disappears,” Sherlock said as they approached a small shape at the end of the hallway. “John give me the tenner in your pocket.”

Would John ever be able to keep up with this boy? They came to a stop in front of the small shape, which turned out to be a primary student. He didn’t look older than nine years of age.

“I—ah,” John said eloquently as Sherlock stuck out his hand demandingly.

He reached into the pocket he’d stuffed a few notes into, just in case, before he’d left his room that evening. He didn’t question how Sherlock knew it was there, but that was not very high on his list of priorities at the moment. He handed Sherlock the tenner and he immediately tucked it into the waiting hands of the little boy who immediately scarpered. Then Sherlock began to lead them in the opposite direction.

“Okay, still lost,” John said irritably. The Changeling was impossible when he was distracted like this. “For the stupid people in the room, would you please explain what is going on—preferably from the beginning, and who was that boy?”

Sherlock sighed heavily as they turned around another corner.

“Lucy Heart, John! Or had you forgotten?” he said.

John did remember Lucy Heart, the girl that had wandered last spring, the girl who Sherlock believed hadn’t wandered at all.

“I remember,” John confirmed.

“Well, when nobody took the facts into any consideration last time I realized I would need more evidence, so I set up for the possibility of the event reoccurring. That boy was Adam Young, one of the many primary students who gather information for me. I instructed them to alert me the moment they heard about a Wandering, so I could investigate its validity.”

John’s eyebrows furrowed and he looked up at Sherlock.

“Wait, you have primary students collecting information for you?”

Sherlock smirked back at him.

“Oh, John, you would be shocked with how much is said around children under the misguided belief in their lack of understanding or ability to retain useful information, especially under the incentive of sufficient money to buy enough sweets to get sick on.”

John thought that over for a moment, twin footsteps echoing loudly in the dark corridor.

“Okay,” he acquiesced. “So someone has wandered again?”
Sherlock nodded sharply.

“Justin Hara; disappeared this morning. He was supposed to attend a pre-ball function but he never showed up. The staff found his things in a Changing booth and they found no sign of him in their sweep of Baker Forest. He was a komodo dragon shift… neat, yeah?”

John’s eyebrows rose and he understood Sherlock’s interest. Changelings were most commonly mammal shifts, followed closely by avian shifts, then marsupials, then, very rarely, reptiles. For whatever reason, there were no fish or bug shifts. Some scientists said they were perhaps too different from humans to be one with them, but either way a reptile shift was unique and to be such a rare species on top of that made it doubly so.

“Okay, makes sense;” John said, finally catching up. “So where are we going?”

John’s voice was conversational and some part of him was wondering why he wasn’t more upset that Sherlock had pulled him out of the middle of the ball, making him leave Sarah dateless.

“If we want to find anything out of the ordinary we have to do so before it disappears. We are going to check his changing booth.”

About twenty minutes later, John had shed both his fancy clothes as well as his human skin and was nose to the earth in front of the booth where Justin Hara had made his last shift. Sherlock was inside the booth, mouth open and drawing in air. John knew he did this when he was trying smell something faint.

<Find anything?> John asked.

<Irritation. All I can really smell is the human in here, from when they collected his things. My sense of smell isn’t as good as yours.> Sherlock said begrudgingly, which made John smile inwardly. <Is there anything out there?>

John sat back and scratched his ear.

<Not that I can smell. It rained this afternoon, though. Even if there was anything it would probably be washed away by now.>

<Disappointment. Come try in here.> Sherlock instructed and padded out onto the grass to give him room.

They’d pushed back the curtain so it was easy for John to cross into the sheltered room. He glued his nose to the ground and started sniffing. Sherlock was right, the smell was indeed primarily human, but John could also smell more, many faint Changing scents, most over a day old. Then he picked out an odd scent—reptilian. That must have been Justin’s, but there was one other, fresher, scent. It was faint but surely a mammalian smell—not human. He told all of this to Sherlock, who was watching, patiently for him, from the grass.

At first the panther said nothing, and John was about to ask when Sherlock stood.

<Fancy a run?> he finally asked simply.

John’s ears twitched then he rolled his shoulders. He’d already ruined the evening and he didn’t feel like going back to the dance anyway—in fact, until that moment he’d actually sort of forgotten about it.
<Sounds good.> John said, slinking after the dark shape, knowing it was pointless to try and get answers out of Sherlock if he wasn’t offering them.

<Don’t speak. I need to think.> was all Sherlock said as they passed the tree line.

John rolled his eyes but he did stay silent.

The next night John received a text requesting his presence in Baker Hall. He took one look at his unfinished maths coursework and stood with a sigh, shutting off his desk lamp. A few minutes later found John standing with his hands stuffed into his coat pockets in front of the huge black doors of Baker Grand Hall. At this hour the door should have been locked but John was rather unsurprised when the door swung open on his first attempt.

Once inside, he looked around the gloom, and even in the darkness John quickly picked out the shadow standing close to the far corridor, staring at the wall. John approached and when he got close enough to speak quietly and be heard, he greeted Sherlock.

“How did you get in here?” John asked.

Sherlock didn’t look away from the wall—the Wanderer’s Wall. He just held up a set of keys that jingled louder than John liked.

“Jesus, Sherlock, are those Greg’s?” John said, grievously.

Sherlock just nodded and leaned forward to study the newest addition to the wall, Justin Hara. His purple marker hung below his pictures. So he’d been a secondary student.

John mentally promised himself he’d have Greg’s keys back to him by morning and dismissed his concern for later.

“So why did you need me to join you in this break in?” John asked.

“I need you to shift,” Sherlock said simply.

John said nothing. Then Sherlock’s words sunk in.

“In here? No—why?”

Sherlock glared at him over his shoulder.

“Because, John, this is actually Justin’s marker, not a replacement. Wear is consistent with use on the outside, and the inside shows it was worn by something with scaled skin.”

John pursed his lips, trying to catch up, arms crossed over his chest.

“So… this was a normal Wandering? Why do I have to shift?”

Sherlock made a dismissive motion with his hand.

“Maybe—or maybe someone knew a missing marker would be noticed this time as it was last
time,” Sherlock hissed at John’s slowness. “I already shifted and tried gleaning something from the
smell but again, I can’t get anything but human off of it. I need you to check.”

“But—but I’d have to…”

John’s ears were red and he was acutely aware of their presence in a place that normally saw
hundreds of bodies passing through it constantly, not at all private. Sherlock shot him another
despairing glance.

“I’ll face the wall to protect your fragile decency. Just do it,” Sherlock said.

John only hesitated a moment more before sighing heavily and turning around.

“Fine,” he said.

He quickly undressed; shooting a glance over his shoulder to make sure Sherlock was still firmly
facing the wall before removing his pants. He didn’t know why he was being such a prude. It’s not
like he hadn’t undressed in front of blokes in locker rooms for years.

Once he was clothed in thick blonde fur he relaxed. He turned and padded towards Sherlock as
well as Justin’s memorial. When he was close, he bumped his muzzle against Sherlock’s leg,
telling him to move.

This was the first time they’d been like this, John shifted and Sherlock human, but just as it hadn’t
really bothered him on the night Sherlock slip-shifted, the dynamic didn’t really change, nor was
communication very hindered. It seemed when it came to them that nothing was dependent on
exactly how much hair, or how many feet, claws or tails they had.

Once he was centred, John reared back, blunt nails clicking loudly against the wall as he propped
himself up with his paws. From this position he could press his nose to the leather marker. Almost
immediately, Sherlock spoke.

“What do you smell? Focus on the—”

Sherlock cut off when John narrowed his eyes in the young genius’s direction.

_Calm down, I’m working on it_, the glance easily conveyed.

John went back to the marker and inhaled. The strongest scent was definitely reptile this time. This
was obviously Justin Hara’s marker. The next most prominent were the humans who had handled
it after he Wandered. John was about to conclude his assessment but then he realized there was
another scent. He pulled away to clear his nasal cavity and began sniffing over the entirety of the
purple leather. He finally figured it out when he passed over a spot where the scent was stronger. It
was the same mammalian scent he’d encountered in the changing booth.

With a curious cock of his head, John dropped back down to the tiled floor.

“What is it?” Sherlock asked, curiosity eating him alive as it was obvious to him that John had
found something.

John flicked his muzzle towards the wall and walked towards his clothes. Sherlock complied and
turned towards the wall. By the time John was clothed, Sherlock was bouncing lightly on the balls
of his feet.

“It’s the same as the booth,” John said and Sherlock whipped around, striding over to him,
encroaching on personal space.

“How exactly do you mean? It is vitally important, John,” Sherlock said, eyes painfully intense as he leaned over John, whose eyebrows furrowed in concentration.

“Well, it’s definitely Hara’s marker. On the surface it smells mostly like the people who retrieved it, but there’s that same faint non-human mammal smell there, too. Mostly on the one side,” John explained, indicating the top left side.

Sherlock spun away in an instant, arms flying up.

“How!” he exulted, spinning in a full circle.

John was officially lost but he was fairly sure it wasn’t socially acceptable to be this excited about whatever it was.

“What? What does it mean, Sherlock?”

Sherlock turned and grabbed both John’s shoulders, looking straight into his eyes. John was a little overwhelmed by the excited light in his eyes.

“It means, John, that something carried that marker back from the forest. It means he was wearing it! He was wearing his marker when it happened, John! Something Wanderers never do! Just the same as Lucy Heart. But they—it—knows the marker was missed last time so they brought it back!”

John shook his head and shut his eyes for a moment so he could think properly.

“What—wearing it when what happened?” he asked.

Sherlock smiled like a mad man.

“When he was taken, John. I don’t know how, and I don’t know why, but someone took Lucy Heart and Justin Hara and tried to make them look like Wanderings. And if I’m right, they won’t be the last.”
John had expected Sherlock to react much in the same way as he had when Lucy Heart disappeared, and this time he thought the staff would believe him. John knew he had no doubts in Sherlock’s deductions; he’d smelled the evidence with his own nose and he’d been prepared to testify in Sherlock’s defence this time, instead of just apologising for his insolence.

But the next morning John’s presence was not called upon and he started to worry Sherlock had gone without him, and if that was true his friend may not be a student at the Baker Institute by the end of the day. No matter how many times John told Sherlock that you can’t call the headmaster an ‘idiotic, blind oaf’ it never seemed to get through the alleged genius’s thick skull. However, when John rapped his knuckles in his characteristic three knocks against Sherlock’s door, a familiar low voice sounded from within. When he opened the door, John saw an unexpected sight, but honestly the unexpected was expected with Sherlock.

The Changeling sat in the middle of the floor with enough open files scattered about him to consume the entirety of the floor. All of the other experiments had been banished to his desk or the square metre space to its left. The bed was also mostly covered in stacks of yet more files. Sherlock’s laptop was open to his right and his mobile was in reach. He glanced up at John but made no other greeting. He looked from his open laptop, to a file, and back.

“I thought you’d be under the feet of any professor who’d listen to you by now,” John said, trying to read the contents of the file closest to him. “What’s all this?”

“I am not going to the faculty this time. It was a mistake to even bother in the first place,” Sherlock said, without looking up, pulling a file from near the foot of the bed. “And these are the files of every student Wandering in the past ten years.”

John’s eyebrows rose, focusing on the first part.

“You aren’t going to the faculty? Why not?” John asked. “Don’t they need to know about the fact that students are being taken?”

Sherlock quickly typed something before answering.

“It wouldn’t do any good. If they believed me, which they probably won’t because they are idiots, they could only go to the police. There would be far too much incompetence getting in my way if that were to happen. The lowest department with the specialised ability to handle a case so centred around Changelings is Scotland Yard and I don’t have enough data or evidence to get them to pay any attention to the case whatsoever. No, I will work this out…” Sherlock trailed off, eyes narrowing at the result on his screen.

John pressed his lips together in silence for a moment, processing. Someone had to figure this out and stop it, that John knew, and at his age and with his upbringing his instinct was to tell someone who could do something about it—the police, the professors—but Sherlock was right. At this point those who could do anything would most likely laugh at a couple of teenagers with a handful of circumstantial evidence. And no matter how much John teased Sherlock on a daily basis; he truly believed that if anyone could figure this out it was his arrogant, genius of a best friend.

So instead of scolding, John merely nodded once. Sherlock noticed and gave him a long glance before going back to his work, something like approval in his eyes. John would help however he could.
“So, how did you get all these? Oh, and why?” John asked, realizing there was a more important question to ask.

Sherlock retrieved another file.

“I had Mycroft send them,” he said.

John chuckled.

“What did you have to pay for that little favour?” John asked, having learned a lot more about Mycroft Holmes in the past months.

Mycroft would never let an opportunity to get something from his younger brother pass him by. John knew his assessment was correct when Sherlock cast him a narrow eyed glare over the top of his laptop.

“I have to attend Mummy’s dinner party next month…” he said, with a disgusted curl of his lips.

John laughed and picked up the biochemistry textbook he’d left in Sherlock’s room yesterday, which had been pushed into the corner of the room since then to make room for Sherlock’s new project.

“And you need all these files to…?” John prompted once more as he began to carefully pick a path towards Sherlock’s bed.

“I need to know if this has ever happened before…” Sherlock said.

John’s head turned toward his friend in surprise.

“What? False Wanderings? You think that’s a possibility?” John asked as he moved one stack of files to create a John-sized space to sit against Sherlock’s head board.

Sherlock nodded and closed one file, opening another. John let that sink in before pushing himself onto the soft duvet, careful not to disturb the precarious stacks.

“Anything I can do to help?” John asked as he settled back.

“No…” Sherlock said simply, staring into the laptop screen.

Alright,” John said, unfazed, knowing Sherlock wouldn’t hesitate to call upon him when he was needed, and then he opened his biochemistry book.

John was no longer seeing Sarah. They still sat together in biochem, with Molly, but with how busy he was… and the fact that Sherlock’s growing focus on the disappearance of Lucy Heart and Justin Hara was making him more neglectful of basic human needs than ever just made it worse. John never thought he would have to try so hard to keep another human being from accidentally starving to death.

Sherlock’s frustration was fed by the fact that progress was slow with the files. Wanderings were such an accepted and culturally significant part of Changeling life that the documentation on them
was weak. The events were supposed to be treated with reverence, not scrutiny. John knew this and how much it infuriated Sherlock because he had been subjected to more than one rant on the subject. He’d woken up to one just the other day. He really didn’t know how Sherlock kept getting into his room when it was locked.

John didn’t realize how fast approaching winter term was until one morning, towards the end of autumn. He was eating breakfast alone before his first lecture when Mike entered the dining hall and sat down across from him. He looked worn far too thin, thick bags under bloodshot eyes.

“Morning, Mike,” John greeted, and Mike nodded in return. “You okay? You look like hell.”

Mike rubbed his eyes and then the back of his head, looking a little awkward.

“Umm, yeah. Actually, I wanted to talk to you about just that,” he said, leaning lightly from side to side.

John cocked his head to the side and set down his tea.

“What?” John asked, utterly confused.

Mike looked like he was struggling with an internal conflict, fingers drumming uneasily on the table.

“Please, dear god, switch rooms with me when winter term starts!” Mike blurted suddenly. “Look I know it’s a lot to ask and I don’t want you to feel obliged to say yes but you’re with Sherlock constantly anyway and you seem to possess some magical ability to put up with him but I just can’t do it anymore!”

He finished, going a little limp. John understood now. Mike looked like hell because he was only getting as much sleep as Sherlock, which was not enough for any normal human being to survive on. No wonder Mike seemed like he was about to have a psychotic breakdown.

“Sure, I’ll switch with you,” John said with a light chuckle.

Mike looked abashed.

“Really?” he said, eyes wide.

Honestly, John knew it probably wouldn’t be good for his sleep schedule either but he highly doubted the hallway had ever made a difference in Sherlock’s infringements upon his time. Even so, John himself was a little surprised at the fact that the idea barely even seemed a little daunting. All he currently thought was that if he moved he could just yell at Sherlock through the wall to get him to go to sleep instead of having to walk down the hall.

John shrugged.

“I’ve developed enough of a tolerance for his violin,” John said, cutting a bite sized piece off the breakfast sausage on his plate.

Plus, if John had an exam or anything else highly important to do on a given day he had no qualms about confiscating the young Changeling’s bow altogether the night prior. Sherlock had yet to figure out a way to make the little instrument produce a loud enough sound to keep anyone up without it thus far.

It would be fine—good, John thought.
For Mike’s part, he looked like he was about to dissolve into relieved sobs.

“Oh, god, mate, you have no idea how much I owe you for this,” he said, going nearly boneless in his seat. “Thank you so much.”

John laughed again, taking a sip of his tea.

“No problem, mate,” he chuckled, hoping he wouldn’t regret this.

Just a few weeks later John’s days changed once more as winter term brought new classes as well as a new room. John still wasn’t sure how Sherlock felt about him taking Mike’s old room. When John told him, Sherlock had been working on the new wall dedicated to the Wanderers’ Case. He had said nothing but he did pause to look at John with narrowed eyes, then over to the adjacent room, before a little smirk bloomed on his lips and he went back to his work. John forced back the concern over the fact that Sherlock was pleased with this development and that was a very bad sign for him.

Also on the list of new things, this term John was taking two courses that would never be seen outside of an Institute. The first was a required course named “Changelings: An Introduction and History.” By the students at Baker it was dubbed, with varying levels of affection, simply “Intro.” Every Changeling to come through the Institute was required to take this course their first Winter Term. They only had it once a year to make sure there were enough new Changelings to fill a class. This was unfortunate for John for two reasons. First, he was a spring shift. The course was supposed to be taken as a way to inform new students about facts of Changeling life that they might find useful. Having been at the Institute for over seven months now meant that most of this was already common knowledge to John. The other aspect of the course, the history, would have made the class worth taking in John’s opinion, if it wasn’t so completely and totally outweighed by the other factor that severely reduced John’s enthusiasm for the course. Since it was the first Winter Term of any new Institute Changeling this meant John would be in a class with children, no older than fifteen and possibly as young as eight.

It was as bad as John expected. He received no shortage of interested looks when he first entered the room. They probably thought he had come to discuss something with Professor Highland, who also taught most of the university level Changeling Studies courses, but instead he sat at a desk in the very back row of the classroom and tried to ignore the heads twisting in his direction. He had been tempted to remove the blue striped tie that marked him as university student but that in itself would have tagged him as a much older student. Besides, there was no way anyone was going to mistake him for a secondary student for one minute… even if a few of them were taller than John.

God damn his vertically challenged genes.

The other class John was taking was far more enjoyable, as well as probably the strangest course John ever had or ever would take. The class was a course on shift-speech. It was only offered to university students and most students who took it radically increased their ability to communicate in shifted form. John had seen the proof in Molly and Greg, who had taken the course last term.

The class did not take place in any of the many buildings on Baker’s campus but instead it was held in a sheltered amphitheatre located in the forest just past B Wing. It was used for a few courses like this one, as well as theatre groups and performances.
The professor for John’s class was an owl, a great grey shift, to be precise. This was because the course was taught in shifted form. Along the benches sat Changelings of all shapes and sizes. It was obvious that the amphitheatre had been constructed to allow for this arrangement. There were normal, wide benches towards the bottom, where most small to midsized shifts could manage to sit comfortably. Right at the front there was an open area for those whose shifts were too small to get up on the normal benches. Along the back there was also an area free of benches, just shallow raised steps where Changelings with larger shifts could stand or sit according to their preference. All about there were stretches of textured bars where avian shifts of varying sizes could perch comfortably.

John understood why this class was only offered to university students on the first day of class as he slunk into the amphitheatre behind a spotted, pot-bellied pig. Even when the professor alighted down onto the perch at the front of the theatre and announced herself as Professor Tidwell, and the class attempted to quiet themselves, the clearing still hummed with the sounds of claws on wood, feathers rustling, the panting of canines, an equine snort. John could not even begin to image the disaster that would be this amphitheatre filled with secondary students, or—heaven forbid—primary students. It would be absolute chaos.

When John had told Sherlock about the course, the Changeling had been confused as to why he was bothering to take it. When John explained that just because they could speak fluently in shifted form didn’t mean he wasn’t interested in being able to talk to other people as well, the young genius only became more baffled and John gave up on explaining it to him.

A week or so into winter term John was woken up at around one o’clock at night by the creak of his door opening. The light from the hallway hurt his eyes as he blearily tried to make out the visitor. However, it wasn’t as if he didn’t already know who it was.

“Sherlock?” John mumbled, shielding his eyes. “What is it?”

Wordlessly his friend entered the room, door swinging shut behind him as he grabbed the rarely used quilt folded at the bottom of John’s bed as well as the spare pillow behind John’s head, causing his head to fall unceremoniously backwards.

“Hey!” John complained indignantly, as Sherlock spread the blanket on John’s floor. “What are you doing?”

“I want to lie down. My bed is covered in files.”

Sherlock placed the pillow on the ground and ungracefully flopped back, settling on his back, palms resting on his chest.

“Well clear them off,” John said, irritated at being woken up but knowing that there was no chance of Sherlock leaving now.

Sherlock ignored him, as John expected.

“It’s been happening for five years.”

Sherlock’s voice was quiet and awake. In the gloom John could see him staring up at the ceiling.
John rubbed his eyes once more and turned on the lamp on his bedside table.

“What’s been happening for five years?”

Sherlock looked at him from under dark lashes. Then suddenly all attempts at feigned peace were abandoned and he popped up off the ground like a ping-pong ball pressed under water and then released.

“Until five years ago, one to two Changelings at each Institute in Britain wandered per year. Historically the average combined student Wanderings was anywhere from 35 to 45 per annum. Five years ago that average jumped from 42, six years ago, to 51, five years ago, and it has hovered between 46 and 57 per annum since then,” Sherlock said, wild light in his eyes, seeing the numbers in the air in front of him.

John was too tired to process at a high enough speed to hope to keep up with Sherlock tonight so he didn’t even pause before prompting an explanation.

“What does that mean, Sherlock?”

Sherlock flopped down again, and John was afraid he’d hurt himself, but he seemed fine.

“It means that in the past five years there have been about ten more Wanderings each year than the historic average. The higher numbers don’t come from specific Institutes but all of them, the increase spread out over a number of Institutes, and which Institutes show an increase changes each year. It’s never the same. I have checked the statistics of neighbouring countries and no such rise in Wanderings is detectable…” Sherlock’s eyes were wide and John was looking over the side of the bed, watching when he looked up to meet John’s gaze. “John, it means in the past five years over fifty British Changelings have been taken, killed, stolen, I don’t know… but they were made to look like Wanderings and nobody has noticed…”

John couldn’t speak for a moment. He just stared, Sherlock’s blue eyes never wavering from John’s. The idea that such a horrible thing could be occurring without the notice of officials… under the guise of something nearly sacred was a hard thing to swallow.

Sherlock finally looked away, rolling back onto his back.

“John… there’s something else…” he murmured.

There was more? How could there be more?

“What?” John’s voice came out hushed.

Sherlock’s eyes narrowed.

“My immediate guess to the culprits of such an act would be a group of Normals… there are still multitudes of anti-Changeling hate groups. It’s happened before, such groups targeting Institutes. Not as elaborately as this but it is a logical possibility except…” Sherlock trailed, head cocking to the side, as if something was actually hard to understand, even for him.

“Except what, Sherlock?” John asked, his hands fist in his duvet.

Sherlock looked up at him, something like wonder in his face.

“There are Changelings involved, John. I don’t know how much, or if it’s willing participation, or coerced, but it was a Changeling that returned Justin Hara’s marker to his changing booth.
Changelings are a part of this,” Sherlock said, light sparking in his eyes.

John shook his head, amazed that Sherlock had figured all this out. His confidence in his decision not to try and make Sherlock leave the case to the staff or police was solidified. They would have never figured all this out, but there was still so much they didn’t know.

“What are we going to do?” John asked.

Sherlock smiled and John’s stomach twisted a little uncomfortably because he hated it when Sherlock forgot about actual lives, which he was obviously doing now.

“We’re going to figure out how and why this is happening, and catch whoever is doing it,” Sherlock said gleefully.

“And save the false Wanderers if they are alive, right, Sherlock?” John asked, with a stern set to his face.

Sherlock rolled his eyes and made a dismissive hand motion with his ‘agreeable’ nod, which infuriated John to no end.

“Sherlock, there could be lives at stake. At least pretend you care about that,” John scolded.

The young genius looked up at John with disdain.

“Caring about them won’t help save them,” Sherlock said.

Sometimes, John really just didn’t understand him. He shook his head, trying not to admit to himself that it hurt to hear Sherlock say things like this for reasons John didn’t understand.

“That’s… that’s not the point,” John said wearily.

Sherlock pushed himself up onto his elbow and looked at John defiantly.

“Well then what is the point, John?”

John opened his mouth to respond but found he had no words to explain himself and he was just tired. He let the anger fall off his face.

“I—no, fine. Never mind. Just go to sleep, Sherlock. I’m sure you’ll work out what’s happening soon,” John said, turning the light off, leaving them both in the dark.

There was nothing for a while and John thought Sherlock might actually be going to sleep, or at least allowing John to do so, even if he doubted he would sleep for a good while now, not with how uncomfortably twisted his stomach was, but then there was a very faint twitch against his mind.

“I’ve disappointed you,” Sherlock said softly in the darkness. “I can feel it.”

Sherlock almost sounded troubled. John sighed in the dark.

“Maybe a bit,” John said, honestly. “But it’s okay. I shouldn’t expect you to feel something just because I think you should.”

He said the words but the tight knot of unease at Sherlock’s apparent disregard for human life still resided in his chest. There was silence and suddenly John knew Sherlock was troubled. He could picture the scowl on his face even in the dark. He was troubled and confused.
“I’m… sorry?” Sherlock’s hesitant and unsure voice escaped into the room.

The knot loosened and John rolled his eyes, even if his friend couldn’t see that. Maybe Sherlock cared about something at least. John shut his eyes and pulled his duvet tighter around him.

“It’s okay, Sherlock. You’re still brilliant,” John murmured, sleep and disposition making him frank.

Sherlock said nothing, but the displeasure John had sensed previously disappeared, and was replaced with a surprised pleasure. A light smile played on John’s lips that shouldn’t have been there for a number of reasons but remained as he slipped into unconsciousness.
<Whoever is orchestrating this is clever, John. And I don’t mean your average clever, like you or even Irene, but me clever.>

Sherlock dug his claws into the gnarled bark of the tree where he was resting and pulled, stretching his back before flopping back down onto the thick branch.

<And I know you don’t like it when I admire criminals but just take a moment to at least realise what it would take to pull off a continued operation like this.>

Sherlock began to lick the inside of his forepaw as he spoke. He sensed a light flash of annoyance from his friend but he didn’t respond so Sherlock continued.

<I mean just the act of rotating between schools like that, making the jump in average Wanderings almost invisible because it was spread over all twenty six Institutes in Great Britain. On top of that, whoever is doing this has managed to make the false Wanderings so similar to true Wanderings that not even I could tell you which of the two hundred and forty six student Wanderings in the past five years were faked because there is no defining difference among them that I can find. They even get fevers, John! Do you realize the brilliance that would take, John?>

Finally, John responded, but not in the way Sherlock wanted.

<Sherlock, that’s all very lovely but do you know how hard it is to try and speak to an unfamiliar speech partner with you jabbering in my ear… brain… whatever. Frustration.>

Sherlock rolled his eyes and looked through the winter-thin foliage that separated him from the Huxley Amphitheatre where his friend was currently trying to have what looked like pathetic excuse for a conversation with a grey goose.

<I still don’t know why you feel the need to take this class…> Sherlock grumbled from the trees.

It was a waste of time in Sherlock’s opinion. He and John could already speak fluently and Sherlock could speak well enough to strangers. However, this was at least a better waste of time than Sarah had been.

Sherlock felt the distinct spark of irritation as the basics of his feelings on the subject slipped over the connection between their minds.

He had been more and more lax on keeping up the solid wall around his mind lately, and that combined with the way the channel was always widening it seemed there wasn’t a whole lot that wasn’t heard when they were in shifted form. Sherlock still had the ability to clamp down on most of his thoughts but usually he couldn’t be bothered.

Despite Sherlock’s outward apparent inattention to the open bond between John and himself he was certainly making notes on it. How could he not when it was leaking out into their human forms?
And that part especially was growing as of late.

Sherlock laid his head against his paws, eyes trained on the blonde wolf who seemed to actually be trying to gesticulate with his paws. Sherlock understood what he was trying to say but the goose looked totally lost.

Despite his recent lapse in mental security, Sherlock did keep these notes from John. It’s not that he exactly worried about how John would react to the knowledge of their… particular uniqueness, but even if John was better and more tolerable than anyone else Sherlock knew, he still fostered certain pedestrian habits and feelings that Sherlock honestly didn’t feel like correcting—that was all.

Sherlock’s tail was waving in agitation by this point. He was bored. God, why was the world so dull sometimes? Well, the case of the Wanderers was interesting but it was slow work. It was similar to waiting to catch a serial killer—actually it might be a serial killer for all he knew at this point. Either way, it meant there was something to look forward to, and that was promising...

John had been pointedly ignoring him but Sherlock felt a flash of angry disapproval at that. Sherlock’s ears flattened and he turned his head away—sulking. This went on for at least three minutes before Sherlock got bored of even that.


<Dear god, Sherlock, stop that! I can’t even focus. Don’t you have a class or something?> John said wearily.

Sherlock’s tail swished back and forth.

<No.> he said simply.

He only had two lectures today and he’d already finished them.

There was a general groan from John, partially because of Sherlock, partly because he didn’t want to be in class right now. He and the goose had no affinity for each other and the conversation was failing miserably. Sherlock could tell and he jumped on the opportunity.

<John, let’s go to Meriden Pond.>

Even from this distance Sherlock saw John’s ears flick in response.

<Why? And what part of ‘I am in class right now’ don’t you understand?> His tone was annoyed but Sherlock didn’t miss the undercurrent of temptation.

<I want to see if the toads have begun to hibernate yet, since we had a cold autumn.> Sherlock said, basically ignoring John’s second question. <You are going to switch conversation partners again in a moment. Slip into the woods when Professor Tidwell isn’t looking. You have an odd number of students in your class. You won’t be missed.>

John was now equally irritated and interested. Still, John had a frustrating streak of responsibility.

<Give me one good reason why we can’t go just as easily after class?> John asked.

Sherlock’s claws sunk violently into the tree bark, making it crack, and a light snarl curled his lips as his eyes narrowed.
<BORED!> he positively shouted at John.

Sherlock felt him sigh internally.

<Jesus, you are like a child sometimes…>

Sherlock would have come up with a scathing retort but despite his words, they were switching partners now, and John was glancing over at Professor Tidwell, ears pricked forward in attention. Then with a single bound John dropped off the bench he’d been occupying and slipped behind an oak tree with his head slunk low.

Ears twitching in pleasure, Sherlock rose and stretched once more before dropping to the forest floor to meet John, who was trying to look disapproving but his tail was waving just slightly back and forth, betraying him completely. He’d told John that class was stupid.

John was usually a good student. In most classes he tried to keep useful notes and he always did his coursework. However, he would admit he was putting no more than minimum necessary effort into his Intro to Changelings course. To be fair, he paid attention when Professor Highland discussed the history of Changelings, but that was mostly stuff they were going to be learning in the second half of the course. So currently John was just bored out of his mind, day by day listening to the lists of things that could go horribly wrong if a shift form wasn’t exercised frequently enough and that slip shifting was nothing to be ashamed of.

Professor Highland was a middle aged serval cat shift, and a good man. He seemed to take pity on John and never called on him to answer questions in front of the class, not drawing attention to him, and he never told John off the few times he’d fallen asleep in class. For this, John would be eternally grateful. Without anyone’s help there was already a freckly, redheaded primary girl who had taken to staring unabashedly at him for long periods of time.

This week’s lecture had all been about shift speech, which was especially mind numbing because of the whole other class John was taking on that subject alone. So by Friday John came in to class fully prepared for a possible nap when he noticed the subject of today’s lecture was projected onto the screen from a powerpoint.

Atypical Shift Speech and Open Bonds, it read.

John decided he would pay attention in class today. It couldn’t hurt.

For the first half of class Professor Highland discussed abnormal shift speech and related disorders. That in itself was rather interesting and John actually took notes on the different shift speech syndromes. Apparently there were certain individuals who lacked the ability to use shift speech at all, and others who never progressed past the conveyance of basic feelings and emotions. There were even very, very rarely people who could broadcast shift speak, but couldn’t receive it. John passively took notes until a new slide with a familiar title popped up on screen above the image of a yin-yang. This was the first thing that sent up sparks in John’s reservoir of instincts. Professor Highland cleared his throat, adjusted his tie, and then began the second half of his lecture.

“Depending on whether you have come from a Changeling or Normal household, you may or may
not have heard of open bonds,” the man started. “From a scientific standpoint, an open bond is characterized by the intrinsic ability of two Changelings to speak fluently to one another from their first encounter in shifted form, regardless of the original familiarity of the individuals, their experience with shift speech, or their maturity. Opened bonded individuals also have been known to possess a light empathetic link while in shifted form.”

For a moment John felt confident. That was almost word for word what Sherlock had told him last summer. Then John’s heart rapidly sunk, with his faith in Sherlock’s honesty, as he realized there were still twenty minutes left in the lecture and Professor Highland looked far from through. He cleared his throat once more, and John twisted his fingers around his pencil in unease.

“However, the cultural and historic significance of the open bond far outweighs any scientific definition created in the modern day,” Professor Highland said with a wry smile towards a few girls who began giggling at that statement.

Oh, no. John didn’t like that either, not one bit. What did those blushing school girls know that he didn’t?

“The open bond is the root of more cultural motifs and traditions than one can count. In nearly every culture there is a concept of rare instances where two people fit each other better than they possibly could with any other person on the planet. The stories vary but at their hearts they all possess this characteristic. Most anthropologists, historians and the like agree that all of these beliefs originated from the occurrence of open bonds in Changelings—the truth behind the myths, so to speak.

“For the Greeks it was one of the legends of the origins of mankind. Humans were originally created with two heads, four arms, and four legs, but Zeus feared that they were too powerful and might overpower the gods. So, he split them each in two, dooming them to spend their lives searching for their other half. The Greeks believed that when two Changelings had an open bond it was because they found their other half, and they had no communication barrier because they were originally part of the same being.

“In Eastern and Taoist cultures it is the source of the yin and yang motif,” Professor Highland said and paused to pull up a larger picture of the symbol.

John just sat back in his chair, a little limp and wide eyed. It was a lot to process, and Highland wasn’t even finished.

“Yin and Yang, two entities fitting together, different, even opposite, forces, but in perfect balance with one another. Even the symbol denotes these attributes. Each side in such stark contrast with the other, yet still each containing elements of the opposite,” he said, first indicating the locked tear drops and then the spots at their cores, the same colour as the shape in which they were twisted into. “Creating one whole.”

The girls giggled again and John wanted to strangle them. This wasn’t funny. How could they possibly think this was funny!? This was serious!

“While not inherently romantic by nature,” Professor Highland began and John dropped his head into his hand with a mumbled ‘Jesus Christ.’ “In western society it is, without a doubt, the origin of the term Soul Mate.”

With that final blow to the entire established structure of John’s life, he resolved to kill Sherlock Holmes. The bastard didn’t think when he asked he might want to know all this? Might have been a little goddamned useful! At least now he understood his friends’ reactions to Sarah and his other
decisions over the past four months.

Professor Highland went on, moving away from the whole soul mate business to less concerning aspects of open bonds—how or why they might happen and John slowly but surely calmed himself down from homicidal. Only at the very end of the lecture did the professor say another little fact that was notable but currently overshadowed by John’s slow recover from having the rug pulled completely out from under him and being thrown on his metaphorical arse. It was at the tail end of a discussion on the empathetic link between open bonded individuals.

“The empathetic link can be found in varying strengths dependent on the Changelings and the strength of the open bond, and is said to grow over time. While it hasn’t been proven, it has been rumoured and alluded to in ancient documents that there actually used to be bonds so powerful that Changelings could feel the empathetic link in human form. However, this is speculation so when the question comes up on your mock exam on Monday don’t be confused!”

Half the class groaned, accepting that just because of that statement they were missing a question on their mock exam, and with a flourish Professor Highland turned off the projector and the lecture was over. John hesitated for a moment as the crashes and clatters of other students leaving rose up around him. Then he lurched upright, heading directly for the front of the classroom.

Professor Highland looked up and smiled as John approached. He was slipping his course materials into his brown, leather bag.

“Hello, Mr. Watson. You seemed to get more out of this lecture than most of the others. Did you find it interesting?” he asked.

Well, that was the understatement of the year.

“Oh, um, yeah,” John said eloquently.

John really wasn’t sure how to begin. Professor Highland helped him out.

“Anything I can help you with?” he said with a grin.

John wasn’t even sure what he wanted to ask about. He shifted his weight from one leg to the other.

“You said open bonds were very rare… I am just curious exactly how rare? I mean have you ever known someone with one?” John finally asked, hands stuffed in his jacket pockets.

Professor Highland adjusted his glasses.

“Well, I have known about a few over the years. We have a higher possibility of seeing them, working at the Institutes, just because so many Changelings rotate through,” he explained.

A little hope flared in John. Maybe it wasn’t such a big deal after all.

“Is there anyone at the Institute with one now?” John asked, consciously having to stop himself from saying ‘anyone else.’

Professor Highland swung his bag over his shoulder and smiled fondly.

“Well as a matter of fact there is, and has been for a good while now—a good friend of mine, Professor Raine in the English department,” he explained.
This was good!

“Who does she have it with?” John asked brightly.

Professor Highland laughed, soft smile on his face, and that expression did not bode well. Already John’s heart was sinking.

“Well, today he’s her husband of over twenty years. They got married as soon as they graduated from the Institute.”

Yeah, the hope was all gone. John Watson was royally screwed.

John had meant to confront Sherlock right away over his deliberate—because it had to be deliberate—exclusion of knowledge, but instead he’d run into him right after class, and the young genius had fired off into one of his rants, or maybe it had been a rave. John hadn’t been paying very close attention. Once he was in the face of the confrontation he had no idea what to say.

‘Hey, Sherlock, why the fuck didn’t you see fit to inform me that we are bloody soul mates?’ had a nice ring to it but he found himself unable to force those words out into the open, fearing what the answer might be.

So John did the only logical thing an eighteen year old boy could do—say nothing and let it build up until he cracked, literally in John’s case.

Two days after professor Highland’s enlightening lecture, a Sunday, John sat in his usual place at the head of Sherlock’s bed with his laptop, answering a few emails from his Normal friends back home. He didn’t talk to them a lot but he’d at least kept up his goal of keeping in touch. One or two emails per term.

Sherlock was working on his own version of the Wanderers’ Wall. The files had been moved into a set of precarious stacks in the corner as Sherlock seemed to have gotten almost all the use he could out of them. The wall across from the bed was the object of Sherlock’s attention. It was the most uninterrupted expanse in the room originally, but now it was the home of an giant map of Great Britain and over that were photographs, names, notes, dates and an excessive amount of string that connected it all in ways that only made sense to Sherlock Holmes.

John knew he’d managed to slightly narrow down which of the Wanderings of the past five years were faked but he was still left with over half the original total, and even those were chosen on precarious speculation. John also knew Sherlock was running out of ideas and that was making him irritable. John was worried they were coming to a dead end.

John was irritable as well but for very different reasons, and with the empathetic link it was creating a nasty feedback loop and just made it worse. The combination meant they’d been bickering all weekend, and yet somehow John had ended up in here after rugby practice. He was starting to believe he was a masochist because being here certainly wasn’t making John any less tense.

He should really just bring it up and get it over with. I mean, it wasn’t going to change anything, right? Because that was what scared John most about this whole thing. Sherlock handled emotional
issues even worse than John did, which at this point gave them the overall emotional maturity of a five year old—perfect balance John’s arse… No, it would be fine. He was going to say something.

John was so engrossed in the thoughts about his problem that he made the fatal mistake of forgetting that his problem was in the room with him. So when John heard a voice not a half meter above his head, it was safe to say he was more than a little shocked.

“John, I need your laptop.”

He was right there. John’s head snapped up to see a curly mass of brunette hair headed straight for him. In his jumpy state John was not equipped to deal with surprise, not one bit.

“Son of a—” he began but the sentence never made it all the way out.

There were actually many factors that probably contributed. John was still a fairly young Changeling and though his control was remarkably good, he never went over four days without a trip into the woods and today was day three. Maybe it was the stress, and the shock was just enough to trigger what none of the factors could have caused alone.

The laptop fell, clattering against the wall, thankfully not falling to the floor. Fabric ripped and a surprised, inhuman yelp replaced the end of his curse. As always it was over in less than a second and John was instinctively twisting to right himself on the yielding bedclothes. A little disoriented, John shook his head.

“John, are you okay?” a mildly surprised voice said from his right.

John sighed heavily. He was fine, but annoyed and a fair bit embarrassed. He looked up at Sherlock and gave a light short bark to say his was fine. Sherlock’s face was slack and calm, his blue eyes were a little wide but really John was just thinking about getting off the bed and making Sherlock let him into his own room so he could relax for a while and then shift back, but as his eyes slid towards the floor they passed over something that made his heart absolutely stop.

Sherlock was wearing a black button up today, and had rolled the sleeves up past his elbows hours ago, as he often did when he was working on something. John’s eyes were now glued to four angry, parallel lines marring the pale skin of his forearm.

John’s stomach roiled as he realized where they had come from. Slip shifts weren’t very controlled… He’d been in such an awkward position…

His heart stuttered back to life but with it came the images of scars, and maybe it was the stress but John will admit he may have panicked.

Oh, fuck. Dear god, no! Fuck… fuck!

He lunged forward without even thinking about it, a pained, hateful whine leaking from his mouth. What had he done? He’d hurt Sherlock. And then he was licking him, warm, wet tongue making broad, sweeping strokes over the offending marks. He wanted to erase them. He didn’t know why he was doing it but the instinct was overpowering.

“Oh, my God!?”

Jesus Christ! I’m sorry! Fuck, fuck, fuck…

“J—John, stop. It’s okay, stop! Look!” Sherlock said pulling away and finally John let himself look. “They’re just welts, John. They’ll disappear in an hour or so.”
John stared, and then blinked twice. Sherlock was right they were actually more pink than red. There wasn’t even any blood. John had gotten worse from wrestling with the neighbour’s dog. He’d thought...

John’s head went limp with relief, ears drooping. Seriously, what was wrong with him?

He hesitated a moment and then turned away. He moved to the end of the bed and collapsed with a heavy sigh. He curled up in a little ball. John knew he was basically sulking but Sherlock did it all the time and it was his turn.

Sherlock didn’t say anything, but John felt the bed dip as Sherlock climbed onto it and heard the sound of his laptop being retrieved. Trust Sherlock to be unfazed by an episode like this. He was just going to go on with whatever he’d been doing before John exploded into a furry, clawed beast —crazy git.

John was thankful. And at least he had an excuse not to bring up the open bond now.

His back was towards Sherlock so John was taken completely by surprise when a pair of long feet wormed their way under his ribcage. He twisted, head turned over his shoulder, question obvious. Sherlock glanced up to meet his gaze, face clear.

“My feet were cold,” he explained.

John’s ears flattened, deadpan expression in his eyes.

“Think of it as atonement for scratching me,” Sherlock said, going back to John’s laptop, keyboard clicking. “You seemed quite concerned earlier.”

Wanker, John thought, and narrowed his eyes at Sherlock but it was lost on him as the young genius didn’t seem to be paying him any mind. The computer screen cast blue light onto Sherlock’s face and made him look even thinner and more frail than usual. No wonder he was cold; he didn’t have a gram of fat on him.

Another, lighter sigh slipped from his wolf lungs and he rolled his eyes before laying his head back down on his paws. The feet wiggled even further under him and John actually leaned back, ensuring they were covered completely.

Two hours later Sherlock finally rose from the bed, pushing John from his light doze at the foot of the bed. He could have changed back an hour and a half ago but he’d been revelling in the inability to speak. This was because John knew he had to say something now. One of them had to be a grown up.

Sherlock stretched and John looked back over his shoulder at his best friend. Sherlock narrowed his eyes towards his Wanderer’s wall, obviously blaming it for not giving him something useful.

“Want to go to the forest?” he asked.

Sherlock often went to the forest when he was stumped with a problem. The clarity it gave him often cleared a path to the solution. Though, thus far, no matter how many trips they took, no solution seemed to be found under the trees.

John rolled his shoulders and rose to his feet, messing up Sherlock’s duvet as he took his turn to stretch. Sherlock knew this was a yes.
“No reason to bother using changing booths when you are already shifted. I’ll just shift here and we can leave the door cracked,” Sherlock said, walking over to make sure the door was lightly cracked and they could get out.

John made another short bark-huff of agreement and turned towards the door to give Sherlock some privacy.

He knew when Sherlock shifted, the familiar widening of feeling that always accompanied it alerted him. In response he made sure to hold his thoughts a little closer to his chest than normal. It had taken time but John had eventually learned how to keep his thoughts in his head, but it was difficult, and not a natural instinct for him. Reason number two why he needed to just get this over with.

The familiar black shape brushed past him. A set of hooked claws made easy work of widening the crack into an exit for them. They headed down the west staircase that was right next to Sherlock’s room. There had been a reason John had never run into Sherlock his first few weeks at the Institute. The west staircase was closer to John’s room and led almost directly to the dining hall which made it more popular, but since Sherlock rarely ate, and certainly not at regular times, he’d rarely used that staircase before he and John became friends.

The dormitories were very Changeling friendly and for that John was thankful. Most doors swung both directions so it was easy to push through and one could, for the most part, get around without opposable thumbs.

When they made it out into the open night John was surprised to see fluffy white puffs of snow drifting towards the earth. It was going to be a long winter.

Once they were under the trees of Baker Forest they began to wander aimlessly. Sherlock was quiet, thinking, as was John. He was just going to say it—just do it.

<So… I had an interesting lecture in Intro last Friday…> John began.

Sherlock’s ears twitched.

<Interesting? What about? I thought that class bored you to tears.>

John steeled himself.

<It was about open bonds.>

It was very, very tiny, but John swore Sherlock’s tail flicked, indicating some form of emotional response to that.

<Oh… that explains why you’ve been acting so strange over the past few days.>

So Sherlock had noticed. Of course he did, and he knew that would make John act strange. John hadn’t expected that.

<What do you mean?> he asked.

They were walking side by side so John didn’t miss the panther’s wearing eye-roll.

<Professor Highland is an intelligent and passionate man but he is also a hopeless romantic.>

Sherlock definitely knew what was bothering John then. A little faith in his humanity was restored
in John.

<Are you saying all that stuff he said isn’t true? About the… the—legends and stuff,> John asked, unable to actually utter any of those horrible words Professor Highland had used.

<No, the histories are true. The open bond did inspire most of those legends,> Sherlock amended and John’s stomach dropped. <But just because they evolved from the open bonds doesn’t mean an open bond is all of those things. We evolved from single celled aquatic organisms, but that doesn’t make me an amoeba.>

Sherlock said the words with certainty, and a calm that made it sound like everything John thought was pleasantly wrong and that it was all fine and right after all. He let that sink in for a moment, paws crunching on the freezing ground. This was good. Sherlock was right. He’d been overreacting the whole time. He let his eyes fall closed for a moment, trusting the sound of Sherlock’s footsteps not to lead them into anything solid.

<I… I hadn’t thought about it like that,> John said.

Sherlock snorted.

<Of course not; you’re an idiot.>

A wheezy laugh escaped John and he nipped the panther’s furry ear.

<Arse,> John said, as he did so.

Sherlock’s head snapped away in surprise.

<Ow!> he complained, but John knew he was mostly just whining.

The panther narrowed his eyes and sped up, out of biting range. John laughed again, utter relief flooding through his system, and trotted forward through the falling white flakes to keep up.

But that was sort of the problem with all this; John wanted to believe Sherlock far too badly. He wanted that to be the truth, but if he ever looked back on this moment he would one day have to admit to himself that he felt the undercurrent below Sherlock’s words, and in those deeper waters was an absolute and blinding fear.

Sherlock was even more afraid of this than John was.
Chapter End Notes

Art by feedellie.tumblr.com
First John’s phone vibrated in his pocket—just a text. He ignored it. John was sure it could wait until after biology. Then it vibrated again, and again, and then twice more in quick succession. Still John ignored it, because now John knew the texts could only be from one person. If he checked them the demanding git would probably have said something abrasive enough to compel a response from John and that would only encourage him. Then his phone started ringing—well buzzing, but he was definitely receiving a call. He fished his mobile out of his pocket, and sure enough the caller ID read ‘Sherlock.’ He never called—hated talking on the phone. This was enough to prompt John to at least check the texts.

He opened his notifications under his desk and saw the six unopened texts and one missed call. He opened the first text.

**John, meet me at the last changing booth. –SH**

Sherlock meant the last changing booth in the row of booths that lined the field on the edge of Baker Forest. It was closest to the tree line and Sherlock’s favourite. Now it had become a common meeting place for the two of them. John opened the next text.

**John, hurry up. –SH**

And the next.

**John, this is important. –SH**

**John. –SH**

**John. –SH**

Then there was the missed call and one more text.

**John, there’s been another Wandering. –SH**

He cursed under his breath and hit the button to respond.

**Why wouldn’t you say that first, idiot?**

John hit send and slipped his mobile back into his pocket, thanking the gods this class was in a lecture hall and that he’d snagged an end seat that afternoon.

As quietly as he could, John slipped his notebook and pencil into his backpack and then quickly stood when the professor turned to write something on the board and made for the door, determinedly not looking towards the teacher. Don’t make eye contact, look confident, John repeated the familiar mantra in his head. With a sad thought, John realized he had far too much practice at this. Sherlock was a terrible influence.

The biology building was one of the fancy, modern buildings behind Baker Grand Hall so it only took John a few minutes to reach the noted changing booth. He recognized Sherlock from all the way across the field but there were two much smaller shapes to his right. When he got closer, John realized it was Adam Knight as well as another primary student, yellow striped tie haphazardly knotted around his neck. He had to be even younger than Adam. He had short brown hair, big ears.
and large anxious eyes. John felt a nervous swoop in his stomach.

“Finally. It took you forever.”

It sounded like the words of Sherlock, but instead it was a cool, scowling remark from Adam Knight. The second boy’s wide eyes flicked up at Adam’s scathing words, obviously uncomfortable. After just a second’s pause, John decided to ignore the rude child and looked up at Sherlock. The Changeling looked wired, like a greyhound behind a gate.

“So, what happened? Andy why are these two here?” John asked, glancing at the newcomer whose ears turned fire red and looked away.

“Hannah Chamberlain Wandered approximately two days ago, at least that’s what the staff believes. She apparently was not highly social and so they only realized she was missing when she didn’t show up for her morning lecture today. Her disappearance went unnoticed over the weekend. Since the Wandering took place a few days ago I doubt even your nose will do much good. I need a scent hound and Adam provided his younger brother, who has a beagle shift.”

John looked at Adam’s stony face and Sherlock’s clear one. He knew Sherlock’s chief concern was the case—and John had a huge stake in this, too, at least in the people they could save. However, sometimes his best friend did things he really shouldn’t, like using primary students as tools, for example.

“Sherlock, did you pull them out of class?” John asked.

Sherlock opened his mouth to reply but Adam beat him to it.

“We got out early,” he said, annoyed.

John didn’t lot like Adam Knight, and was far more concerned about his quivering younger brother, Henry.

“Did you force your brother to do this?” John asked, scowl set firmly on his face.

The dark haired boy’s eyes narrowed.

“He’s getting paid, too!”

John glared at Sherlock and then looked at Henry, who was staring at his toes.

“Er, Henry was it?” John asked, ignoring the way Sherlock had started fluttering around like a mother bird protecting a nest, realizing John was trying to ruin his plan. “You know you don’t have to do this if you don’t want to.”

The little boy shifted back and forth, not making eye contact.

“N-no, I want to do it…” the little boy stuttered.

John looked back up at Sherlock.

“John, we aren’t going to be able to find anything this time without a scent hound,” Sherlock implored.

“You couldn’t have found a more… age appropriate volunteer?” John asked.

“I could have asked my older sister but her shift is a bush dog and her sense of smell is awful so it
wouldn’t do you much good. Henry’s is far better,” Adam threw out.

John’s glare silenced him.

Sherlock’s bottom lip pushed out into an obvious pout.

“None of them will work with me,” Sherlock whined.

John counted to three in his head.

“Sherlock, they are primary students. They’re not allowed into the deep forest without adequate supervision and I’m sorry but you hardly qualify,” John said, arms crossed over his chest.

Sherlock grinned.

“That’s why I called you!”

So he’d been called here as a babysitter. Fantastic.

With one last all suffering sigh, John gave in.

Unfortunately not even the hyperactive nose of Henry’s beagle shift could recover anything in the forest. Henry was devastated but soon recovered under John’s consolation and Sherlock’s promise that he could be the one to check Hannah Chamberlain’s marker for signs of tampering, which John thought was actually kind, because John could tell Sherlock had already decided, for reasons invisible to John, that this was another fake.

Sherlock and John trailed behind the floppy eared beagle and the haughty blackbird that had helped interpret Henry’s shift speech all afternoon. While the whispers were only in their minds, they still walked with their shoulders close to talk.

<You already know this one is faked, don’t you?> John asked for confirmation.

Sherlock’s steel blue eyes remained forward but he nodded once. John let it go silent for a moment and watched Henry’s disproportionate puppy paws catch on a stick, and his brother flap his wings indignantly and scream complaints as they pitched forward. John’s jaw tightened with the growing unease he’d felt since they’d first stepped under the trees. Baker forest was like home, but right now it didn’t feel friendly at all—it felt haunted.

<Sherlock… I don’t think we can bring them in here again> John said.

John expected a series of complaints and denials but no such words assaulted his mind.

<I… I think you’re right.>

He’d prepared a list of reasons to shut Sherlock down and was about to let them fly when he realized Sherlock actually agreed.


He was watching so he saw how Sherlock’s whiskers twitched, his ears flattened minutely, and his icy eyes raked the trees.

<I believe you have felt it, too, John… but I think we are being watched.>
No wave of shock passed over John. He had good instincts and there was a reason for his own unease. Instead his hardened eyes began to scan the trees, not truly expecting to see anything.

Three fake Wandering’s at the name Institute within the last year? If you count out Lucy Heart and just count Justin and Hannah from this school, it’s two only half way through the school year. They… he… has been so meticulous in the past. No more than one, maybe two per Institute in a year, and pulled it off without a second glance… until Lucy Heart. And then the scrutiny was noticed, as we know because both Justin and Hannah’s markers were returned.

John’s face toughened in worry and confusion.

Why wouldn’t they avoid Baker for a while then? You said they rotated through Institutes. Why wouldn’t they just take from the others?

John felt Sherlock’s tail bump against his own as it swung in slow, wide arcs.

Maybe… whoever is doing this is glad their work is finally being appreciated. Sherlock’s low tones hummed in his mind. Maybe… they’re just bored.

John’s teeth pressed even harder together, hackles rising, and for once John thought there was a little too much sympathy in the voice of Sherlock Holmes.

The first few days after the Wandering, Sherlock threw himself back into the case once more. A profile on their enemies was added to the wall, and there was compiled a web of necessary components—informants, inside men, backers and at the very centre there was the mastermind—the one who Sherlock said was bored. It made John uncomfortable, the way Sherlock would stare at that spot, eyes intense and nearly excited. Even worse was the nagging sensation that it was staring gleefully back.

But as it historically had, the excitement faded into frustration as Sherlock ran into more dead ends, and John tried to ignore the way Sherlock’s admiration for the mastermind seemed to grow with his frustration. John was worried about what might happen if this got any more personal. Sherlock’s excitement was innocent, as it could be for him, but John feared about the rules of the game they were playing and that Sherlock assumed their opponent would play by them. Sherlock saw a worthy opponent; John saw a crocodile waiting under murky water. No good could come of the mastermind’s attention.

As the winter progressed, John became so nervous that when Sherlock demanded he come to his room for a new experiment, and to bring an apple, John didn’t even protest. He stopped by the dining hall on the way back from class, grabbed an apple and made his way straight up to 631A.

When he entered the room, Sherlock’s back was to him.

“Shut the door,” he said when he heard John cross the threshold.

John did as he was told.

“Brought the apple,” John said, holding up the shiny red fruit.

“Good, give it here,” Sherlock said, turning and sticking out his hand.
When he turned, John finally caught sight of what Sherlock was holding in his hand. It was a clear plastic baggie, and inside it were a few shrivelled green clumps. For once John didn’t need Sherlock to classify which plant this was.

“Jesus Christ! Sherlock, is that cannabis!?” John blurted.

“Indeed,” Sherlock said levelly as he took the apple.

So it was going to be a ‘drag the answers out one by one’ day. Great. So where to start?

“How did you get that?” John decided.

Sherlock set the bag on his desk and began to inspect the apple.

“Well, I believe Greg confiscated it from a couple of sixth formers this morning. He was being annoying in history so I pick pocketed him. That I ended up with this is purely chance,” Sherlock explained.

John ran a hand over his face.

“He’s going to know it was you who took it,” John pointed out.

Sherlock shrugged.

“Most likely, but it’s not like he’s going to report his own failure,” Sherlock said, and John wondered how they still had any friends at all.

“So, why do you still have it?” John asked, moving on.

Sherlock didn’t hesitate.

“Because I want to smoke it,” he said simply.

“I’m sorry, but what?” John asked. “You?”

Sherlock’s eyes furrowed at John’s surprise and judgment.

“I just want to try it once—for the sake of scientific curiosity. John, I’m bored,” Sherlock whined, exposing his truest motivator.

“You’re bored so you’re going to try cannabis?” John confirmed.

Sherlock shook his head.

“We are going to smoke cannabis,” Sherlock amended his statement.

John’s raised an eyebrow.

“What? Why?”

“I wish to both experience the effects as well as observe them first hand,” Sherlock explained.

John’s eyebrow just rose higher.

“You really think you are going to be in a state to observe?” John asked.

Sherlock rolled his eyes.
“It’s just cannabis, John,” he said.

John debated. A month or so ago he would have refused to participate in something so illegal for something as trivial as Sherlock’s boredom and whim, but right now he was just pleased Sherlock was focusing on something other than the ones behind the Wanderers’ case. Besides, there are many people who would pay very good money to see Sherlock Holmes stoned. Who was John to squander such an opportunity?

“Fine. What’s the apple for?” John asked.

Sherlock retrieved a pocket knife and a screwdriver from his desk.

“I read online that you can turn an apple into a pipe and smoke with it,” Sherlock explained as he began to carve.

About an hour later, John lay on his back on Sherlock’s bed, perpendicular to the wall so his heels were propped up against it and his head hung upside down off the side. Sherlock lay spread eagle on the floor.

This wasn’t the first time John had tried cannabis. There had been two other times in sixth form when a couple of his friends got some and John agreed to try it with them, but both times there had been too many blokes and not enough substance, so all John felt was sobriety and a sore throat. He’d really just abandoned the idea after that, never having much interest in the first place. This time, though, it had just been Sherlock and himself, and there had been more than enough to go around. John’s brain currently felt like it weighed twenty kilos.

Sherlock seemed to be much in the same state. John had never seen him look so relaxed but troubled at the same time. He kept mumbling how it was like thinking through molasses. It kept making John giggle, and then Sherlock would giggle, too. Really, John felt like he was so loose he could fall apart if he let himself. His mind was utterly free to roam as well.

John turned his head to look at his best friend, his face turned up towards the ceiling. Sherlock was wearing one of his white, school shirts, rolled up to his elbows, and a few of the buttons were undone, spread arms pulling them apart to expose a fair expanse of smooth, alabaster skin. How did it get like that? He wondered. It must be even softer than any of the girls John had been with.

At that point John probably should have taken an inventory of the turn his thoughts were taking, but he didn’t.

He followed the line of Sherlock’s tendons up his pale neck, and to the curve of his jaw, highlighted by the light they were currently openly exposed to, as were his cheekbones—clear, high planes blushed pink with the THC bouncing around in his wonderful brain at this very moment. John complained and griped his fair share, but at his core, John believed Sherlock’s mind was something amazing, unique and truly inspiring.

Having said that, John thought Sherlock’s eyes were the most instantly striking thing about him—the windows to that mind. They changed colour. John had never seen any eyes that did that before. They had been the first part of Sherlock that John ever knew. He would never forget first two times he saw Sherlock’s eyes, or the time he saw them for what he was in whole.

The first was the strange stare of a strange boy in a strange new world. Then came the gaze of an even stranger creature under the sight of the moon, icy and clear but so very complicated. And then
there was the day that Sherlock’s eyes betrayed his true identity and the two creatures became one.

It wasn’t until each one of these strangely artistic thoughts and observations passed through John’s mind did he come to a final, yet somehow separate, realization: his best friend, Sherlock Holmes, was really sort of beautiful—well, very beautiful.

And now he was staring right back at John, fraction of a question on his lovely face. Body relaxed, blood pooling with gravity in John’s head, some little part in his mind said he should feel something about the thoughts swirling around in his mind—guilt? Concern, most definitely—but there was none of that as his best friend, who was apparently gorgeous, stared him down. No, instead, a smile broke out on his face and John Watson began to giggle, not a care in the world. Sherlock’s face cracked into laughter, too, low voice harmonising with John’s higher giggles.

When they quieted, Sherlock looked back up at the ceiling.

“John,” he said after a moment. “When you were little, what did you want to be?”

“Like, professionally?”

“Mhmm,” Sherlock murmured.

John closed his eyes, revelling in how heavy his arms felt.

“A doctor,” John said, nearly instantly.

Sherlock craned his neck to look at John.

“Even then?” he asked.

“Yeah,” John hummed. “My father was an army doctor. I didn’t want to be just like him exactly, but I always wanted to be able to do what he did—the excitement, the adventure, fixing people. He used to let me borrow his stethoscope and army cap and I’d run around the house, pretending to shoot Harry and then saving her.”

John laughed breathily and then looked at his friend, who had a strange look on his face, a mix of many things that only John would be able to sense. There was interest and even fondness, but even more there was envy and displaced hurt. John’s heart throbbed painfully and he wanted to say something about it but Sherlock looked away.

“What about you? What did you want to be?” John asked.

Sherlock paused and John thought about what little Sherlock might have wanted to be—a chemist, a policeman… perhaps a mad scientist. It wasn’t any of those, though.

“I wanted to be a pirate.”

John blinked at him twice. Then he started cracking up, head bouncing against the edge of the bed as his stomach muscles contracted and relaxed in quick succession. Sherlock’s lips twitched, settling in a smile.

John’s eyes flitted around the room for a while, taking in all there was to see through this new lens. They finally stopped on Sherlock’s polished violin.

Suddenly the urge to hear him play was overwhelming. It may have been the intensity of his gaze
on the object or his focus slipping through, but Sherlock rose from the floor and retrieved the instrument wordlessly. He sat cross-legged on the floor, John watching intently as he applied a fresh layer of rosin to the bow. Once finished, Sherlock put one leg out in front of him and adjusted his posture, other leg crossed in front, arch of his foot pressed into the side of his knee.

Then Sherlock lay the bow against the strings, and pulled, first note slipping directly under John’s skin. His eyes slipped shut, sweet sounds painting colours and landscapes onto the backs of his eyelids. Nothing had ever been so vivid. The piece was familiar, but different at the same time, unbearably sweet but strangely sad. A loose smile played on John’s lips, and he was silent.

Neither of them said a word for a very long time. John lay quiet on the bed and Sherlock stole a couple of pillows to boost himself up so he could lean against the mattress without it interfering with his bowing. He stared at the far wall. He had finished the first piece, and then went on to play through each movement of Vivaldi’s seasons, and then on to Bach. He was half way through a piece when he stopped suddenly. John was half dozing, the high wearing off, but the unfinished notes stirred his mind and he opened his eyes to see Sherlock standing, eyes fixed on his Wanderer’s Wall, flicking rapidly over his information laden map. There was something deliberate in his movements.

“Sherlock, what is it?” John murmured.

His shoulders were slack and his curly hair was mussed from lying on the ground earlier but John could feel his mind was focused to a knifepoint, and he couldn’t tear his eyes away from the wall.

“John, about what percent of Changelings have shifts that you would consider exotic, or rare?” Sherlock asked.

John’s eyebrows furrowed.

“I don’t know… about the same as exotic animals to common ones, I guess?” John said, not really having much of a clue.

The violin left his shoulder as Sherlock took a few steps towards the names and photographs.

“Why didn’t I see it before…? How many, John, of these would you call exotic, or rare?” he asked, indicating the names and shifts.

John narrowed his eyes and rolled onto his stomach so he could actually see them right side up. Sherlock had the hundreds of Wanderers separated geographically by Institute and then by year of disappearance. Each Wanderer was marked by the traditional two part photo, human and shift, also their name, age and species of shift—but those were far too small for John to read at this distance. John instead scanned over the photographs, counted the ones he knew could be considered unusual or were threatened species, as well as the ones he didn’t know the names for at all.

“There are… a lot,” John said, having lost count.

Sherlock was grinning like a mad man, and suddenly he actually jumped into the air and spun around. He paused, staring at the wall for a moment more. Then his bow became a pointer.

“In the last school year alone! Look, John! From the Smith Institute: Marie Dent, Cuvier’s gazelle shift, and Haley Tam, a Javan rhino. From the Esther Institute; David Harrow, a ring tailed lemur shift. From the Alabaster Institute, Finn Hillman, a Yangtze river dolphin. Lange Institute: Marisa Allhallows, Bicknell’s thrush. Highland Institute: Darcy Williams, przewalski’s horse. Churchill Institute: Jared Sampson, a California condor,” Sherlock said, swinging the bow across the map,
pointing at each individual. He wasn’t done. “Then there’s Lisa Jones, a golden lion tamarind shift from the Overfield Institute. From the Vinson Institute there’s Damien Mars, Bengal tiger…. And finally Lucy Heart, Baker Institute, snow leopard… ten out of fifty one Wanderings are threatened or exotic species. That’s a pretty steep ratio…”

His bow finally came to a rest, lowering to his side.

“And this year from Baker there has been Justin Hara, a rare komodo dragon shift, and Hannah Chamberlain, whose shift was an elusive okapi…. and there was another Wandering from Alabaster just two weeks ago, a giant otter…”

John’s throat was stuck and his face was painted with shock. He rolled off the bed to stand next to his best friend.

“They’re taking students with rare shifts…” John breathed, understanding.

Side by side they stood, letting the names and faces sink in.

...  ...

Though the epiphany was a breakthrough, it still wasn’t a definite way to decide which shifts were faked or real. Sherlock had to accept the fact that statistically even some of the exotic shifts were most likely true Wanderings but it was still impossible to tell which. And even though he knew which students were being taken he still had nearly no idea why they were, and unless he knew that it was impossible to truly decide which Wanderings were false.

Since Changelings were involved Sherlock thought it may actually be a hate group, as he initially thought, but with a focus on rare shifts. It had happened before, so called ‘anti-elitist’, speciesist congregations. So it could be one of those, but if that was the students were mostly likely long dead, which was unfortunate because dead people are much harder to track down that living ones. For a plethora of reasons, Sherlock had not explained the details of this theory to John yet, who he thought would probably get angry at him again.

All of the students seemed to have a basic, objective level of attractiveness so maybe it was some specialized prostitution or sex slave trade… but the truth was eluding Sherlock to this point.

He was on his way though, at least until three days later, before he could come to any sort of conclusion, because suddenly all possible paths of deduction fell away as Sherlock’s world promptly turned completely upside down.

“What do you mean you’ve never heard the Beatles? You can’t be serious, Sherlock,” John said as they climbed the east staircase, returning from class for the day.

Sherlock scowled; John was always so fixated on his rare but extensive gaps in knowledge. This particular event had been sparked by John hearing a song he called “She Loves You” in the hallway. He’d commented and Sherlock had asked who the song was by. When John had told him it was by “the Beatles” he’d simply remarked that he didn’t recognise the name. It seemed harmless at the time but apparently he’d committed some heinous faux pas once again.

“No, I have not, or if I have I’ve deleted it as useless information,” Sherlock said.

John sputtered.
“Deleted it? Like… you don’t even know the songs!? The big ones? I Want to Hold Your Hand? Eleanor Rigby? Penny Lane? Let it Be? Come Together!”

Sherlock’s scowl deepened even further as they reached the sixth floor of A Wing.

“Last time I checked, murderers and criminals hardly ever draw upon the works of the Beatles,” Sherlock said, as he unlocked his door to let them inside. “Therefore it doesn’t interest me.”

John just shook his head and laughed, walking over to where he left his work book for Intro on Sherlock’s desk.

“But… it’s the Beatles!” John giggled.

Sherlock opened his mouth to fire a scathing remark back at John, but then he saw the wall behind him, and the pocket knife they used to make the apple pipe thrust into it.

“Sherlock, what is it?” John asked, immediately becoming aware of the shift in his mood.

Sherlock took a step forward and realized the knife had been stabbed into the very centre of his newest web of string and data, right into the space he’d labelled ‘mastermind’ and pinned by it to the wall was a simple, white envelope. John followed his gaze and tensed. John had good instincts.

“Sherlock, what is that?” John asked slowly.

He cocked his head to the side, excitement rising. The expected was wonderful in such a dull world. John caution was enough to hold him back a little though, so Sherlock approached carefully.

“I don’t know…” Sherlock said, voice low.

There was more to it, Sherlock realized, when he got close enough to see. Sherlock had written the word mastermind on a slip of paper and taped it to the wall a while ago now. The knife ran through the envelope and right into the ‘m’ of ‘mind.’ As for the rest of the word, Sherlock’s script had been altered. He’d written in a simple black pen, but now the first M, the one in ‘Master,’ was red. Someone had taken what looked like a red paint and gone over it violently, it even overflowed onto the wall. The white envelope read “Sherlock” in clear, looping, black script.

Even Sherlock paused a little at the disturbing sign, but then he carefully pulled the knife from the wall, taking the not in hand and placing the pocket knife on this desk. John watched, focused and tense as a spring, as Sherlock turned the letter over and slowly broke the seal, reaching inside.

There were two pieced of paper, on folded in half on top, and a smaller one of cardstock behind it. He unfolded the first sheet.

A second passed.

And then another.

And then Sherlock’s blood froze in his veins and with a faint howl in his mind a mantra started running through his brain—the brain releases epinephrine and norepinephrine. The pituitary gland releases corticotrophin-releasing factor and adrenocorticotropic hormone. They all work together to trigger dozens of other hormones throughout the body to create the physical and mental reaction we call ‘fear’… the brain releases—How could this be happening!? This couldn’t happen!

Even Sherlock couldn’t help but read.
Dear Sherlock,

I know it’s been a while but I was recently approached by a generous, anonymous party who was kind enough to inform me on how you have been over these long years. He even gave me a lovely picture, how you’ve grown, Sherlock. On that note, I have come to the decision that it is time for me to see how you are coming along myself, as some of the news I have received troubles me. I will see you very soon now, Sherlock.

Sincerely,

Your father, Sigur Holmes

His eyes were swimming in and out of focus. He felt… strange. This just didn’t make any sense. He couldn’t quite name what his body was doing exactly at this moment. Somehow he flipped to the little cardstock note, on autopilot. This one was very short and written in the same angry, red pen as the M. Only four words:

Daddy misses you, Sherlock. :)

Sherlock rocked, graving going sideways. He vaguely heard John trying to get his attention, obviously feeling the panic and turmoil radiating from his mind, but unaware as to the reason, but he was frozen, stomach roiling. Oh, that was what the feeling was called: nausea, some detached part of his brain assessed.

No! Not again! Oh, please no…! No…

Glazed, angry eyes swam before his gaze, full of intent. They were everywhere.

“Sherlock!”

John’s voice cut the chains holding him in place, but that was no better. All of John’s effort to get Sherlock to eat breakfast this morning was about the go to waste. The papers fell from his fingers and he stumbled towards the small bin by his desk, reaching for it. John called out when his knees hit the floor, but he couldn’t respond because suddenly everything evacuated his stomach with one almighty, wrenching twist.

“Sherlock!” John shouted, and Sherlock could feel his flaring worries against his mind as he dropped to the floor beside him.

John should be worried, Sherlock thought as he heaved once more, eyes naturally tearing up. Well, he had been. His friend had tried to warn him about the mastermind. Sherlock had heard and felt his feelings on the subject. So this is what he’d meant by ‘personal.’ His rational mind was quickly fading though, as his opponent intended all along he realized, and analytical thought was chucked away with his self-control.

John’s hand was gripping his shoulder as he continued to retch.

“Sherlock, what’s wrong!?”
He looked over and for just a second John’s honest eyes were sufficient to clear the horrible memories from his sight for just long enough to answer, even if his voice was two octaves higher than normal, and it shook like a leaf; his whole body was trembling.

“J-John, he—he’s coming back...!”

Then his stomach heaved viciously once more, and the last part of the composed person he’d created with years of work fell into the bin with his sick, leaving nothing but a scared child shaking on the floor.
The first thing John did after reading the letter was tell Sherlock it was going to be okay, in a very calm and steady voice, even as rage flooded his system. He brought Sherlock a glass of water to clear his mouth, and helped him onto his bed. He tucked the blanket over his best friend and slipped the horrible letters into his back pocket. If Sherlock noticed he didn’t say anything, but then, he had disappeared into his mind a while ago.

“Sherlock, I’m going to be right back,” John said, waiting for a response.

None came. John’s insides ached and he reached out to touch Sherlock’s shoulder reassuringly, but the Changeling flinched and John’s throat tightened painfully. He swallowed and after a moment’s hesitation he laid his palm on Sherlock’s shoulder, who thankfully didn’t turn away. He didn’t make any response at all, just stared blankly across the room.

“I’m just going to be right back,” John reiterated anyway.

Then he quickly slipped into the hallway and into his own room. Without Sherlock to protect from his anger, fury hardened his features. He wanted to break things—he’d never held a gun but at the moment he would greatly enjoy access to one. Instead of giving in to these urges, however, John steeled himself, knowing what he had to do.

He pulled out his mobile and scrolled through his contacts. He hit send and put the phone to his ear. He also pulled the letters out of his pocket and stared at them, gaze tinted red, as the phone began to ring. The paper crinkled with how tightly his fingers clenched them. There was a click as his call was answered.

“John?” a familiar voice greeted.

There were very few people who had access to the personal number of the most powerful man in Britain. However, John Watson was one of them. John didn’t waste any time with formalities.

“Mycroft, we got a letter—it was delivered by the one behind the Wanderer’s case. He found your father. Now the bastard is trying to come back for Sherlock.”

“Don’t worry, John. My people are going to be watching,” Mycroft assured the furious boy on the line.

Anthea reentered the room, face serious. Mycroft’s stomach dropped.

“Good,” John said roughly.

Mycroft leaned back at his desk, watching his assistant with a growing acceptance of the truth. He hadn’t wanted to believe this, John’s explanation about how the mastermind behind the false
Wanderings seemed to have noticed Sherlock, and had triggered the absolute worst possible scenario. But he’d been working with Anthea for a very long time now, and he could read the truth on her face before she even got the chance to speak.

“Call me the second anything changes or if anything happens,” Mycroft instructed into his phone.

“Right,” John’s tight voice responded.

Mycroft forced himself to sound sure and not to pause.

“It’s all going to be okay, John.”

There was silence on the line, and then there was a click as the young Changeling disconnected. John had a keen head on him and Mycroft accepted the fact that John probably didn’t believe him.

He lowered his phone and leaned forward, elbows on the desk, chin resting on his thumbs, fingers pressed together before his lips. He paused a moment before working up the strength to look at the brunette aide.

“I checked like you asked me, sir,” she said.

Mycroft stared ahead, slideshow of the past playing before his eyes.

“And?” he asked, already knowing the worst.

“Nobody seems to know where he is… Sigur Holmes has dropped off the map, sir.”

Mycroft’s lips pressed together and he continued to stare ahead. Seconds dragged by.

“What are we going to do, sir?”

Mycroft’s eyes narrowed and visible menace settled on his shoulders. He was not a child this time, certainly not.

“We are going to find him… and make him disappear,” Mycroft stated. “I will not fail my brother again.”

The next few days were absolute torture. Despite Mycroft’s assurances, John was absolutely wired. Sherlock was not coping well. Most often he just stared into oblivion, but every once in a while he’d break into a panic, clutching at his head or his scars—and John had no idea how to stop it. He wasn’t himself; he was unreachable.

John was fairly sure Sherlock hadn’t slept in three days and had little more than the cups of tea and water John tricked him into drinking while he zoned out. He’d managed to get him to choke down a few biscuits yesterday afternoon, but this was hardly a sustainable pattern.

He had convinced Sherlock to go to class that morning, if only to get him out of his room and breathe a little fresh air. He’d given Sherlock a lot of logical reasons, and Sherlock had seemed better. His eyes were clearer, sharper, more motivated. He was almost totally coherent. It should have encouraged John, but it was such a thin mask over the mounting, manic anxiety it made John
so nervous that he couldn’t even remember what Professor Highland had said in his Intro lecture five minutes previously. He rushed out of class the second the bell rang.

Normally he would have headed back towards the north corridor to head straight down to the changing booths to shift for his speech class, but today he took a detour through the south corridor, knowing it passed by Sherlock’s history class room.

Half way down the corridor John spotted Greg and flagged him down.

“Greg!” John called.

Greg smiled as they moved out of the flow of traffic.

“John! What’s up?” he asked.

John shifted his weight, left hand clenching nervously.

“Have you seen, Sherlock?” John asked, as he and Greg shared a history module.

Greg shook his head.

“No, he wasn’t in class today,” he explained.

John’s own anxiety ratcheted up about four notches. He’d walked with Sherlock across campus until they split apart, John to go to Intro and Sherlock to go, presumably, to history. Why hadn’t he gone? He’d given John every sign that he was actually going to go. John immediately reached for his mobile and opened a new text message.

Greg seemed to notice his distress.

“Everything okay?” he asked. “The two of you have seemed off the past couple days.”

Where are you? Are you okay? John typed and hit send.

The question finally reached him after a short delay and he answered with furrowed brows.

“Oh, um, there have just been some family issues,” John muttered.

His phone buzzed and he instantly opened the text, chest loosening just a bit when he saw it was from Sherlock.

In 631A. I’m fine.

The anxiety returned in full force.

Greg was nodding.

“Oh, yeah? I’m sorry. Are your families’ really religious or something?”

Fime? Sherlock never misspelled in a word—basically had a dictionary stored in his brain—and rarely used anything less than eloquent complete sentences, unless he was being demanding. He also never left off his characteristic signoff. It just didn’t happen.

John barely heard Greg, let alone comprehended the implication of his words. He shook his head and looked up at his friend.
“I’m sorry, what…?” but his worries were overwhelming. “Er, I’m sorry, Greg. I have to go.”

Then John was sweeping down the corridor, not even noticing how Greg was looking at him like he was a crazy person—maybe he was, but he wasn’t willing to risk it.

He forced himself to walk at a pace slower than a run all the way back to A Wing. If he ran he would have to admit he was panicking. It felt like it took days to get to the sixth floor landing but finally he stood in front of the door that read 631A and then his hand was on the door knob. He didn’t knock, but when he gripped the knob it didn’t turn. Sherlock had locked the door.

“Sherlock!” John called through the wood, but there was no response.

John’s heart began to pound against his ribs.

“Jesus Christ… oh, dear god, no,” John breathed as he began to rattle the knob violently.

He couldn’t have failed already. This couldn’t be happening.

Three seconds later John snapped. The knobs were old; the locks were weak. John leaned back and then rammed forward, just beside the door frame. The flimsy lock gave way under his shoulder, and John caught the knob to stop the door from slamming into the wall.

Now, John had been expecting the worst. His worries for Sherlock had painted a horrible image of what his friend’s father would do to him if John couldn’t stop him, if he got past Mycroft. Yes, John was worried about what was coming for Sherlock from the outside world, but John still had made a horrible mistake when he neglected to consider what Sherlock could do to **himself**, which was obviously a factor, because John felt like his world was splintering.

John’s hand went up to fist over his mouth.

“J-Jesus Christ,” he moaned around his hand.

He couldn’t breathe! He was choking.

His best friend was lying slack against his bed. John was seeing in fragments. There was a belt loosened and resting around Sherlock’s left wrist. There was a clear vial on the floor with clear liquid inside. John had seen ones like it before—in the clinic. Why did Sherlock have that? Subconsciously, John must have been avoiding the final horrific piece of the picture but there was no denying the presence of the syringe on the floor, hypodermic needle glinting in the light.

John was stumbling forward. Sherlock was so very pale. What had he done to himself?! Sherlock’s right hand rested in the crook of his elbow. He looked so limp, curls lying against lifelessly against his forehead, dark eyelashes brushing his cheeks.

“Sherlock! Sherlock!” John tried to rouse him; his skin was clammy against John’s hands.

Did he overdose? Was John too late?

He grabbed the abandoned vial—Morphine solution. There was still a lot left but it was probably full when Sherlock got—stole—it, and John didn’t know how much it would take anyway. He was still shaking Sherlock and he’d never felt so damned helpless in his life. Sherlock could be dying. He cast the vial aside, it clattered loudly on the floor, and mumbled Sherlock’s name on repeat as he awkwardly worked to pull his mumble out of his pocket to call 999.

“John…?” a confused murmur hit him like a freight train.
His head snapped up and he nearly dropped his mobile.

Sherlock’s pupils were pinpoints in his ice-blue eyes, the whole sky was visible in his expansive irises. They were empty but fragile.

“Sherlock, I’m calling an ambulance. Just hold on, damnit,” John said, trying to sound stronger than he felt.

A limp hand reached out to his mobile, revealing the red mark in his skin and making John’s throat close up again.

“No. Took the right amount. Just… just didn’t want to be scared anymore,” Sherlock slurred.

“It’s okay.”

Sherlock stared blankly at the ground and John stared at his face, seconds ticking away with his fear for Sherlock’s life. The loss was quickly being balanced out by anger and drowning sorrow. Finally the trio of emotions caused him to crack.

“No it’s not, Sherlock!” John shouted, suddenly, startling the drug fogged Changeling. “You can’t DO this! You could kill yourself, you… you idiot!”

If felt like there was glass in his oesophagus and chilli powder in his eyes. John’s anger, fear and sadness flashing like fire against Sherlock’s drugged mind completely broke his stupor and the adverse side effects began to kick. He was hyperventilating, eyes wide, arms hugging his body. Sweat broke out on his forehead.

“I’m scared, John…! I’m so afraid… I just wanted the fear to go away, John…! He’s all I can see. He’s all I can see…” Sherlock moaned, fingers spasming over the scars they both knew hid beneath the thin fabric of his shirt, eyes squeezing shut. “I know he’s coming. I just wanted the fear to go away… but I’m still so scared. I don’t want to be scared. No one saves me… nobody ever came.”

Sherlock was slipping into true hysterics.

John’s face was wet. He was crying, really crying. A choked sob broke free as John dropped his mobile and reached for Sherlock. He grabbed his best friend and pulled him sideways, close. He expected him to resist, but instead he pushed forward, into John’s chest. John fell back, hitting the bed frame painfully but he didn’t care. Sherlock’s hands fisted in John’s shirt. His arms barred like steel around Sherlock’s back. Their white school shirts wrinkled and shifted. John could feel the raised, ropy flesh of the scars under his fingers through the fabric; he didn’t move his hand away though. John buried his face in the crook of Sherlock’s neck. John realized he was speaking.

“God… god damnit… I’m here. I won’t let him hurt you. I swear to god, Sherlock, he will never hurt you again. I promise I will protect you. I promise, Sherlock…” John rambled on and on.

John felt Sherlock’s rapid heart beating violently through his back and against John’s forearm. He was shaking, breath shallow—side effects of the morphine. Why was this happening? Why did this have to happen to Sherlock?! It wasn’t fair! It wasn’t the first or last time John would think this. He rocked them back and forth. He continued to whisper pathetic reassurances. He wanted to be furious—wrath was powerful, and he felt like being more furiously angry at Sigur Holmes in this moment would lessen the pain, but he couldn’t even pretend that was his primary emotion now. All he felt was crippling sadness and frustration—complete helplessness. He wished he could be stronger—solid and strong for Sherlock, but he knew the tears he couldn’t hold back were dripping
from his nose and chin onto Sherlock’s shoulder, and he couldn’t even manage to keep it together.

“Never again, Sherlock. Don’t ever do this again. I promise—I won’t let anything happen to you. Do you hear me? I won’t!” John vowed and crushed Sherlock even closer to him. “Never. Again.”

John’s hand was cradling Sherlock’s head as they rocked and rocked, limbs twisted and John trying to stop them from both falling apart completely.

. . .

Sherlock reverted to basically the same state he’d been in before the morphine episode in the days following. His arms bandaged, he slipped back into oblivion. Well there were two things that could be construed as a change. First, John managed to wring a promise out of Sherlock once he was sober. He made him swear he wouldn’t mess with the morphine again. The promise wasn’t worth much, nor was it that whole hearted, but it was something. The other change seemed to be that Sherlock appeared to be now using John as a coping strategy in some form. It wasn’t really noticeable at first, he still barely said anything or even acknowledged John most of the time, but when John had to go to class, or got up to get food, or anything else, Sherlock would stir.

John’s hand was constantly on his phone—waiting and checking for the phone call that would tell him this was over. Then Sherlock could return to himself, but the call didn’t come and John’s unease and frustration rose in equal measure. “The most powerful man in Britain”… fat lot of good that title was doing. He couldn’t even find one sick bastard. John’s eyes couldn’t help but flick up towards the centre of the web and the mutilated name there, and think that whoever it was had a hand in making sure Mycroft remained unsuccessful.

John was doing some homework on Sherlock’s unused desk when someone knocked lightly on the door. John rose and crossed the small room and then opened the door half way. The familiar face of Mrs. Hudson met him.

After the incident, John realized he couldn’t handle all this on his own, and after some agonizing deliberation he had recruited Mrs. Hudson, who actually seemed to already understand far more than John expected when he’d hinted at the problem. Though, she had been at the Institute when Sherlock arrived, running the primary dorms at that time. John wasn’t surprised that she, and probably a few other key staff members, were informed about Sherlock’s situation.

Mrs. Hudson had taken to checking in on Sherlock for John when he was in class—both of them had given up on trying to get Sherlock to attend his own classes for the time being.

“Hello, dearest,” she greeted.

John gave her a tight smile in return and made to join her in the hallway.

“John…?” a concerned voice called to him from across the room.

John turned to see blue eyes peeking out from Sherlock’s duvet, lightly confused.

“It’s okay, Sherlock. It’s just Mrs. Hudson. I’ll be back in a moment,” John murmured.

Once he was out in the hall, John gently shut the door behind him.
“How is he doing? Mrs. Hudson asked softly.

John shrugged, face haggard.

“No better, no worse,” John said.

Mrs. Hudson’s kind face was soaked with sympathy.

“Poor soul. I’m so sorry both of you are having to go through this,” Mrs. Hudson cooed. “Has he eaten today? I brought some titbits.”

She held up a plate of cheese and crackers.

“No, not yet. Thank you. Hopefully I can trick him into eating something.”

Mrs. Hudson handed over the plate with a small smile.

“You know, he’s always been impossible with food. When he was small I used to have to take away his microscope until he listened to me, just to get him to eat a bit of supper.”

John smiled fondly.

“He’s a handful now. I can’t imagine how he was at age six,” John said.

Mrs. Hudson chuckled.

“Oh, you should have seen the shouting matches, my dear! Always at each other’s throats we were, but you would have been so surprised at the way he’d act if any of the other children did anything nasty to me. It was a little hypocritical but endearing none the less,” she said, eyes filled with memories.

John had to smile at that. Sherlock was so much more human than he gave himself credit for.

“You have been so good with all of this, John, dear. I don’t know what he’d be like if you hadn’t come along and had been here for him when you were.”

The smile dropped off John’s face and he found he could only nod.

“Thanks for bringing this,” John said, raising the plate a touch.

“Of course, sweetheart,” she said. “Don’t hesitate to call if you need anything.”

“I won’t,” John said.

By the next day, though, John had to break the cycle. Sherlock was trembling by the time John got back from class, and John was feeling a little shaky himself. He hadn’t shifted in four days and for Sherlock it had been even longer.

“Sherlock,” John said as he crossed the room. “You need to exercise your shift. It’s been nearly a week.”
He didn’t say anything but he pulled the duvet tight around him, but the childish reaction was actually a good sign.

“Come on,” John said, placing his hand on Sherlock’s shoulder. “We’ll just take a run along the tree line. The fresh air will do you some good.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes dramatically but then he threw the covers away from himself and stumbled towards the door. John sighed in relief.

He did however pull out his phone and address a text to Greg and Molly. He figured it would be good for Sherlock to be around some familiar people.

It started off well, it really did. Sherlock didn’t seem particularly pleased when the white shepherd and small rabbit appeared, but again, John was under the impression that annoyance was better than fear or the numb emptiness that Sherlock had been displaying of late.

<Hello! Contentment. Little run, then?> Greg said as he closed in on the wolf and the panther.

John bobbed his head.

<Yeah, just along the tree line.>

Molly’s ears waved but if either of them thought the distinction was strange they chose not to mention it.

Even after they began to move it seemed to be going well. Sherlock loped along at an easy pace next to John, Greg in front and Molly just behind, but then John noticed the slowly mounting agitation emanating from Sherlock. The feline’s breath began to speed up and his pace quickened. When John looked at him his whiskers were twitching madly and his eyes were wide. Then John felt the terror break loose.

<Sherlock…> John tried to connect but it was too late.

The fear and anxiety were feeding into each other, growing rapidly. It took John far too long and by the time he could start to respond, Sherlock was in one of his full blown panic attacks, and this time instead of curling in on himself like he had in human form, he was going to try and use his panther body to out run it. He veered to the right, aiming towards the heart of the forest.

<Sherlock!> John shouted.

John barked; if he had been human it surely would have been a curse. As he turned to pursue, Greg and Molly became aware of the shift in direction.

<John!?> Molly asked in confusion, looking for an explanation.

<What’s going on!?> Greg added.

But John had no time to answer as he shot off after Sherlock, who was now sprinting through the trees, leaving his friends no choice but to run after him.

John and Greg had no difficulty keeping up with Sherlock, but they were getting deeper and deeper into the woods and Molly was lagging behind.

<What’s happening, John? Confusion,> Greg’s voice rung in his head as John leaped over a log after the dark, retreating shape.
<Panic attack,> John said simply.

Molly’s feather thoughts touched his mind.

<Panic attack?>

Her voice already sounded a little distant. John didn’t answer.

They ran and ran, but Sherlock’s shift wasn’t built for stamina and soon his ribs were heaving for breath and a little white foam had gathered in the corners of his mouth. He wasn’t responding to any of John’s calls, no matter what he said. The sound of three sets of paws drumming on the earth accompanied his harsh breathing.

<Sherlock! You have to stop!>

Now John was starting to panic too. It was getting dark and there was something wrong—very, very wrong. Sherlock’s wide eyes were trained forward but John’s were flashing to every bush, every tree, each shadow. His eyes were wide, too. His instincts were screaming. Sherlock needed to know: they needed to get out of here, now.

<Sherlock, stop! We have to—>

John never finished his sentence.

<What are you running from, my dear Sherlock?>

The voice was deep and smooth but something sharp and dangerous lay hidden beneath it, like a blade swaddled in black velvet.

Sherlock’s reaction was so immediate and powerful it even affected John—the terror and shock was like a lance in his mind. The panther stopped suddenly enough that the canines overshot him before they could stop. It was clear that the voice had been broadcast to all of them because all three of their heads were whipping from side to side, trying to locate the source, and Molly’s voice, now clearer as she began to catch up, sounded in their minds.

<Fear. Who is that?>

Shit! This was not good! John thought. Molly wouldn’t stand a chance.

Even though she hadn’t witnessed Sherlock’s reaction to it, the menace in the voice was enough to frighten her. Greg’s voice chimed in, too.

<Shock. What’s going on? Lost.>

It was too much for just a second, but then the switch flipped and a deadly calm settled over John’s body.

<Danger. Sherlock’s father. Hate. Molly, go back! Urgency.>

Growls started to rip from John’s throat, aggression rolling off his body in waves as he searched for the still unseen enemy. Sherlock was a shaking mess on the forest floor and Greg’s eyes were sliding between them.

<Fury. Molly, get help! Dread.>
Greg was putting the pieces together, at least enough of them to realize the gravity of the situation they were currently caught in.

<B-but… Hesitation,> Molly protested leaving them.

Greg’s large ears flattened against his head and his eyes snapped to a shadow hidden in the trees. A great shape was approaching and he was the first to see it.

<Awe. Molly, run! Stress,> Greg shouted, in concern.

Then Sherlock saw the beast and a horrible cry broke from his lungs.

John knew it wasn’t fair, and probably wrong. He should have told Greg to run with Molly, to escape, but he had no delusions of being able to stop the monster approaching them now on his own.

<Desperation. Greg, don’t let him get to Sherlock.>

Greg’s eyes snapped back and forth, from the shrouded beast back to the quivery black shape and he hesitated, but then his tail straightened and he matched John’s aggressive stance.

<Right…>

Then a giant feline emerged into the twilight and John actually recoiled as Sherlock’s turmoil buffeted his mind. The African lion’s head was held higher than any wild lion would hold itself, posture oozing pride and disdain. His mane was tinged with darkness against the gold of the creature’s pelt; even in the dusk it glowed. John then locked eyes with the Changeling that he’d always know was Sigur Holmes, father of Sherlock Holmes and the object of the genius’ only nightmares. His eyes were full of cold fire, cruel and venemous.

Greg was growling defensively, but the sounds were nothing in comparison to the violent, lupine snarls shredding John’s throat, exploding out of him like thunder, face twisted into a terrible mask of determined eyes, curled lips and sharp teeth. The lion’s eyes narrowed.

<You… must be John Watson. I’ve been told about you. I know you must have some delusions of importance, what with that flimsy bond it is said you share with Sherlock, but that means nothing to me. This is matter between my son and I—move.>

The words were steeped in condescension and like hell John was moving one centimetre. With a snarling bark John opened his mind at Sigur Holmes and though he didn’t bother to formulate words the floodgates were opened and John fired every tiny speck of fury, rage and absolute and all-consuming hate at the man he’d never met before but loathed more than he’d loathed any other person in his life to this point in his life combined. It was a torrent, a hurricane, a tempest the likes of which John didn’t even know he had it in himself to possess.

To his credit, Holmes only narrowed his eyes once more and laid his ears flat against his head, holding his ground but John had no doubt he felt the storm.

<HOW!?> John finally spat one word, stepping more fully in front of Sherlock.

The king of beasts’ tail lashed.

<How did I get here? How did I slip past my meddlesome eldest son?> he translated from John’s abridged question. <I won’t deny I had help from a new… friend, who not only
informed me of my son’s growth and brilliance, and of certain poor influences that have been acting upon him of late," he said, baring his fangs directly at John, who snarled right back. But he also recommended I play to Mycroft’s weakest points, and stay in his blind spot. It’s a nearly impossible task to survey every wood in Britain.

So he’d been travelling in shifted form. John had to admit it was clever, unexpected, but right now that thought was only secondary to John realizing that Sigur was fully focused on him, leaving himself open to Greg.

elope. Now! Blood." John shot at Greg, making sure his intent was clear, forcing himself to keep eye contact with the horrible man as to not give himself away.

Greg leapt forward, lunging for Holmes’ throat. The beast was more aware, and faster, than John had expected and before John could even leap to the aid of the snowy shepherd, a brick heavy paw flashed out to collide with the side of Greg’s skull. To obtain the necessary speed, Holmes had hit with the back of his paw, but even though there were no claws the blow was extremely powerful.

Greg!

John shouted, horrified, as the white shape abruptly switched direction, shoulder meeting the gnarled roots of a tree with an awful thud.

John heard Sherlock cry out in startled terror at the sound and sight of violence. Greg lay limp on the ground, out cold. John resisted the urge to go to him, forcing his paws to stay rooted, stay a shield for Sherlock.

Sherlock! Sherlock!

John tried to get his attention. Sherlock, you need to run. Get away from here! I’ll hold him off!

John had promised. He’d promised to protect him.

The panther, however, was totally paralysed, wide eyes glued to the demon from his past returned to get him.

Please, Sherlock...!

John begged as the fearsome lion began to approach.

John wouldn’t let him get to Sherlock. He would die before he let that happen. Unfortunately, at this point that was a distinct possibility. John knew Greg had been nothing more than a physical obstacle for Sigur Holmes. John was not so lucky. He could see in the callous glare that flashed in his eyes as he looked at him; when it came to John it was personal. The wolf shift would suffer.

I’m going to give you one last chance, John Watson. Move out of my way or you will pay with your blood." his deep voice was steeped in hate.

Sherlock, run!

Sigur snarled, obviously realising his threatening warning was being completely ignored. John wasn’t even looking at him. It was game over.

Sherlock wasn’t going to run. He was in pieces and there was no way he was going to pull himself together to help John save him, and John knew he couldn’t overpower the monster. Optimistically
the lion shift weighed four times as much as John, at least, and he had that much more strength. All John could hope to do now was try to make sure help found them before it was too late. It had to be coming—it just had to.

With one last defiant glare John inhaled deeply and reared. Then he howled. The sound echoed through the trees, louder and more desperate than John had ever howled before, bursting through the night like the siren it was supposed to be.

John hadn’t expected to be spared the razor sharp claws, but that didn’t stop his howl from morphing into a strangled, pained cry when they hooked into his skin, ripping upwards, pulling him open. On two legs, John was off balance and easily tossed through the air.

<JOHN!> he heard Sherlock scream his name in terror just before he collided with the trunk of a very solid tree.

A sharp yelp escaped him as his shoulder impacted, and Sherlock’s panic for John as well as himself consumed his mind for just a millisecond before the left over momentum snapped his head back and slammed it into the unyielding tree bark.

Then the world went black.

Chapter End Notes

Art by anathemarmotqueen.tumblr.com
Sorry there are a couple typos throughout this story here. I realize a small number of mistakes I fixed were not fixed on the original docs so I apologize if you catch one. I'll be working them out in time. Cheers.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

<Come now, Sherlock. Enough of this…>

Jesus Christ…

The ground was moving, rolling up and down like the deck of a ship tipping over ocean swells. Where… where was he? The earth was cold, very cold, but not all of it. There was this growing wet patch beneath his shoulder and chest, and it was the exact opposite of cold—it burned and it ached, but not as bad as his head which was spinning like a top.

What happened?

It was difficult. It felt like there were bounders weighing down even the smallest of his muscles, but somehow John forced his eyes open enough to see—at least sort of. The forest floor was rocking and his vision was so blurry.

<Really, my son, you are trying my patience…>

There was a white patch across the clearing. It wasn’t moving, but his eyes were drawn to the other presences in his proximity. There was a crouched black shape… and a—a gold wraith leaning over the shaking shadow.

John was so confused, brain wrapped in addling fog. He blinked, once, twice to clear his vision and what came into focus first was blue. They were wide, panicked eyes staring directly at him, shoulders hunched, body pressed the ground, head low.

Sherlock…

But he wasn’t alone. There was the demon written into his DNA hanging over him, whispering terror in his ear, low growl rumbling through the earth.

<Sherlock, shift back now. Let me see how you’ve grown, my boy>

Sherlock didn’t move. He didn’t speak. He couldn’t really. John had known that all along. It was too much a part of him—it had shaped him and he could no more move against it than John move against a mountain. He just shook, clinging to the midnight shrouded body that was his last defence against the… the worst.

Yeah, John remembered what the monster wanted, and John had failed to keep it from him, because he knew Sherlock’s defences were failing rapidly. Right now he was just a scared child under the wrath of a bastard father. He wasn’t going to last—he’d shift back and then… well, John could see it in the blue orbs begging, begging for help.
‘*No one saves me.*’

He’d promised—he’d promised to protect him.

The lion snarled.

*<I said change back! Now, before I lose my patience completely. You know it will only be worse if you push me. You know what will happen if you disobey me again, my son…> the monster hissed.*

He was broadcasting his thoughts, or at least making sure John could hear. Maybe he knew John was semiconscious. This was a claim. He wanted John to hear this—that he’d won.

That sick fuck.

Sherlock’s mind was still frantic with terror—John thought they might both be consumed by it.

John’s chest rose and fell, pained, sting in his shoulder growing but that was clearing his head. He tried to move his paws, sending shooting pain through his limbs and a fresh wave of warmth into the soil. Still, eyes locked on his.

He’d promised.

*<NOW!>*

The roar hit John’s mind and Sherlock flinched. He was too far gone to even shift back, and Sigur Holmes’ patience had run its course. An iron paw rose to fall; John saw the curved daggers glint in the moonlight.

*<John…>*

It was barely a whisper, maybe a goodbye, and then it was as if Sherlock’s mind was buckling under the force of fear and the will of his personal monster. He *was* going to shift.

*No! No! No, Sherlock!*

He had to save Sherlock.

Then a very strange thing came to pass. John’s mind burst forth from where he lay struggling to rise on the cold forest floor. Where Sherlock’s mind gave, John’s rose to support it—pushing with his whole being, stopping his friend from falling, and then John wrapped around him—totally and completely, encasing him in every fibre of his being. He slipped through the cracks, binding them together, and enfolding Sherlock’s mind wholly in his own. He poured every reassurance, every good feeling, all the warmth he could muster over the fragile brilliant mind.

*<It’s going to be okay…>* John whispered.

Then John was up, body eager to follow the example of his soul. He caught sight of Sherlock’s eyes as he sprung—and for the first time since the letter came, they were warm, and calm, if a little dazed.
This time Sigur was caught off guard. The lacerations he’d inflicted on John were less severe than he’d thought, claws having caught in John’s thickened winter pelt and thrown him more than ripped him. It had been the impact that stunned and temporarily immobilized him—and this time it was the bastard who was off balance.

He’d aimed for the lion’s unflawed face. Then there was impact. John’s snapping jaws closed repeatedly over the feline’s broad muzzle and brow. With a sick sense of satisfaction, John tasted blood in his mouth.

The beast roared and reared back, recoiling away in pain, throwing John off. John landed on his feet and his injured shoulder screamed and almost gave, but he held himself up, and kept the shield of his mind around Sherlock.

John backed up until he was again a physical barrier as well.

<John…!?> Sherlock’s voice rung within his head, lost.

Blood was seeping down John’s right foreleg, and while, yes, the injury wasn’t immediately fatal or immobilizing it was painful and blood loss was going to take its toll if—when—he continued to fight. So again John faced a situation in which his only option was gaining some time.

<No!> Sherlock’s confused voice begged.

John poured in some more reassurance.

<Shh… it’s going to be okay. If I can’t stop him you can run. You will run.> John told him, forcing a smile into his voice, ignoring the way Sherlock’s mind was rebelling against his plan.

Unfortunately, Sigur was recovering quickly from the shock and pain. Drops of blood hit John’s face as the monster shook his heavy head, now marred with a number of puncture wounds. That at least gave John some pleasure.

His eyes were like the fires of Hell, now. John would be pulverized—no possibility of recovery this time. Though, John guessed this would give them some more time while the lion ripped his body to shreds. The Changeling turned to face him, a good few meters away. John steadied himself, holding his head high. He may only just be a man but if he was going to die he was going to face it. With a perverse irony he realized it was his own father who bred in him such values. Well, his would have to make up for Sherlock’s shitty one. John guessed there might be something to that whole balance nonsense after all.

Time seemed to slow as John saw Sigur’s muscles rippling like liquid steel, preparing to launch. He felt Sherlock behind him, almost half beneath him. John didn’t know if it was intentional or
reflex, but as he slid a paw back to brace himself, it encountered a thick black tail, which quickly ensnared it. There was a little pulse and John felt his mind wrap even tighter around Sherlock's.

<Don’t let go…> John whispered into Sherlock as he bared his teeth a second before the inevitable.

The lion leaped and John tensed for impact, hoping to use some of the force to roll them away from Sherlock. Maybe he could hold out for a little while. He would put up as much of a fight as he could. He had to try. John snarled.

<JOHN, DUCK!> a voice screamed in his head.

From out of the trees, there was a new flash of gold flying through the air. John’s reflexes kicked in and he dropped, sliding back, basically crushing Sherlock and himself to the ground.

The two gilded beasts collided, the newcomer impacting from an angle. They both fell from the air, roars and snarls rising to a cacophony as they hit the ground.

<Mycroft!> John shouted, eyes widening.

Then there were others, many shapes joining them in the moonlight, all converging on Sigur Holmes. Not even the king of beasts could withstand the might of so many. There was a monkey with a syringe, and a gorilla grabbed the monster—in any other circumstance it would have been strange to the point of comedy—but now, as a small shape leapt from the back of a hyena and rammed the hypodermic needle into the foreleg of the beast, all John felt was a dark sense of relief and vindication.

Sherlock’s heaving ribs pressed against John, drawing his attention. They were both breathing hard. Sherlock was still wide eyed and trembling but as John’s complete occupation of his mind began to fade, the fear didn’t return, only a deep sense of shock and disbelief.

<It’s all over, Sherlock.> John said.

He tried to stand but his head spun, and he realized it had been adrenaline alone keeping him upright. John blinked, vision going fuzzy once more.

<John!?> Sherlock’s concerned voice touched his muddled mind.

<I… I told you he wouldn’t get you…> John swayed. The relief was overwhelming—as was the blood loss. Sherlock was safe, though. The bastard would never touch him again.

John was only vaguely aware when he keeled over and hit the earth, necessity no longer forcing him into consciousness. He gratefully let the darkness close in around him. Sherlock’s presence was there at the edge of his mind, fearful and calling.

<It’s all going to be okay… it’s over…> John assured.

Even shifted, bleeding and broken, there was something like a smile on John’s face as he slipped into blissful oblivion.
When John came to he was in a very white room that smelled familiar—like antiseptic. He recognized the clinic, Baker’s training hospital. The dripping of an IV was the only noise in the room. John inhaled and stared, confused, at the ceiling. There was pressure and a tugging sensation when he breathed. John’s brow furrowed as he tried to organize his thoughts.

“You sustained a number of lacerations across your right pectoral up to your shoulder. You experienced moderate blood loss, but not enough to warrant a blood transfusion, and now a saline solution is being administered intravenously to make up for lost blood volume. You have fourteen stitches between the lacerations—the doctor says there is little to no muscle damage and all of the wounds should heal quickly if taken care of properly. You also sustained a number of contusions to your left side as well as a few other mild bruises. You don’t have a concussion. Estimated complete recovery time is between one and a half and two weeks.”

Well that would explain the restraints around his chest. He was firmly bandaged in sterile, elastic wrappings.

John turned his head to find the source of the voice; it wasn’t far. Sherlock was tucked into an uncomfortable visitor’s chair. His knees were pulled up to his chest where his arms encircled them. He was staring right at John, face masked. John saw the grey sky and pouring rain outside the window behind him.

“Sherlock,” John greeted with a weak smile. “Are you okay?”

The young genius raised an eyebrow.

“Of course, I’m not the one in the hospital bed,” Sherlock pointed out.

John shimmied up so he was more sitting than lying down.

“Oh, I’m fine,” John said.

Sherlock had basically just told him as much in a lot more words.

“He could have killed you,” Sherlock said, without any inflection, just one of his straightforward facts. “You could have died.”

John looked himself over, catching a glimpse of the white bandages under the silly hospital smock they’d put him in.

“Well, I didn’t,” John pointed out.

Sherlock’s brow furrowed and John realized in some way that was foreign enough to confuse him; he felt guilty—a completely new emotion for the young Changeling and he didn’t know how to respond to it, but after all he’d been through John wouldn’t stand for adding guilt to the cocktail of things he must be sussing out in that big brain of his.

“John, I…” Sherlock started but John cut him off.

“Look, Sherlock, I made a promise. It’s over now,” John said, obviously meaning the conversation as well as the event.

If one of them had a problem then it was the other’s problem, too, John thought. He didn’t know when that fact had become the truth, but there was no denying it now.
Sherlock’s eyes widened for a moment, but then there was understanding. Sherlock looked like he was about to say something else, but then his gaze snapped to the open door over John’s shoulder and his face curled into a displeased glare and his mouth snapped shut.

John quickly followed his eyes to see Mycroft Holmes entering the room, damp umbrella tucked under his arm.

“John, I’m glad to see you’re awake,” Mycroft said cordially.

John responded with a tight grin.

“I’m a quick healer,” he said.

Mycroft pursed his lips, pausing a second.

“I want to speak to you both about what happened today in—”

Mycroft was cut off by the sound of a chair scraping loudly against the linoleum as Sherlock quickly evacuated it.

“Sherlock?” John asked, confused.

Sherlock sped around the bed and blew past his brother to escape into the hall. It wasn’t uncommon for Sherlock to respond in such a childish manner when it came to Mycroft, but John had thought that, in light of recent events and Mycroft’s key role in them, he might have at least given his brother a chance this time.

“Sherlock!” John called after him but he was long gone.

John sighed and scowled, chest stinging from when he sat up to call after the absent Changeling.

“Damn,” he muttered and turned to Mycroft. “I’m sorry. I don’t know why he’s being like this. If it wasn’t for you… just—thank you.”

John ended with his focus fully on the elder Holmes. Yes, John normally thought Mycroft was a pompous, interfering git, but when it came to Sherlock’s true welfare, they were united.

Mycroft simply leaned back and inhaled.

“If it wasn’t for your sacrifice I would have been too late… again,” Mycroft said with a disgusted curl of his lips, but then steadied himself and looked back at John. “You owe me nothing, John.”

John’s face hardened.

“But you weren’t too late… we stopped him,” John stated.

Mycroft looked at him for a moment, eyes lofty and calculating.

“Indeed… we did,” he murmured.

John hesitated but then asked the question in the back of his throat.

“What are you going to do with him?”

Neither man was confused about who they were talking about, not with the cloud that had gathered above them.
“My father will have a long life, but never again will he have the pleasure of seeing the sun, nor will he ever have the opportunity to hurt Sherlock ever again,” the words were threatening enough on their own, but the icy hint of a smile on his face said so much more.

*Hell can have him when I’m done with him,* John translated.

John gave a single nod—approval.

“Good,” he stated harshly.

There was another pause and then John looked back at Mycroft.

“What about the mastermind?” he asked.

Mycroft pursed his lips, fingers tightening on his umbrella.

“Nothing,” he hissed. “There is no trace of anything to even link the Wanderings to this event. We don’t even know how he found or contacted my father. Obviously my brother was doing better than anyone else could. If anyone is going to figure out who he is and find a way to catch him it will be Sherlock.”

Shock took over John’s expression.

“He’s going to continue working on the case? After what happened?” John asked, flabbergasted.

Mycroft didn’t look pleased and he pointedly looked at the side table on the far side of John’s bed. John followed his gaze and saw a stack of familiar files resting there. There were more by the chair Sherlock had been occupying just a moment ago.

“Are you honestly surprised, John? I wish he wouldn’t but you and I both know if we try and stop him he’ll only get himself into worse trouble on his own. You must help him, John. Make sure he doesn’t do anything… irreparably stupid,” Mycroft said sourly.

John almost laughed. It was true. They did enough idiotic stuff with John’s common sense holding them back. Without his or Mycroft’s help, John saw Sherlock in a jail cell or worse for pissing off the wrong person on his quest for the truth. John nodded and then there was a knock on the door and a nurse walked into the room.

“Good to see you’re awake, Mr. Watson. I just have to check over a few things. Shouldn’t take more than a minute,” he said with a friendly smile.

Mycroft moved out of the way.

“Right, then, I’ll leave you to it. I wish you a speedy recovery, John,” Mycroft said as he moved towards the door.

John’s fingers clenched.

“Mycroft,” John called, and the man paused.

If Sherlock wasn’t going to say it someone else had to.

“Wait… maybe—maybe I don’t owe you anything, but still, I want to say thank you again, for him,” John said with feeling—standing in for his absentee best friend.

Mycroft hesitated, brows knitting a touch, and then he swept out the door.
Sherlock returned only a few minutes later, just after the nurse left. John wondered if he’d waited for the nurse to leave on purpose to avoid seeing John’s wounds unbandaged. He didn’t blame him. They were a little gruesome. Four ragged lines ran from about ten centimetres under his collar bone up to his shoulder. The middle two had been sealed shut with a couple stitches each where the claws had gone deepest. All things considered, though, they weren’t too bad. He’d have scars but not bad ones—nothing like Sherlock’s, but they’d both been marked now.

“You know, he did save us,” John chided lightly when Sherlock had settled back into his ball on the chair.

He looked a little surprised and he held John’s gaze for a moment—strange mix of confusion and conflict in his eyes, before he scowled and put his chin back on his knees.

John drew Sherlock into a conversation about various infections one could get while staying in a hospital. John immediately forced himself to forget all the horrible possibilities when there was another knock on the door. John was pleased when he turned to see Greg and Molly leaning around the door frame. Greg had a little bit of gauze taped to the right side of his forehead but looked fine otherwise.

“Can we come in?” Molly asked nervously.

“Of course,” John said, aware of the tension rolling off Sherlock in waves.

They both knew that if their friends had ever bought their lie about the lion Wanderer, they certainly didn’t now.

“You okay? Both of you?” Greg asked, first to John and then Sherlock.

Sherlock’s eyes widened with bewilderment.

“We’re okay,” John said, worried about Greg. “What about you? I’m so sorry I put you in that situation. I just didn’t know what else to do. You too, Molly. I—”

But Greg raised his hand to stop him, shaking his head.

“Nope, none of that,” he said. “We’re your friends and I’m glad we were there to help. Well… not that I ended up helping much at all… or remembering much… with the little concussion,” Greg said dryly, rubbing his head. “But like I said, you don’t have to say sorry about this stuff to your friends.”

He tried to end strongly but it was forced and little awkward, coming out rather amusing, but Molly nodded resolutely at his side.

Sherlock looked at them both like they were crazing and John couldn’t help but giggle silently. Trust Sherlock not to even realize that he had friends at all.

“Molly, did you find Mycroft?” John asked out of curiosity, and to give Sherlock a chance to adjust to his new realisation.

Molly nodded, hands clasped in front of her.

“Yes, Mr. Holmes was already to the field with a lot of other people by the time I got there,” Molly said, a little shaky at the recent memory. “I told him where to find you all, and I think he heard you
howl.”

John smiled and Molly looked at the floor. The silence prevailed for a moment.

“Well,” Greg cut in. “We wanted to stop in to make sure you were both okay… but I might pass out if I don’t eat soon. Want us to bring you guys something?”

“No thanks,” John said, maybe it was the pain killers he was surely on but he wasn’t hungry in the slightest. He glanced at Sherlock. “You?”

The young Changeling shook his head and then their friends turned to go. Just before Greg got to the door Molly stopped and turned back, ears already pink.

“Um, Sherlock, I just—I just wanted to let you know you can trust us,” Molly stuttered.

Sherlock raised an eyebrow, obviously not getting what she meant.

“Trust you with what…?” Sherlock asked obliviously.

Molly went even redder and her hands twisted together like her words always did.

“I just meant—I mean you don’t have to worry a-about us saying anything about what happened with… with... I just mean we won’t say anything,” Molly ended in her usual awkward, but well intended tumble.

There was a tense silence and then she turned and bolted. Greg followed with a final wave in their direction. John laid his head back, medication and excitement making him drowsy.

“You don’t have to stay,” John said, though he had to admit he liked the company.

“I’m fine,” Sherlock said and bent to retrieve a file from the stack next to the chair.

John’s brow furrowed.

“Sherlock, are you seriously going to start on with the Wanderers case already… at all?” John had to ask.

Sherlock didn’t look up from the file.

“The mastermind was testing me with this—he wanted to see if I could be broken,” Sherlock stated. “Well… I won’t be.”

John pressed his lips together.


Sherlock nodded firmly.

“It’s the only reasoning that makes sense. He’s not stupid."

The pillow mussed up John’s hair as he shook his head. Maybe the mastermind wasn’t stupid but he was surely completely insane.

“You’re sure that’s it?”

Sherlock’s lips were a thin line.
“Yes. It has to be,” Sherlock hissed. “And he won’t beat me.”

John realized the file was shaking slightly in his hands and just maybe this was how Sherlock was going to pull himself out of this nightmare. He had to be saved from his own demon so now he was going to find the one who sent it after him. It was a little convoluted, but there were people missing and a determined Sherlock was better than a hopeless one. He’d already told Mycroft he’d help anyway. So John said one word.

“Yeah.”

The doctors let John go a few hours later with a light course of antibiotics, instructions to keep the wounds clean and to change the bandages daily. It was evening by the time John made it back to his room in the set of clothing Mrs. Hudson had brought from his changing booth, Sherlock in tow.

He was grateful to find that nobody had contacted his parents so no damage control was necessary. Thank god he was legally an adult. He really would rather not explain that he’d gotten clawed up by the sick, psychotic, lion father of his best friend.

John immediately went to lie back in his bed, looking forward to just relaxing for a while. Sherlock hadn’t stopped talking since the moment they exited the hospital room. He seemed to be trying to push the last week out of existence with the sheer force of words. John didn’t stop him—whatever helped—but by this point it was all blurring into white noise.

John opened his laptop, deciding to reply to a couple of emails sitting in his inbox from his Normal friends, because honestly after the past few days he could really use some normal.

Sherlock kept at it for hours, going orally over every miniscule detail he had accumulated on the false Wanderings. Finally, John decided he needed to succumb to the calls of sleep. He was exhausted again and even if they didn’t have class tomorrow it was getting late, nothing but black outside John’s window.

He set his laptop on his bedside table and carefully swung his legs over the side of the bed. He went to stretch but remembered his movements were restricted. Sherlock surely noticed him getting ready for bed; his eyes kept flicking nervously over to his fading friend, and his words started to
take on a desperate edge.

“Sherlock,” John tried to interrupt, but no avail.

“Justin Hara had a Komodo dragon shift—highly rare, largest species of the entire lizard family, and closely related to the monitor lizard,” Sherlock rambled up at the ceiling.

“Sherlock,” John tried again.

“He was a tenth year—average intelligence, except for in writing based courses where he excelled. He disappeared on October 21, the day of the Autumn Ball—”

“Sherlock!” John said, finally raising his voice a touch.

The young genius finally stopped and looked at him.


John took a calming breath, reminding himself that for once Sherlock was entitled to a few disproportionate emotional responses. John’s face stayed totally calm.

“Sherlock, you need to go to bed. I know for a fact you haven’t slept in four days,” John said, clearly.

The spike in fear in Sherlock’s widening eyes was unmistakable. There was a half second’s pause.

“No, I’m good, thanks,” Sherlock said and made to continue pacing.

John wasn’t going to have it, though. His hand caught Sherlock’s wrist on instinct. The brunette’s head snapped around and he stopped but he didn’t flinch, something John thought they were both rather surprised about.

“Sherlock, you need to sleep,” John reiterated.

The mask was long shattered on Sherlock’s face but even if he had managed to sustain it, he couldn’t ignore the frantic feelings brushing the borders of his mind. Sherlock’s eyes were glassy with exhaustion and fear. His lips trembled with the words he was trying to hold back.

“I can’t,” he finally said brokenly as he pulled away and kept pacing. “I tried—I mean I started to fall asleep in the hospital. When I’m awake I can lock it all away—but I can’t delete it and it all comes back when I sleep, when I can’t stop it. It’s all I can see, John. Just me, alone in the dark and I… I can’t do it. I can’t hold it back.”

John watched, desolate, as is best friend tugged helplessly at his hair. John would give anything to make it stop. That’s probably what prompted him to say what he did next—because it was crazy and he doubted such insanity would have been uttered at any other time.

“I could do it,” John said solidly.

That certainly made Sherlock stop in his tracks.

“What?” Sherlock said befuddled

John stuffed his hands in his pockets, as if that was somehow going to balance what he was saying.

“I could do that thing I did in the forest. I… could hold it back for you,” John said.
Sherlock had no idea what to say to that, John knew—which was probably best because John did not feel like arguing right now.

“One way or another you need to sleep tonight,” John said, resolve growing. “So shift.”

Sherlock hesitated.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

To prove just how sure he was, John turned his back, flipped off the light, and began the slow process of removing his shirt without straining his injury.

“Yes, I’m sure, Sherlock. Like I said, you need sleep. This is worth a try,” John stated.

There was another second of hesitation and then John heard Sherlock shirking his favourite coat.

Once John was shifted he hopped gingerly up onto his bed, landing unsteadily with the lack of support from his right foreleg. Luckily the bandages were made with Changelings and mind and therefore were extra stretchy so they weren’t uncomfortable in his wolf body.

John turned to see Sherlock sitting and watching him intently from the floor, tail twitching, a black shadow in the dark room. He was about eye level from where John lay.

<Well… lying down might help with the sleeping> John pointed out.

Sherlock paused and then grabbed the throw blanket from the food of John’s bed in his jaws and pulled it to the floor. Then he lay down and put his heavy head on his paws. John followed suit.

Then John began to reach out, trying to imitate what he did in Baker Forest, but it was more difficult now—fueled by concern instead of all consuming desperation. He could feel Sherlock’s mind clearly, apprehensive and curious, but he just couldn’t wrap around it like he did before. It remained separate. John was frustrated and after a few minutes Sherlock’s curiosity morphed into skepticism.

<It’s not working> Sherlock stated the obvious.

Sherlock was lying down though, and in the dark his exhaustion was asserting itself and with it came the flickering of blood and darkness. His anxiety was rising quickly, too. John had to figure this out. He thought back to the woods, evaluating through the haze of pain and adrenaline. Then John remembered how the feeling had surged when Sherlock’s tail wrapped around his leg.

<In the forest it worked better… with physical contact> John forced out, putting it in Sherlock-terms.

Sherlock’s ears swivelled forward, head cocking to the side.

<Worth a try> Sherlock said after a moment, copying John’s earlier words.

John resolutely ignored the way his heart beat a little faster when the mattress dipped at Sherlock’s added weight. The panther paused; John stayed where he was, letting Sherlock decide the extent of this experiment. John just continued on trying to encircle Sherlock’s mind with his own.

Finally Sherlock settled for mirroring John’s relaxed, sphinx-like position, just shifted down the bed a bit. Then he leaned over, shoulder and side pressing into John’s ribcage. John had been pressing with all his might, and then it was like someone had been holding the door shut and
suddenly they jumped out of the way so John tumbled through at the sudden lack of resistance.

The effects were instantaneous and John’s mind covered Sherlock’s completely. John heard him intake a sharp breath of surprise and then felt his body and mind utterly relax as John ventured deeper, saturating his brain with the same calm reassurance he had under the trees.

In seconds Sherlock was barely conscious, sleep deprivation taking its toll. Some of it was feeding back directly into John so he was totally relaxed and drowsy that he didn’t even jump when suddenly Sherlock was burrowing even closer to him, obviously trying to boost the effects even more, aware or not. John gave in with only mild surprise and rolled on to his side as Sherlock’s head wormed between his forelegs, somehow avoiding aggravating his injuries.

When he stilled, Sherlock was curled into a tight ball against John’s underbelly, side of his muzzle firmly buried in the ruff of John’s neck. The connection had indeed swelled once again and the bond was basically sustaining itself at this point. Sherlock’s mind thrummed with ease as he slipped completely from awareness.

John had never felt so relieved in his life. No nightmares would touch them tonight, not when they were protected like this. It might be unconventional, but even the next morning with a completely clear head, John wouldn’t regret this solution.

Sherlock’s breathing was deep and measured against John’s ribs, soothing after so much fear and pain. They were okay. Once more they were going to be okay.

Just before he drifted off, John tucked his head down so he could feel the ridge of Sherlock’s skull against his lower muzzle, and the particularly soft fur that grew behind his ears tickled John’s nose. Then he joined Sherlock in the blissful serenity of sleep, entwined in both body and mind, and in the aftermath there was at last a moment of peace.
Just the faint glow of dawn lit the room when Sherlock awoke. His body felt strange, and he realized it was probably the side effect of actually having slept deeply and restfully for more than a few hours. He hadn’t done that in years, and now he’d done it in John’s room—in John’s bed. With that thought Sherlock realized his head was resting on a distinctly furless body—his curled knuckles rested on clearly human ribs, because, yes, he no longer had paws either—or a tail, or rotating ears, or whiskers for that matter. Sherlock hesitantly opened his eyes.

His head was on John’s left shoulder, the unbandaged one, though he could feel the white strips wrapped around John’s chest scratching against his chin. It sent a little spike of pain through Sherlock—seeing John hurt like this, because of him, but mostly he felt an odd and confusing twist in his gut. John had willingly taken an injury for him. He’d stayed, and done so much more.

And Sherlock didn’t feel frightened when John touched him—even suddenly. Sherlock didn’t usually like to be touched by most people. There were times in his past where he’d made exceptions for the sake of scientific curiosity, but at those times he’d always been fully prepared for contact. Sherlock didn’t even flinch when John completely surprised him most of the time.

Sherlock had fully intended to continue this level headed, detached analysis of these developments but suddenly John took a deep breath and moved. The arm that had been loose against the bed behind Sherlock tightened in and fingertips brushed Sherlock’s lower back—it was like a static shock bouncing up his spine and preventing any continued contemplation. Sherlock fought the urge to move in response. Then John exhaled warm air through the curled strands of Sherlock’s hair—which relaxed him as a counterpoint.

Unfortunately, Sherlock was still left with the irreversible awareness of the fact that John was naked. He was too, but for some reason that really wasn’t all that important. He was a Changeling; he was accustomed to nudity.

However, there was something different in the faintly tanned skin before his eyes now. John’s stomach was flat and his chest was toned from rugby. Sherlock hadn’t realized the extent of it as John’s body was always hidden under school uniforms and soft jumpers, but even perfectly relaxed the muscles were visible on his abdomen, just a little bit, and there was a pale trail of downy hair starting under his navel and running down—

Sherlock instantly decided distance was paramount to the study of this development. He felt unusual and his head felt cloudy in a way that would have been more familiar if the comparative memories hadn’t been deleted a good while ago.
Very carefully, Sherlock extracted himself from the tangle of limbs he’d got himself into. John made a small noise of protest at the loss of heat but he didn’t wake. Sherlock quickly slipped into his clothes and went to the door. He hesitated there though, and glanced back at John, still sleeping soundly, before disappearing into the hallway.

Sherlock seemed to recover faster than anyone who knew him expected. He truly seemed back to his normal, fairly abrasive, self. He was insulting people; he was riling up his professors. He was aggravating Mrs. Hudson. He was going to class, as much as he ever did, and he was eating with John and their friends again. Only John knew that Sherlock hadn’t quite recovered completely—not yet at least.

In the weeks after the return and fall of Sigur Holmes, there were nights of fading frequency when John was interrupted by a lightly haunted figure appearing in his room. Sometimes it was while he was studying or on his laptop late at night. Sometimes it was as John was getting ready for bed, as if he’d been waiting for John to do so, but more often than not, John was awoken by the strangely fragile shape at the end of his bed.

“John, I can’t sleep,” were the only words he would ever say.

Then without a word of commentary, or a noise of protest, they would wordlessly continue the arrangement from that first night. John really should feel more awkward about the whole thing, he thought one night. It’s not like he wasn’t aware of the fact that he often woke up human—and what that meant. Sherlock was always gone by the time he stirred. John had half woken up once or twice while Sherlock was leaving but for some reason he couldn’t bring himself to move, as if Sherlock was a small bird that would start and take off permanently if John startled him in any way. He told himself he was afraid of this because if Sherlock spooked then he’d be facing the nightmares again and as Sherlock’s best friend John couldn’t let that happen. He just couldn’t.

Sherlock was going to get through this—already the visits were getting less frequent, and John would help however Sherlock wanted him to.

About a month after the confrontation in the woods, John quickly made his way up the stairs of A Wing, grinning widely. He’d been unbandaged for a few weeks and was back in top form, shoulder no longer hindering him at all.

John knocked and opened the door of 631A, not waiting for an invitation. If Sherlock didn’t want John to come in he locked the door, and then John tried to kick it down because it usually meant Sherlock was doing something ungodly with John’s possessions.

Luckily no such bad omen came to pass today and the door opened easily under his hand.

Sherlock looked up from his microscope when John entered, eyebrows knitting at the unusual, glowing smile on his face.

“You’re excited about something,” he deduced.

John bobbed his head.
“Good one,” he teased. “Do you want to know why?”

Sherlock’s eyes narrowed and his fingers tightened lightly on the dial used to raise and lower the slides. He didn’t answer.

“Because you were wrong, Sherlock,” John said gleefully.

This made Sherlock’s scowl deepen, but John knew he wouldn’t be able to resist bait like that.

“What are you talking about?” he asked shortly.

“I’m talking about the Beatles,” John said. “I hope you didn’t delete them again.”

Sherlock raised an eyebrow.

“Why…?” he said slowly.

“Because you were wrong,” John said, and he shouldn’t have been quite so excited about this but he was only human and he spent a whole lot of time with this arrogant bastard.

John cleared his throat, and began to recite a few practiced facts. John had never been so thankful that Professor Highland had a tendency to go off on tangents during his lectures.

“Charles Manson, around the late 1960s, formed the group known as the Manson Family in California. He entertained the idea of an impending apocalyptic race war… which he called Helter Skelter—after the famous Beatles song. Oh, he called the compound the ‘Yellow Submarine.’”

Sherlock just stared at him for a moment.

“You said no criminals drew from the Beatles. Well, Manson was a convicted murderer,” John said happily, strange for a sentence with the word ‘murderer’ so prominent.

Sherlock did a good job of masking it on his face, but John could easily tell he was miffed as he went back to his microscope.

“And?” he asked.

John crossed over to the bed and unzipped his backpack to pull out his laptop.

“Well, you can’t continue on with this serious gap in knowledge can you?” John said.

Sherlock turned to look at John, and John looked over his extensive Beatles collection. He almost started with ‘Come Together’ but he didn’t want to hear Sherlock point out all of the clear crimes against logic in the song. Instead, John scrolled down to ‘Let it Be’ and then pressed play.

Sherlock didn’t tell him to turn it off, and by the second chorus John suspected he might actually be enjoying it—or at least he was enjoying thoughts of tying it to homicide.

By the third song, and after John had related the Liverpudlian origins of the iconic group, Sherlock moved to join John on the bed to look at the pictures of the band members that John had pulled up on Wikipedia.

Much of the rest of the afternoon was spent in this fashion. Sometimes Sherlock asked a question but mostly he just listened to the music or John’s commentary, or they both sat in silence when a particularly good song would play. John ended up leaning against the wall, Sherlock by his side.
“Anytime you feel the pain… Hey, Jude, refrain. Don’t carry the world upon your shoulder… what?”

Sherlock was staring at John intently.

“You were singing,” Sherlock said, as if that warranted the strange intensity in his eyes.

John’s lips turned in surprise. He hadn’t even realised.

“Oh, sorry,” John said, not sure why he was apologising. His voice wasn’t *that* bad. “This is one of my favourites.”

Sherlock didn’t say anything in return and John’s throat worked. Unfortunately the empathetic link was providing no insight or explanation for the unidentified *something* swirling behind the surface of Sherlock’s eyes.

Then the song changed and Sherlock turned to narrow his eyes at the laptop.

“These lyrics are grossly inaccurate,” he said and paused to listen a moment. “To the point of idiocy. People definitely need more than love—like food, and sleep. *Love* isn’t even a necessary to sustain life in the first place.”

John rolled his eyes, knowing there was going to be absolutely no convincing Sherlock otherwise. John settled for annoying him instead.

“*There’s nothing you can know that isn’t known,*” John sang, a little louder than he normally would.

Sherlock’s brow furrowed.

“False. That is why people do experiments,” Sherlock said.

“*There’s nothing you can see that isn’t shown,*” John giggled.

“What does that even mean?”

John leaned forward.

“*There’s nowhere you’re meant to be that isn’t where you’re meant to be,*” John grinned.
“No, that’s just—”

“It’s EASY...!”

Sherlock just looked at him like he was crazy, totally lost when his logic was flat out ignored. John thought it was a bit endearing.

“All you need is love,” John sang, and Sherlock just shook his head.

Then there was a knock on the door, and John moved the laptop to go check it. At this time of day it was probably Mrs. Hudson dropping by to give them a plate of biscuits or tea, always with the warning that it was a one time thing.

“All you need is love,” John sung again as he stood.

“Wrong.”

“All you need is love!” John attempted to drown him out as his hand closed around the doorknob. “All you need is love. Love—love is all you need…”

John trailed off as he opened the door. He was sure Sherlock had said something back. The bastard always had to have the last word, but if he did John didn’t hear it as he took in the sight in front of him—well, below him actually, because there was currently a primary student sobbing on Sherlock’s doorstep.

“Henry?” John recognized the crying child. “What’s wrong?”

The loud weeping of the little boy was a strange accompaniment to the uplifting outro of the Beatles’ classic. Sherlock was now craning his neck to see what was going on from where he sat on the bed.

“Sammi is gone!” the small child bawled. “She wandered. Sammi wandered…!”

John’s brow furrowed and he sighed sadly.

Then, a series of habits imprinted on him by his mother took over. John led the crying child into the room and set about getting the lad a cup of tea. It wasn’t the first time John was happy that Sherlock had a Bunsen burner and a mini fridge in his room. Leaving milk and sugar in the dorm was admittedly a bit dodgy—but John always made Sherlock swear he hadn’t done anything to them.

By the time John transferred the steaming mug to Henry’s small hands Sherlock had gotten a little more information, under John’s demand that he be gentle about it.

Sammi was Henry and Adam’s older sister, a university student. She Wandered within the last 24 hours. They found her things in a Changing booth after she failed to meet with Henry that afternoon to take him to ice cream.

“What was her shift again?” Sherlock asked, encroaching upon Henry’s personal space.

He flinched under Sherlock’s gaze.

“B-b..bush dog,” the young Changeling stuttered.

John’s brow furrowed from where he leaned against Sherlock’s wardrobe, ready to jump in if Sherlock got too obnoxious. He had no idea what a bush dog was.
“Bush dog! *Speothos venaticus*! A canid only found in Central and South America.” Sherlock shouted, jumping off the bed and nearly scaring the pants off poor Henry. After Sherlock’s epiphany about the nature of the missing Changelings he had memorized the entirety of the endangered species list in detail. “Classified as near threatened. Highly elusive and the only member of its genus. Definitely rare! Oh, they’d want her without a—”

“Sherlock,” John called him to focus.

His attention snapped to John with his head cocked in confusion. John looked pointedly at Henry and his quivering bottom lip, obviously in danger of breaking back into hysterical sobs—and then he did.

“S-she was t-taken…? S-someone took S-Sammi!??” he wailed. “I want Sammi…!”

Sherlock stared wide eyed at the tragically upset Henry. He had no idea how to react; John was already crossing the room. He knelt in front of the young, splotchy-faced Changeling, took his tea, placed it on the floor and put his hands on the boy’s shoulders.

“Henry, it’s okay. Sherlock and I will find your sister. That’s what all this is for. We’re going to find all the false Wanderers, your sister, too,” John said soothingly, but sincerely—he meant it.

Henry stilled for a second, searching John’s face. Even at such a young age he needed to make sure John wasn’t lying. Apparently he found what he was looking for and then suddenly he lunged forward, wrapping his arms tightly around John’s neck. John made a couple calming noises and patted him on the back. He caught Sherlock’s analytical gaze. He’d been staring.

They both knew they couldn’t assure that Sammi would be safe, but for once Sherlock let John say something that wasn’t the whole truth. Perhaps he finally realized that sometimes there were words that needed to be said, no matter how difficult or impossible they were to keep. They held each other’s eyes as Henry hiccuped into John’s shoulder.

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John and Sherlock took Henry down to Mrs. Hudson, John trying his best not to fall down the stairs with an armful of crying primary student.

Then it was straight into Baker Forest. This was the earliest they’d heard of a Wandering since Justin, and they weren’t going to let the opportunity go to waste. John was severely uneasy. Sherlock assured him that Sammi’s Wandering had nothing to do with their connection to the Knight brothers. Sammi was the only bush dog shift in all of Great Britain; he had checked with Mycroft on their way to the booths. It was completely and independently logical that she would be taken.

John still felt sick about the whole thing, but he quickly pushed it out of his mind with his nose to the ground.

They followed Sammi’s scent from the booth and into the forest, Sherlock following John’s measured strides. They traced it east until a slightly familiar scent joined the mix.

*<Sherlock, it’s that scent, the one we found on the markers,>* John said.
Sherlock’s ears pricked forward excitedly.

<Are you sure?> he asked as John continued to sniff the area.

The smells painted a picture and sometimes John thought his human form was as good as blind in comparison to this.

<Yes. She met the other mammal here. They… lingered… but there was no struggle,> John concluded, Sherlock committing the notes to memory. <They continued together in that direction.>

John pointed his muzzle still further east. Without a word, Sherlock started off in that direction. They continued on for a long time, following John’s nose. They quickly passed the border of Baker Forest and still strode on. It was getting dark when John finally stopped—Sherlock nearly ran into him it was so abrupt.

<Here—something happened here. They stopped.>

And their scents were no longer the only fresh ones to inhale. John snuffled forward, head sweeping in wide arcs. Sherlock was nearly vibrating with apprehension. John was just trying to add it all up.

<Sherlock… there’s another Changeling… it smells like a mammal… but off… there were humans, too. And I smell petrol.>

In the dark, John hadn’t realized. He’d been so focused on the smells saturating his nasal cavity, but as he moved around a bush everything suddenly fell into place, because John was now standing at the edge of a very narrow dirt road, barely more than a path, but it was easy to put together what happened now. The smell of petrol was strong and the trail ended completely.

<Sherlock, they got into a car or something. This is where the trail ends…> John said, turning back towards the clearing.

Sherlock didn’t immediately respond but John could feel his mind working on overdrive. John worked on trying to figure out exactly how many unshifted Changelings or Normals, he wasn’t sure which, had been in the clearing. Finally, Sherlock returned from his head.

<I want to collect samples.>

That was all the warning John got before Sherlock shifted.

<What the hell!?> John tried to complain but Sherlock obviously could no longer hear him.

A sound of protest burst through his jaw. Sherlock was already picking some moss off the ground.

“John, stop being so pedestrian. It’s just the human body,” Sherlock chastised. “Now shift out. I need your help.”

John’s ears flattened against his skull and he backed up a few steps.

Absolutely not.

Sherlock scowled over his shoulder at John’s gut resistance. John realized this was probably a silly line to draw after all the others they ignored out of existence but he held on to it for a little longer.
“John, you are a Changeling. Don’t act like a Normal,” Sherlock drawled.

Sherlock had a point. It was just… no. John was being ridiculous. There were much bigger things at stake.

With a heavy sigh, John shifted. He felt distinctly uncomfortable, standing there in the middle of the woods, completely starkers except for what would have, to any passer-by, appeared to be a simple blue dog collar with a silver nameplate that declared him as a student of the Baker Institute.

“Fine, what do you want me to do?” John asked Sherlock, who was still crouching with his back to John.

He plucked a piece of moss from a small depression in the ground. Then he stood and began to speak as he turned. John very determinedly kept his gaze at eye level, and realized that this wasn’t actually that awkward at all. He’d just expected it to be. This was just Sherlock—strange as ever as he studied a tiny clump of moss.

“I need you to—”

Then Sherlock looked up at John, who was totally relaxed now, and stopped mid-sentence. His throat worked, as if the rest of the words had just gotten stuck there. John raised an eyebrow as it seemed that Sherlock’s supercomputer of a brain had just suddenly crashed. Well, they were getting more information in this one day than they had in months; maybe his brain had just overheated.

“Yes?” John prompted.

Then his head shook back and forth; he blinked twice and then a sound escaped Sherlock’s lips that could only be described as a verbal malfunction—it wasn’t even a word.

“I’m sorry, what?” John asked.

Sherlock’s eyes were locked onto his neck, where his marker hung a bit loose. Did he have dirt on his skin? Sherlock blinked and shook his head again.

“I need you to shift back,” Sherlock said in a rush, before his systems could fail again, John thought.


“Because, John, I need to use a few of your guard hairs to secure the samples to your marker,” he said as he turned to look for more samples.

John scowled and crossed his arms over his chest, but the effect was wasted as Sherlock was very clearly not looking at him.

“Then why did you have me shift in the first place!?” John complained loudly.

“I—changed—my—mind,” Sherlock spat, with hostility.

John threw up his arms.

“Jesus Christ, you’re completely insufferable sometimes, you know that?” John retaliated, but then shifted, and when he was on four paws his hackles were noticeably raised.

He did however suffer Sherlock plucking out a few hairs from his tail, and if he didn’t know better,
John would have thought Sherlock’s fingers were shaking when they contacted the blue strip around his neck.

One April afternoon, Molly entered the dining hall with an unmistakable bounce in her step—at least unmistakable for her. Okay, she was smiling and not looking at the ground but that was basically a bounce for her.

She sat down next to Greg and across from John and Sherlock. Mike had been mostly absent since he and Suzie had started getting serious so it was just the four of them. Sherlock had a mug of tea and John and Greg were picking at the pasta on their plates.

“So,” Greg started once Molly was settled, “Is everyone still good for the trip into town Friday night?”

Sherlock scowled but he had needed a couple things form town so John had long since used that as leverage to convince Sherlock to accompany them on the proposed pub run they had planned for the end of the week.

“Yeah, of course. We’ll be there,” John said.

Greg smiled and turned to Molly.

“And you, Molly?” Greg asked.

Molly’s face pinkened and she looked down at the table.

“Yes—I mean yeah, but I-ah-wanted to ask—would any of you mind if I brought a… um, friend?”

Greg cocked his head to the side and John’s attention focused. Sherlock seemed interested in the ceiling more than the conversation.

“Well, I don’t see why not. Friend?” Greg asked.

Molly blushed even more severely and twisted her hands in her skirt.

“Umm… well, my… boyfriend,” Molly explained.

Sherlock nodded just slightly—so he’d known from the beginning. Greg and John however were painted with surprise. Greg didn’t look excited for her, though, for some reason John couldn’t place. John would have to be the excited one then.

“Molly’s got a boyfriend?” John said, genuine smile splitting his face. “Who’s the lucky man?”

Molly grinned up at him.

“He’s a Normal who lives in town. He works in IT for the Institute. That’s how I met him,” Molly explained bashfully. “His name is Jim.”

Chapter End Notes
Art by ofthespeckledband.tumblr.com
Jim apparently had to work late, so he was going to meet Molly, Greg, Sherlock and John at the pub. John and Greg both ordered a pint of beer. Molly sipped on a pinkish drink that John wasn’t sure contained any alcohol at all. Sherlock hadn’t ordered anything and his focus skipped around the room. John figured he was fighting fatal boredom by deducing the lives of each bar patron.

To be honest, Greg didn’t look particularly thrilled to be in the pub either. A girl at the bar had obviously flirted with him and he hadn’t even seemed to notice. This left John and Molly to discuss the animal physiology course they were both trying to get into next term.

Most medical schools had many veterinary programs and most medical students were smart enough to take advantage of this. It was difficult if not impossible to get a job in most medical fields without at least very basic veterinary skills, and if you wanted to work in emergency care it was of paramount importance to have a staff capable of treating shifted Changelings.

John was at the bottom of his first pint and Greg was half way through his second when Molly perked up, gaze locking onto the door. She hopped off her tall chair and walked over to meet a man in the tightest pair of jeans John had probably ever seen. He was older than the Changelings in the bar, most likely in his early twenties and he was wearing a v-neck tee shirt and an easy smile on his face.

Molly led him over to the table, pointing at each of her friends in turn, introducing them. She stopped when she reached the small group.

“Everyone,” she said, looking more sure of herself than usual, “This is Jim.”

“Hello, I’ve heard so much about you—all of you,” Jim said, pausing strangely in the middle of his sentence, as if he hadn’t originally intended for it to be plural.

He smiled amicably, though, and John doubted he deserved the cold reception he was about to receive. Sherlock’s gaze flicked over Jim for just a second and then back to a couple holed up in a booth, who he was trying to decide were getting back together for the third or fourth time. Greg just took a heavy swig of his beer. Jim’s smile faltered and his gaze settled on Sherlock’s complete dismissal.

“Ah... they mean hello,” John said, a little irritated at his friends’ lack of courtesy.

Then the man’s eyes flashed up towards John and for a second he thought there was something there that made his blood run cold, but then John must have been imagining it because the smile and nod he received were warm and clean. John mentally shook his head and returned the gesture with a tight smile. Jim’s gaze lingered for a moment before he turned to Molly with a tender expression.

“I’m sorry, Molls,” he said. “I still wanted to stop by to meet your friends, but a bunch of the
campus servers are down so I can’t stay.”

Molly’s face fell.

“Wow, dedicated—working on a Friday night,” Greg commented, pint in hand, making John want to kick him under the table, but it was a tall table and it would have been completely obvious.

Thankfully, Jim seemed to ignore the comment as he bent to give Molly a goodbye kiss on the cheek, making her blush viciously.

“It was nice meeting you all,” Jim said, and then leaned in to shake each of their hands.

Greg shook his hand apathetically but Jim was completely ignored when he reached across the table for Sherlock’s. John quickly intervened and grasped Jim’s hand solidly. He leaned in for just a second, as if giving another nod of thanks, and then turned to go.

Weird bloke, John thought, but he seemed to make Molly happy.

Once Jim was out the door, Molly turned to the boys with a splitting smile on her face.

“Well, what do you all think of Jim?” Molly asked.

John opened his mouth to give the most positive review he could but he was completely beaten to the punch.

“Gay.”

Strange how a single word from Sherlock Holmes had the ability to throw a whole group into chaos.

“What?” Molly squeeked.

“What!?” John echoed forcefully.

Greg just choked on his beer.

Sherlock merely continued to focus on the off-and-on couple.

“Jim from IT is gay,” he confirmed his meaning.

The color drained out of Molly’s face.

“He’s not,” she denied.

John scowled.

“How could you possibly know that?” John asked.

It probably wasn’t the right thing to say but he had to know.

Sherlock tore his gaze away from what he obviously thought was a much more interesting puzzle. He rolled his eyes.

“Did none of you see his exposed, designer underwear? The chain around his neck? The product in his hair!” Sherlock said dramatically. “Jimmy is gay!”

Greg’s eyebrows were threatening to disappear into his hairline.
“That does not mean he’s—” John started to protest.

“Oh, also, supported by the fact that he managed to slip his number into John’s jacket pocket,” Sherlock dropped the final bombshell.

“Yes!” the word slipped gleefully out of Greg’s mouth before he caught himself.

It was lost in the chaos as John confirmed Sherlock’s statement by removing a slip of paper from his pocket. There was a set of written numbers breaking up the white surface. John felt the beginning of a headache at the base of his skull.

“I told you,” Sherlock said.

When John finally looked up, there were tears shining in Molly’s eyes and the two regular teenage boys began to justifiably panic. Sherlock just sighed heavily, as if this was far more than he should be expected to put up with.

“Y-y-you’re just—sometimes you’re … just horrible,” Molly said passionately, then turned her anger on her appropriately mortified friends. “All of you…!”

A little sob escaped her and her face crumpled before she turned to storm out of the pub, hair swinging angrily and glowing orange under the amber bar lights.

Greg was too shell shocked to say anything but John turned to Sherlock.

“Sherlock, how could you say all that!?” John asked angrily.

Sherlock scowled.

“What? It’s better that she not know and it ends with her finding him with another man?” Sherlock asked. “I was doing Molly a favor.”

John leaned back in his chair, frustrated.

“Fine, but you could have been a lot gentler,” John tried to explain. “You really upset her!”

Obviously Sherlock wasn’t really listening anymore, as he glanced at the couple’s booth once more and finally muttered ‘four’ and moved his eyes to the next table.

“Oh, Molly’s going to be fine,” Sherlock drawled. “Greg is going to ask her out.”

John’s eyes snapped wide and Greg spat half his mouthful of ale back into his pint. John turned to his silver haired friend.

“You’re asking Molly out?” John asked first and then remembered to take another step back.

“No… wait, you fancy Molly?”

Greg looked like a deer in the headlights.

“I—well, I… um, I—” Greg stumbled into complete incoherency.

Sherlock was leaning on his hand with his elbow on the table as he watched an exchange between a spectacled patron and the bartender.

“Oh, do give him a minute, John. This is all very new for dear Greg,” Sherlock said. “He only realized his interest in our Molly when he found out she was taken, and only decided to ask her out
a few minutes ago when he realized she would no longer be otherwise committed.”

Sherlock finished with less inflection than one would use relating what they had for breakfast. John and Greg momentarily lapsed into awed silence.

Finally Greg spoke.

“Well, I better go find Molly,” he said, pulling his coat off the back of his chair.

John nodded at the loose salute Greg gave him as a goodbye.

“Good luck, mate,” John said, and Greg nodded once before starting to make his way towards the door and the chilly, night air, leaving John and Sherlock alone at the table.

John sighed and let himself relax a bit, taking a drink of his beer and feeling the carbonation pop on his tongue.

“You know, you could stand to be more delicate,” John chided, knowing it wouldn’t do any good, but feeling like he was obligated to say it anyway.

True to character, Sherlock only curled his lip up in disgust, eyes still trained on the bar.

John leaned his weight on the hard wood table and followed his gaze.

“So,” John said, giving in, “Is the one with the glasses sleeping with the bartender?”

Sherlock smirked, obviously pleased at John’s own observations as well as his own.

“Yes… but he hasn’t told her he’s married yet,” Sherlock smiled, glancing sidelong at John.

John giggled and brought his pint to his lips.

“Brilliant.”

John was studying on his bed. Pale, May sunlight filtered through the sixth floor windows. The text book was heavy in John’s lap. He looked up when his door opened without a knock preceding. It was Sherlock—of course it was.

He strode purposefully into the room. John was well used to such entrances.

“Can I help you with something?” John asked, looking back down at his text.

“I need help with an experiment,” Sherlock stated, voice low.

“Yeah? What kind of experime—” John started but the words died in his throat as he glanced up.

He’d heard Sherlock’s footsteps, but he hadn’t realized just how close he’d gotten, and he definitely hadn’t noticed the searing intensity in his blue eyes. There was the familiar dash of uncertainty that Sherlock had only ever shown John, but over that was determination and something melting.
“Sh-Sherlock?” John stuttered as Sherlock pulled the text book out of his hands and dropped it unceremoniously on the floor.

“I need to do an experiment on the fluxuation of hormones under variable stimuli,” Sherlock said, voice anything but his usual clipped tone.

John’s stomach then swooped violently as the bed dipped under the new weight of Sherlock’s knee. The support allowed the pale skinned teen to move his body right over John’s, hovering just a few centimeters above his face—eye to eye. John’s world quickly shrunk to the sky blue orbs and the body they resided in. He wanted to ask what was going on, but he was completely speechless up until the moment Sherlock’s lips finally covered his own.

They were soft, and warmer than John expected. Part of John was in shock, but the much bigger part crackled with heat and it was entirely out of his range of abilities to hold himself still when Sherlock’s mouth began to work over his.

John parted his lips and, under whose power he didn’t know, their tongues met and his hand shot up to cup Sherlock’s neck, thumb tracing along his jaw. Sherlock tasted like tea, but stronger and sweeter, along with something else entirely.

John hummed deeply when their tongues intertwined completely, and Sherlock’s hands grasped his shoulders. Long, thin fingers pressed into his skin through his stripy, blue jumper.

When Sherlock pulled away, to John’s semi silent protests, he had a tiny flash of clarity that allowed him to wonder, just for a second, what the fuck was going on, but then Sherlock’s clever tongue traced his jugular vein and all coherent thought was abandoned as that mouth moved over his skin. John couldn’t help but use his hands to urge him on. It just felt too good and the scent of Sherlock was saturating his head as his dark, curly hair was close enough to brush against his cheek. It was the same smell that John caught on his sheets the nights after Sherlock couldn’t sleep and they woke up tangled together.

“Sherlock…” he whispered.

John grasped helplessly at the young genius, hands fisting in his white school shirt to pull Sherlock’s lips back up to his own. He outright moaned at the recovered contact and inhaled sharply when Sherlock’s hand found its way under John’s jumper. He arched into the contact and tried to drag Sherlock even closer. All of John’s blood was rushing down to a very specific part of his body and his head felt like it was filled with helium. He wanted this more than he’d ever wanted anything for himself in his whole life.

“Mmmn… Sherlock,” John murmured as teeth sank into his bottom lip.

John’s fingers buried themselves firmly in silky, brown hair, and the slide of a violinist’s hand from ribs over taut stomach muscles, the way they might play over tuned strings, was the only warning John received before the heel of Sherlock’s palm slid unyieldingly over the growing bulge in his jeans.

Surprised, John couldn’t restrain himself and bucked up into Sherlock’s hand.

“Sherlock!” John said, as their lips parted with a distinct pop as John gasped wildly as a spike of pleasure shot through his system, and then John woke with a start.

It was barely dawn and John was alone in his room. His heart thundered in his chest and a thin sheen of sweat rested on his brow. His chest rose and fell quickly as he tried to reorganize his
flailing mind—images fresh and burned into place.

Sick with dread, John lifted his duvet and groaned at the undeniable evidence poorly concealed by his pajama trousers. He closed his eyes and let his head fall back onto his pillow.

“Oh… this is not good…” John moaned, trying to forget the way Sherlock’s name had sprung from his lips as he woke.

Since Sammi’s disappearance, Sherlock had decided to focus their effort away from the mastermind himself and instead try to fill in a couple of the other blanks on his web.

“They all go willingly, John,” a low voice sounded a few centimeters above his shoulder as John was walking down the corridor between classes with Molly.

It was like someone electrocuted him. John sprung away so quickly and violently his shoulder and backpack slammed against the wall he’d forgotten was so close beside him. Both Molly and Sherlock were looking at him like he was crazy—which he was considering himself as a serious possibility to be honest.

“Jesus Christ! You scared the piss out of me,” John said as he tried to regain some dignity, determinedly looking anywhere but at the tall, dark haired by with questions in his eyes.

“As I was saying, they most likely are achieving the lack resistance by blackmail and threats, and for that—”

“You’d need an informant on the inside to get to know the victims,” John finished huffily. “I know. You told me last night.”

John had strategically made sure Molly was in between him and Sherlock when they started walking again so now Sherlock was trying to talk around her.

“Well, I wasn’t sure if you heard me. You got upset and started throwing your possessions at me until I left. I thought it might be valuable to reiterate,” Sherlock said accusingly.

Molly shot him another confused look that he deftly ignored.

“I was asleep,” John grumbled.

Well it wasn’t his fault that damn dream was throwing him into a mad sexual identity crisis as well as inspiring a number of other unwelcome side effects that certain did not support Sherlock showing up next to his bed in the middle of the night when his guard was down.

It wasn’t as if Sherlock was having one of his bad nights—he hadn’t had that face on. John always knew that face. Thank god it so infrequent now. John didn’t know if he could handle Sherlock actually in his bed at the moment. No, he was sure he couldn’t.

No last night there weren’t any nightmares. No, instead Sherlock had come to tell John some small realization that full well could have waited until morning and oh, also to further dismantle John’s entire self image—with those damn cheekbones and sparkling eyes that brought up far too many
unbidden images. He told himself they were just flashbacks to the dream, and he flat out refused to see them as independent observations.

Because everything about this was just crazy—and not in the good way.

The morning after the dream, John came up with several compelling reasons why the only option was to pack the dream away and forget about it, discount it as one of those nightmarish, hormone saturated teenaged dreams. Because seriously, John hadn’t had more than a drop of luck in that area since he’d come to the Baker Institute. He’d had so many other things to worry about and they were all certainly worth it, really, but the fact was that John hadn’t even kissed someone in nearly a year now. He’d just been so busy. Plus, he spent so much time with Sherlock that he had probably just managed to accidentally work his way into the wrong dream. It was just a fluke.

“Anyway…” Sherlock began, drawing John back into the present. “I am going to begin cross-referencing the Wanderings at Baker to look for a common denominator. Ask around in your classes to see if Sami was spending any time with any new people in the weeks before she Wandered.”

John sighed, knowing it was going to be impossible to gain such information without sounding like a nutter. Oh well, half the Institute thought he was crazy for the company he kept alone.

“Right…” John said wearily as they passed the administrative offices.

“Good,” Sherlock said, and then took a sharp right into the student records office and John silently prayed that he wouldn’t do something to get him kicked out of school.

John and Molly continued in silence for a moment or so but he didn’t miss the sidelong glanced she was shooting in his direction and he had no hope that the silence would last. Already his mind was on overdrive to produce an adequate response to whatever question she was going to ask.

“So, did you two have a spat or something?” she asked timidly.

“I’m straight,” John blurted before he could stop himself.

He quickly realized he had been the one to edit ‘spat’ into ‘lover’s spat’ in his head. His face burned with shame but it was too late. Molly’s eyes were trained on him and she was more perceptive than anyone gave her credit for. She was going to see right through him, but when she spoke it was far from what John expected to hear.

“How do you know?” Molly asked.

John’s eyebrows shot upwards.

“I’m sorry, what?”

Molly blushed and looked at the ground, stopping in front of her classroom, so traffic began to flow around them.

“I—I just meant, I don’t know exactly what’s bothering you, but I can guess… and I just thought… can any of us know that completely yet? It’s… isn’t university supposed to be when most of us truly find all that out?” Molly said softly. “I just mean, I don’t think it’s something to get worked up over when you’re still young enough that you could easily find out something new about yourself.”

Molly usually stumbled when she spoke, and usually it never came out right, but once in a blue
moon Molly spoke some of the most profound, insightful commentaries John had ever heard.

This was one of those moments. John could only blink owlishly at her a few times before she mumbled a hasty goodbye and something that sounded like good luck before disappearing into the open door.

John sighed heavily and ran a tired hand over his face. Well, now he just had no idea where he stood.

In the end, Molly’s words were not wasted on John—maybe he was a little less straight than he thought and that was fine. He was able to calm down from his complete identity crisis, but it still didn’t change the fact that at the heart of all this strife was Sherlock Holmes, and that brought on a whole set of its own problems.

First, and most important, was the fact that Sherlock was his best friend and that meant John knew about his past. For all John knew, even *thinking* about him that way could violate all the trust that Sherlock had in him.

And even *if* Sherlock wouldn’t be completely betrayed then that still left the glaring and impassable fact that this was *Sherlock Holmes*—a person who ate out of only absolute necessity, slept when his body dropped, and thought *breathing* was *boring*. John was fairly sure he would have a whole speech about the endeavors of the mind overshadowing trite hormonal needs. John had never seen him so much as show a passing interest in a girl or boy for that matter—which he guessed should be a key part of this assessment. The fact was that the idea of Sherlock in a relationship was the most preposterous idea that John had ever considered.

So John decided his best option was to pack it up in a little box and let it gather dust in the attic of his mind.

It seemed like a sustainable idea at the time.

Well, it worked for a little while.

“*John!*”

John was in a study hall, waiting until he had to go out and shift for his speech class when Sherlock was suddenly hovering over him, palms on the table top, with a fierce look in his eyes. John turned to the next page in his book.

“Sherlock,” John greeted neutrally.

He used to respond to this level of excitement, but Sherlock often got this excited about pond scum, so over time John’s responsiveness had faded a touch.

“I found the common denominator,” Sherlock said, voice sharp.

That got John’s attention. He leaned back in his chair and looked up at his friend, whose curls hung wildly over his forehead.
“What?” John prompted.

“I found the informant, John, the one person who had contact with each of the false Wanderer’s before they disappeared,” Sherlock said.

John clearly saw the red line branching out from the center of the web on Sherlock’s wall out to the neatly written ‘informant’ in his mind.

“What?” John asked.

Sherlock hesitated for only half a second before his eyes flashed bright with excitement.

“Irene Adler.”

According to Sherlock Irene Adler had been seeing Hannah Chamberlin as well as Sammi Knight in the month or so before each of them disappeared. She had at least shared a class or had some other connection to each of the other false Wanderers in Baker. Strangely, John had no trouble believing Sherlock when he said it was Adler.

They finally found the woman in the Grand Entryway of Baker Hall. She sat in one of the plush armchairs that helped make the building look as posh as it did. She helped too. Irene held a silver compact mirror in her palm and a blood red tube of lipstick in her other hand.

John’s mood dropped at the mere sight of her. It could have been anyone, but no, it had to be Irene. “Sherlock Holmes,” she purred as they approached. “What brings you to see me?”

John sighed and readied himself to be ignored for most of the conversation.

“Oh, nothing much,” Sherlock said archly. “I was just wondering how your job is going? Does it pay well?”

Her eyes widened in surprise for just a moment before her expression shifted into a sure smile. “Well, bravo, Sherlock,” she said smoothly. “It took you a while to figure it out but you got there in the end.”

He compact snapped shut and she slipped it into her black handbag. John was just shocked that she wasn’t even denying it. Sherlock, however, didn’t seem surprised at all. “Who is it? Who is your boss?” Sherlock cut straight to the quick.

Irene appeared unruffled as she delicately crossed one leg over the other and leaned back in the armchair, folding her hands over her knee.

“Oh, Sherlock you must know there is no way you can make me tell you that,” she cooed with mock disappointment. “Or really anything for that matter. You have no evidence against me, no leverage. You should know better than to face me so unprepared.”

Sherlock narrowed his eyes at the woman, but John was furious. “How can you even—how could you do this in the first place!? Help these people do—”

“I have no idea what happens to the ones they tell me to watch. I collect information. I go places
where others cannot and then I get paid,” Irene cut him off. “I am sorry, John Watson, but such is the way of the world.”

John’s mouth opened and closed, too angry for words. Sherlock spoke before John could recover.

“You haven’t even met him, have you?” Sherlock stated, barely a question.

Irene laughed.

“Oh, darling, of course not. He’s far smarter than that,” she said, voice like red velvet. “And he’s had his eye on you right from the beginning, you know.”

John saw Sherlock still at this and his own stomach dropped uncomfortably. Irene leaned forward onto her elbows.

“You know what he calls you…? The **virgin**,” she said with a quiet amusement and Sherlock’s gaze rose to a glare. “That’s what the Autumn Ball was all about. He wanted to see if you could be… broken.”

The smile on Irene’s face made John want to punch her. He had more than an inkling of what being broken by Irene Adler would have entailed. Too bad John was raised not to hit women, or he would be seriously considering wiping the grin off her face.

“Well, sorry to *disappoint*,” Sherlock said with a sneer.

That was right, John remembered. Sherlock had left the dance that night, left Irene alone in the auditorium.

But then Irene laughed once more and John’s small bubble of satisfaction deflated.

“Oh, don’t sell yourself short, Sherlock. The night wasn’t wasted. You were already half way there without my help,” Irene grinned, and then for the first time in the conversation she actually looked at John, which was unnerving in itself.

Sherlock actually flinched and John felt the tension curling away from him. He locked eyes with Irene and what seemed to John like a silent battle of wills rose between them. After what seemed like an eternity, Sherlock scoffed and broke his glare away from her, turning on his heel.

“Come on, John,” he hissed. “She won’t tell us anything.”

With one last glance at Irene, who obviously knew she’d won the first round, John spun to follow Sherlock, who was already half way across the hall of milling people.

John only caught up to Sherlock once they were outside, crossing the commons towards A Wing. The grass was wet with dew and John’s breath lightly fogged in the cool spring air. He matched his stride to Sherlock’s and opened his mouth to ask what the hell Irene had been talking about but then he was blindsided as a set of words beat his into the open air.

“I’m not a virgin,” Sherlock stated, as if he was correcting a false statement.

John almost tripped and fell on his face. Of all the things John could imagine Sherlock saying in this moment, well he hadn’t even bothered to put it on the list.

“I—I’m sorry, *what!*?” John said.
He’d probably misheard.

“Despite my past belief that sexual activities and pursuits are an unnecessary activity that pales in comparison to the exploits of the mind, a few years ago an opportunity presented itself and I decided to take advantage—for the sake of scientific curiosity and data,” Sherlock tacked quickly onto the end with a sidelong glance at John.

John was currently blinking at him like an idiot. He heard the words. They just didn’t completely make any sense yet.

“No… you!?” John asked—because he needed complete confirmation.

Sherlock’s head snapped towards John and his eyes narrowed into a glare.

“Just because I have a certain history as well as a general belief that the needs of the mind are far more important than those of the body, does not mean I’m incapable of performing or partaking in acts of sexual intercourse, John,” Sherlock spat and sped his pace.

With wide eyes watching his friend walk away, John realized he’d offended Sherlock. He immediately felt guilty as well as rather amused, however conflicting those feelings were, because not even in his craziest dreams had John ever thought those words would come, in that order, out of Sherlock’s mouth.

John jogged a couple steps to catch up.

“Sherlock! Sherlock, look, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to imply that…” John said, unsure what exactly he wanted to apologize for—all of it really. “Who-um-who was she?”

John couldn’t help asking, though he ignored why that was. If it was Irene though, John might have to strangle something.

Sherlock didn’t pause, or slow, but he did answer, which John hoped meant he’d accepted his apology.

“Victor,” Sherlock said. “His name was Victor.”

John almost tripped over his own feet, and that box he’d stored in the dark corner of his mind sprung right open, spilling its contents absolutely everywhere.
Sherlock Holmes met Victor Trevor in the first term of his eleventh year, in a university organic chemistry course. Victor was a third year university student with a bull terrier shift, and up until that point in his life, Sherlock had been fully aware of sex—what it was, what it did to those with lesser mental capacities, but the how and why of those facts were mostly abstract concepts to him. He’d tried to do some research online but it was hardly worth wading through the lakes of pornography that shrouded any actual analysis.

It’s not that Sherlock’s attention was particularly drawn to Victor, but it didn’t take a genius to figure out that the antisocial prodigy had caught Victor’s eye. He laughed at Sherlock’s scornful remarks instead of getting upset which was a first outside of Irene. Victor wasn’t unbearably stupid either, nor was he any sort of threat.

So when Victor had made a proposition, Sherlock hadn’t said no. Maybe it was pure scientific experimentation. Maybe his hormones had just found a logical way to undermine his past beliefs. Either way, it led him to a series of visits to Victor’s B Wing flat.

It was a mutually beneficial engagement. Victor was a sexually active, noncommittal twenty one year old university student with a young lover who was utterly uninterested in a relationship outside the bedroom, and even that ‘relationship’ was limited to the time it took for Sherlock to get his breath back and put his shirt on.

Sherlock would admit it was interesting for a while. It turned out there were some benefits and positive aspects of sexual intercourse, and Victor never asked anything more of Sherlock than he cared to give. He didn’t ask questions or delve too deep—and he never spread the knowledge of what lie beneath Sherlock’s clothes. He would only laugh from where he lay sprawled in his bed as Sherlock pulled his trousers on like the bed would catch fire if he remained there for too long. He thought Sherlock was odd, but amusing, usually to Sherlock’s annoyance, and he loved Sherlock’s body.

So it worked, until it didn’t. It wasn’t surprising, nor was it dramatic. The novelty wore off for Sherlock and Victor’s rampant hormones began seeking a new target. Sherlock had never given him a reason to lock his focus. They never talked about it. Sherlock just stopped coming over and Victor stopped texting. As far as Sherlock was concerned the experiment was a success. Victor graduated a year later and Sherlock deleted all the information he hadn’t found useful and having let his hormones run the show for once, they were more manageable and he hadn’t had so much as a spark of interest in a second trail—until a few weeks ago of course.

“Sherlock!”

Sherlock pressed his lips against his steepled fingers from where he stood as still as a statue in front
of the great map on his wall, obscured by all his additions.

That was John’s voice. When did John get here? Had he been here the whole time? He’d been working on a term paper… No, that was last night. When had he left? Sherlock just must not have heard him come in.

“Yes, John?” Sherlock said.

With a glance Sherlock surmised that John was back from class—something Sherlock had definitely forgotten about—and had returned quickly, if his fast breathing and flushed cheeks were anything to go by. If John had a purpose for rushing, it seemed to be momentarily forgotten as his brow furrowed and he cocked his head to the side.

“Have you moved since I left?” he asked.

Sherlock raised a single eyebrow.

“When did you leave?” Sherlock countered.

John just rolled his eyes and shook his head as if he were having a momentary internal conflict—probably about something trivial like not eating or sleeping. He recovered quickly enough.

“Tracy Abbot wandered,” John rushed. “Three whole days ago now. How haven’t you heard about this?”

“I did hear about it,” Sherlock corrected.

A small girl with blonde curls had approached him in the corridor two days ago. She had gone away with a crisp ten pound note in her pocket.

“You already knew!? Why haven’t we been out to the forest? Or even the booths!?” John asked, shocked.

Sherlock didn’t look away from the wall.

“Because she wandered, John,” he said.

“Yes, that’s what I said. So why—”

Sherlock turned and made a severing gesture with his hand.

“No, John, she was an actual Wanderer. She was a red squirrel. She wasn’t unusual or interesting,” Sherlock said, phrasing bringing a scowl to John’s face. “You must not forget that the reason that this conspiracy is so successful is because Wanderings do happen.”

John looked a little defiant, for reasons that Sherlock didn’t understand.

“Are you sure?” John asked.

Sherlock’s face turned to confusion.

“Of course I’m sure,” Sherlock said. “Why?”

John sighed but seemed to at least relax.

“Okay. It’s just… I guess it’s better than what the false-Wanderers are probably going through, but
still, it’s just sort of… sad, you know?” John asked, though he probably knew Sherlock didn’t. “True Wanderers are really gone. There’s no chance of them coming back.”

Sherlock cocked his head to the side. John really was strange sometimes. Many people were grieved when people close to them Wandered, but it was socially accepted and most people were unbothered by the Wanderings of those they weren’t personally close with. It was something you were aware of from the day you entered an Institute, or earlier if you came from a Changeling family. John hadn’t, and he changed so late—perhaps he never got used to the idea with all the falsehoods surrounding the subject since he arrived at Baker.

“It’s supposed to be true freedom,” Sherlock said, rattling off the common view.

John shrugged and half smiled, moving towards the bed.

“Maybe so, but they’re still gone to us,” John said. “That’s the sad part.”

Sherlock didn’t know what to say to that. John pulled his coursework out of his bag. Sherlock just watched, unsure why John’s confusing words were actually striking him.

Maybe Sherlock could understand, just a bit, he thought as John settled on his duvet.

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Sherlock rarely checked his mailbox on the first floor of A Wing, but Mycroft was sending him some secure documents that he refused to photocopy, to Sherlock’s acute annoyance. So it was just chance that he happened to check the box and discover a postcard that was postmarked only a few days previously. It was from the London Zoo of all places, but as he flipped it over Sherlock quickly realized that was of absolutely no importance, simply a mode of transportation that would be untraceable.

The letters were clear and sharp, and written in bright red ink. Sherlock’s gut filled with acid and his eyes narrowed to angry slits.

_The game has been wonderfully fun, Sherlock, but playtime is nearly over. Never forget that it was curiosity that killed the cat._

There was no smiley face this time.

.   .   .

John had rushed from his last class. He was going to miss his shift speech class, as he’d moved onto the advanced course for spring term, but well, he was mostly getting the hang of it by now. This was more important.

**John, there’s been a development – SH**

He’d received the text at the end of his animal anatomy class. After the text, John had spent the rest of the class nearly leaping out of his seat. Once again, John had no idea what his professor had
been lecturing on that day.

When he finally reached 631A, Sherlock was standing by the window and he was holding what appeared to be a small, rectangular piece of heavy paper.

“Sherlock, what’s happened?”

For once Sherlock didn’t start spouting words like a fountain. He simply turned away from the window and held out the paper, red and white catching John’s eye as he took it he realized it was a postcard. Sherlock fixed his gaze on John as his eyes scanned over the scarlet message, recognition of the script lighting a spark in John’s stomach and each word was like petrol poured over it. Despite the simmering fire in his belly, a deadly calm settled over John.

John knew he should probably have been scared or worried at least, but instead all he felt was anger and hate feeding into determination. Besides what the bastard had done, is doing, to Changelings, John also had a personal score to settle with the man who had dug into the past to resurrect Sherlock’s original demon and set it on the young Changeling.

Sherlock took a step closer when John didn’t lift his bladed gaze from the offending words.

“John?” Sherlock probed.

John’s fierce eyes pulled away from the page and met Sherlock’s curious stare. It was like he was waiting to see how John would react to the new development.

“This means we’re getting closer, doesn’t it?” John asked.

Sherlock took another step closer.

“It could be that,” Sherlock confirmed, though he seemed to have other theories.

“Good,” John said harshly.

Sherlock’s brow furrowed in mild confusion, but interest was simmering just below.

“You aren’t upset? Worried? You aren’t going to suggest I back off the case?” the young genius questioned, leaning forward.

John looked down at the words for another moment and felt his face harden, images of frozen faces hanging on the wall, as well as Sherlock shaking against him, rotated through his mind.

“No, I want to save those people,” John said, head snapping back up. “I want you to catch him.”

Then his heard thudded once because when had Sherlock gotten so close!?

At his words, Sherlock’s eyes widened for just a nanosecond before his gaze intensified once more and he nodded slightly once. If John had planned to say more, those plans were long lost. His tongue had probably become too dry to speak anyway, because Sherlock was looking at him strangely and he was only centimeters away.

John turned the postcard absently in his fingers, because apparently that was the only part of him that would move right now. His mind screamed at him to get out of this situation because it would be far too easy to take a step forward, tilt his head up, and—John rapidly began to mentally scan through his list of reasons why doing things like that were horrible ideas.

John glanced down for just a moment and latched onto the only thing there, the postcard, now face
up in his hands. It was easy to recognize its origin. John had been to the London Zoo as a child.

“You know, my parents took Harry and I to the zoo when we were small, but now that I’ve Changed I think it might make me uncomfortable,” John blurted with a giggle, offhand, desperate for anything to break this tension.

The expressions on Sherlock’s face came slow at first but then his head jerked back like he’d been slapped. His mouth hung open and his eyes were as wide as they could be.

“Oh… oh!” he shouted, making John jump as the dark haired Changeling sprung away from him, spinning on the balls of his feet.

“Sherlock…!?" John questioned.

He was instantly back in John’s personal space as he gripped John’s shoulders tightly, his expression was nearly wild.

“John, you’re brilliant!” Sherlock said, to John’s utter confusion. “I’ve been so stupid! Of course it’s not a coincidence! How didn’t I see it? It’s been right there the whole time and I missed it—well, there hasn’t been such a thing in hundreds of years…”

Sherlock was babbling and it was so difficult to understand anything he said when he got like this...

“Sherlock!” John called to get his attention. “What? What are you talking about?”

His smile was gleeful and his fingers pressed into John’s shoulders.

“I know why they’re being taken—the false Wanderers!”

John’s stomach swooped. This was it. He knew better than to expect that Sherlock’s excitement meant that the Changelings were alive, but he could hope.

“John, it’s—” and John would talk to him later about how inappropriate it was to be this excited. “It’s a menagerie!”

Even John had heard of menageries. They were among the historic acts of inhumanity—like witch hunts and the burning of homosexuals. They were most prominent during the dark ages when Christianity gained momentum in the western world and Changelings were demonized and persecuted openly as Hell spawn. Changelings, the ‘beast-hearted’ or ‘demon-souled’ as they were often called, were hunted and killed like animals, and were forced into hiding, becoming adept at blending in to Normal society, but then a new fad arose among the nobility.

Kings and rich nobles took up the habit of collecting and keeping Changelings in horrific menageries. The number and uniqueness of the Changelings were considered status symbols among the aristocracy. They were sick, horrible places where, at best Changelings were kept in cages like zoo animals for the rest of their lives, or at worst were pitted against wild animals or even other Changelings in gladiator-like death matches.
As far as John knew, the practice hadn’t made it out of the Middle Ages. For one to have appeared in the 21st Century was stupefying but Sherlock had long since convinced him it couldn’t be much else. It could have been individual exports of human trafficking—that was still rampant in third world countries—but Sherlock was now sure the post card had been a clue.

Neither John nor Sherlock were pleased about this fact. John thought it sort of threw a wrench in ‘the mastermind is scared because we’re getting close’ theory. He just had to hold on to the knowledge that sociopaths usually wanted to get caught; hopefully this theory could be applied here. Either way, John still was determined to find him.

After the excitement of discovery wore off, Sherlock just got angry because he took the hint as an insult, and was even more furious that he’d needed it. He wouldn’t say so aloud, but John could tell.

The high of the new information didn’t fade for a good few days. Sherlock bounced from states of bursting excitement to swirling frustration when each new thread he followed lead to nowhere. John knew it was pointless to try and calm him at the moment. He would come down eventually.

Until then John just took care to point him in the direction of his classes during the day and slipped tea, water and food into his hands during the evening and night. Sherlock was too busy ranting, pacing and thinking to fight him as he once might have.

His steam finally ran out four days after they received the postcard. John had been sitting on the floor against the bed revising for some upcoming exams. He still had two weeks but with Sherlock around he was never sure when he’d have time. Sherlock had been sitting on the bed with a new round of files and historical documents he had persuaded Mycroft to send up that morning. John was alerted to the change on the bed by the sound of papers crinkling behind him. When he turned John was met with the sight of a sleeping Sherlock Holmes. He had keeled right over into a stack of files. It wasn’t that uncommon a sight for John. Due to Sherlock’s nasty habit of refusing to sleep for days, he had a tendency to sleep where he fell—quite literally. John had been expecting this for the last 24 hours. The sight still made him sigh, but he’d be lying if he said it wasn’t laced with fondness.

John closed and stacked his books and then stood to clear the debris strewn over Sherlock’s bed. When he turned John was met with the sight of a sleeping Sherlock Holmes. He had keeled right over into a stack of files. It wasn’t that uncommon a sight for John. Due to Sherlock’s nasty habit of refusing to sleep for days, he had a tendency to sleep where he fell—quite literally. John had been expecting this for the last 24 hours. The sight still made him sigh, but he’d be lying if he said it wasn’t laced with fondness.

John closed and stacked his books and then stood to clear the debris strewn over Sherlock’s bed. Sherlock was seemingly dead to the world, not even making a sound of protest when John moved his arms to gain access to the papers that were pinned under him. Then John set about tucking the lanky genius under the duvet. It involved a little bit of manhandling but John was gentle and Sherlock only murmured softly as John laid him back against the pillows.

Sherlock lay on his back with his head turned just slightly to the side, lips just barely parted—relaxed. He looked so much younger without the constant intensity he always threw about while conscious. His curly hair was strewn messily over his forehead, and the light traces of fondness John had previously felt swelled overwhelmingly. He still had his list of reasons and logically he knew better but, for some reason, in that moment John acted.

Without even really thinking about it, like his body was moving on its own, John extended his hand to tenderly brush the dark curls away from Sherlock’s brow and then he leaned forward and pressed his lips, brief and chaste, against Sherlock’s forehead, and it had nothing to do with the fact that he thought Sherlock was attractive, or that he’d held center stage in the most perplexingly hot dream of John’s life. No, it was because this was Sherlock, his best mate, who refused to sleep until he dropped, who John had to take into the forest when his brain had twisted itself into knots that fresh air and studying bullfrogs seemed to untangle instantly, the genius whose mind he’d held
When John straightened he blinked once, a little surprised at what he’d just done, and then made sure he hadn’t been caught. Sherlock’s face was still utterly at ease. John sighed once, ignoring the strange twinge in his heart that may have been something like regret, and turned to pick up his books from where he’d left them on the desk and turned out the lights before going to the door. He almost got out, he really did.

“John?” the voice called as his hand closed over the door knob.

Well, shit, John thought and he should have known his luck wouldn’t hold out.

Heart beating rapidly, John turned to see the shape of Sherlock pushed up onto his elbows in the dark.

“Yes…” John asked, daring to hope Sherlock had been awoken when he’d turned out the lights and had been asleep for the interesting part.

“Come over here,” Sherlock said and his eyes said that John’s luck had failed him again.

Still, John crossed back over to the bed, stomach sinking. He’d done the deed and now he was going to pay for it in what could only be an intensely awkward conversation that would probably result in the closest friendship he’d ever had being broken into pieces. John stared resolutely at duvet, anywhere but Sherlock’s bewildered eyes—unfortunately he could still feel it fluttering faintly in the dark, the confusion.

“Why did you do that?” Sherlock asked.

John briefly considered lying, saying he didn’t know what Sherlock was talking about, that it was an experiment, something, but it wasn’t like there was any legitimate way to excuse this. Sherlock would know he was lying anyway.

So John told the truth.

“Because I care about you.”

John hazarded a glance up at Sherlock who merely had cocked his head to the side, analytical expression fixed firmly on his face. Great. He was being deduced. How had John let himself make this mistake?

“But I thought you were heterosexual,” Sherlock stated and John’s face burned.

Still, he couldn’t help but laugh at the preposterousness of this conversation.

“You and me both,” John said.

There was a long, uncomfortable pause.

“Oh… oh,” Sherlock exclaimed, a soft shadow of the noise of discovery he’d made four days previously and John just desperately wished this moment would be over. “Well, then I believe you missed, John.”

John’s head snapped back up, jaw a little slack. What?!

There was something like determination, or a challenge, in Sherlock’s still sleep laden, blue eyes. Did he mean what John thought he meant? There was a tickle up against the wall of his mind and
oh—yes, John thought. He did.

John realized he’d actually stopped breathing as he processed that, and with wide eyes he inhaled suddenly and sharply. For once, John didn’t waste another moment considering the likelihood that this could be another dream. For once, John tore his list of reasons into tiny, irreparable pieces and leaned forward, setting his books on the nightstand.

Sherlock didn’t move and let John come to him, forcing himself to stay still, eyes open. John brought both his hands up to Sherlock’s face, thumbs brushing over high cheekbones. He hesitated for only half a second to feel their breaths mingle before he threw caution to the wind and pressed his lips to Sherlock’s. And Jesus Christ it was a million times better than any damn dream.

Sherlock’s hand came up to cover John’s before sliding down his arm to rest over his heart when John began to lean him back until his head hit the pillow. John moved his lips gently over Sherlock’s, heart thrumming gleefully when Sherlock responded and pressed his fingers into John’s shirt. John inhaled through his nose, willing this to be burned into his mind, and Sherlock did taste a little like tea, but also so much else that was indescribable.

John let his lips linger for just a moment longer before he pressed one last brief kiss against what felt like a sly smile. Sherlock’s eyes stayed closed when John lifted his head. He brushed his thumb one more time over Sherlock’s cheek before letting go; he didn’t want to push.

“Goodnight, Sherlock,” John whispered softly as he gathered his books back up into his arms.

Sherlock said nothing. The pale Changeling seemed to have fallen back to sleep, but just before John slipped through the door a voice floated to catch him on his way out.

“Goodnight, John.”

He may have been imagining it, but if John didn’t know better, he would have said there was an undercurrent of self-satisfaction in the farewell. Either way, John smiled and giggled softly as he closed the door behind him.

He shook his head. He felt buzzed, jittery. It wasn’t a wholly bad feeling.

No, John thought. He rather liked it.
Chapter End Notes

Art by anathemarmotqueen.tumblr.com
Gravity

Chapter Notes

Warning: Rating has gone up. Sorry for the long wait! It's been crazy. For those who haven't checked it out recently, the Ashes blog is brimming with some really fabulous questions, fanart, and extra info for those interested. Enjoy Gravity <3

To John's surprise, nothing really changed after he kissed Sherlock. What that said about their relationship prior to that night John didn't know, but whatever it was, by some miracle it worked.

Responding to some instinct, John was taking it slow, careful not to push Sherlock. So in all honesty everything pretty much stayed the same, except, of course, in the few places where it didn't.

Like late at night when John was trying to get some sleep before an exam day and Sherlock was playing the violin, notes slipping past the wall like it didn't exist. So John rose and slipped into the hall, like he always did, opened the door to 631A and crossed the room to the dark haired teen, eyelids heavy. As he usually did, John slipped the bow from his fingers, and this is where something changed. Instead of just turning and leaving, John cupped Sherlock's jaw in his palm and left a lingering kiss on his lips. Then he straightened, still half asleep, said goodnight and returned to his own room. He placed the bow on his nightstand, got under the covers and then fell asleep to the sound of nimble fingers plucking softly on tight violin strings.

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In light of his new discovery, Sherlock decided it was time to face Irene again.

Looking back, the young genius had been completely unsurprised when he figured out Irene was a part of the web. Just as it was for Sherlock, the Institute must be painfully boring for someone of her intelligence and skill sets. Sherlock couldn't blame her for moving on to bigger things.

Unfortunately, she'd made the fatal mistake of joining the wrong side.

They found the woman leaning against a forest-side wall of Baker Hall. She spotted them quickly.

"If you came to try and get more information from me, then you're wasting your time, boys," Irene stated coolly, thumb brushing absently over the buttons on her phone.

John scowled at her but said nothing. Sherlock made sure to keep his face clear at this point.

"I believe you're wrong," Sherlock said simply.

Irene raised a carefully shaped brow, but said nothing.

"Give us his name," he continued.
Her eyes narrowed. She was smart enough to notice the confidence around Sherlock and the tension rolling off John and realize that it meant they were on more even footing that last time, even if she didn't yet know why.

"He cut contact with me after you two tracked me down," she said accusingly.

Sherlock felt the hot flash faintly and knew John had reached his limit. It was okay. Sherlock had brought John along for more than moral support.

"Like we care about your bloody 'job'! Like that matters! Tell us his name," John demanded angrily.

Irene looked defiant and cold.

"Of course it matters, you fool. It's not about my financial security. The point is that he has eyes and ears everywhere and I tell you, I'll be dead before the next week," Irene said back sharply. "I've got to look out for me, darling."

Her last word was soft and condescending. John just shook his head, eyes and mouth open in an amazement that was anything but positive. It was a look John made when he didn't believe someone—because what they said made him furious and doubt humanity. Sherlock had been on the receiving end of it once or twice… he didn't like it then, but now it served its purpose.

"You selfish—do you have any idea what you've helped do!" John nearly shouted.

Irene crossed her arms over her chest.

"I told you it's none of my business—" she began.

"It's a menagerie," Sherlock cut her off. "I'm sure you've learned about them in history courses."

Irene's eyes widened, just barely giving away the overwhelming shock that was rocking her. The stories of menageries embodied every cruel, horrible, injustice that had ever been done to Changelings. Of course there had been many other historic atrocities, but the menageries seemed to take all of them and wrap them up in one horrific, nauseating package. Even Irene would be affected by news of one existing today.

Sherlock knew they had to strike while the iron was hot. John took care of it.

"Your own people! Human beings! Changelings, kept in cages like animals and you helped do it! How could you live with—"

"I didn't know," Irene said quietly, whole body tensed.

John scoffed and threw up his hands.

"Didn't want to, is more likely," Sherlock prodded.

She locked eyes with him, conflict swirling around in her eyes.

"Give us the name, Irene," Sherlock said, voice hard.

Fear and desperation clouded her face and Sherlock found himself uncomfortable with that, though the feeling would never show.

"He'll kill me," the woman whispered.
Sherlock resolutely ignored the unbidden memory of a girl in a red dress leaning towards him, elbows on the table, jaw resting on her little palms. Her face was confident and clever, even before she'd begun painting it into a weapon.

"You were the one who chose to mix yourself up with a mad man," Sherlock forced himself to say.

The desperation was fading in her eyes and instead they glassed with fear and defeat, but still she paused, hoping. Sherlock said nothing and continued to stare at her, gaze sharp as knives, letting John's disgust feed into him, as well as his own pride, making him hardened as steel.

Finally, the woman closed her eyes, and if a single tear fell down her cheek. Sherlock forced himself not to really see it. He had won, in the end.

"Moriarty," she said quietly, voice shaking over the syllables. "His name is Moriarty."

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John had received the text around midnight.

**Meet me in Lab 4 of the biology building – SH**

"You took Greg's keys again to get in here, didn't you?" John asked as he entered the fluorescently lit lab to see a dark haired Changeling bent over a high powered microscope.

Sherlock didn't look up.

"At dinner, yes..." he said in absent confirmation as he made a note with his right hand.

John continued over and turned so he could lean against the lab bench while Sherlock worked.

"You better get them back before he needs them. He could get into trouble," John said, barely a condemnation.

"The faculty is fully aware that Lestrade can't stop me from getting these no matter how hard he tries," Sherlock said, adjusting the focus of the microscope. "Besides, I'll slip them under the door before morning."

John figured that was as positive a response he could hope to get and let it drop. Sherlock took the slide he'd been looking at off the slide table and put it away. Then he pulled out a set of instruments that reminded John of the ones the technicians had used when he donated blood a few years back.

"So, have you found anything about Moriarty?" John asked.

Since they'd gotten the name three days ago Sherlock had used every method he knew of to find him. He'd even gone into London the other day. He told John it was to meet with Mycroft but John hadn't been told exactly what for. However, since he'd heard a whisper of hallway gossip that afternoon a new theory was forming. It had been strange enough that he hadn't invited John to go with him.

"There are vague whispers of the name everywhere but nothing definite," Sherlock said as he poked a hypodermic needle into his forearm so a small amount of blood filled the attached vial.
"He's real, though. There is no doubt of that."

John nodded, still pleased they now had a name he could direct his hate towards.

"What are you doing?" John finally asked as the genius removed the hypodermic needle and replaced it with a small cotton ball.

It may have been a light stalling tactic, but John wasn't sure exactly sure how Sherlock would react when John brought up what he meant to.

"An experiment," was all he said as he tossed the cotton ball in the biohazard bin, and picked up another hypodermic-vial combo. "Give me your arm."

John very vaguely wondered when a request like this became something he complied with without question as he rolled up his sleeve and held out his arm. He didn't flinch when the needle breeched his skin. Sherlock's hands were cool as they kept him steady. The vial began to fill with red.

"Irene Adler was found dead in London three days ago," John finally said, voice low, eyes on Sherlock's face.

Sherlock didn't respond visibly in any way. He kept his eyes on the blood pooling into the vial.

"Her body was burned to a crisp. They had to use dental records to identify her," John continued, still watching.

"Mm," Sherlock said noncommittally, like it was old news he didn't care about.

Sherlock handed him a cotton ball and still said nothing.

"It's odd… three days ago… Weren't you in London three days ago?" John asked, cocking his head at his dark haired friend who was now labeling the vial.

"Yes," Sherlock said simply.

John paused, watching the seemingly indifferent Changeling closely.

"I'm sorry. I know you two knew each other for a long time," John said, not really knowing how to characterize that relationship. "It's just a mad coincidence that you happened to be in London the same day she was murdered there."

"Very strange," Sherlock said with finality and John knew he would never get more out of the atypically silent Changeling.

For the second time that night John decided to let something drop, though a shadow of a quiet smile tugged at the corner of his mouth.

A few moments of comfortable silence passed between them as they rested in their own minds and the dance of the moment faded out and Sherlock had put the labeled vials into his bag.

He was brought back to attention as Sherlock moved to stand in front of John, who still leaned against the lab bench, elbows bent, palms resting on the edge. There was something calculating in his eyes and he cocked his head in an unarticulated question. John raised an eyebrow in return, obviously not denying the young Changeling.

Then Sherlock stepped forward and kissed him squarely on the mouth.
John smiled into it as their lips moved together for a moment, before he giggled.

"What's this?" John laughed, though he didn't move Sherlock out of his space, hand having moved up to rest on Sherlock's side.

"Independent variable," Sherlock said, though his voice was rough and deep on John's lips. "Already took the control."

He nodded towards his bag where the two vials of blood were stored.

He shouldn't have laughed. Despite the circumstances, John could feel the heat of Sherlock's thoughts against his mind, but it was too perfect.

"Let me guess, hormones in the blood in relation to stimuli?" John asked, moving his other hand up to Sherlock's hip.

Sherlock moved his head back just enough that he could pin John with a surprised stare.

"How did you know?" he asked.

"I know you," John giggled, pulling him in to press another kiss to his lips, "And I had a dream like this once."

Sherlock moved closer so he could lean forward, one hand on the lab bench, the other on John's jaw.

"You did?" Sherlock asked between kisses, sounding pleased.


And then the conversation promptly faded to an end as Sherlock nipped at his bottom lip and John started his own investigation, centered around the study of Sherlock's lips and clever tongue.

When Jackson Ford, a second year university student with a bird of paradise shift, wandered, you would have thought Christmas had come early for Sherlock Holmes—if he got excited about the holidays like normal people did.

"He's gone too far! Five Wanderings in a single year? It's unheard of! The staff is already beginning to talk!"

Sherlock's excited ravings reached John in his flickering, poorly lit changing booth. They'd tried to find the abduction site but because Ford's shift was avian, it had been a rather hopeless endeavor to begin with, but still, John could feel Sherlock's excitement bumping up against his mind.

"If the Institute is questioning it they'll have to listen and then they'll have to take it Scotland Yard, and if Scotland Yard gets involved, oh, the equipment and databases I could gain access to!" Sherlock continued. "Oh, John, isn't it thrilling?"

John couldn't see him but he could easily tell Sherlock must be close to bouncing up and down. John's enthusiasm was definitely present, however, surely for very different reasons.
"Yeah, Sherlock. It's brilliant," John said as he pulled on his jeans. "We're finally going to be able to find all of them. They're going to get to go home."

John smiled to himself and Sherlock was quite outside the booth. John could tell he was leaning against one of the wall edges from where his elbow made a bump in the curtain.

"You really care about all of them, John… how do you always care so much?" the genius finally asked softly.

John's lips quirked.

"Well, someone's got to, don't they? Speaking of caring, you haven't eaten yet today have you?" John asked, aware that it was close to midnight already.

Sherlock scoffed, tender moment passing.

"Aren't you done yet?"

Actually he wasn't. John had gotten a bur stuck in his hair. Usually if they got caught in his fur during a trip into the forest, they would fall right out as he made the transition from fur to skin, or fur to hair, but this time one on his head caught in his hair during the shift. He'd gotten distracted from redressing when he noticed.

"Just… I've got a bur—give me a minute," John said absently, as he tried and failed to dislodge the prickly object.

Sherlock gave a suffering sigh.

"Here, let me—"

There was a rustle as Sherlock pushed through the curtain, and then froze solid.

John had managed to get his trousers onto his hips, but they weren't even buttoned. He hadn't put his shirt back on and his marker was still most definitely hanging around his neck. He was sort of frozen, too, because there was something burning in Sherlock's eyes and the feeling of his mind had shifted suddenly and radically.

"Sherlock?" John hesitantly questioned, fingers still tangled in his own hair.

It was like his voice had cut the ties holding Sherlock in place and John was very suddenly being crowded up against the wall of the booth. There were fingers in his hair, one tug, and the bur was loose and promptly dropped to the ground. John only managed to snap his eyes wide open before long fingers curled under the blue marker around his neck and yanked his head forward, causing his lips to crush against Sherlock's with near bruising force.

John responded instinctually, lips parting under Sherlock's greedy open mouthed kisses. The violinist's other hand pressed over his stomach, making his abdominal muscles jump at the touch of night-chilled fingers. John's own quickly shot up to burry themselves in Sherlock's bay curls.

Then his brain finally clicked back online.

"Sh-Sherlock? What are you—" John tried to ask because this was nothing like they'd done before.

This was definitely and indisputably going somewhere they'd never gone before.

The fingers tightened around his marker and he was held in place so Sherlock could hiss directly in
"I know you want this, John. I feel it in your mind. I've seen it in your blood. I am not some delicate flower, so stop being such a gentleman!"

And on the last word, Sherlock slid his free hand down, past John's open fly to grind his palm over John's cock, which was already half hard in his pants. He gasped and his head kicked back in equal parts shock and pleasure, hitting the wall of the booth with a low thud.

John resolutely decided to give into Sherlock's demands in that moment—how could he not when it felt like the genius had just lit him on fire?

There was something he was forgetting, though. It was just so hard to remember while Sherlock's teeth tugged on his earlobe and palmed him roughly through his shorts. John hazily opened his eyes and saw the simple white washed walls and the heavy curtain separating the two Changelings from the open air, still fairly cold at night, even in June. Finally it clicked.

"Nn-ah-okay, Sherlock," John stuttered to a start. "But not here—"

Sherlock pulled his head back to eye John seriously, as if he was making sure that the short intermission didn't mean this wasn't going to go exactly where he wanted it to. John's wide need-glazed eyes were enough of an answer for the moment.

It was a good thing it was late and dark as the two lust-addled young men attempted to make it back to A Wing. There was a lot of clumsy groping, stumbling, and kissing in stairwells. John was fairly sure he buttoned his shirt wrong, but it wasn't worth the time it would take to fix it. Plus his marker was still bouncing against his collar bones as he and Sherlock took the stairs two or three at a time, so if they were unfortunate enough to run into anyone at this point they'd probably miss the poor buttoning skills anyway.

John was actually surprised when they reached the sixth floor without having tumbled to a premature death. They hesitated a moment in front of 631A and 629A having to decide which door to proceed through; it was an easy choice as John remember the ledgers and files he'd seen all over Sherlock's bed that morning.

John fumbled with the lock as Sherlock grazed the back of his neck with his teeth, catching the marker enough that it rubbed against his collar bones. John had quickly realized in the few short weeks since he and Sherlock had started this part of their relationship that Sherlock was more than capable in this area and he was a wicked quick study when it came to picking up on what John liked, and now it was like a switch had been flipped and he was using every scrap of knowledge he possessed to drive John out of his right mind. He ground his forehead against the hard wood of his door, head falling forward under Sherlock's touch.

Finally, the barrier gave way and they stumbled into John's room. He habitually flicked on the light as they basically fell through the doorway. Their lips were locked, hands already tugging at each other's clothing as the door clicked shut and they backed towards the bed.

By the time they got close, Sherlock's coat and both their shoes had been discarded. Sherlock had worked the buttons back open on John's shirt and pushed it aside so it hung from his elbows and the genius could move his mouth down to his shoulder, where thin white scars marked him, and then back up to John's mouth.

The backs of John's knees hit the edge of the bed and they were forced to stop moving back. They paused for a moment, too focused on the way their tongues were twisting from one mouth to the
other, back and forth, but then John was suddenly overbalanced as Sherlock leaned abruptly forward, pushing at his bare chest. Their lips parted with a sharp pop as John fell ungracefully onto his elbows and back on the bed. His eyes opened in surprise.

Sherlock's hands started on his shoulders, eyes as focused as lasers on John's body, and the things it was doing to him to know Sherlock was observing him with such intensity. The dark haired genius firmly ran his hands downward, over John's chest, his ribs and over his stomach, until he reached his trousers, leaving a double trail of warm stripes down his torso.

John really thought he should do something. This was all happening so fast. Why had he been taking things slow again? For Sherlock, he recalled. However, that very same person was currently yanking his trousers down his legs and everything just felt so damn good, and when John had opened his mouth to say something Sherlock had pinned him with a glare that dared him to protest. So when Sherlock's fingers slipped under the elastic of his boxers and curled around him to pull his now fully fledged erection free, the only thing John could do was hitch his hips reflexively and gasp.

But it was nothing compared to the burst of pleasure that shot through his body when kiss-swollen lips closed over the head of his cock.

"Sherlock!" John said sharply as his hands shot down to bury his fingers in dark curls.

He was careful not to push or tug at Sherlock's head, despite how hard it was to control himself at all as that usually sharp tongue swirled, soft and firm, over the tip, pressing up against the underside. One of Sherlock's hands encircled the part of John that was currently not enveloped in wet heat and the other held his hip, stilling him. It was too much. What had possessed them? How did they get here?

When John looked down from where he rested on his elbows—which was a huge mistake—he was met with the sight of Sherlock Holmes sucking him off, lips wet and moving, cheeks hollowing as he pulled, flushed, eyelashes casting shadows on his cheek bones. It was a million times more than he could handle. He let his head fall back and his eyes fall shut, moan leaking from his throat. At that, John swore he felt Sherlock smile against the tip of his cock—the prideful git. If he kept up like this John wasn't going to last long at all. It had been too long and he wasn't that experienced.

John felt Sherlock's fingers playing over his stomach, half distracting from, half increasing, the warm pulses of pleasure that were racing through him. John tried to concentrate very hard on just breathing.

When that hand moved down to his hip again, it braced him, and then Sherlock took him in as far as he could and John's whole body flexed with the effort it took not to buck upwards wildly.

"Sherlock!"

The name burst out hoarsely. John screwed his eyes shut tightly as the genius bobbed up and down and he could feel Sherlock's throat constricting around him and yes this was so far too much—it was going to be over in a minute if he didn't do something, John thought and forced himself to look back down.

He pulled on Sherlock's shoulders and the genius lifted his lips off him, a tiny string of saliva connecting them for just a second and the sight of that in combination with the way Sherlock's eyes had darkened to near green almost undid John right then.
He messily pulled their lips back together as he resumed his endeavor to relieve Sherlock of his clothing, rough, sure hands memorizing pale skin as he went.

There was a soft moment of hesitation when John's hands met the ropy scars that ran all the way from Sherlock's shoulder blade into the dip of his hip. Sherlock had stilled under him, eyes wary and guarded. John's thumb traced over one line softly, unsure, before he pressed his full palm over them and matched the pressure with a kiss to Sherlock's forehead, the first place he'd ever kissed him. He wouldn't shy away from his closest friend—not a single part of him.

Sherlock responded under his touch, moving into it, sighing low. Then it was both of them tearing at each other's remaining garments, desperate for more contact. The closer they got the more their need looped back into the other and John no longer had any doubts that this was exactly what Sherlock wanted. Finally the only thing left between them was John's marker, but his fingers were fumbling as he tried to get at the buckle.

Once more Sherlock's impatience made itself known as he pushed John back against the bed and crawled over him. John gave up on the marker. He hissed as their bodies aligned, limbs tangling, chests pressed together and then came their hips, erections trapped between them and they both couldn't stop from moaning.

It was chaotic and messy, as most first times were. They writhed and twisted into each other, palms on skin, hands pulling closer, trying to hold each other completely, a physical imitation of the intangible bond they shared.

"John," Sherlock murmured, more and more. "John…"

John rolled them over, a pretty impressive maneuver on such a small bed, so he could straddle Sherlock's hips and bend to press warm kisses all over his chest. The press of his lips to Sherlock's skin were telling, trying so hard to convey how John felt about this impossible boy. Once more trying to say that he knew him—completely—and he loved him. Sherlock heard; the feelings John's attention evoked were present on his tongue as he whispered John's name, there in the back of his mind, slipping over the link between them.

Sherlock's fingers carded into John's short blond hair and pulled their lips back together, and their hips back into alignment. Then they gave into instinct, rolling together over and over, breaths coming shorter and shorter. Pressure and heat began to build at the base of John's spine and something possessed him to push himself up and reach between them, taking both himself and Sherlock in hand. Sherlock bit John's lower lip as he groaned, matching the pace of John's thrusts. Unable to function enough to continue kissing Sherlock, John's forehead dropped to his shoulder, a thin layer of sweat making their skin slippery.

The build inside of him was reaching an apex, but Sherlock's rhythm was faltering so he couldn't be far behind.

"Sherlock… I-ah-I'm… I'm going to…" John tried to warn but the words just were so far beyond his abilities.

Sherlock just dug his fingers into John's back and began snapping his hips up into John's hand even faster.

"John…!"

A single broken call of his name was all it took and John's orgasm hit him like a freight train. He went tight as a trip wire as he spilled over both of them. One or two more upward thrusts and
Sherlock was coming, too, eyes wide and lips parted. John rolled his hips a few more times, wringing the last drops of pleasure out of them both, before he collapsed sideways, landing half on top of Sherlock.

Their breathing was loud and heavy as they regained awareness. John raised his head to meet Sherlock's half lidded, spent gaze. Despite the wild intensity of what they'd just experienced, it was a simple overpowering rush of affection for the blue-eyed genius that made him lean forward and press a deep, lingering kiss to his lips.

John used a handful of tissues from his bedside table to clean them up before collapsing bonelessly once more to the bed next to Sherlock. The young Changeling was a little tense for a minute, watching John, and for the first time that night John got the impression that this was something Sherlock hadn't done before. He wasn't sure what to do next.

So John kissed him quickly on the forehead before rising one more time to shut out the lights and finally take his marker off. With a light grimace he wondered if he'd ever be able to look at the thing in the same way again—without remembering this. Well, this was not a bad thing to remember, he thought to himself with a small smile.

When he returned to the bed he pulled the covers out from under Sherlock, crawled into bed, and pulled the covers over them both. Then he wrapped his arms around his best mate, boyfriend, lover, apparent soul mate, whatever the hell this was, and pulled him close, so his head tucked into the space where shoulder, neck and chest met, recreating the position they used to pretend they didn't wake up in after Sherlock had nightmares—flawlessly intertwined.

After a hesitant second, Sherlock relaxed into him, legs tangling with John's, as clingy as he ever was on those mornings they never talked about. A sleepy smile crossed John's face, because he couldn't imagine why he spent so much time agonizing over this. This was how it was always supposed to be, John thought as he laid his cheek against silky curls.

"Goodnight, Sherlock," John whispered.

John felt a soft smile against his chest.

"Goodnight, John."
Hello everyone. I’m so sorry that it’s been... well forever. But I’m back and I want to thank everyone for their ridiculously kind words and support. You guys are all amazing. This is for you guys <3

Chapters will be posted on Wednesdays!

The news had come from Greg. The captain of the student guard had been on cloud nine in the weeks since he’d found Molly with her tears chilled on her cheeks, in a park in town after Sherlock Holmes had shattered her mirage relationship with gay Jim from IT. Though he hadn’t told any of the details to Sherlock or John, he’d wiped the tears from her face, and when they showed up to meet their friends for lunch on the following Monday, Molly and Greg and been together, with soft smiles constantly flitting from their lips to their eyes and back, and nobody mentioned the chaos of the previous Friday.

But the persistent contentment that had taken up residence in the future crow’s feet on Greg’s face was not present when Sherlock found him rushing through the entryway of the Baker Building. He’d been looking for the shepherd shift to have him pull out a number of the school’s old records. Since the school had stopped shutting Sherlock’s theories down completely, Greg had been able to openly give him access to many of the Institute’s files. He’d even been helping Sherlock and John lately—completely willing to believe Sherlock’s theories after the encounter with Sigur Holmes in the woods. While personally Sherlock preferred to work alone or with John, he had to admit the extra eyes allowed them to move more quickly through paperwork.

“Greg,” Sherlock called as he moved to intercept the young man’s path. “I need—”

Greg barely slowed down, poorly knotted tie flipped up over his shoulder.

“I don’t have time right now, Sherlock,” Greg said.

That’s when Sherlock noticed the heaviness and concern in Greg’s face, laden with trouble. He hadn’t even managed to fully close his book bag in his haste, and his phone was clutched in his hand.

“What’s going on?” Sherlock asked, turning to match pace with him for a few steps.

Greg was practically running though, so his answer was tossed over his shoulder.

“Some sixth former got attacked on the edge of the woods,” Greg said, black shoes squeaking on the checkered marble.

Sherlock had stopped then, rocking on his toes, contemplation descending on his features.

Sherlock had let Greg go, but later at dinner he’d found the student guard and interrogated him. Greg looked tired as he ate, Molly’s concerned face turned towards him as he recounted the details
“Mark is going to be okay,” Greg said, referencing the college student that was attacked. “He needed a couple stitches but there was no long term damage done. Messed up, though. He’d been headed into the woods for a walk, stag shift, when two big brutes jump him. Said they were some kind of canine shifts. They bloodied him up and then ran off. A secondary schooler found him limping towards the school and called help. Mark’s a good guy as far as anyone can tell. Doesn’t have a history of getting into any trouble. No idea why he’d be attacked.”

Greg rolled some carrots around his plate with his fork, corners of his mouth turned down.

“Were the attackers students?” Sherlock pressed, leaning over the table.

Greg shrugged, putting his fork down and placed his elbows and crossed arms on the table.

“Mark said he didn’t see any markers, but they could have taken them off. It happened too fast for him to get any good looks at the shifts, couldn’t give us a breed or anything… nothing to match to a student even if the faculty and police tried. There’s really nothing to go on,” Greg said, eyes distant, remembering the trials of the day.

Molly squeezed his arm gently and he came back to the present, shooting her a reassuring, if tight, half smile.

Sherlock pursed his lips. He had no explanation for the unprompted attack. Maybe the sixth former was lying and he’d got into more trouble than people knew. Maybe the attack was truly random. Maybe some drunk changelings from town. That was always possible.

The explanation was enough for Sherlock in the moment, and he was too focused on the Wanderer’s case to dedicate much of his processing power to a random attack, despite the twist of discomfort that wiggled in his stomach at the strange proceedings.

However, he didn’t give it another thought… until a second attack followed. Then a third.

. . .

“Holmes, we don’t have time for this right now!” the head of campus security snapped as the student tried to get him to pay attention.

He was an older man, bald patch on the back of his head. He may have been in shape at one point, but now his suit jacket remained unbuttoned to make room for the bulge around his middle.

Sherlock had come in with a large file, a compilation of evidence. The short version of all of his research, everything he had that supported his theory on the false Wanderings. He’d come to get the faculty to review it, and then hopefully they’d be convinced enough to send it on to Scotland Yard. But Mr. Brewers was having absolutely none of it.

“We don’t have time for your mad theories on a completely natural thing, Mr. Holmes. We’ve had three unexplained attacks on our student body and you want me to look at Wanderings?” Mr. Brewers snapped. “Get out of my sodding office.”

Mouth opening and closing like a fish, the offended genius stomped off. Even so, it wasn’t until he
was greeted by similar, if more diplomatic, responses from a number of other faculties that his brain began to spin in a new direction.

It was as he stared at the door of the Dean’s office, shiny brass nameplate reflected in his eyes that it hit his brain like a strike of lighting.

It set a fire. Rage burned through his system.

\[ ...
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“*It’s him, John!*” Sherlock roared as he slammed the door of John’s room wide open, making the wolf shift jump from where he sat at his desk, revising for something that was definitely less important than what Sherlock had to say.

“Who?” John asked.

“*Moriarty!*” Sherlock spat the name like acid on his tongue.

John’s eyebrows knitted and he leaned back, pushing his chair out so he could look directly at Sherlock, who had begun to pace madly over the floor. Sherlock was furious, as he always was when he realized something later than he believed he should have.

“I should have known from the first attack!”

Luckily John had got better at not being wholly stupid, as Sherlock didn’t think he could drag him through the steps today. He was too upset to build little bridges for John over his mental leaps.

He folded his arms over his chest and his mouth became a tight line.

“You think Moriarty is behind the campus attacks?”

Sherlock spun towards John.

“Of course he is!” Sherlock said. “It’s a distraction, John. Isn’t it obvious?”

Knowing better than to say it wasn’t, John just waited for him to continue.

“We are getting closer! But more than that, the faculty was starting to get suspicious! So what does he do? He gives them something else to focus on! Something tangible. It’s brilliant,” Sherlock hissed. “While the attacks continue, the Institute won’t put a hair of their scrutiny on a series of questionable Wanderings.”

Sherlock was so outraged that it rolled off of him. He was sure John could feel it like a flame against his mind. It was bubbling over.

He was always one step behind. Moriarty’s web was made of steel, and it had more threads than Sherlock could keep in his sight at once, and it made him furious. He wanted to break something.

“Hey, hey!” John called his focus, feeling the dangerous turns Sherlock’s thoughts were taking.

John had complained quite a lot when he had to replace his favorite mug.
Sherlock’s eyes snapped towards John, rage still crackling through his system, demanding a release. His eyes dropped John’s lips. If he couldn’t break things he’d have to let it out another way.

And there it was. He fell on John like a storm.

An hour and two sets of clothing on the floor later, Sherlock found he felt much better.

... ...

On a rainy Saturday in June, a strange event was taking place in the most isolated common room in the A Wing dormitories. Sherlock wasn’t sure how he had been made to agree to this. He hated to admit that it may have been connected to his and John’s activities that morning, as painfully mortal as it sounded, but he couldn’t help but admit he had felt unusually compliant lately.

The campus attacks had been a blow, that was true, but it seemed one John Watson was providing ample and more enjoyable alternatives to fuming over files he’d already memorized. Some voice in his head thought perhaps he should be annoyed, as John was distracting him from the case in some ways, but for some reason he couldn’t bring himself to care. Besides, the... vigorous activity and frequent hormone spikes seemed to be a highly effective way of clearing his head. It was a fact that he’d had several important cognitive leaps while lying in John’s bed, heart rate still elevated.

Still, a year ago, Sherlock would have never seen himself where he stood now, violin and bow in hand, playing—for an audience.

“The faculty is discouraging people from doing much outside until they discover the root of these attacks, and they’ve been interested in your playing for a long time now, it’s been mentioned fairly regularly,” John had reasoned.

Sherlock had then pointed out that they weren’t going to discover anything until Moriarty decided he wanted the attacks to stop, but John had said that wasn’t really the point and then there’d been an argument and John had been yelling something about having friends and social obligations and if Sherlock was being completely honest he still wasn’t sure about the cost benefit ratio of having friends yet, but here he was.

Now John sat in a plush chair by the window. The glass was beaded with raindrops, silver dots on a platinum backdrop. The lupine changeling looked content now, thin red jumper with its sleeves pushed up towards his elbows, exposing the forearms that were beginning to tone again with the start of rugby season. Molly and Greg sat on one couch together, their hands laced over Greg’s knee. Mike and Suzie sat on the other sofa. Mike had admitted he’d probably heard well enough of Sherlock’s playing for a lifetime, but Suzie had wanted to go so he took one for the team, making John promise that Sherlock wouldn’t play any of that screechy stuff he was partial to in the middle of the night.

Sherlock wasn’t planning on it, so Mike had nothing to fear. He only produced that kind of noise when it reflected his head. When storms of frustration or complete and utter boredom set in.

No, today he played nicely, reminiscent of the very few recitals he had been coerced into participating in as a child.

He’d started with a few classics to warm up, but quickly moved onto some of his original
compositions. One with a shifting tempo got the most attention. It started slow and steady, then moved suddenly into high energy segments, that at first sounded dark but then moved into bright bouncing notes like laughter, before finally ending on something almost sweet, but low and perhaps a bit sad. Even Sherlock was particularly pleased with a few variations he’d woven through it in a fit of inspiration, catching John’s eye in the middle of the piece.

By the time Sherlock had played the last poignant note, Molly’s eyes were glassy, lips pressed together in small smile, and Suzie’s palms were clasped together.

“That one was really good!” Greg commented as soon as he was sure it was over. “What’s it called?”

Sherlock didn’t look up from where he was applying a fresh coat of sticky rosin to his reddened bow.

“It doesn’t have a name,” Sherlock said.

It did, in fact, have a name. It just wasn’t a name Sherlock wanted to share.

“Mm,” Greg said, not having any reason to suspect Sherlock was lying and therefore moving on.

Sherlock played two more pieces before pulling his violin from below his chin, lowering his bow and bending at the waist, palms forward, to bow.

Molly, Suzie and Mike clapped, and John and Greg smiled approvingly as the wind changed and droplets began to splatter loudly against the window panes.

“Wow, if you always played like that, perhaps I wouldn’t have offered to switch rooms with John,” Mike said as the group rose from where they’d been seated.

“Be happy you did, though, ‘cause now you’d have other noises to keep you up at night!” Greg said cheekily as he stretched his neck.

Sherlock was unfazed as he packed his things away, but John—and Molly—of course turned a light shade of pink as the others giggled at Sherlock and John’s expense.

“Right!” Greg said, clapping his hands and rubbing his palms together. “Any of you lot hungry?”

There were three varying versions of yes and one resolute no from Sherlock.

“See you after dinner then,” John said, not putting up a fight, as Sherlock had been present at both breakfast and lunch that day.

“Bring tea,” Sherlock said, back to John as he picked up a stray block of rosin.

By the mixed flutter of annoyance and amusement feathering against his mind, Sherlock could guess John had rolled his eyes but Sherlock didn’t care as long as he brought the tea, which he would. Only when John was in a truly foul mood did he deny Sherlock’s demands out of spite.

Then Sherlock was alone in the common room, surrounded on four sides with fleur-de-lis wallpaper. While he hadn’t had to use them, Sherlock had brought his music note books down, which he now retrieved from the empty armchair. He stopped there, and opened to the handwritten sheet music, wanting to add the variation he’d played earlier to the piece. He flipped to the right page, where a title most definitely sat proudly at the top of the page in Sherlock’s own flowing script.
But there was another script there. Script that was most definitely not in Sherlock’s hand. Script that was familiar—written in red ink.

Sherlock’s blood chilled and slowed in his veins as he instantly absorbed the small note in the header.

‘You’re disgusting.’

Slowed heartbeat thudding in his ears, Sherlock turned a few pages backwards to another heading, suspicions confirmed as he opened on John II.

‘I thought you were better than this.’

He flipped the pages quickly—John I.

‘When did you become so dreadfully boring?’

The Wolf.

‘Pathetic.’

Sherlock rapidly flipped back and forth through the handwritten music, very literally seeing red.

‘Sickening.’

‘I had such high hopes for you.’

‘Night Eyes’? Really? Uhg.’

He had even marked up the ones that Sherlock had titled obscurely, but the mastermind saw right through each one, targeting every single song Sherlock had written with John in mind. Anything else was untouched.

There was a buzzing in Sherlock’s head and suddenly he realized this was a new element. This was different than anything before. This wasn’t supposed to be part of the game. This game was between Sherlock and Moriarty. After the inclusion of his father, he shouldn’t have been surprised, but that had been blood—that was a test.

This… this wasn’t in the rules.

And for the first time since Sherlock discovered Lucy Hart’s wandering was faked, a sense of uncertainty settled over him. A seed had been planted, and Sherlock had no idea how to stop it from sprouting… or what fruit it would bear when it did.

When John returned from dinner that night, hands occupied with two steaming mugs of tea, he called through Sherlock’s door to be let in. He waited for a minute, but no sounds came from inside.
“Sherlock!” John tried again.

He waited a few more seconds but there was still no response.

“Damn him,” John grumbled, awkwardly shifting the tea to free one hand. “Maybe he went for a run…”

John doubted it, as Sherlock rarely went into the forest without John these days. Though they had indeed had an argument about it the other day when John said he shouldn’t go there alone with the attacks going on.

“Moriarty wants to hurt my investigation, John, not my body. I won’t be attacked,” he’d said with scorn.

“Oh, and you don’t think maiming you would slow down your investigating,” John had snapped.

“No,” Sherlock had snapped back.

So there was a small chance that Sherlock would have gone into the woods to be vindictive, but John once again doubted it. If he was going to do something dramatic, he would have done it within twenty four hours of the argument. Besides, he’d been in a fairly good mood lately.

Finally John managed to twist the handle and toe the door open with his foot.

John had been right about fifty percent of his guesses.

Sherlock wasn’t out.

But his good mood seemed to have vanished, which became quickly apparent.

“Why didn’t you open the door, you arse,” John said, not truly annoyed—yet. Then he took in his surroundings. “What the bloody hell…?”

Sherlock had ruined his room. The bed was pulled away from the wall, pushed to the center. The desk had moved into its place, shoved into the corner near the door, with files stacked almost to the ceiling on top of it. Sherlock’s wardrobe was completely absent. The result of these changes was two completely open walls, or, walls that would have been open if not for the layer of pictures, records, notes, maps and the string that linked many of them together. The files that couldn’t fit on the desk, or that Sherlock was planning on using in the near future, were stacked against the wall where his bed had been. The Wanderers’ case had engulfed the entire room, and right in the center of it, perched on the bed, with his back bent and palms pressed together like some kind of odd monkey, was Sherlock Holmes, eyes darting as fast as swallows over the two information coated walls. Up and down and side to side to side they flitted, almost moving faster than seemed human. They didn’t look at John once.

“Hey,” John called when Sherlock didn’t answer.

“Busy,” was the single word Sherlock uttered.

John narrowed his eyes.

“I brought your tea.”

Still Sherlock didn’t look up.

“I don’t want it anymore. Get rid of it,” Sherlock murmured.
John’s eye twitched but if his appearance was anything to go by, Sherlock was too far inside his own head to even feel the heat of John’s annoyance against his mind. John took a deep breath and counted to five.

“Where is your wardrobe?” John asked, moving on, placing Sherlock’s tea on the stack of files closest to the bed.

“In your room.”

Sherlock’s eyes seemed to trace a path that was completely invisible to anyone but him.

“I’m sorry, what?” John said, irritation seeping into his words.

“I needed more room,” Sherlock mumbled, and he still hadn’t even looked at John.

John was about to retort hotly but finally he felt the atmosphere that had been pulsing in the room since he arrived. The air was… thin, uncomfortably so. There was a weird humming vibrating the walls that seemed to be originating from Sherlock.

“Sherlock, are you okay?” John said.

That finally got a response. Muscles twitched in Sherlock’s cheek.

“John, stop talking. You’re distracting me,” he said quickly.

John’s brow crinkled.

“Sherlock—”

“Shh.”

John threw up his hands. There was clearly nothing for it. He’d see if things were better the next day. The door clicked shut behind him. Blue eyes continued to run red paths over the wall.

Things weren’t better in the morning. In fact, Sherlock’s unexplained agitation only grew as each day passed, and despite John’s many attempts to unearth it, the genius provided no excuse for his sudden shift in behavior.

The only thing that kept John from truly panicking was the fact that Sherlock still often came to him at night. During the days he’d stopped attending most of his classes—only attending the utter minimum to keep the faculty and by extension Mrs. Hudson and John off his case. The same attitude seemed to extend to his appetite. It was like John had gone back in time, and once again Sherlock regularly denied food with the explanation that digestion slowed his brain. It was often like pulling teeth to get Sherlock to eat a damn biscuit. Except for that first night after he’d played for their friends, though, he still was happy to consume large amounts of tea. But that didn’t really seem to be helping, as a diet that mostly consisted of liquids and caffeine was not affecting him well. He was twitchy, and permanent furrows settled on his brow.

And even though he often stayed up all night staring at the wall—John knew, he could hear the plucking of his violin strings—Sherlock still came to John frequently when the moon was in the
He entered John’s dorm, where the air wasn’t stuffy. John had finally been able to leave the window cracked with the days approaching summer, and you could smell the forest, which comforted John… and he thought it soothed Sherlock as well.

On those nights they were as close as ever, closer. As the days passed, Sherlock’s actions took on wild tones. He held John tighter, touched more fully, and kissed more deeply. And in the aftermath he always stayed, their forms often becoming furry so they could fall asleep completely intertwined. He almost always let John take him to breakfast the following mornings.

So John kept his head, for a while, but things were getting worse and, like an elastic stretched to its limit, things could only keep on moving ahead as they were for so long before a snap.

It all came to a head about two and a half weeks after Sherlock rearranged his room.

John had been heading back to A Wing from his chemistry class, feeble rays of sun kissing the campus intermittently as the clouds moved overhead. That’s when John saw him, leaning against the corner of the dormitory, far from the main path, looking out towards the forest. His curls bounced against his forehead as a breeze swept across the grass.

But John didn’t really notice those things.

The only thing he noticed was the white stick, pressed between his closed lips; then he saw the cloud of smoke bloom into the air, hovering mockingly before dissipating.

Dark clouds descended on John’s features and his path changed abruptly. He strode briskly over the lawn, and maybe it was chance or maybe Sherlock could feel the outrage pulsing off of John from a distance, but suddenly grey eyes swept towards him. His brow dipped questioningly. He was honestly confused.

“What the hell are you doing!?” John said as soon as he stopped, just a foot or two away from the dark haired changeling, locks oscillating between apparent black and a russet brown as the sun came and went.

Sherlock cocked his head to the side.

“Smoking…?”

“Why?” John ground out.

“I’ve found the nicotine helps me think,” he said.

John spluttered and another gust of wind tossed Sherlock’s curls in the air and made the cherry on the cigarette glow bright red.

“You—I—you’ve found?” John nearly shouted. “As in this isn’t the first time you’ve smoked?”

Sherlock’s confusion only seemed to grow. It might be worth restating that John’s father was a doctor, so he’d been exposed to a lot more facts about smoking than the average English youth. He’d been so scarred by his father’s talks and visual aids that he knew from age 4 that he’d never smoke a cigarette. But even so, it wasn’t the fifties, how could Sherlock be confused about his fury?

“No…? I’ve tried it two other times in the past two days and I’ve discovered the effects are quite satisfying.”
John’s jaw dropped. At first he was baffled as to how he hadn’t smelled it on him, or… well, tasted it, but then he remembered that Sherlock hadn’t come out of his room in the past 60 hours or so, only taking food from John once before slamming the door in his face.

Sherlock moved to take another drag off the cigarette. It never reached his lips.

John plucked it from his fingers as it approached his face, throwing it directly onto the ground and stomping out with his shoe. His heart beat rapidly in his chest.

“John!” Sherlock said sharply, more confused than ever, but now also indignant.

“You can’t just start smoking, Sherlock!” John said angrily.

John finally felt a wisp anger against his own.

“Why not? We tried cannabis. I don’t see how this is any different,” Sherlock tried to reason.

John’s fists balled up at his sides.

“It’s different,” John growled. “Cannabis doesn’t kill people, Sherlock.”

Sherlock straightened his back and looked down his nose at John, in that proud way that royally pissed John off.

“One pack of cigarettes isn’t going to kill anyone, John,” Sherlock said, fishing the box out of his pocket and holding it up.

John’s face was flushed, and a vein was pulsing in his temple. He snapped.

“Oh, for—It says how it can kill you all over the bloody, fucking box!” John said, throwing his arm out towards the small cardboard package, which indeed was coated with a number of warnings that, at their most basic level, simply stated these will kill you.

Of course, John’s anger was fuelled by concern, and by fear. Deep seated instincts roiled against this development, screaming dangers bred from Sherlock’s natural tendencies. John didn’t say it aloud but Sherlock had an addictive personality, and he shuddered remembering Sherlock’s last foray into substances.

They stared each other down for just half a second before John realized he was too wound up to utter any words that wouldn’t just get him into more trouble, words that would make Sherlock entrench himself further into this idiocy.

But his blood was still running hot and he had no power to stop some action, and he thought this was better than punching Sherlock in the face. He snatched the whole box of cigarettes out of Sherlock’s hand and promptly stomped away, ignoring the protests of the changeling behind him.

Sherlock followed John into the building, but had no hope of pulling the crushed package from John’s fist so merely tried to reason with him. He stopped though when John turned down the hall that led to Mrs. Hudson’s office.

“John, don’t!”

John knew Sherlock wouldn’t follow and receive Mrs. Hudson’s direct scolding. Which is exactly why he’d walked that direction.

“Go eat something, Sherlock,” John snapped over his shoulder, just as he slipped around the
Sherlock wasn’t following anymore. So John passed right by Mrs. Hudson’s office, never having planned on actually going there in the first place. Though he did plan on telling her at some point… in his state he didn’t think he could formulate a sentence without using words that would offend Mrs. Hudson mortally. Instead he walked into the nearest public washroom in the building and flipped on a faucet, then shoved the red and white package under the stream until he was sure every cigarette inside was completely saturated, completely ruined.

He knew that Sherlock would easily deduce where the smokes were and retrieve them, just to prove he could, so John had to make sure they were rendered totally unsalvageable. It felt like a win, if empty and small.

After the cigarettes were disposed of in the bin, John finally began to breathe properly. He looked up at himself in the mirror, watching as the anger faded and the fear behind it surfaced. That face in the mirror was failing, it had cracked today. His own anxiety had been exposed and that was not good. He and Sherlock had an open bond. One of them freaking out was enough. If he started freaking out, too, he wasn’t sure where their heads would end up.

He had to do something.

He just wasn’t sure what.
Cracks

Chapter Notes

I forgot last week but I want to thank my beta and brit pick, Kathe for her continued help. I’d also love to thank Hayden, who plot tests the chapters and puts up with the unbetad version to give me valuable feedback.

Also I want to remind everyone that if you have any big questions, want to see some fanart or contact me for any other reasons, you can do so at heartoutofashes.tumblr.com.

Thank you everyone! Enjoy!

Sherlock had pushed his bed back as far into the corner as the files and misplaced desk would allow when he returned to the room that night, making sure it was as far away from the case walls as possible in the small space. He’d found the soggy cigarettes easily enough, after he deduced that John hadn’t actually been to see Mrs. Hudson. The latter was what had actually deflated him. Sherlock had left the soaked pack in the bin and retreated to his room, but then the red-lined walls seemed like they were leaning in on him. So he’d pushed his bed away and then curled up in a sulky ball with his back to it.

He hadn’t taken off his coat, and the turned up collar covered his ears. After a while the position became uncomfortable and he realised his human body wasn’t adequate for the sullen mood he was going for. Plus, the other reason he’d moved his bed was to be closer to a wall so that he might hear a certain someone through. So he shucked his coat and the rest of his clothes and hopped back into the bed as a petulant black shadow.

It had been a few hours and John still hadn’t returned to his room. It was clearly empty. Maybe John was mad enough to stay in Greg or Mike’s room. Sherlock’s ears twitched uncomfortably. He tucked his tail over his nose and curled up tighter, like a dragon upon a hoard, but his hoard consisted of flashing thoughts instead of jewels.

John wasn’t staying in someone else’s room, but he still didn’t return until it was almost midnight, and Sherlock’s room had descended into a musky dark, only offset by a dim, shadeless lamp that squatted in the corner near the information stacked walls. He wasn’t alone. Sherlock’s ears twisted towards the hallway.

“Thanks for going all the way to town,” John murmured, and Sherlock could hear the strain in his voice, tight and sharper than normal, even in a sincere thank you.

The two sets of footsteps stopped.

“Nah, no problem, John,” Greg said a bit tiredly. “With what’s been going on, it would be stupid to go alone.”

There were a few murmured goodbyes and then Sherlock heard one set of footsteps shuffle down the hallway—Greg.
He heard no sounds for a moment, then one, and two steps in his direction. Then there was another stop. Sherlock refused to move, icy eyes continuing to drill into the same spot they’d been focused on for the past six hours. A heavy sigh and a short cough slipped under the door… then brisk footsteps moved away. The door one down from his opened, and then shut more sharply than it normally did.

Sherlock flinched, but held his position.

When John finally came, he didn’t hesitate again. He didn’t knock. He threw the door open and marched in.

Sherlock had shifted back to his human form at some point in the night to gain access to the violin. At the time he’d been planning to play something truly obnoxious, but somehow he’d ended up plucking the strings soft as a harp until the first light of the day began to seep into the sky.

Sherlock had heard John coming a good thirty seconds before he barged in, and already his hackles were raising, ready for the next round of anger John was going to throw at him.

Because he’d been sure that was why John had come, and he was ready for that. Ready to look down his nose and puff out his chest and narrow his eyes and fire sharp words into air with the aim of knocking John’s volleys down.

What actually occurred wasn’t something he’d prepared for. It wasn’t words thrown into the air, but some sort of small box, which Sherlock’s hands shot up to catch on reflex. His defensiveness dissipated instantly, immediately replaced with confusion. It was light, and made out of thin paper-cardboard, packaging, pharmacist’s logo pasted into a corner.

John moved to sit on the corner of Sherlock’s bed, back stiff.

*Nicotine Patch.*

Sherlock looked from the box up to John, brow still furrowed, baffled. John sat with his hands balled up on his knees and serious look on his face, lips pressed into a hard line, watching Sherlock closely.

“John?”

“You said that the nicotine helped you think,” John said, looking completely uncomfortable, like he secretly was considering taking the box back and punching Sherlock in the face instead.

That was it, though. It finally dawned on Sherlock. This was a compromise.

“You went into town with Greg last night to get these,” Sherlock stated.

John didn’t say anything; he knew it wasn’t a question.

Some weird feeling began pulsing in Sherlock’s gut. This was John. This was John, staying again, letting a leopard collapse in his arms, sitting with him through the night, following him into the forest.

The message was clear.

*I’m still not going anywhere.*
“I’m afraid, John.”

The words left his mouth before he thought about calling them back. Wide sky pools held John in their cold depths.

“I’m afraid of what he’s going to do. I don’t know if there’s anything he can’t do. He’s always a step ahead,” the words tumbled out in an agitated stream and Sherlock’s fingers twisted in his sheets. “I’m always behind. I’m afraid I can’t beat him.”

“Hey!” John said; voice sharp, eyes soft. “No. Shut up. Before we met, you knew who I was from an awkward stride. You’re clever, Sherlock. The cleverest person I’ve ever known.”

Sherlock cocked his head just a bit, eyebrows bent and lips twisted as if to say that didn’t mean much. June sun began streaming through the window, highlighting the rise of his cheekbones.

“No, stop it now. You’re going to catch him, Sherlock,” John said, raising his hand and pointing towards the genius’ chest to underline his point.

Two sets of blue eyes bored into each other, almost like a battle of wills.

“How do you know?” Sherlock asked.

Finally… finally, John smiled. The small one reserved for when he thought Sherlock was being an idiot. That had always made him so happy. He chuckled and shook his head glancing down before looking up to meet Sherlock’s gaze again. One warm palm came up to the genius’ pale cheek.

“Because you’re Sherlock Holmes.”

He couldn’t help it, a wry smile and a flush of pleasure flooded through him. Then John kissed him, and he was sure he would drown in it. Suddenly, he almost… hurt. A strange tension in his chest and tightening in his throat, because John was still here. He knew he had no hope of putting the things that should have been said into words, and he hoped that John would find it in himself to forgive him for his transgressions just one more time. He couldn’t put it into words, so if he couldn’t tell him, at least he could do everything in his power to show him.

In the weeks since Jackson Ford wandered, since he and Sherlock had first… well—John had been a willing participant in many different kinds of sex. They’d had horny teenage sex. They’d had awkward sex, fraught with annoyingly narrow dorm beds. They’d had happy sex, filled with giggles and smiles on skin. They’d had sleepy sex. They’d had angry, annoyed, and infuriated sex—regularly.

But when Sherlock began to return John’s kiss, when he pressed forward and his fingers twisted into the front of John’s shirt, he knew this was going to be something new.

It was hot, but not like the demanding sparks of that first time, nor did it burn into him like anger. The feeling flowed around his mind like hot water, filling him up. When he fell back onto the bed, inhaling sharply as Sherlock’s weight settled over him, it felt like being submerged in a steaming pool, pulled down to the bottom without the fear of not being able to breathe.

Sherlock was doing that for him. As their tongues pressed, and tasted, and their teeth nipped and clacked, Sherlock would exhale and John was inhaling, breathing together as their minds got closer and closer. It wasn’t as tangible as what John did for Sherlock when he had nightmares, when they were in shifted form. It was subtler, less like his mind wrapping around Sherlock’s and more like a
tiny part of each of their selves, sharing this experience.

Sherlock moved his mouth from John’s lips to trail down his jaw, tracing the tense muscles of his neck. He kissed and lapped and sucked, one hand in John’s hair, the other still clenched almost painfully in his shirt. He was frenzied; he was… desperate, John finally realised. Sherlock Holmes was desperate, trying to tell John what he couldn’t say—what he didn’t need to, not with the way he touched, and never with the way John could feel the nearly aching throb of his brilliant mind against his own.

Sherlock sucked on his earlobe, pulling with his teeth and teasing with his tongue.

“Christ!” John gasped, fingers pressed into Sherlock’s spine as he instinctively twitched his whole body in response.

Finally, when Sherlock began to fumble hopelessly with the buttons on John’s shirt, the wolf shift decided it was time to flip the tables. It was his turn.

He rolled them over, Sherlock’s curls bouncing against his pillow. John made quick and efficient work of Sherlock’s own shirt from his position of leverage in between his legs, nearly on all fours above the lithe genius. Holding himself up with his palm pressed into the mattress, John ducked his head to begin kissing down Sherlock’s chest, pale skin rising and falling quicker than normal against his lips. His free hand found its way down over Sherlock’s ribs, one at a time, over his waist, before finally stopping at his hips, fingers dipping below his belt, thumb caressing the hollow it found there.

Sherlock’s skin was so damned smooth, soft and surprisingly warm, except for where the spots and trails left by John cooled in the air, only to be quickly reheated by the flush turning the surface of his body pink. On another day, John would have made his way down and kissed and bit at Sherlock’s belly until he received a huffy, annoyed chastisement of his name from above, making him giggle and infuriate Sherlock that much more.

But today wasn’t a day for teasing. So John simply pressed his lips against the twitching muscles of Sherlock’s stomach, only briefly dipping his tongue into his navel, just to feel the way he flinched.

“John. Yes, John, please,” Sherlock had begun to murmur, the beginning of what would be a long stream of words.

His lungs filled and emptied rapidly as John unbuckled his belt, unbuttoned his button and unzipped his zip. At first John had been nervous about this. It’s not like he’d been a virgin before Sherlock, even though he had never been with a bloke before. Still, kissing was much the same, bodies were mostly the same, except Sherlock was all angles and flats where women were all curves and soft. Even the real sex part was fairly similar, when he was in control. He’d definitely never sucked a cock before Sherlock, though, and his prior experience hadn’t really transferred there. He hadn’t expected to enjoy it—and it wasn’t that it gave John much pleasure so to speak, but…

Sherlock shook when John’s mouth closed over him. He positively quivered.

“John! John! Yes, yes, yes…” he almost cried. “Please…”

And he begged, when John was crouched between his knees like this, one hand around the base of his cock and the other splayed against the flat of Sherlock’s belly, stopping him from moving too much. He pled and very occasionally he even cursed, when John sucked hard, swirling his tongue
around the tip like Sherlock often did to him.

He shivered and shook when John painted a stripe with his tongue from base to head.

“John, oh, John,” Sherlock gasped, and then, finally, he went quiet as John closed over him again.

This was Sherlock Holmes like nobody ever saw. Nobody else saw him open like this, spine bowed, fingers twisted into the sheets. John focused on his task, bobbing his head up and down, taking Sherlock in as deeply as he could.

Suddenly there was a short flurry of movement above him, and something small hit him in the head and another item had been tossed down the bed. John knew what they’d be before he looked.

“John, please, I need it…!” Sherlock said and John pulled off, turning his head to squeeze his eyes shut and groan hotly into Sherlock’s inner thigh.

He picked up the lube first, making sure he knew where the condom had fallen. This part of the relationship had been another new one for John, but with Sherlock’s guidance he’d picked it up rather quickly, and he’d done it enough times to be more than confident. He’d also had it done to him a few times… so he knew how to make it feel good. John shivered at the memory.

Still mouthing Sherlock’s thigh, John popped the cap on the tube and squeezed some of the cold, slick stuff on his fingers. He waited for it to warm.

“John!” Sherlock pressed, voice strained, low and rough.

John took Sherlock back into his mouth and he pressed one of the genius’ knees up and found that other spot between his legs. Sherlock hissed at the initial chill but quickly began demanding more again.

Slowly, John pressed one finger inside, all the way to the knuckle. Sherlock tensed at first, but then relaxed, beginning to move his hips abortively, body confused by the dual sensations. John began to push in and out slowly, searching… Sherlock shuddered and a long, low moan leaked from his chest. John repeated the action, again and again, until it seemed that Sherlock was making one long continuous groan. John added another finger and Sherlock was writhing under him. He’d never been quite like this before… never this much at John’s mercy, never this frantic before.

“John…! Please, now…!” Sherlock rasped from above.

John looked up and nearly froze with the sight. A sweat had broken out on Sherlock’s forehead, making the dark curls stick to his skin. His cheekbones were flamed with red and his eyes… glassy but so blue, like the ice in them had melted. John pulled his fingers out, inadvertently making Sherlock flinch again, pretty little flick of the chin.

John grabbed for the condom, ripping open the packaging quickly. It wasn’t a second after he got it on that a long fingered hand slid behind his neck and pulled him down, two sets of lips meeting bruisingly once again. His fingers slid up the back of John’s skull, threading through John’s short, dirty blonde hair, not tugging, but making sure that John wouldn’t stray an inch.

As the shorter changeling reached between them, their lips parted, but just barely, hovering over each other. John lined up and he opened his eyes. Two blue saucers, only revealed as fragments of sky under a half lidded gaze, rested just centimetres away, waiting.

“Please,” he breathed, and John swallowed the word, then let his eyes slam shut as he pressed his hips forward.
Sherlock’s head fell back, baring the white flesh of his neck. Feeble morning sunlight washed into the room from the east, but it was cold in comparison to the body beneath John. His lips fell open and his mind momentarily emptied, rendered useless by the sensation of slipping inside Sherlock’s body. When he felt his hips resting against the backs of Sherlock’s legs, the ones he could also feel hugging his ribs, over the small of his back, pulling him closer, John paused. He combed his fingers through Sherlock’s damp locks, pushing them away from his face. Then he laid a single kiss to the genius’ brow, like on that very first night.

Sherlock’s eyes snapped open and John felt something splinter and break at the edge of his mind, releasing something, like a failing dam. If not for the insight provided by the connection of their minds, John may have believed Sherlock was in complete control of himself as he rolled up, deliberately tilted his head to the side and captured his lips. Only John, who saw through him, and then further, to the part that was truly amazing, filled with light and spinning, whirring brilliance, could know how powerless Sherlock was in that moment.

“Please,” Sherlock whispered once more against his lips. “John.”

That’s what he said, but what John heard was thank you, and it was wholly too much.

His whole body rolled with it, he pulled nearly all the way out before pressing back in, not quickly, but steadily. He angled his hips and rolled again, satisfied when the panther shift in his arms bucked against him, and he felt fingernails bite gently into his back. He held that rhythm, and they rolled together, in perfect unison. John heard Sherlock’s groans and sighs in his ear and left his own tattooed into the skin of the brilliant man’s neck—his… Sherlock.

He murmured his name over and over again as the heat began to burn and he felt a bead of sweat slide down his spine and his tempo began to falter. John kissed Sherlock’s flushed chest, pushing himself up, and then quelling the subsequent complaints with a hand slipped between them.

Sherlock’s hands touched him everywhere, as if he couldn’t bear to stop, and John’s fingers formed a ring around his cock. He pumped him, trying to keep it slow, set up a pace but they were both just too far gone. His mind was ablaze. He could barely see. He definitely couldn’t see anything but Sherlock below him. He didn’t see the messy files, or the abandoned mugs, only so few in number and lacking ecosystems of their own due to John’s diligence. Neither of them saw the sun hanging in the sky, haloed by thin clouds, pouring a thin, silver light over the deep greens of the forest.

They didn’t see the faces or the red webs that coated the walls. All they could see was each other, all they could feel was in that moment, confined to the contact between them.

“John…” Sherlock gasped as John’s hand moved rapidly over him, as he thrust into him over and over, hitting that spot just right with every rolling push. “John… I can’t—I’m going…”

“Shh…” John hummed against his jaw, and moved faster.

One more thrust and John felt Sherlock’s orgasm overcome him, first as supernova at the edge of the galaxy of his own mind, then as a slickness pouring over his hand. The first wave hit and was followed by bright pulses of light that then collapsed inward, like a black hole grabbing John and dragging him roughly down with it. John didn’t fight it.

“Sh-Sherlock!” John nearly shouted as he came, thrusting and freezing, still as stone as his mouth fell open and he dropped over the edge.

He rolled his hips one and twice more, making both bodies flinch with the aftershocks. After a moment John slid out, quickly tying off the condom and tossing it in the bin before collapsing again.
John opened his eyes to the feeling of Sherlock’s hand sliding down to press against his left pectoral. Sherlock’s own eyes were trained heavily on the spot of contact, some element of wonder swirling around in the melted arctic depths. Belatedly, John realised Sherlock was feeling his heartbeat, thumping against his ribs powerfully in the post orgasmic bliss. Slowly, John took Sherlock’s hand in his own, bringing it up to place a kiss against his palm.

Sherlock looked at him, brow furrowing in confusion, that strange expression that signified a lack of understanding in his own feelings, in John.

Then, with that look of befuddlement still in place, Sherlock snaked his arms around John’s body, urging him closer, until John’s forehead pressed against his collarbone. On their sides, John could feel Sherlock press his face into his blonde hair. John wasn’t exactly used to being held like this, but he found he rather liked it, especially the way Sherlock’s ever uncertain hands trailed down his back. The genius was new at this, even scared, perhaps, of his own feelings. But John was an expert at dealing with Sherlock Holmes. For as long as he could remember he was the human holding out food to a wild animal, trying to prove he meant it no harm. This felt like the satisfaction of a bird finally landing on his hand, and the smile that pushed at his cheeks reflected the simple joy of that trust. He wouldn’t move for as long as Sherlock wanted to hold him like this.

In being given this rare gift, John wouldn’t in his wildest dreams think of spooking him now, and in the ageing day, Sherlock’s fingers continued to count the bones in John’s body.

...  

In the following days Sherlock felt... much better. It was a strange and rather inexplicable development. Deep down Sherlock knew that nothing had changed. His anxieties were just as founded as they had been previously, but even with two nicotine patches adhered to his forearm, Moriarty seemed far away.

John’s birthday came. And for his nineteenth birthday Sherlock had got him a very rare 1918 edition of *Gray’s Anatomy*, which he seemed to thoroughly enjoy. It seemed to go over much better than the presentation on long term effects of Rugby injuries at a young age that Sherlock had put together for him the previous year. While Sherlock still believed that the updated presentation that contained very elaborate research and evidence from modern medicine had more merit than an outdated anatomy book, John was happy enough, so this time Sherlock was content to let it go.

It had been a festive night, John’s birthday. They’d gone to the pub and many people came, both their close personal friends as well as many of John’s rugby mates, including Bill Murray and Seb Moran—which of course was seriously uncomfortable as neither group meshed at all, though, as always, Sherlock was the only one who noticed. He’d tried to tell John but apparently he had no interest, and stopped Sherlock before he got a sentence in. “Not today, Sherlock,” he’d said with a smile. “Just—give me one day.” Sherlock had no idea what he meant by *that*.

For approximately one hundred and two hours after John came into Sherlock’s room carrying a box of nicotine patches with the restatement of a promise among the adhesive circles, the world seemed stable once more under Sherlock’s feet.

Sherlock had been planning to meet John at two o clock in a dark corner of the library, where Sherlock was reviewing any book he could find on menageries. It’s not that he needed help to cover the material, nor did he trust John to review any of it without his own eyes going over them, but John’s presence often stimulated his mind just as much as any cigarette or patch.
“I can’t just talk to the air, John,” Sherlock said once, more than a year ago now. “People will think I’m crazy.”

“And that would ruin your glittering reputation,” John had said, but had come anyway, as Sherlock expected him to that day in the library.

However, two o’clock came and went. Sherlock got annoyed by 2:02, but the confusion didn’t start until 2:10. That was when he sent the first text, musty bookshelves looming above him. Maybe John couldn’t find him in the labyrinths of books… no, they’d used this spot before.

**Where are you? – SH**

He waited a whole two minutes to send the next text.

**John, I’m waiting in the library. – SH**

Whole subsequent sixty second intervals spanned between the successive texts.

**John, you’re late. – SH**

**John. – SH**

**John. – SH**

**Where are you? – SH**

**John. – SH**

It wouldn’t do. He needed John. He tried to remember where John would be. Sherlock hadn’t made it his priority to remember John’s class schedule. He huffed and began to drum his fingers in agitation on the hardwood table. What was it this term? Intro to Changelings…? No, that was last term.

He must have said at one time. While he definitely didn’t keep it at the forefront of his mind he definitely wouldn’t have deleted it…

Sherlock squeezed his eyes shut and pressed his fingers into his temples. Memories with keywords rolled through his head like soundbytes in an ordered file. *Classes.*

“Ah!” Sherlock gasped after only a minute. “Ecology! From 12:00 pm to 1:45 pm in the biology building… with Molly Hooper!”

Sherlock checked his phone one last time before he stood and made a beeline out of the library.

It was as Sherlock was crossing the damp lawn between the library on the east border of campus and the biology building, which was closer to the changing booths and the woods, that he caught sight of Molly Hooper crossing briskly over the grass.

“Molly!” Sherlock called, and she turned sharply.

The wind caught her hair and threw it into her face.

As she was pulling the stray hairs from her mouth, Sherlock came to a stop in front of her.

“Have you seen John?” he asked as she blushed hotly.
“I—um—I… what?” she stumbled, flustered. “Oh, John. No. He wasn’t in class today. He texted me and said he wasn’t feeling good. He asked me to get his coursework—here, could you give it to him?”

Sherlock had stopped listening about halfway through. A raindrop caught by the wind splashed against his cheek bone. Molly flinched as one caught her in the nose; she looked up nervously at the threatening clouds.

“John’s… not feeling well?” Sherlock questioned. “Why didn’t he tell me?”

“You didn’t know?” Molly said reflexively, then her cheeks turned pink as she realised the unintentional tactlessness of her words. “Oh—I just, I mean, I’m sure he just didn’t want to bother you. You know how John is.”

She ducked her head and quickly fumbled for her bag, probably to get the coursework. Sherlock never found out if his hypothesis was correct.

The blood had started to thud in his ears again. He was halfway across the lawn before Molly looked up from her bag.

As his feet flew across the grass, Sherlock’s mind flew faster, bringing up all recollections of recent strains of illness that had passed through campus. There was a head cold going around, and a strange surge of mono cases. There was also a pretty severe stomach bug going around that had put many members of the student body briefly out of classes with high fevers. The head cold was the most likely, as it was currently present in the largest percentage of the student body.

By the time Sherlock had calculated the percent chance that John had contracted mono, he was taking the fifth floor staircase two at a time.

“John!” he was already calling, earning himself strange looks from the other members of A Wing.

He stopped abruptly in front of 629A, which is when he realised he wasn’t sure he could breathe. Strange.

His hand curled around the door knob, and, slowly, it swung inwards.

John didn’t have mono.

He didn’t have a head cold.

The smell of a stomach bug was entirely absent from the room.

However, there was a fever.

And in the span of a single second, Sherlock Holmes’ entire world shattered around him.
He walked towards the bed as if in a daze, past two, twin wardrobes—his and John’s… standing side by side. He moved so slowly past John’s desk, where biology and chemistry texts lay stacked in neat piles. John’s mug sat on John’s bedside table next to a package of paracetamol that had clearly not done its job. And in the middle of the bed, under a pile of blankets, was John.

No, it wasn’t a cold. It was a fever—and a bad one.

He lay on his back, a few drops of sweat beading on his forehead, red flush from his ears all the way down his neck. He breathed shallowly through parted, chapped lips. Occasionally he would moan and his eyes would dart below his shuttered eyes. Sherlock stood so close his knees almost brushed the bed, staring down as the information refused to process.

A bead of sweat slid down John’s cheek, falling, slipping—a small dark dot appeared on John’s blue pillowcase.

Sherlock realised his head had begun to shake slowly back and forth.

“No…” Sherlock began to back away from the bed. “It can’t—he doesn’t… no… no…"

John’s brow furrowed, and he tried to open bleary eyes, but the fever had too strong a hold of him to allow him to rise out of his fog.

“Sh… Sherlock…” he breathed, and whether it was due to Sherlock’s presence or some fever dream, it couldn’t be said.

John didn’t fit the profile. His shift wasn’t rare… why would… unless…

Sherlock’s back hit his own wardrobe and his legs buckled beneath him, sliding down the wooden faced doors. His head dropped between his knees and his fingers twisted into his hair.

“No… no…”

Sherlock was shaking and for a while he was wholly unaware of time and space and the continued rotation of the earth. He curled, frozen, in the corner of John’s room while his only real friend overheated on the bed.

Suddenly, it hit him. The reality of everything, even if his brain was still rejecting the implications. Sherlock rose without grace, stumbled towards the door. Despite the incomprehensible
possibilities—akin to apocalypse in Sherlock’s mind—some small part of him was still on the case, was still put together enough to make it to his own room before he let go, to pull a hypodermic needle and a few vials from a hidden cache and return to John’s bedside.

He refused to look at John’s face, at his clammy cheeks. Instead he ripped back the covers to expose the wolf shift’s arm. He carefully injected the needle into the crook of John’s arm, filling three of the vials with John’s blood. In that moment he didn’t do anything with them though. He just put them aside.

It seemed his ability to hold it together was rapidly deteriorating.

If… if this wasn’t… if it wasn’t faked… Sherlock couldn’t think it, but he also knew he couldn’t leave the room. Not now. He was going to stay. He reached his hand out for John, but he was shaking... besides, it wouldn’t be enough like this. He needed to be stronger.

He shed his clothes and shifted. The bed squeaked as a feline weight hit the mattress. Sherlock lay down, tucking his nose into John’s neck. The skin there burned against his own. He could feel the chaos of John’s mind now, through only a single barrier. His breathing was harsh and nearly pained, but when Sherlock settled next to him, he finally reacted.

“Sherlock…?” he murmured and two clouded eyes met Sherlock’s icy clear.

He groaned and Sherlock rasped his tongue over John’s damp forehead, rough tongue catching and pushing back the sticky strands of hair. Then John curled into him as if burying himself in Sherlock’s black fur was the only way he wouldn’t freeze to death—he was shaking so badly. Sherlock didn’t move away, only curled around John as much as physically possible. He felt John’s fingers pull at his fur as they curled into it like anchors on an ocean floor.

Sherlock had left John’s bed early that morning, and there had been no sign of fever then, which meant it had to have set in sometime around midmorning.

The sun began to sink, and with it, so did John’s fever, and a doubt rose in Sherlock—a confusion. The hyperthermia that always marked the beginning of the wandering persisted on average between 22 and 28 hours. John’s fever couldn’t have lasted more than twelve, perhaps thirteen hours, when it broke.

It was only 9:11 pm when John opened his eyes and recognised Sherlock in his right mind.

“Hello, you,” John said, voice tired, but no longer weak.

He ran his fingers through the silky fur on Sherlock’s heavy head, and on another day the sensation would have been pleasurable, comforting, to Sherlock—but today it didn’t even begin to penetrate the storm in the leopard’s mind.

John’s eyes were warm.

“What time is it? What an unpleasant way to spend the day,” John murmured. “How long have you been here, Sherlock?”

Sherlock was a bit thrown by his calmness. His eyes were narrowed intensely.

“What?” John asked.

Sherlock shook his head and slid from John’s arms, catching the way the wolf shift still shivered slightly at the change in temperature. He wasn’t a hundred percent, but the fever had broken.
Sherlock shifted back, definitely needing to lower the communication barrier.

He still sat on the bed, knee pressed into John’s pyjama-clad side. He hadn’t even managed to get dressed that morning.

“You had a fever, John,” Sherlock said.

John nodded and raised a brow in confusion at Sherlock, almost smiling even.

“Yeah…? I was here for it. Haven’t been that out of sorts in a few years.”

Sherlock just stared at him.

“What?” John said, cocking his head slightly to the side and then lightly flinching. “Ow, my head is pounding…”

Sherlock bored his eyes into John’s, conveying the gravity of the possibility that weighed on his mind, even if he couldn’t make himself say it.

“What?” John asked again, but then of course it dawned on him. For how much Sherlock troubled him for it, John was not an unintelligent individual. “No… you don’t think? Don’t be ridiculous, Sherlock. I just caught a bug.”

Sherlock couldn’t speak; it felt like his tongue was glued to the roof of his mouth. John’s warm eyes searched his face, eyebrows dipping in dismissal.

“I don’t fit the profile,” John said. “I’m a grey wolf. Not exactly rare.”

Sherlock’s mind was faltering. John was so sure, but then he always was understated when it came to himself, unless it was about a skill he knew he possessed. When it came to this kind of thing he did tend to downplay… but he didn’t fit the profile. The fever was short.

But then red words danced before Sherlock’s eyes and he realised he couldn’t know. He really just didn’t know. And for once he wasn’t angry. Anger was born by frustration. Sherlock wasn’t frustrated, he was lost.

His head began to spin again.

“Sherlock…?” John said, reaching out to him. “Hey. Hey, Sherlock, look at me…”

He was shaking again. How strange, the chemistry of his own body betraying him—an excess of epinephrine. An indiscriminate fight or flight response that couldn’t tell the difference between physical danger and something that Sherlock couldn’t just run from—that he couldn’t just fight off with fists or claws or teeth. Yet his body released the hormones anyway, sending them flying through his bloodstream, making his heart pound in his chest even as he forced himself to control his breathing. Bodies were… stupid. They gave you away.

He lifted his hand just slightly off the bed, eyes drilling holes into his own flesh, and watched it tremble.

“Sherlock!”

The genius’ head snapped up, to John’s face—still ashen with the after effects of his fever. It was too much.

He leapt from the bed and made for the door, twisting the handle and pulling the inch necessary to
unlatch it before dropping to all fours. Claws hooked into wood and a single inward pull yanked the door wide open. He heard John calling to him but he didn’t respond.

Maybe the adrenaline was properly administered—as Sherlock didn’t stop running for a long time that night.

For a while after Sherlock left, John simply sat in his bed and thought. His head and stomach hurt though, and Sherlock was being ridiculous. It was just a stomach bug or something. He didn’t fit the profile for the fake wanderings, and though he felt ill, he felt perfectly content in his human body. When he looked out of the window, the forest held no more than its usual allure. He didn’t feel like shifting—what he really felt was hungry. He hadn’t eaten all day.

So, without any real ideas of what to do otherwise, John shrugged on a jumper a pair of trousers and made his way down to the dining hall. Despite the late hour, he wasn’t really surprised to find Greg there. His strange hours as the captain of the student guard in combination with his near constant hunger meant Greg could be found in the hall at almost any time of day.

John grabbed a plate of shepherd’s pie, probably out a little longer than was good for it, as well as a mug of strong tea before going to join the silver haired changeling. Greg looked up from his own pie when John sat down across from him.

“Hello,” he said reflexively and then gave John a once over. “Damn, John, you look like shite.”

“Cheers,” John said and took a long pull of his tea.

Greg chuckled.

“Molly said you were under the weather today,” Greg continued. “Catch something?”

John paused to chew and swallow a large forkful of food before answering.

“Yeah, a stomach bug or something. Mostly fine now though. Short thing,” John explained, but a frown pulled at the corner of his lips.

Greg cocked his head to the side.

“What is it?” he asked, noticing the troubled expression on his friend’s face.

John pushed some gravy around his plate, tapping the metal against the surface a few times.

“It’s… It’s Sherlock.”

“Isn’t it always?” Greg said jokingly, though his attention remained focused, face still sombre.

“What this time though?”

John took his mug into his hands, looking at the dark, translucent liquid that filled it.

“Well… I had a fever,” John said, and those words alone brought a heavy seriousness down on Greg’s face. “Sherlock’s afraid I’m going to be the next fake wandering.”
Greg leaned in closer, as if he was worried about people overhearing in the nearly empty hall.

“You don’t think…?”

John shook his head quickly.

“No. My shift isn’t rare. I don’t fit,” John assured him. “I was just sick. I’m not going to wander, faked or not. I’m just… worried about him.”

Greg still looked concerned, and they sat quietly for a while. John grappled with what he said next, unsure how to say it.

“Even… even with that, though. Greg… things… things are ramping up. I don’t have any proof, just an instinct. Sherlock is getting too much attention from this Moriarty… I’m starting to think it won’t end well. This isn’t just a missing book or an unsolved small town crime. This is bigger, which is why we can’t stop—even I couldn’t bring myself to stop now, even if Sherlock would ever consider it… but—but if anything happens to me…” John swallowed, having to pause a second, continuing to stare into his mug. “I know it’s a lot to ask—”

“Hey,” Greg said, dipping his head to catch John’s eye before he finished. “It’s alright, John.”

A lot passed between them in that silence, lots of things two young blokes couldn’t really hope to put into words. John pressed his lips together and nodded sharply.

“Just make sure he’s okay.”

John was awoken in the middle of the night by the opening and closing of his door. He didn’t need to see to know that it was Sherlock.

“Have you calmed down yet?” John asked groggily, rubbing his eye with a loose fist.

Sherlock didn’t say anything but simply strode slowly over to the bed. He stopped next to the bedside table, veritably standing right over John, not saying a word.

“Well, that’s not creepy at all,” John said, perhaps a little more tactlessly than normal on account of his taxing day.

Finally Sherlock spoke.

“John,” he said, rough and dark. “Don’t go into the woods. Don’t even go to the meadow alone. Don’t… don’t go anywhere where there aren’t people.”

Maybe John didn’t believe that anything was wrong with him. He really did believe that he’d just caught a virus or something—but that didn’t mean he had to be brazenly stupid about it. They’d gotten themselves in pretty deep.

And while Sherlock’s fears seemed a bit unrealistic to John, he couldn’t argue against such reasonable precautions when he could feel the roiling of Sherlock’s head just out of sight. So, for once, John didn’t argue.
“Alright, Sherlock.”

“Promise, John,” he whispered and John caught the glint of moonlight in pale blue eyes.

John frowned at what he saw there, and something inside him twisted sadly.

“I promise,” John assured. “Now come to bed.”

And Sherlock didn’t argue either.

The next few days were agony for Sherlock. He was torn between trying to solve the case now, eradicating any perceived danger permanently, and following John around in shifted form everywhere he went like an agitated guard dog. He settled for the wholly unsatisfying combination of working on the case and spending as much time as possible around John.

John was not making his life easy though. While he had stuck to his promise, he wouldn’t suffer Sherlock following him to class.

“Sherlock, I refuse to stop living my life,” he’d snapped when Sherlock had tried to follow him into chemistry the day after his fever. “Go to class! You’ve missed almost all of your psychology classes this term. Just ‘cause you’re Sherlock Holmes doesn’t mean they won’t fail you.”

Sherlock hadn’t followed him into the class, but he definitely hadn’t gone to his own like John told him to. Instead he’d gone back to the lab and spent another few fruitless hours staring at blood that had yet to reveal any compounds that would have induced hyperthermia, which John of course only used as further evidence against Sherlock’s doubts, constantly trying to impress upon him that there was nothing wrong.

Their friends weren’t as deliberately deluded as John—and honestly Sherlock wished they would be. They were almost the worst part. Subtle concern radiated off them. John wasn’t picking up on it but to Sherlock the space between them was saturated with it. And it wasn’t just concern when it came to Sherlock… it was pity.

And he hated every second of it.

Plus, they dared to voice those possibilities that Sherlock didn’t even dare comprehend. He didn’t have John’s apparent capacity for denial but he had a line… words he couldn’t speak, but their friends could.

Sherlock had been looking for Greg to ask him to help index and interview the residents of A Wing, having been told he was with Molly in the small commons on the fourth floor. If a substance was administered to induce a fever, then someone had to have come to administer it. It was probably an inside job… but Sherlock knew that Moriarty had got inside the dorms before. The letters could have been delivered, but the writing in his music books was mostly done on site. The chances of them being removed and replaced before Sherlock noticing seemed unlikely. So maybe someone had noticed something strange. It was a big task but a new direction could—

That was when he’d heard Molly and Greg speaking around the corner.
“I just don’t know, Molly. Both of them are so far off opposite deep ends I have no clue which one has the right idea,” Greg said, obviously in the middle of discussion the issue. “I want to believe, John. I mean his seems more likely. It was one thing to think about the false wanderings when they were happening to people we barely know… but it just doesn’t seem possible now. But… after what happened in the woods, with Sherlock’s father…”

Sherlock froze around the corner, listening.

“There’s something else though, too,” Molly murmured, and she was clearly the one who had started the conversation and was finally reaching her point, but scared to get there.

“Yes…” Greg murmured, and it was like he already knew what she meant.

In a way so did Sherlock.

“What if… what if it’s not a fake,” Molly whispered, voice steeped in worry. “What if they’re both wrong.”

Greg sighed heavily and Sherlock could almost see him rubbing a hand across his face wearily.

“Sherlock said that John’s fever was only twelve or thirteen hours,” Greg recited. “Normally the fevers before wanderings are a lot longer than that…”

Molly paused, and Sherlock knew she was struggling. Molly had a lot of trouble speaking, but that’s because she was kind but didn’t really know how to say anything that wasn’t completely true. These two traits were constantly at odds. Kind people are normally liars. Softening truths. Crafting reassurances.

It was hard to be honest and kind, but Molly was, however poor the results of that were.

“But… but we both know that’s on average. John’s already shown a number of unusual traits for a changeling… his late shift, his unusual control… even their open bond—who knows how any of that could affect the length of a Wander fever,” Molly said, all hesitance. “So… what if—what if it’s real? What will happen if—if John…”

Another exhausted sigh came from Greg and he was quiet for a long while.

“If John wanders… I don’t know if Sherlock will be able to handle it.”

Huh. Sherlock didn’t know either.

Mechanically he turned around and walked away from the common room.

Then he deleted the conversation from his memory.

On the thirteenth of July, four days since John’s fever, the Baker Institute was buzzing with the anxiety of impending final exams, but in John’s world the tension finally seemed to have reached its peak, and now the only direction it could go was back down. The previous day had been a wreck, what with 98% of wanderings occurring within seventy two hours of the onset of fever. But John was at about ninety eight hours now, if Sherlock’s approximations could be trusted—which of course they could.
For this, John was thankful. Sherlock had spent every night since the fever in John’s bed, but no matter how John tried to soothe him, verbally, through distraction or even through certain physical activities, the nightmares had come every night—almost as bad as during the winter after the incident with Sigur Holmes.

It was mid-afternoon and John was crossing the lawn in shifted form, on his way to his advanced shift speech class when he was waylaid by a familiar face.

< Panic! John!!>

He turned to see a gorilla galloping towards him on all fours.

< Confusion. Sebastian? >

He rolled to a stop just in front of John, throwing up clumps of grass.

< Concern. Pain. It’s Bill! We were hiking up on Hallow Hill and there was a landslide—Jeremy went to get help and I was scared to move him. You know first aid—please. Urgency.>

John’s eyes widened in shock and a set of instincts kicked in.

< Steadiness. I’m grabbing the first aid kit. Assurance.>

There were two first aid kits easily accessible on the lawn, each stowed in a box under the benches in the first and last booths.

The silverback nodded his head vigorously and followed as John sprinted to the last booth, nosing inside and quickly grabbing the handle of the red bag.

<Hurry…! Fear.>

John darted back into the open air. The clouds moved slowly through the sky, obscuring the sun for short intervals before light would flood back down onto the forest.

<Lead the way. Haste.>

They hit the treeline in a matter of seconds and John felt his heart beating steady in his chest, following Sebastian’s silver fur through the shadows. His feet kicked up dirt and leaves as he easily kept pace with the gorilla, whose knuckles pounded a rhythm into the earth. The first aid kit bounced against John’s chest with each pace. He took the opportunity to get some more information.

<What happened?>

Seb threw his hand up to push a branch out of his way and John quickly ducked under.

<Overwhelmed. We were running the ridge and Bill was out front and he jumped over this gap and then the trail just went out from under him. Some dead logs and things went with him and his leg is fucked up really bad.>

Seb swung over the creek, young maple branch bending under his weight; John’s lithe form flew over the shrinking summer stream.
Confusion. He doesn’t have any head injury?

Seb glanced over his shoulder. The bushes around them rustled as they moved quickly through the brush.

Nothing as bad as what happened to his leg. It’s gotta be broken.

John wished Sebastian had just carried him out. Unless there was a serious head injury, the time would probably do more damage than Seb would have, due to the possibility of shock. It was too late for that now, though.

Pressing. So he’s alone out there now?

Seb looked back again.

No. Chester stayed with him and Jeremy and I went to get help.

Something pricked at John’s gut, something that he probably should have picked up on earlier, but much stronger instincts must have dulled his senses to the problems with Sebastian’s story. Jeremy had a black bear shift and could definitely move faster than Seb’s gorilla, so why had both of them gone for help? As a matter of fact, he hadn’t seen Jeremy at all—Seb had practically come out of nowhere. Perhaps Jeremy had run ahead… all the details could make sense… but something still felt very wrong.

Words spoken in a low voice floated back to John.

“Only lies have details.”

Stupid.

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

In that moment John noticed Sebastian had slowed and he berated himself even more. They were far into the woods now. How hadn’t he seen it earlier?

They slowed more and just as they came to a walk John finally spoke.

So… how long have you been working for him, Sebastian?
<So… how long have you been working for him, Sebastian?>

Wind kicked through the dark green leaves above their heads.

<A while. Flat.>

Sebastian’s voice had changed. Completely stripped of any guise. He made no effort to hide the truth now, they both knew.

<It was you… it was you the whole time, wasn’t it? I knew that scent on the markers smelled familiar. Sure.>

The gorilla shift didn’t respond. Once again, they both knew the answer.

Sebastian looked over his broad shoulder, taking in John’s continued paces.

<Mild interest. You’re not going to try to run?>

John huffed air through his nose, as close as he could get to a sardonic chuckle.

<What? That your favourite part, Sebastian? You always were aggressive on the pitch. Biting.>

Sebastian didn’t turn but John swore he saw the ape’s spine stiffen.

John could probably escape if he ran now. He was faster than Sebastian. But that wasn’t an option; it hadn’t been an option since John had stopped at Sebastian’s call.

<Deadpan. He said you wouldn’t give me any trouble but I’ve seen you play rugby so I guess I just expected something more out of you at first.>

He didn’t rise to the obvious bait Sebastian had thrown out in his offense. Instead he aimed to offend more. He couldn’t run, but that didn’t mean he had to make this enjoyable for the bastard.

<You were clearly hired as brawn and not brains.>

Sebastian didn’t respond this time. Maybe he really just didn’t care. It wouldn’t surprise John; he was clearly better at acting than he’d been given credit for. He had a feeling this stoic creature was more similar to the true Sebastian than the intense but mostly amicable young man he’d got to know in the last year or so.

<Giving. No. Of course I’m not going to run. Out of curiosity, who were you going to threaten to kill if I did?>

John began to recognise the trees and smells around him. He realised they were heading towards the eastern edge of Baker Forest, a path similar to the one they’d tracked Sammi Knight along.

<Your father, mother, sister, and boyfriend would all be dead within the hour if you tried...>
anything.>

He wanted to shudder, to close his eyes and bow his head. How had he got into this mess? How had things got so completely out of hand? But he made sure to keep up a brave face. He wouldn’t give any of them the satisfaction of his fear. And Sebastian didn’t even deserve his anger, he thought, as he suppressed the urge to allow his hackles to rise.

<Cheek. Please. Moriarty wouldn’t touch Sherlock. That’s why I’m here isn’t it?>

Sebastian didn’t bother answering, clearly having had enough of John’s barbed comments.

John realised he was still carrying the first aid kit and let it drop to the ground, but Sebastian stopped then and turned on the path.

<Don’t drop that.>

John flicked at ear at him, unimpressed, before he understood.

<Ah. Right. Wouldn’t want to leave evidence in the middle of the woods.>

If John had been human he may have allowed himself a self-deprecating sort of smile. But he was a wolf, and simply held his tail straight out behind him and kept his head high, refusing to slink away.

He made a point to rub his body against as many trees and shrubs as possible. He knew it probably wouldn’t do any good, but it couldn’t hurt either.

They walked until they reached a clearing, one John recognised once again. Seb took the first aid kit from him and John fought the urge to snap at his fingers. Sebastian moved away, backing up a few paces towards the trees.

It was the small meadow by the dirt road. He’d known this was where they’d been heading so there was no surprise upon their arrival, and this time the smell of petrol was strong. There was a car parked nearby.

It was strange to see it again… wrong. It felt so terribly wrong to be waiting here for his inescapable, surely unfortunate fate, while he could still see Sherlock and himself in his mind’s eye, standing buck naked in the woods together, looking for clues.

It had never been a game, of course. There had been people missing, and John had always taken it seriously. But looking back on that day, remembering the way Sherlock had blushed and turned away when he saw John naked, remembering how he hadn’t known why or what it meant then… it had at least been an adventure back then.

But the sun was sinking behind the low mountains now, and John stood without Sherlock in the clearing, and it felt much too real. It felt cold. He and Sebastian weren’t alone.

Something moved in the growing shadows of the trees at the edge of clearing. John couldn’t fight the way the fur on his back rose now. Something primal was coming to life in John. It wasn’t like when Sigur had come, no simple fight or flight response. This was deeper than the fight between two predators. This was the fear of a snake in the grass.

Of the spider.
<The guest of honour arrives. I’ve been so hoping to see you again.>

The voice was strange… open, almost playful and teasing—and it sent shivers right down John’s spine. His eyes darted around and he barely suppressed the urge to growl low in his throat.

There was the crack of a branch straight ahead, and John’s every sense focused on the single spot. Something small walked into the light.

It was a creature that John didn’t completely recognise. It looked like a kind of badger, except smaller than the ones John had seen, and it was white from the crown of its head, down the broad of its back to the top of its short bushy tail. And despite the small size in comparison to the European badgers, there was something in its sharp face, black eyes and long claws that said there was much more than met the eye, something dangerous.

The thing came forward, paces slow and deliberate, and like never before in his life John felt the urge to flee, to run far, far away from this treacherous creature. That in itself scared him. It wasn’t in his nature to run, but badger made him want to.

John didn’t need an introduction. There were no doubts in his mind.

<Red. Moriarty. Loathing.>

<I gave you my number. I thought you would call.> he drawled as he came closer.

John’s ears twisted back; and his head cocked in complete confusion. What the hell was this madman talking about?

Then it came. The image of a small white piece of paper with red numbers sitting in the palm of his hand as Sherlock executed the relationship of a dear friend.

<Shock. It was you… it was all a set up. That was you.>

Moriarty turned his head to the side and he was close enough for John to see his own reflection in the black of his eyes. They looked right through John. They were simultaneously filled with a vast world and the utter emptiness of the void. It made John’s insides feel just as empty.

<Beseeching. I just wanted to talk to you.>

For a moment John felt completely frozen by his words, his presence. He would hate to admit that he was awed. John, who was unaffected by the grandeur of Mycroft Holmes, who stood unflinching before the lion, felt caught. Small and trapped, paralysed—but slowly, as those eyes bored into him, it passed.

<Steady. No… it wasn’t me. It was Sherlock. It was always about Sherlock. You don’t care about me.>

Moriarty’s nose twitched back and forth; then he suddenly sat back on his haunches, a nearly dramatic movement.

<True. You are tool John Watson. For him, a crutch, a blinder, a whore… and for me you’ll make an adequate flame thrower.>

John did growl now.

Moriarty didn’t seem to notice. He looked past John, at Sebastian, who had been sitting completely
silent at the edge of the clearing. John had almost completely forgotten about him in the
overwhelming presence of the nutter before them.

<You better head back now, my dear Sebastian. Make sure his marker is with his things.> 

John tensed but knew it was useless to fight as Sebastian came up and began to work at the buckle
on his marker with large fingers. Instead he found his courage in another way, for what little good
it would do.

<Defiance. You’ve gone too far you know. They were starting to wonder when you took
Jackson Ford. You take me and it will make six. You confident that your petty attacks will
draw enough attention away from that?>

Moriarty stared at him, and stared longer.

<Hmm, I don’t know. But it doesn’t matter. I guess you couldn’t be expected to understand…
you’re so ordinary,> he sounded so grieved, though John didn’t know why. <The game is over,
John Watson.>

He came close.

<I’ve won. I won the moment Sherlock Holmes decided it would be a good idea to sleep with
his pet. He’s tainted. He’s fixed!> Moriarty screamed the last words into John’s mind and the
wolf tried to jump away, but only bounced into Sebastian, who had just successfully removed his
marker. Then the voice returned, soft as a fleece. <So I’m done playing.>

Sebastian had begun to move back towards the trees but Moriarty stopped him. His eyes narrowed.

<Wait! Come here.>

John was focused on Sebastian so when a lancing pain exploded in his cheek he wasn’t prepared.
He yelped sharply and cussed in his head. He felt a small amount of blood seep into his fur.

Moriarty tasted the blood on his claws before he sat back on his haunches again. This time he
leaned back to balance and put out a paw to Sebastian. The gorilla gave him the marker. John
snarled sharply as he felt one paw against the opposite cheek. It wasn’t graceful with paws, but
with the marker hanging behind claws, Moriarty pressed the marker against John’s bloodied cheek.

John yelped again as and tried to pull away and Moriarty rubbed, but he found himself held by the
scruff by Sebastian.

Moriarty leaned back again, looking self-satisfied as he raised his paw for the gorilla to take the
marker back. The dark blue collar didn’t show the blood as anything more than possible mud or
grime, which was clearly why Moriarty felt comfortable doing it.

<Another red message to you, dear Sherlock.>

Sebastian disappeared then, and it was just John and Moriarty in the clearing. There were surely
others nearby; John could still smell the car, just through the trees, but for the moment it was just
the two of them. Though he didn’t dare, and he knew he couldn’t, for a moment John let himself
fantasise about killing the hateful creature, about snapping Moriarty’s neck between his jaws.

<He’s going to find you. He’s going to catch you.>
As John said the words he held his head a bit higher. It wasn’t a threat, it was a promise. Moriarty looked at him curiously again.

<I don’t think so. I’m rather hard to hold on to> He moved close again, only centimetres away from John’s bloodied fur, so all John wanted to do was back away. <Honey badgers have notoriously loose skin… You think you’ve got a grip on us… and then you feel claws on your face… and teeth in your throat>

Moriarty’s jaw snapped a hair’s breadth from his ear and John jerked away, ears flat against his neck.

* * *

When John wasn’t back to his room within fifteen minutes after his shift speech class, Sherlock began compulsively checking his phone. A pile of red string lay at his feet, every piece having been removed from the wall. His school jacket was shucked onto the ground so he stood in the thin, short-sleeved white button up that served as part of their summer uniform—no tie, as usual.

He huffed in annoyance; realising that John must have gone straight to dinner. Sherlock had eaten lunch with him today, so it wasn’t wholly unusual for John to assume he wasn’t hungry for dinner— which he wasn’t. But in the past few days he would have appreciated more regular check-ins. He punched a couple of buttons on his phone to bring up a blank message.

Are you at dinner? – SH

Sherlock was feeling better. He was starting to think he’d been wrong, and had indeed just panicked. Upon examining John’s blood, he had found traces of a possible virus and there’d been a very high white blood cell count. He didn’t find anything completely unwholesome. Still, he’d sent the samples to Mycroft to have them tested in ways he didn’t have access to at the Institute. He’d yet to hear anything.

Still… Sherlock was far from settled. He bounced on the balls of his feet, eyeing his silent phone, for thirty more seconds before snatching it up, as well as his favourite coat from the back of his chair. He left the room in a whirl.

John wasn’t in the dining hall. Sherlock looked around for anyone that they were close to, and found no one. Then he pulled his mobile from his pocket again.

To: All

Where is John Watson? – SH

He then turned and made for the exit of the A Wing dorms, and all the panic that had been dying, like an infection finally responding to antibiotics, suddenly surged back to life.

There’s a reason why they tell you to take all the pills, even if you feel better.

The first response came from Molly. He had expected responses from their close friends faster. He had changed the text tone for his number in all of their phones to a loud foghorn noise when they weren’t paying attention.
No. I haven’t seen him since Chemistry this morning. Is everything all right?

Mike’s response came just a second after.

I haven’t. Have you checked the dining hall?

Sherlock began striding quickly towards the amphitheatre where John’s shift speech class was held.

Greg’s text came next.

No. Is something wrong? Where are you, Sherlock?

Sherlock growled at the negatives.

Bill Murray’s text came as Sherlock was punching a series of numbers into his dialer.

No. Is this Sherlock? Everything alright?

Sherlock hit send. It rung shrilly in his ear and he loathed the sound. It rung again.

“Pick up, you antique—”

“Hello?”

Sherlock was striding past Baker Hall now, heading towards the east edge of campus, where the amphitheatre was located.

“Mrs. Hudson. Have you seen, John?” he said quickly.

“No, I haven’t. He said he’d come for tea sometime this week but I haven’t seen him since yesterday. I was wa—”

Sherlock ended the call, and scrolled through the various texts. Not a single one said they’d seen John. All, ‘no’s and ‘how did you get my number’.

When Sherlock came to the graduated steps of the amphitheatre he wasn’t surprised to find it wholly empty. The perches and seats and steps were completely vacant, the only occupants were the leaves being tossed through the clearing by the wind. It was unusually cold, working its way under Sherlock’s upturned collar. He then stood in crisis for a moment.

Stay human and stay close to receive word from his phone, or shift and try to determine where John went after class by smell, if he could pick up John’s scent under the multitude of changelings that must have been present in class—if John had even come to class.

After a ten second delay he decided to shift. He stripped, and then folded his clothes into his coat; tying the arms together to make a loop so that he could wrap it around his shoulders when dropped to all fours. He then pressed his nose to the ground and made towards the left side of the theatre. Luckily people were fairly habitual, and John wasn’t wholly an exception. In classes 90% of students sat within three seats of where they sat of the first day for the remainder of their time in the class. John preferred a bench on the left side, usually three or four away from the back—Sherlock knew from the time he’d spent harassing the wolf from the maple tree a few metres into the forest from the left bound of the amphitheatre.

Sherlock started at the fourth row down, then moved up to the third… then the second and first.
He then tried five, six, seven, eight… all the way down to the front row.

Then he tried the right side. There was a faint trace of John… maybe. But nothing fresh. Nothing that said John had been anywhere near the amphitheatre that day. Adrenaline began to course through his veins.

He returned to his phone on the top tier of the amphitheatre and took in the new round of noes flashing on the lock screen. His head rose slowly, blue eyes gazing out over the green span of the meadow. There was an adolescent deer and a squirrel chasing each other along the tree line in the deepening dusk, but Sherlock saw past them, to the changing booths standing like pale tombstones against the backdrop of the dark trees.

Sherlock didn’t want to consider it. He didn’t want to think about. But he wouldn’t be out here if he had the ability to induce idiotic delusion. His ribs expanded and contracted rapidly. Sherlock picked up his phone in his mouth and began to cross straight towards the changing booths.

As soon as Sherlock reached the booths he thought he smelled John. His tail lashed in fear. He pawed his clothes from around his head and dropped his phone into the first booth as he checked it. Then he moved to the next one, checking to see if he could smell John, to see if John’s things were there.

As he nosed past each curtain he hoped to find it empty—and some were. Others were filled with clothes of people who weren’t John, which was good too. Still, as he progressed down the line, he grew frantic, a consistent growl festering in his throat. He’d begun to nearly run.

Booth twenty five: clear.

Booth twenty six: occupied, not John.

Booth twenty seven: occupied, not John.

Booth twenty eight: clear.

Sherlock froze in front of booth twenty nine—the second to last booth, on the end closest to Baker Forest.

It was also the booth John almost always used. Sherlock had always used thirty and…

Sherlock couldn’t move. He could smell John. John had been here—today. He could smell it on the curtains; he could smell it on the grass. His eyes honed in on a sandy blonde hair stuck to the heavy fabric.

The leopard’s powerful muscles froze from liquid to solid steel. He was a black statue in the growing darkness. Maybe he could fade into the night. He certainly would rather dissipate than nose past that curtain. He’d never been so afraid of a simple truth before.

He didn’t remember making the conscious decision. He didn’t recall deciding to act yet—but his body couldn’t take it any longer. An ebony paw flashed before his eyes, claws like little scythes in the air. They grabbed the curtain and flung it aside.

Then the world disappeared around him. He was in a white space. He was alone in the aether. Alone except for a dangerous ring which pulled him in, that made his paws move forward when all he wanted to do was bolt. It dragged him close until he could stare straight down at it, a circle before his feet.
It was blue.

And the smell of blood rose from it like steam.

<John…>

A snarl began to form on his muzzle, a noise of rejection as his ears turned to lay flat against his head. And he was backing away again, backing into the real world, where grass and clouds still moved with the wind and pierced straight through his fur.


There was a rushing noise in his ears and the snarl grew louder in his throat as his feet touched grass.

The hurricane that was spinning inside him continued to build and build. It filled his chest and it filled his head and poured into his eyes and he could taste it on his tongue. He couldn’t see anything but John’s smile. He couldn’t hear anything but the sound of John’s quiet laughter.

<J OHN!>

A strangled roar exploded from Sherlock Holmes. It rolled over the grounds of the Baker Institute. It turned heads. It faded.

Then it died.

“Sorry. Procedure,” were the last two words John heard in a severely not-sorry tone before he flinched at the bite of a hypodermic needle against his neck.

Then there was blackness.

He came to slowly, to the sound of an engine rumbling below him. John groaned and opened his eyes to find that he was lying down on a bench in the back of what appeared to be a large van. There were no windows. The only other occupant was Molly’s ex-boyfriend, who sat smiling on the other bench.

Except he wasn’t Molly’s ex-boyfriend—well he was, but that had been an act. The jeans, the chain, the number… it had all be a complete ruse.

Across from him sat Moriarty, clad in a well-fitting suit, the mastermind, the spider, the badger.

“Ohhh! You’re awake,” Moriarty said as he caught John’s eyes, making a comically expressive face as began. “Good morning, pet.”

John got the urge to punch him again, but his head was still heavy. Also, he quickly realised, his hands were now cuffed. Moriarty had made him march to the road from the clearing, where he’d been instructed to shift back by a guard or driver or henchman—once John would have thought henchmen were just as plausible as arch enemies… but here he sat in the back of a van with a criminal mastermind, so henchman were probably also real.
They’d given him a pair of short cotton trousers and instructed him to climb into the back of the van, where he’d been promptly knocked out; most likely so that he wouldn’t be able to determine how long they’d been driving. Despite Moriarty’s comment, he couldn’t know whether it was actually morning yet, as there were no windows in the back of the van.

John awkwardly pushed himself up so he could sit straight. He was deliberate, making sure he didn’t slip, even with his cuffed hands. Everything he did was deliberate when Moriarty was there. It felt like being in the room with a predator, and one false step or sign of weakness would make him dinner. John straightened his spine and squared his shoulders.

“It’s good you’re up. We’re almost there. Wouldn’t want you dozy for your introductions,” Moriarty purred in that whimsical and chilling cadence.

He snaked his head around so John couldn’t help but look him in the eyes, and John wouldn’t let himself look away. He clenched his jaw and held the madman’s gaze. He may have been a captive. There may have been nothing he could do to change that, but he’d be damned if he would let this sick psycho shame him. His eyes were appropriately red brown, and without the curtain of his black-eyed shift, John could see so much more.

Sherlock’s eyes had been the first thing that John had noticed about him. It had been like looking through a peephole to a fantastical world. A shining machine of silvers and whites, precise and all moving together in a rapidly spinning and twisting synchronisation that made the regular human mind look like a dirty diesel engine.

What John saw in Moriarty’s eyes was just as impressive, he couldn’t lie. Except it wasn’t the same either. The more he looked the more he saw and the more his insides chilled, the more primal instincts that made him feel small and chased bubbled up.

It was indeed an incomprehensible machine, with microscopic pistons and slight gears, locked together and flying—but it was coated in black. Dark, dripping shadows like oil, and somewhere in the depths, furnaces burned.

John could see the fires.

Moriarty let out a slow laugh, as if he could see inside John’s head too—and found it funny. He shook his head, allowing John a reprieve from his eyes.

“Ohhh, John,” he murmured in amusement. “You poor, pathetic little creature.”

John pressed his lips tightly together and lifted his sights to the opposite side of the van, promising himself he wouldn’t give anything else to this psycho.

Finally the van stopped.

“Oh! We’re here!” Moriarty said ecstatically. “You ready to see your new home, boy?!”

Turns out John wouldn’t see it from the outside though, as he was quickly blindfolded and led out of the vehicle, almost stumbling over the drop. Then he was walked for some way. He heard doors opening and then closing with finality.

“Pryde is waiting in the side room,” a voice said, and John was moving again.

His blindfold finally came off. He was in a smallish room with stone walls. There were shelves with folded trousers and shirts made from the same material as John wore. There were other things as well; things that made John’s stomach churn.
There were also people. Moriarty and his henchman stood on either side of John. Moriarty had his hands behind his back and was rocking up and down on his toes, smiling as if he was waiting in line for a ferris wheel.

Across from them were a number of men. Some looked like henchmen too, others looked like house staff. Had he found himself in Downton Abbey by mistake?

There was one man that stuck out clearly. He wore an expensive suit, and a silver watch chain hung from his waistcoat, which was tailored to fit perfectly around his slightly protruding stomach. He had greying hair and angry lines in his face.

“You’re late, Mr. Moriarty,” he said, voice cold.

The madman seemed unphased.

“Oh, you know. Wanted to have a little chat with this one. Time got away from me,” Moriarty said unapologetically.

The man, who John was guessing was the one they called Pryde, narrowed his eyes distastefully at Moriarty but didn’t comment further. Instead he walked forward towards John. Cold hands touched his jaw and John was so unprepared for it that he didn’t think before flinching and pulling away.

The backhanded smack to his face came quickly and without precedent. John gasped in shock, eyes wide.

“Don’t move, sout,” he said, letting the slur fly without hesitation and put his hands back on John.

Moriarty pushed his lips together and looked up towards the ceiling completely feigning feeling awkward. Shame burned in John as he was examined, like cattle, the horrible word ringing in his ears.

“Shift,” the command was issued like iron.

John didn’t react at first. It was one thing to not react but some small part of him still rebelled against actively bowing to this man.

“John, you’d do well to remember what’s at stake,” Moriarty cooed and John gritted his teeth and nearly growled before he had fangs.

And yet he did as he was told, let his trousers drop and fell to four legs.

“A wolf? Not anything special, Mr. Moriarty,” Pryde commented, unimpressed and perhaps a bit annoyed.

John was getting the impression that the relationship between Moriarty and Pryde was wholly one of business. Pryde certainly seemed to bear no love for the madman.

“You asked for something sturdier. He’s not for your vintage collection, Mr. Pryde. He’s utility. Didn’t you see the scars he’s already got? I’ve seen this one take on a lion,” Moriarty commented and low growls rumbled in John’s chest.

A new sort of fear began to grow in John now. He’d known he didn’t fit the profile, and while it hadn’t been at the forefront of his mind with everything else going on—there was the question now. He wasn’t rare. He wasn’t special… so why would Pryde be considering taking him at all?
“He’s a fighter, this one,” Moriarty pressed excitedly—like a fucking used car salesman.

Pryde merely grunted.

“I guess he’ll do for the ring.”

Suddenly John realised he might be facing an even worse fate than a life in a cage.

Chapter End Notes

TERM NOTES: Sout is a terrible slur for a Changeling. It is the epitome slur in English speaking countries, and has bled into a few other European dialects. Sout comes from an old, very condemning, Old English/Anglo-Saxon name for Changelings, "sawol nieten" meaning "soul beast". Over time the term was merged and bastardized, resulting in the modern slur.

Any questions about the Changeling verse can be asked at heartoutofashes.tumblr.com. =]
Chapter Notes

There is a Changeling fable referenced in this chapter. If you'd like to fully understand the reference, you can read the fable HERE.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was nearly unbearable for John to stand there and be handled—examined—like a contestant in Crufts, but he bore it, because he had no other options, because everyone he loved would suffer if he didn’t.

After what seemed like an eternity of dehumanising examination, John was commanded to shift back. He willed his cheeks not to burn as he snatched the thin trousers off the floor and covered himself. Nobody in the room, not one of the too many sets of eyes even bothered to look away. It was only the first of so many things that forced John to realise just how much they viewed him as an animal, as an inhuman thing.

“This is where we say our goodbyes, John. I would say it was a pleasure, but it wasn’t,” Moriarty drawled. “I’ll give your best regards to Sherlock.”

That was it—the final straw. Despite the power everyone in the room had over him, in spite of what was at stake, John lost it.

“You sick, fucking, inhuman bastard!” John shouted and lunged at him with cuffed hands.

Moriarty jumped back and held his hands up dramatically, even though John didn’t get more than a foot before Pryde’s men grabbed him.

“Oh! Bad doggy! Rude!” Moriarty snapped, stepping towards John and shaking his finger.

The wolf shift fought against the hands holding him—he was too angry for words. He wanted to hurt him, both for what he’d done to John, to all of the Changelings—and for what he was doing to Sherlock Holmes.

His nostrils flared, and his breath came and went rapidly in his rage. Fire crackled in his eyes as he tried to burn holes in Moriarty’s face. The madman only grinned gleefully.

John was forced to his knees; refusing to look away even as pain lanced through his bones, foreshadowing bruises.

That’s when John felt the barrel of a gun against his head. He froze.

“Oh!” Moriarty gasped. “You had better be careful, John-boy. You know what happens to bad dogs…”

He came closer as John’s chest continued to rise and fall too quickly. Moriarty kneeled in front of him and leaned in, lips close to his ear, and whispered.

“They get put down.”
Then he stood and strode out of the door, henchman following behind.

John was hauled to his feet. He didn’t fight anymore. With the gun still pressed into his skull, he was led to the other door in the room.

“Put him in the prepared cage. Next to the Kestrel,” Pryde told the men holding John.

The door opened, and John finally laid eyes on a place that had been on his mind for so long, but that he’d hoped never to see. And now that he had, he was struck dumb. His lips parted. His eyes glassed over.

It didn’t look like a zoo or a prison. If he was asked, John couldn’t have said what he was expecting but it certainly wasn’t this. At first glance… it was beautiful. Pryde must have lived in a grand old castle, for they were in a massive courtyard, surrounded on all four sides by stone walls and arches. There was a roof above, but it was made of glass so John could see the stars splashed across the black sky. Below his feet was a cobbled path and around him was lush green foliage, manicured bushes, trees, and flowers that could have belonged in a botanical garden. The paths wove throughout the yard, leading to small arched bridges which spanned trickling pools where lotus blossoms floated and koi swam in lazy circles.

And that’s what made it so horrible, John thought, as his throat worked; because among all this beauty stood the cages, and behind wrought iron and silver wire were their eyes. People… it would have been better if it had been a prison, because there was something even more sickening about being kept in this beautiful place. They weren’t people here… they were barely animals. They were art… an accessory to Pryde’s sick empire.

Pryde’s men tossed him into a wrought iron cage. They weren’t gentle either. Apparently, he’d been branded as aggressive and therefore was not treated gently in return. He grunted sharply as his shoulder and chin collided with the hard ground. John curled his hands into fists, feeling the thin layer of straw that covered the ground.

“What did you do to piss them off?”

A teasing but kind voice reached John where he lay on the floor. John was still flushed with anger. He looked up. The cage next to the one he’d been thrown in was different. His was made of iron bars set about six inches apart. The other cage was made of a fine but rigid looking chicken wire on two sides. The sides that faced the path were made of glass. Just on the other side of the mesh was a girl, a young woman. She had short blonde hair and what had clearly once been a bright, full face. Still, the eyes set above her pink cheeks seemed to retain some shadow of a spark. Her face transformed into an apologetic expression as John met her eyes.

“I’m sorry. This must be so terrible for you and I’m being a smart arse,” she said, voice tragic and genuine. “My name is Mary Morstan. What’s yours?”

Now John looked sad, too. There were others around. A younger boy was watching from the cage on the other side of John’s. There were other eyes staring through the dark. He could see the light reflected in their broken eyes.

“John Watson…” he looked back at Mary. “This wasn’t supposed to happen…”

She shook her head and hugged her knees, leaning into the corner where two mesh walls met.

“No… of course not.”
John looked at the locked door, cracking pieces of straw in his fist.

“No. That bastard—we were getting close to finding you and he had to go and—”

Sherlock’s face flashed behind his eyes and John slammed his fist down on the stone floor. Pain slashed up his arm, a new bruise blooming under abused skin.

“Damn it!”

They messed up. Now John was here and Sherlock was going to be fighting Moriarty so much more alone than before. He was punishing Sherlock, and John was the weapon. That was the worst part of it all.

“Hush, love. Nothing good comes from causing a racket here,” Mary warned, eyeing a patrolling guard.

John’s face stayed defiant a moment before it crumpled.

“Did you say you were going to save us…?”

It was the boy, dark skinned and skinny; he couldn’t be older than twelve and his sadness was drawn on his face with a permanent marker. Mary was staring at the new prisoner, and finally actually thinking about his words. Her brow furrowed, and her hand came up to curl into the chicken wire.

“You knew we were here. You’re angry, but you aren’t surprised—you knew,” Mary said.

And John had been through so much today. He may have lost everything.

But he hadn’t lost everything, had he? He still had hope. He had more than Mary and the boy who was staring at John with a sort of terrified wonder.

“What’s your name?” John asked him.

“Trev. Trevor Stone,” he stumbled over his words.

John looked at him, eyebrows pinched with pity, and yeah, he recognised his face.

“Your shift is a giant otter… and you were taken a few months ago, now, right?” John murmured; he saw the boy’s face, both of his faces, pinned to Sherlock’s wall.

Trev stood up to his knees, gripping the bars of his cage, which were narrower and closer together than the ones enclosing John.

“Yes! How did you know?!”

“Trev, darling, hush. Don’t draw the guards,” Mary warned reflexively, though her eyes were wide and trained on John.

John looked back at her and found he recognised her, too, now that he was looking properly.

“You’re a falcon of some kind—endangered of course. You’ve been here… longer,” John continued.

Her throat worked.
“Seychelles Kestrel. Coming up on a year now,” She said and hugged her legs a bit tighter, eyes misty when she rubbed her hands down her legs and looked back at John. “How could you…?”

John’s words stuck in his throat but then a completely unfunny laugh slipped from his lips and he had to momentarily drop his face towards the ground.

“I’m sorry—look at me, showing off as badly as he would,” John said, but then he collected himself. “I—I had a… my best—”

He stumbled again, blue eyes and messy curls spinning around in his head. He coughed. They deserved to know that they weren’t lost.

“He figured it out. He saw that the wanderings were faked. We’ve been looking, investigating. Well, mostly Sherlock—he figured it out. A menagerie.”

John looked between the two Changelings.

“Sherlock?” Trev asked.

John’s throat locked up for another second but he forced the words out, eyes blazing.

“Sherlock Holmes. He’s a bloody genius—and he is going to save us.”

...  

They didn’t find Sherlock Holmes for thirty six hours after John Watson’s clothes and marker were found on Wednesday morning, the day after many people on campus had received a text asking if they knew his whereabouts. Mrs. Haytham found him from above, flying over the forest on hawk’s wings. He lay in the middle of a fork on a forest road a few miles past the border of Baker Forest.

By the time he was carried out of the forest, rumours had already flooded to all corners of the Institute. The open bond between Sherlock Holmes and John Watson was common knowledge at Baker, so John’s wandering was sure to be the subject of gossip. Of course, wanderings were accepted, but nobody had ever heard of half of an open-bonded pair wandering. What were the chances? And despite the freedom of wandering, the tragedy of the one left behind wouldn’t have been ignored—but then Sherlock Holmes was nowhere to be found either.

Many people thought both of them had wandered, then. Sherlock’s clothes were found by the changing booths, and even though nobody could recall Sherlock having a fever, many conjectured that the open bond had triggered the last change in both of them. Others whispered about the Wolf and the Doe… they thought Sherlock simply followed to sad ends. Neither group had expected to see the genius again.

And most still hadn’t seen him, but someone had, and word of Sherlock Holmes’ return spread like wild fire.

Sherlock himself, however, hadn’t heard a word of their idle whisperings. He was a mad phantom that spent most of his time in his poorly lit dorm room, or floating around campus after dark, digging through files in store rooms. His mind was wild and his moods oscillated from a whirling hurricane; tracking names and histories and probabilities and facts, to a desolate wasteland—a black pool that he couldn’t break the surface of.
People came and went regularly around him, but Sherlock couldn’t remember their faces. He couldn’t recall who searched through his drawers for contraband or which of their friends was trying to coerce him into eating. He didn’t know how many hours were passing in those first few days—maybe it was weeks. He probably would have stayed in such an oblivious state for much longer, if the case hadn’t drawn him to Baker Hall for a set of medical records.

Greg was there, or maybe it was Anderson. The sour member of the student guard had been around rather a lot lately. Sherlock had been sure that Anderson hated him… not that it mattered. He was one of many faces that floated around him, like annoying, tea-peddling ghosts.

The sky was grey, but it was quite warm in the late July air as the students rushed around to sit their final exams. Most of them had discarded their jackets in favour of the short sleeved button ups that were permitted in summer term. Sherlock wore his coat.

There were students waiting for cars with their luggage at their feet in the roundabout before Baker Hall—the early finishers. Sherlock didn’t know if he had any exams this term. He certainly hadn’t sat any.

He paused in front of the large, dark doors. He felt his shadow hover awkwardly. Sherlock gazed at the Latin motto above the door.

*Iuncti Mutatimus. Iuncti Crescimus.*

Together we change. Together we grow.

Sherlock stood there as people passed around him. They may have been whispering.

“Alright, move along now,” his shadow snapped at the whisperers.

Ah, Greg was his shadow today. Sherlock continued to stare.

“Iuncti Cadimus,” Sherlock murmured and then pushed into the building.

They didn’t make it to the medical record room. They didn’t make it to the argument where Greg would tell him that it was completely against the rules and he couldn’t go in there, nor did they get to the part where Sherlock ignored him and took what he needed anyway. They definitely didn’t get to the part shortly after where Greg offered to help.

Instead, they crossed quickly through the large open Hall and then into the main corridor, and that was when Greg saw something happening near the wall, and looked quickly at Sherlock. That was when he realised Sherlock had already seen it. That was when he cussed violently.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake. Of all the bloody times they could have—Hey, Sherlock—”

But it was way too late. The image had already burned the fog away, it left him bare to the truth, which shattered any defences Sherlock had left.

It was him—smiling at Sherlock. But it wasn’t Sherlock’s smile. It was a camera smile, and the glare of the glass sat on his cheek, and some man was hanging a blue circle below a brass nameplate that read John Hamish Watson and Sherlock Holmes’ world was crumbling.

He was moving before he made the decision to do so. He was shouting, too, though he wasn’t exactly sure what he was saying. He grabbed the man and ripped the marker from the wall—the one that had been smeared with John’s blood, the blood they were all too stupid to admit was anything more than incidental. They were so bloody blind.
They refused to admit that John was made to bleed.

That John was made to disappear.


Someone was pulling him off, pulling him back.

“Sherlock, stop!” Greg grunted in his ear, arm like a bar around his chest—but Sherlock couldn’t hear him over his own shouts.

“John Watson didn’t wander! He was taken! You can’t just put him up there! It was a lie! A trick—Moriarty’s trick! Can’t you see that he’s fooling you?! You’re doing exactly what he wants!”

Sherlock shouted at the poor confused man who was just doing his job. “I can get John back!”

And with those words Sherlock nearly collapsed. He grabbed Greg’s jacket as he began to shake. A group of secondary school girls who watched closely covered their mouths as their eyes glassed over—surely thinking that this was some great act of love; and not outrage at basic, *elective*, human denial. Even as the thought crossed his mind, Sherlock began to buckle in a very unprofessional manner.

“He took John… he took John—I should have—I didn’t—”

Sherlock was mumbling and the students still in the corridor continued to stare.

“Oi! Piss off! The lot of you!” Greg barked over Sherlock’s shoulder, sending them scurrying.

He ushered Sherlock into the nearest door, an empty classroom. Sherlock stumbled in and Greg let the door slam shut. The genius moved chaotically to the far wall, before falling against it. He pulled his knees up to his chest and twisted his hands into his hair. Greg came over quickly and kneeled down, putting an easy hand on Sherlock’s shoulder.

“Hey, you alright, mate?” he murmured.

It was a stupid question but Sherlock knew that it was common, and a social obligation to ask stupid questions in certain situations so he let it go. It did get him thinking about obligations though.

“You don’t have to keep following me around,” Sherlock said to the floor. “I’m capable of taking care of myself.”

Greg didn’t move away.

“You clearly can’t,” Greg said, never one to soften the truth much—maybe that’s why Molly and he got on so well.

“It’s not your business to play babysitter,” Sherlock said, deciding to focus on this instead of breaking down again, feeling the cold bite of a silver buckle against his palm. “I know John asked you to look after me. I know he would have. But all of you are incredibly stifling.”

If Sherlock had looked up he would have seen Greg’s look, half scowl, half pity.

“Yes, I did ask,” Greg said, half scowl, half pity. “I mean it—I mean I asked, but that’s not why we’re all doing this, Sherlock,” Greg said tiredly.

That caught Sherlock completely off guard, so much that he forgot for a whole three seconds that
he was holding something stained with John’s blood. His head popped up, brows knit, to look at Greg’s sad expression, shadowy in the dark classroom.

“Why are you doing it then?”

Greg’s face was steady and Sherlock felt his hand briefly squeeze his arm.

“Because we’re your friends.”

And once again, Sherlock was knocked completely off kilter. A look of genuine confusion flashed across his face.

“You are?” he asked.

Greg almost laughed.

“Of course we are, you toser,” Greg said.

Sherlock stared at him, indexing, calculating, assessing. Was Greg making a joke? He occasionally liked to do that… but no, none of the signs were there, and Greg wouldn’t make a joke now. Even Sherlock knew that would be tactless, which meant… oh.

Oh.

Sherlock looked back down. He’d figured the riddle out and the distraction dissipated and the chaos welled up from his gut. It flooded into his lungs, boiled painfully in his throat. He stared at the blue marker in his hands and knew his eyes were teary.

“It’s… it’s my fault. If it wasn’t for me he never would have—I never thought—” Sherlock’s throat worked, only letting half the words out.

It was a feeling he’d never experienced before he had met John, and only recently recognised. He was a self absorbed, selfish creature. He knew that, but John had broken through that and left him raw to the flames of shame— when John had lain wounded in a hospital bed at the claws of his father. But he’d managed to pack that away. John’s smiling face; his sure words had served as a steel box in which to hide the doubt.

But now John was gone.

“It’s my fault.”

“Hey, Sherlock, just breathe,” Greg said.

Sherlock hadn’t realized his chest was heaving.

“Look—there are a lot of things that are your fault, Sherlock. My almost getting fired from my position as Captain, for constantly not having my keys, is your fault. The janitor being afraid of the sixth floor is your fault. The reason they lock the sulphuric acid away at night and Mike panics at loud noises is definitely your fault. Open bonds don’t… they don’t happen to people who don’t work together. Under his jumpers John is just as crazy as you are,” Greg said. “He chose to follow you. He wanted to save them.”

Sherlock’s eyes were wide as he stared at Greg’s face, dumbfounded again. No words were forthcoming.

“And he believed in you. He believed you would find him. So chin up. Weren’t we here so you
could do something illegal for just that reason?” Greg finished.

Sherlock took a deep breath, readying himself to stand, but then the door opened. He picked out a familiar silhouette and his eyes narrowed.

“What are you doing here?” Sherlock said, uncomfortably aware that his eyes were probably red.

“Hello, dear brother,” Mycroft’s eternally and unbearably smarmy voice reached the two teenagers across the room.

“How did you know we were here?” Sherlock grumbled. “Have you got cameras all over the Institute now?”

Mycroft’s eyes narrowed and he smiled tightly. John used to giggle every time he made that stupid face. Greg looked uncomfortably between the two Holmes brothers.

“You’re not exactly hard to find. You’ve been making quite a commotion, brother-mine,” Mycroft said. “There was a group of young girls, who seemed to find your most recent display quite... tragic.”

Sherlock’s eyes flashed angrily, but then, to his own dismay, he found himself looking away, gripping John’s marker tightly. Mycroft’s eyes spotted the blue leather and his face changed, almost regretful.

“Why are you here, Mycroft,” Sherlock stated rather than asked.

Mycroft straightened his spine, adjusting his grip on that umbrella that he insisted on carrying everywhere with him.

“I had John’s blood analysed. Even the professional equipment almost missed it, but there was a by-product of an inorganic compound… my people say it would have caused the symptoms you report John exhibiting,” Mycroft said.

Greg’s eyes widened but Sherlock didn’t move.

“You mean…?” Greg asked.

“Yes. John Watson was poisoned. It is statistically unbelievable that his was a real wandering.”

Chapter End Notes

Once again, if you'd like to read the story of the Wolf and the Doe, you can do so HERE. The art was done by the lovely Ana.
Everyone should send big thanks to Kathe who had a very busy week and was stressed but still got the chapter to me in time for a Wednesday posting. You're awesome.

As always if you have any questions, wanna see some neat fanart or just wanna talk about the changeling!verse, then you can contact me at heartoutofashes.tumblr.com. Thank you so much everyone for your continued support on this project. <3

“You aren’t here for the same reasons as Trev and I, are you John?” Mary asked on that first night.

When John looked up through the crossed bars above his head, he could see stars. The otter shift stared at him intently.

“No,” John said, and huffed a breath through an unamused smile. “My shift is a common wolf… it’s a long story.”

Mary had changed position, so she now sat cross legged, facing John.

“It’s not like we’ve got anywhere to go,” she said.

John actually laughed that time, hard and short, in spite of everything. He quickly sobered.

“Well, Sherlock figured it out, that the wanderings weren’t real… and it didn’t take long for the mastermind of this whole thing to take notice. Moriarty… he’s—”

John hesitated to come up with the proper word for what Moriarty was.

“The ratel,” Trev murmured, terror in his eyes.

John cocked his head to the side.

“You’ve met him?” John asked.

Mary’s voice answered.

“We’ve all met him… once,” she murmured darkly.

“Right… of course,” John said

He floated back to the dark woods and black eyes.

“So you caught the eye of the badger,” Mary prompted and John returned to the cage.

“Yes,” John confirmed. “Sherlock said the mastermind was bored… but then so was Sherlock… It… it was like a game, to both of them, in the beginning. A dangerous, terrible game…”

John looked up at the glass ceiling again.
“But then we realised Moriarty was playing a very different game than Sherlock’s…”

Reality set in at dawn. A chime rang and Mary stirred from where she had tucked herself back into the corner. Trev had shifted and fallen asleep about two hours previously, after John had finished relating the story of the wanderers’ case to them. John had stuck to the facts of their discovery, and left out as many personal details as possible. It had been too hard to talk about Sherlock in that way.

After that first story, he and Mary had continued to talk. She revealed she had been attending the Lange Institute for nursing which had led into many whispers without real substance. John discovered Mary was a late shift like him, and had only begun attending the Lange Institute when she was sixteen. Then Mary had wanted to know any news from the outside world, and John was happy to prattle on about any current events he could think of, just to stave off the inevitable silence. But then the bell chimed and any human forms around John began to disappear.

“During the day, except for at meals, they make us shift. Aesthetics and all,” Mary murmured as she saw him turn his head this way and that, and when he looked at her, he saw something next to that spark John had noticed in her eyes before; he saw there was also a shadow of defeat.

John didn’t move for a moment.

“It’s not worth the fight, John,” Mary said, noticing his hesitation.

“Isn’t it?” John muttered, but then shifted.

Then John finally felt the silence, the real, tangible void, so clear now that he wasn’t fighting, wasn’t being handled like a Yorkshire Terrier at a show. It had been the most demeaning moment of John’s life, but it had also been quite distracting.

Now it was clear, though. John was alone in his head. There was no brush of black velvet, no remote storm. The horizons of his mind were clear. He was a solitary boat, floating in a vast empty ocean. It felt like a hole in his chest. The form that should have been a refuge only served as a stark reminder of separation.

There was a sort of bed made up of some straw and a blanket piled up in the corner, and John crossed to it. He dropped and curled up in a tight ball, back to the corner, keeping the door in his line of sight. His ears lay back and each beat of his heart echoed painfully, with no answer.

No more words were exchanged for the rest of the day. John didn’t even get up, except for once when Pryde came around for what John was informed was his daily walk, which he used to admire his collection. When he came close, John rose and let his hackles spike. He didn’t growl or charge. He didn’t do anything a real wolf would have done. He was under order to be in this form but he would be damned if he let Pryde forget what he was. He simply stared at the man as he stood on the other side of the bars with his hands clasped behind his back. John held his gaze until he walked away.

John noticed Mary sitting on a branch that sprouted from a small tree they had placed in her enclosure. She stared at the sky. John turned his eyes up, watched a cloud roll across the blue-silver sky. They watched it like a vigil, like a study—Sherlock’s eyes to Uni blue, to Mrs. Hudson’s purple cardigan, to the indigo of a bad bruise.

John shifted as soon as the bell chimed again, just to throw the barriers of his mind up again, to
make it easier to pretend there wasn’t nothing on the other side of them. Mary shifted back as well, though Trev continued to swim lazy circles in the pool in his cage, a substantially larger enclosure than John or Mary’s.

John settled back into the cushioned corner and Mary sat just a foot or two away, two layers of metal between. They were quiet for a minute but then Mary spoke quietly.

“He… he wasn’t just your friend, was he? Sherlock,” she clarified softly.

John leaned back against the bars, legs bent in front of him, arms out straight and clasped, resting on his knees. He stared at the way that his fingers intertwined slackly.

“No. I wasn’t taken because Sherlock needed me to solve the case.”

Mary’s pale brows twisted in sympathy.

“It was emotional warfare,” she said, and she wasn’t wrong. “He took you to hurt him.”

John pursed his lips together and nodded abortively.

“When Sherlock and I—when we finally admitted… Moriarty apparently didn’t like when Sherlock’s attentions were split,” John said, trying to get the message across without saying the words that had always been so hard to say. It was easier to be angry. “That’s when things spun out of control.”

Out of the corner of his eye, John could see the well practiced sadness on Mary’s face. She’d clearly had too many opportunities to wear such an expression, and idly John thought that the frown didn’t suit her face.

“You weren’t together before, then?” Mary asked. “I mean when this all started, you were just friends?”

John had to laugh a bit at that, low and breathy.

“As much as I wish I could say yes. If you had asked me then I would have definitely said yes, but it would have been a lie. It’s never been normal between Sherlock and I… we—well, we have an open bond,” the words were thick in John’s throat, the images of floating alone on the waves pulled to the forefront of his mind; what the open bond really was had never been clearer to John than it had been that day.

His eyes flashed to Mary when he heard her gasp softly. Her hand had come up to loosely cover her mouth and her eyes were glassy. John looked away. A muscle in his jaw twitched as he looked up to see the emerging constellations.

“John, I’m so…” she whispered roughly. “How dare Moriarty…”

The wolf shift took a few deep breaths.

“Sherlock is—he’s the best person I’ve ever met. The cleverest, most brilliant—as long as Moriarty is out there trying to play his blasted game, Sherlock will beat him. He’ll find us.”
Since Mycroft had delivered the news of John’s potential poisoning, the elder Holmes had pledged his complete support and was providing both services and some insight. He’d even apologised for not being able to devote his full attention, as he had matters of state to attend to—which had frankly been a wholly unsettling experience for Sherlock. He’d quickly shifted the conversation to the topic of Mycroft’s expanding waistline. He’d told him that leaving polo after he’d graduated was a mistake, and Mycroft had left in a huff.

On a day not too long after Mycroft’s announcement, something broke Sherlock’s pattern. Sherlock had known they were coming. Mrs. Hudson had come to talk to him about it the previous evening.

“Look, Sherlock, dear, I know there is a chance John may… not have wandered—”

“He didn’t,” Sherlock corrected.

Mrs. Hudson’s brows had pinched and she looked tragic.

“Oh course. Didn’t wander, dear,” she amended and put another biscuit on Sherlock’s plate. “But they don’t know that, and this is already so hard on them—”

Sherlock had rolled his eyes, already knowing where she was going with this, and he didn’t feel like putting up with her hedging.

“You don’t want me to contradict their current beliefs, if I see them,” Sherlock concluded.

Mrs. Hudson looked briefly pleased, as if she’d expected him not to understand.

“Yes, dear, it’s just better like this—”

“You don’t think they might want to know he’s not gone forever?” Sherlock said, not that he cared what they believed; he simply resented the implications of Mrs. Hudson’s words and, as usual, felt contrary.

“Of course, dear, but in case—well, it would make it more difficult if—”

“If I don’t find him,” Sherlock had snapped.

Mrs. Hudson’s face crumpled and she’d reached out.

“Oh, Sherlock,” she said, beseeching.

He’d stood and prepared to leave.

“I won’t tell them. It will just be a merry surprise for them,” Sherlock had said with mocking brightness.

He hadn’t slept that night. Instead he brought some files into John’s room and studied the papers from his bed. Though, strangely, he found he couldn’t read—and when the cause of his affliction was quickly discovered to be tears it had been quite a shock. And they didn’t stop. He’d gasped for breath and wrapped himself in John’s blanket, twisted his fingers into the fabric until the sun rose over Baker Forest.
“We don’t really have any place for the books… but what will happen to them?” a woman’s unsteady voice asked.

Mrs. Hudson stood with her hands clasped in front of her by the door of 629A.

“Anything you don’t want to take will be donated, but not until the end of the summer at the earliest… we’ve convinced the directors to leave the room for a while as—well, Sherlock has sort of taken it over,” Mrs. Hudson explained, nodding towards the two sets of wardrobes on the right wall. “Dr. Mortimer, the councillor, didn’t think it would be a good idea to force him…”

Mrs. Hudson trailed off, hand coming up to cover her mouth. The woman and the man who accompanied her were quiet for a moment.

“They—John and Sherlock—Sherlock wasn’t just a good friend, was he?” the woman asked thickly.

Mrs. Hudson pressed her lips together and gave herself a mental pep talk to keep any tears from her eyes as she shook her head.

“They had… and open bond you see,” Mrs. Hudson said.

“John said, on the phone,” the woman said. “Said it was why they could talk so easily when they were shifted.”

Mrs. Hudson shook her head again, almost looking angry.

“Oh—those boys, they couldn’t ever just—it’s so much more than that, dear. Those two, they were made for each other, in a way,” Mrs. Hudson could only bring herself to briefly explain.

The woman bowed her head and picked a blue scarf up off the bed that had not belonged to John Watson.

“I mean, we knew they were close, but John never said—” she choked on the last few words, tears forming.

The man took her hand, looking like he’d long since lost the ability to say anything at all.

“Oh, dear, I don’t think they even knew until recently just what it all meant,” Mrs. Hudson assured her.

The woman looked up.

“I—I want to see him. I mean—I’d like to see Sherlock before we go—could we?”

Mrs. Hudson looked distinctly uncomfortable, shifting from foot to foot.

“I don’t know if—I mean of course. It’s just… he’s not been taking it all very well. I mean, he might not be—”

The woman came forward, placing a hand on Mrs. Hudson’s arm.

“It’s okay. I still want to see him.”

Mrs. Hudson paused, thinking, but then took a shaky breath and nodded.

“Right. Right, of course. Greg usually knows where he’ll be… I’ll just…”
The three people, older than most who crossed the summer-empty grounds, made their way across the field, towards the amphitheatre where small shows and shift speech classes were held. The sky was an English-sun blue, tinted with grey but still warm. The sunlight percolated through the lush green foliage of a maple tree. At its base a black shape was curled. He had considered climbing up there, but he hadn’t felt up to it when he’d finally arrived that morning.

The leopard knew exactly who the people were as they came around the trees. He would have known who they were even if he hadn’t visited their residence last winter and tasted the woman’s roast ham as he heard the interesting war stories of the man and endured the prophetic mockings of their daughter—as their son begged him to behave.

He would have known when he saw John’s dusty blond in her hair, when he saw John’s eyes set into the man’s face.

Dr. and Mrs. Watson stopped when they saw him.

“Sherlock,” Mrs. Hudson said, standing at the edge of the grass.

Sherlock simply turned his head away, laying it on ebony paws. He heard the sound of a set of feet approaching.

“Sherlock…?” Mrs. Watson began, voice so raw.

Sherlock didn’t look at her but his ear did twitch and she continued anyway. They always did.

“I wanted—before we go I wanted to talk to you… This has been so hard on our family, but I know it must be unbearably difficult for you too…” she said and her words were forced out, as it seemed each one had to be filled with air instead of something solid, just to make her able to push them across her tongue and past her lips.

Suddenly Sherlock felt a hand on his shoulder—over his scars. His hackles rose but a trilling sound burst briefly from his throat, cutting like broken glass.

“And we, our family, have each other in this time… so if you ever—if you ever need,” she was crying now, Sherlock could hear it if not see it. “You’re not alone in this.”

Sherlock’s claws dug into the bark and he shut his eyes.

“We know—we know you and John weren’t just friends,” she said, weeping. “He cared for you, so much… he loved you.”

Sherlock wanted her to go. He desperately wanted to be anywhere but at the edge of the forest where he’d met John Watson. And yet he didn’t run away. He let the woman continue.

“So I… I wanted to tell you—after John changed, he was upset. He’d had friend and things, he was used to his life, so it was hard for him to be uprooted like that, of course. But before that… my son—it’s not like was unhappy, but a mother has a sense about these things… and John, he was just… he was never quite there. It was never quite right for him…” Mrs. Watson said around her tears and Sherlock felt fingers in his fur.

For someone who had basically condemned the thought of being touched two years ago, he found himself pathetically focused on the simple human contact as well as the sound of the woman’s sobs. They got louder as she forced herself to continue.
“But then John came here—to Baker,” she cried and against his will Sherlock found himself sitting up and turning his head to look at the woman kneeling beside him. She choked as their eyes met, finally seeing Sherlock. “He met you.”

Sherlock looked at her time worn face, laugh lines now filled with tears. His eyes narrowed and he opened his mouth slightly, breathing a bit harshly, before trying to control himself. He saw Dr. Watson staring past them from a few yards away. Sherlock saw the way his hands were clasped behind his back and his face looked like stone, and yet his grief was just as clear as his wife’s. Sherlock could see where John had inherited his stoicism, and it made Sherlock feel like he was breaking apart, holding the knowledge that John was still out there. That he wasn’t gone because of chance. But because he’d met Sherlock—but then Mrs. Watson continued to lay down words that burned into him, sounds wreathed in embers.

“And he was so happy,” she sobbed, curling forward in her overflowing loss.

Mrs. Hudson held back her cries with a tight hand as Dr. Watson stood straight, as if a military posture would stop the tears sliding down his face as he watched his wife collapse into the black form of Sherlock Holmes, who would have done anything to be given the chance to run away.

“You made him so happy,” she said and held Sherlock’s ill equipped gaze for a moment. “His smiles were finally real, and when he laughed it was unrestrained, and warm. My son was so alive with you. Even when he complained he—he was better with you, Sherlock Holmes…!”

Then Sherlock let out a keen, shutting his eyes against the world and cursing John Watson. Mrs. Watson sobbed and gave into her grief. Sherlock continued to wheeze in feline pain as he felt Mrs. Watson’s arms around his neck. He was powerless to save himself as her tears seeped into his fur.

He wanted to say that it wasn’t true. John would have been better with anyone but him. That if it wasn’t for him she’d still have her son—but he couldn’t and he shattered under the weight of her faith. It was a burden he hadn’t asked for. He didn’t want it. He didn’t deserve it, and yet, John’s laughter and the sparks in his eyes throbbed in Sherlock’s painfully isolated mind and he couldn’t help but think the first time he really saw John Watson was in an alley in London with bruised knuckles and a stolen book between them.

“You made him happier than he’d ever been… I’m so sorry…”

And with eyes on them, Sherlock let his head fall against John’s mother’s shoulder and together they mourned a wound that time would never close.

It didn’t take long for John to discover exactly what his intended purpose was in the menagerie. It was only a week or two after he arrived before the first party was held. They came in the evening—all suits and blue blood. There were so many. So many who came in and didn’t bat an eye. They walked through the paths and gazed into the enclosures, where all were instructed to stay in shifted form, and then discussed Pryde’s collection—a Menagerie, what a novelty.

Then Pryde’s men brought in a number of small cages on wheels, and John could hear the growling and the barking. A howl split through the room and Mary flew towards John. They weren’t changelings, but real animals.
John had been craning his head, putting his paw up on a Japanese maple that squatted right outside his cage so he could see what was happening.

Trev, who John had previously been talking to, looked terrified and retreated to his pool, unable to look at John.

John caught on just as three large men with a muzzle and a leash appeared at the door to his cage. He growled wildly at them, backing towards the far wall, but their hands were quickly on him.

She called out to him as they painfully grabbed his scruff and snout, forcing his face into a muzzle before they dragged him out of his cage, wearing one of those pinch collars like they put on unruly dogs. He tried to escape them out of pure instinct but they were huge men and nearly dragged him off the ground, choking him.

At the centre of the menagerie there was a shallow pit, about ten meters in diameter, enclosed with a low fence, so anyone around it could stare down at whatever was occurring in ring. Which was soon to be a fight involving John Watson. They opened a gate, and then ripped the muzzle off as they pushed him in. He was snarling like a hurricane when his paws hit the ground and lunged back at them, only to hear commentary from above, noises of interest, placing of bets.

And John stopped, and looked up. He saw their faces, looking at him like he was a racing horse to be evaluated and gambled on. He heard one say that with as fierce as this one seemed, he’d put one hundred pounds on the first match lasting under a minute.

John’s ears folded against his neck and his tail dropped as the horrifying reality set it. He was so alone. There was no way out.

The gate on the other side opened and something growling and barking was being momentarily held back. A boxer dog, John realised quickly. There was foam on its lips, fury in its eyes and scars on its body. The poor bastard… John found himself thinking this, and then realised what he was going to have to do. He looked at the walls, and thought that he might be able to jump them, but then his eyes glued themselves to the guns hanging at the waists of the many, many guards situated around the ring.

It felt like claws on his chest again and he backed away, but then they let the boxer go—and it flew at John.

He thought about Sherlock. He thought about his family—and how he couldn’t just give up. So he snarled and the sound broke his heart on the way out, but allowed him to slip into that quiet place in his head. He felt steady, and strong—ready.

He jumped to the side, and opened his mouth wide. He felt muscle and bone under his teeth.

Then John tasted blood.
Brink

<John. John, look at me.>

He’d been forced to fight three times that night. Two dogs and a bobcat. They hadn’t really been a threat to John’s life. How could they be? Some of them might be physically stronger than him, but in addition to claws and teeth he had a human mind.

It didn’t mean that he hadn’t been bloodied though.

After the match they’d checked him over, made sure he didn’t have any cuts or bites that were severe, and then they tossed him back in his cage. He lay where he fell, breathing, drifting, as the guests began to leave.

<Firm. Trev, get him some water.>

Using a nicked cup, the boy scooped some water out of the pool in his enclosure and quickly came back to the bars, sliding it through before shifting back to his lithe, aquatic form.

<John, Drink.>

And finally John responded, because suddenly he needed a drink. It didn’t matter that it was the water from Trev’s pool. He just needed to get the taste of blood out of his mouth. He lapped at the water hungrily. Then, when it was half gone, he knocked it over and rubbed his muzzle into the resulting puddle, bringing his paws up to clean the remaining blood from his face.

Then John went very quiet, eyes boring into the wetness, catching the traces of red, even in the dark. He became like rock.

<John.>

He didn’t answer her. He was lost again. All he could see was red. He was drowning in it.

<John.>

<Annoyance. What, Sherlock?!>

His head whipped to the side, and he realised. There was no panther at his side. Nothing that would make this okay. Just a small, heartbroken looking bird.

<John… what’s your favourite place in the world? Demanding.>

It was the strangeness, the discord, that brought John to the surface.

<What? Confusion. Why?>

Yellow eyes continued to gaze at him levelly.

<Serious. Because I want you to tell me about it. Finality. So, what is your favourite place in the world?>

John blinked at her, slow, but he answered anyway.
<Why?> she quickly followed up.

His ears twitched as he tried to formulate an answer.

<Because… it’s London. Beauty. Violence. It’s so… alive. It’s exciting. I’ve loved it as long as I can remember, from the first time that I went there with my family. There’s so many people, so many places—even ones that people don’t know about. Sherlock seems to know all of them though.>

Mary’s head bobbed, urging him to continue. John looked up at the sky.

<We used to go there on weekends. We’d take the first train from Oxenholme and the last train back. I never knew when we were going ahead of time. Sherlock would just appear at the crack of dawn with train tickets—sometimes there was a reason, an old crime he’d figured out, something he wanted from the city… but sometimes there wasn’t much of a reason at all. Of all of Sherlock’s annoying habits, that should have probably gone on the list, but it didn’t. I was always eager. It was London, after all.>

Mary and Trev watched the haggard wolf as his wounded eyes filled with stars and his ears twitched forward. His mouth couldn’t smile, but something about his face seemed to glow with a sort of contentment, laden with memories.

<You know.> he said, glancing between them. <I’d started assuming that we’d end up there, one day, after university. I don’t even think I realised when I started thinking that. I mean, I love London, but Sherlock… Sherlock Holmes belongs there.>

As John finished, he realised that his heart had slowed. He felt like the ground was level again and his breath flowed easily in and out of his lungs. He levelled his eyes at Mary.

<How did you know?>

She shuffled her wings, tiny talons making soft clicks on the stone floor.

<Sometimes, when it all gets too much. I remember my favourite places, my friends… I try to remember every little detail and… it helps.>

John didn’t exactly know what to say, but then it became obvious.

<Thank you.>

Sherlock had just sat a number of exams. It turned out that Mycroft’s help was at least partially conditional, and he’d been required to go and speak to his professors about being given the opportunity to take the exams he’d missed. Because of his past relationships with his professors, Sherlock had expected to be turned away quickly. After all, what professor at the Baker Institute didn’t dream about the opportunity to fail Sherlock Holmes? He’d been hoping for that, betting on
it. He would have fulfilled his obligation without wasting much time. But unfortunately, that didn’t happen.

Instead they all looked at him with sad eyes and said of course he could take his exams. Sherlock had asked them if it was even allowed. The term was over and final marks were calculated, but they said that they’d contact the administration and that he shouldn’t worry. It had been severely disappointing, and he’d had to waste a whole three hours of his day, sitting exams he’d have been happy to fail. He was tempted to simply write “Mycroft is a corpulent, insufferable nuisance” on the top of each exam and then turn it in, but he realised he probably shouldn’t test Mycroft when he currently, to his utter disgust, needed him.

Sherlock could tell that someone had been in his room as soon as he opened the door to 631A. He didn’t think much of it initially. People had been coming into his room constantly, John’s too, looking through his things for illicit substances—as if they’d be able to find the drugs if Sherlock had hidden them. He hadn’t, so it was a doubly fruitless exercise for them, but who was Sherlock to try and stop them? He couldn’t be bothered.

Sherlock pulled his scarf from around his neck and slipped his jacket off his shoulders, placing his phone on top of a stack of files where another phone already rested. The strange thing was that Sherlock was actually feeling hungry that particular afternoon. He’d been hoping Mrs. Hudson would mount another instalment of her tea and biscuits campaign. He was even considering lying down for the first time in seventy two hours.

The problem was that there was already something on Sherlock’s bed. A small envelope, his name relayed in ruby on the bright white surface. He realised that his parole officers weren’t the only ones who had been in his room that day.

He froze at first, wide, icy gaze burning into the paper. The world stuttered and slowed as Sherlock processed what it meant, in a fraction of a fraction of a second.

Then he strode over in two long steps and snatched the letter up, beginning to tear it open in the same frantic motion.

Dear Sherlock,

I thought you might be interested to know that I recently acquired a new dog for an acquaintance of mine. He’s not exactly house broken, a bit rough around the edges. You know how it is with rescues. But his new master has a steady hand and will train him up well in no time!

Your dearest friend,

Jim Moriarty

PS – We both knew you weren’t ready for the responsibility of a pet, Sherlock. Daddy’s done, and very disappointed. The game is over. You know what has to happen next.

Meet you at the epilogue—wouldn’t want to come away without a moral! See you again soon.

A series of emotions that Sherlock was in no way equipped to deal with flooded him. There was fury and rage… and deep, chasm-opening hurt. There was also, so tiny it was quickly drowned in the waters, a tiny spark of relief that flared at the foot of the mountain before it collapsed.
John was definitely alive.

But then the torrent, the avalanche, did come, and his hands shook but not with fear or hurt this time—it was fire. It was the storm. It took everything in his power to let the letter fall back to his bed unharmed, and that was apparently all the power he had, because suddenly he shook apart completely, mind opening to the void, slip shifting. And it was nearly ironic that in fighting against complete dehumanisation, Sherlock was becoming a monster—a fanged, clawed shadow that settled into its skin with a snarl.

The stacks of files fell before him first, a hurricane of papers exploded through the air. Manila folders were shredded. The floor, which had already been mostly covered, turned quickly into a sea of white scraps.

His violin went next. Thin rosewood splintered against his tongue and taut strings snapped one after another, curling in defeat before the whole mangled corpse was cast towards the door where it lay, destined never to sing again.

Then Sherlock spun, an ebony whirlwind, wrath not yet spent. His last victim was the walls, red lines dancing like flames in his eyes. He leapt onto the desk, making sure to leave the surface scarred as he flew at the wall. He dug his claws in and dragged the first wounds down to the ground. Then he pounced again, ripping faces and names and lines and dates and places to the floor. He worked chaotically, but soon the walls were almost completely bare of the case, wall paper dangling like ribbons.

Finally there were only two elements left, both placed centrally on the main wall. John’s marker and picture… and at the centre of the web; Moriarty, written in Sherlock’s own scrawl on a large strip of paper. He hesitated, just for a moment as his predator-eyes focused, pupils contracting into slits. Then he let loose a furious roar. Both paws landed squarely. His claws dug in, puncturing the paper, stabbing through the letters, and deep into the wall beyond.

Then Sherlock ripped it apart.

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Days passed like rocks being laid on John’s chest, turning weeks into stones. Mary and Trev helped to pull a few off. Mary, by dragging fond memories from the sinkholes in his mind. Trev, by giving him someone to keep a brave face on for. In return, John told them about Sherlock, distracted them and gave them hope.

“So who did it then? Who took the stuff if nobody had broken in?” Trev asked eagerly.

Trev leaned into the bars of his cage to get closer to John, who was wrapped in his blanket, leaning against the back wall of his cage, telling the story of a very rich family that had been robbed blind, with apparently no evidence of breaking and entering—or much else. It had occurred in a town not too far from the Baker Institute and Sherlock had dragged them out there one weekend in the previous autumn after the police were stumped.

Mary sat in the corner on the other side of John with her own blanket around her shoulders, light smile curling the corner of her lip as she listened.

“It was the cat,” John said, lips quirking, wearing a look that mixed pride and self satisfaction.
Trev looked completely lost.

“What?” he asked. “The cat?!”

John nodded, a bit playful. Mary looked a bit surprised too, but mostly amused by John actually being a bit theatrical.


John laughed once softly.

“The police hadn’t thought to ask, but Sherlock noticed a discarded set of cat bowls in the trash. He examined them and realised that they couldn’t be more than a few months old—bar code sticker was still intact and pure white,” John explained further when Trev cocked his head to the side in question. “But when we had looked around there hadn’t been any recent signs of a cat. When we asked, we discovered the family had recently taken in a stray cat. It had shown up at their door and begged for food, instantly bonded with their daughter, so they took it in, but then it disappeared about a week after the burglary.”

Trev still looked baffled, but Mary was clever and figured it out right away.

“That cat was a Changeling,” she declared.

“Miss Leah Booker,” John confirmed with a grin. “A twenty two year old cat burglar.”

Mary put her face in her hand, shoulders shaking with silent laughter at the bad pun.

“You’re terrible,” Mary remarked. “If I hadn’t heard all the other stories about your Sherlock, I would say you made it all up for that joke.”

But before John could defend himself, Trev demanded a conclusion.

“So, did you catch her?”

John looked back at the dark skinned boy.

“Yep,” John assured.

“How?” Mary asked. “Wouldn’t she be long gone?”

John nodded.

“But Sherlock knew she’d repeat the ruse. Her downfall was her precaution. See, she waited to disappear after the burglaries, to make sure the cat’s disappearance didn’t correlate too strongly with the thefts. Sherlock told the police to simply wait until the next rich family in the region was robbed of every valuable they owned. Then they only had to detain the cat. It’s safe to say the family in Heversham was very confused when the police arrested their new pet.”

Trev and Mary were both laughing, and John gave into it as soon as he finished the story, but then he flinched sharply as the movement sent pain through a wound on his shoulder blade. It had been a cougar. It shouldn’t have got a shot in, but it moved just like—

“John, are you alright?” Mary’s voice pulled him out of his head.

She’d stopped laughing and was looking at him, eyes concerned but face slightly hardened by her expectations. She already had a good idea of what was wrong.
Honestly, John had expected to have a wound become horribly infected and be the death of him at the beginning, but weeks had passed and he was still kicking, which led him to believe they were putting antibiotics in his food.

John looked back at Mary, forcing a tight smile to his lips.

“I’m fine.”

And she didn’t call his bluff, even if they both knew he was anything but fine. They held each other’s gaze and she pretended not to see how sunken his eyes were and John pretended he could get the taste of blood out of his mouth. She pretended she hadn’t noticed the way his ribs had already begun to show a bit since he arrived, either from stress or lack of appetite. He pretended it was still easy to remember how Sherlock smiled when they were alone, that the sounds of snarls and growls weren’t blotting out the memory of his voice. They made themselves pretend that John wasn’t slowly slipping away.

...  

“And why is he interested in you? Why has he contacted you in particular, Mr. Holmes?” Detective Inspector Reynolds asked.

The balding Scotland Yard detective stood aggressively in front of Sherlock, who was seated in an uncomfortable metal chair behind a large metal table. There was even a glass of water on the surface in front of him and the balding man’s partner stood with his arms crossed by the door. It was disgustingly cliché.

Mycroft stood behind Sherlock’s shoulder but the young Changeling was resolutely ignoring him. Sherlock made eye contact with the younger, brunette detective by the door, Detective Inspector Graham.

“So, since everything else is here, should I expect you to tell DI Reynolds to leave after he shouts at me so you can come and sit down and we’ll have a nice chat to gain my trust and then I’ll willingly tell you the dark truth?” Sherlock asked with a large, clearly fake, smile.

“Hey, listen here—” DI Graham started.

“Sherlock,” Mycroft snapped.

“No? Not good cop? Then maybe you’re the rough but secretly caring one,” Sherlock said, looking back at DI Reynolds, who was going red in the face.

“Sherlock!” Mycroft nearly shouted.

“What?! Molly watches American TV incessantly. It’s hardly my fault. You did tell me to be more culturally aware, brother,” Sherlock said archly.

He didn’t look back, but he could feel Mycroft’s long suffering eye roll.

“I meant you should know we have a queen and not a king—just… answer their questions, little brother,” Mycroft said, exasperation thinly veiled by upturned lips.
In his head Sherlock could hear John’s voice telling Mycroft not to break something trying to keep that convincing smile on his face. He’d always loved that John wasn’t intimidated by Mycroft. It might have been one of his best qualities. They needed John back for that very quality, or Mycroft’s head might get so bulbous that he could actually see everything in the world with massive eyes, instead of just hearing about it all.

“Fine,” Sherlock said, raising his eyes at DI Reynolds.

Sherlock laced his fingers together in front of him and waited for the inspector to continue.

“Why did this Moriarty reach out to you in particular?” DI Reynolds repeated his question.

“Because I’m very clever, and he is also very clever,” Sherlock said.

Both inspectors narrowed their eyes at him.

“You can’t honestly expect us to believe that a criminal of this magnitude—”

“You’re right—I can’t expect anything from you when your brains are clearly filled with an amalgam of molasses and mould.”

“Sherlock,” Mycroft warned, but Sherlock was at the end of his rope.

He twisted in his chair to glare viciously at his brother.

“What, Mycroft?!”

“They’re trying to help you find John, brother dear,” Mycroft said sweetly, in the way that tea was sweet when you replace the sugar with salt.

Sherlock narrowed his eyes in repulsion.

“Oh, don’t you try to emotionally manipulate me, brother. It’s hardly becoming of one of your stature,” Sherlock sneered. “Besides! They can’t help!”

Sherlock slammed a hand down on the table, nearly combusting with disdain when he saw DI Graham twitch into a ready stance, like Sherlock was dangerous.

Sherlock would be lying if he wasn’t a tiny bit disillusioned. He should have been more prepared for this level of incompetence. He had, after all, seen the unsolved case ratios, but it was Scotland Yard. He’d held out a miniscule amount of hope that they might have something to offer, but they were just as much blithering idiots as everyone else.

“They’ve had the case for weeks and if anything they’ve lost ground!” Sherlock continued. “I mean look at them! Currently they think I’m somehow involved in making them disappear—like I’m in on it. This is a waste of time!”

It was fair to say that the officers were out of their comfort zone, and mixes of offence and utter shock lit their faces as Sherlock gesticulated wildly at them.

Sherlock stood, turned up his collar and made right around DI Graham to open the door.

“Sherlock!” Mycroft called after him angrily, and Sherlock did hesitate, for a brief second, turning back.

“Oh, and DI Reynolds, you might just try talking to your wife if you think she’s having an affair.”
Then he was out of the door before the flabbergasted DI could even begin to sputter with rage.

He strode through the building, bee-lining towards the door, confident that at this pace Mycroft couldn’t catch up without jogging—and Mycroft didn’t jog… in public, heath kicks aside.

Sherlock stepped into the open London air and took a deep breath, tasting the hints of smog and air pollution—it was even better than cigarette smoke, but he couldn’t linger. Mycroft would make it out of the building eventually, so Sherlock strode towards the street, hailing a cab. One quickly pulled over and Sherlock slipped into the back seat.

“Where to, young man?” a middle aged woman with a thick, cockney accent asked as Sherlock settled in, already beginning to disengage.

“I don’t care. Just drive,” Sherlock said, just wanting to think.

“I need a destination, sir,” she said, firmly but not unkindly.

Sherlock sighed dramatically and pulled a couple of large notes out of the wallet that he’d nicked from DI Graham’s pocket on his way out of the interrogation room.

“Just drive to a train station on the outskirts of London. I don’t care which one,” Sherlock said, deciding to dig one more thorn into Mycroft’s side on the off chance he tried to catch up with him—Mycroft would know where Sherlock would choose to go, even if he was being clever, so Sherlock took the decision out of his own hands just to spite his brother.

“Alright, sir. Whatever you say,” the cabbie replied, money having quelled any protests as she began to drive.

Sherlock leaned back and inhaled through his nose and exhaled through his mouth, sinking down, finally focusing on the conclusion he’d come to in the face of his inadequate interrogators.

He wasn’t going to find John, not on this path. He’d been trying to solve the case, ignoring Moriarty’s game, refusing to play—but he was too good. Moriarty made sure that the walls around the road he wanted Sherlock to walk were tall, and that there wasn’t a single thing on the other side of them. There were no clues. No alternate routes. Scotland Yard couldn’t help and Sherlock was out of options. If there was any more data it had been hidden far out of his reach. There was only one hand left to play, though Sherlock had been trying so hard to avoid it—but again, it looked like he was out of cards.

The only game left to play was Moriarty’s.

But how to engage? Sherlock briefly thought about just announcing it, as he wouldn’t put it past Moriarty to have the whole of England bugged in some way—but no. That wasn’t clever enough. That wasn’t subtle enough. He would have given Sherlock a way.

The letter. It had to be connected to the letter. He wouldn’t have sent it just to taunt Sherlock. If he had, there wouldn’t have been so much information. If he just wanted to taunt Sherlock he would have simply sent him a picture of John’s bloodied body—no, don’t think about that.

So what was the letter saying?

Sherlock had closed his eyes tightly in the back seat, brow wrinkled, fingers on his temples, journeying into his Mind Palace. John had nearly laughed himself silly when Sherlock first explained the technique.
“You have a mind palace?!” he’d interrupted.

“You’re missing the point, John,” Sherlock had rolled his eyes. “What matters is manifesting a physical place in which to deposit information. It could be anything, an apartment building, a park—”

He’d kept laughing.

“And yours is a palace?” John had confirmed.

“Yes, and?”

Then John had giggled himself into incomprehensibility.

Whether John thought it was funny or not luckily did not affect the success of the method.

Sherlock made his way through his own brain, up stairs, through grand halls, quickly arriving at a study with many file cabinets. That part was easy, as he knew exactly where he’d put the letter. The words were as red as they had been on paper.

What was new? What was wrong?

It was simple, now that Sherlock was looking for it. Honestly he’d seen them before, he’d just been denying the invitation, refusing to pick up the pieces and place them on the board, but they were right there—the two unexpected elements, the game pieces.

Your dearest friend, Jim Moriarty.

See you again soon.

The first he’d already noticed. Moriarty’s first name, his given name, disclosed for the first time. Jim. James. Jimmy.

The second had been ignored, though it was glaringly obvious now. Again. But they hadn’t met yet, so why had he written it? He could be implying that he was watching, that he’d seen Sherlock, but not the other way around—but no, it was too convenient. Too deliberate—so it was false, but also true—why true?

Because they’d met before, only Sherlock hadn’t known.

Sherlock’s hand hovered in front of him, as his fingers brushed over the script in his head.

See you again soon, Jim.

The images flashed easily to the surface as the cab rumbled beneath him—tight trousers, tight shirt, designer underwear and nervous smile. It had been easy to read him—except he’d read him wrong. It was a false script. Jim was written in invisible ink, and Sherlock only saw the message he’d written on purpose. It had all been an act.

Sherlock’s eyes snapped wide and he gasped.

He’d been right there, right there, and Jim Moriarty wanted him to know, which meant...

“Of course,” Sherlock breathed, missing the way the cabbie kept glancing nervously at his apparently manic passenger.
The phone number.

“Supported by the fact that he managed to slip his number into John’s jacket pocket.”

He had the way; he’d had it for months—if he could only remember. It must still be up there somewhere. Sherlock squeezed his eyes shut again and he was in a corridor lined with a plethora of doors. His fingers danced over the knobs, skipping, not opening any but feeling what was behind each.

Where was it?

His feet glided over the deep purple runner that led down before the doorways. He stopped suddenly, long fingers hovering over a brass knob. One twist and the door swung open—the sound of laughter, near shouts, flavoured with the smell of ale washed over him. And there it was, Jim from IT, with an easy slide as he shook John’s hand, two fingers pinching a folded bit of white, dipping into his pocket, but that was not what Sherlock needed. With a wave of his hand, Sherlock skipped forward, stood next to the table.

His eyes focused as a shocked John reached into his pocket—he didn’t look at John’s face, though.

“Sorry, I don’t need you distracting me right now,” Sherlock murmured.

They’d been sitting next to each other, so there’s no way he Sherlock couldn’t have seen. Careful fingers unfolded the strip of paper… revealing ten digits.

“There you are…”

Sherlock opened his eyes, back in the cab, and pulled out his mobile. He dialled the numbers.

“Hellooo. Took you long enough. I was starting to think you’d never call.”

“No you weren’t.”

The voice was familiar, but the way he talked was definitely the cadence of a new creature.

“Oh, Sherlock, there’s no need to be so serious, my dear.”

“I didn’t call to chat,” Sherlock said.

“No,” Jim Moriarty agreed. “You called so we could finish the story.”

“Where?” Sherlock said flatly, refusing to be bated.

He could almost hear the smile on the other end of the line.

“How about the clearing near the forest road?” he asked. “Tomorrow at 7 p.m.”

“Poetic,” Sherlock commented.

“And I don’t think I have to impress upon you that this act will only have two characters?”

“Of course.”

“Oh,” Moriarty said as an afterthought, voice going dark. “And wear the long coat, not the furry one.”
Then the line went dead.
As always, thanks for your guys’ support. Let me know what you think. Enjoy, and if you have any questions about the fic or the changeling!verse, you can contact me at heartoutofashes.tumblr.com.

They sat side by side on the bed, arms pressed together with their backs against the wall. John rested with his legs crossed, so one of his legs was half tucked under Sherlock’s bended knees. Steaming mugs were cupped in their hands as snow piled up on John’s windowsill.

Sherlock was talking and smiling and John was laughing, feeling their bodies jostle beautifully with the movement. Sherlock laughed too, in that low, musically contented way of his. John’s heart throbbed, so warm and pure it nearly hurt as they smiled at one another, cheeks flushed and eyes bright.

John didn’t resist the urge to kiss him when the feeling descended. He set his mug of tea lightly on the side table, lifted a hand and placed a palm on Sherlock’s jaw, drawing him close to kiss him slowly, lingering. There was no tongue, or teeth, just the earnest press of two sets of lips. This soft pressure was enough. John could stay right here like this forever if the universe would let him, feeling Sherlock’s heartbeat through his lips—but moments weren’t meant to last forever. He pulled back when he felt wetness on his fingertips. He took in Sherlock’s fond expression but he had to ask.

“Hey… why are you crying, Sherlock?”

Because he was, despite the mostly serene nature of his face, tears slipped heavily from his eyes. It was a strange juxtaposition, but for some reason John didn’t feel strongly about it. He simply brushed a few salty beads from Sherlock’s cheeks, deliberate and unhurried.

“Because you’re bleeding, John.”

John looked down, and sure enough, large red patches marked his shirt, his trousers. He looked back up at Sherlock.

“It’s okay,” John assured him. “I’m always bleeding. I’m used to it.”

Sherlock shook his head though, serenity slowly but surely breaking on his features, splintering into devastation, then into fear.

“He wants me to bleed, too, John.”

And suddenly John noticed that there was a growing splotch of red on Sherlock’s chest, unfurling like a rose—right over his heart. John’s pulse began to race in his chest, and he meant to reach out, to say something, but before he could, the bed disappeared from beneath them. They were falling, shifting, and Sherlock was lost to the blackness.

When John could see again, the London skyline was all around him, strangely illuminated, almost like they were glowing. The sky above was black, no stars, but instead there were tiny white flakes
falling slowly around him. Those tiny fragments of snow that were too small to even be called flakes, but always fell when it was coldest. They drifted down to settle on the already present blanket of unbroken white.

John was on the top of a building, unnaturally flat and uniform. He called out for Sherlock, but he couldn’t feel him at all. John looked down on the streets to find them empty. There were no people, no cars, or cabs,—no visible sources of light except for the yellow pools cast down by the street lamps and the muted glow of the skyscrapers.

That’s when he saw Sherlock, pacing forward, a piece of charcoal marking the paper snow with his paw-prints.

<Sherlock!>

John called to him, but if his voice was carrying at all, Sherlock didn’t hear him. He was… following something… a patch of copper sauntering just out of the reach of the lights. It stayed just out of Sherlock’s sight, but from his vantage point, John could see her. He saw the Vixen, leading Sherlock towards the night. What was she doing here?

But then John realised that Sherlock was being followed as well as led—no… not followed. Stalked. A shadow leapt from a low roof top, swinging silently under a balcony. Something else strode through the black of the side streets, drawing ever closer.

And a small, dark shape followed closest, nearly hounding Sherlock. But the panther didn’t know, couldn’t see the razor smile in the dark. Fear curled around John as he paced at the edge of the roof, looking for a way down—but there was absolutely nothing there. The roof was unnatural, and not a single door, window or even a vent was provided for John’s desperation.

<Sherlock!> he continued to call out with no avail.

The shapes drew closer. A gorilla… a lion… the badger.

John was growling, howling, shift screaming, calling out to Sherlock as his nails hovered over empty air. He leaned out as far as his instincts would possibly allow.

Then the vixen was gone. Sherlock stopped in the middle of a junction, haloed in the light of four streetlamps. He finally seemed to realise something was wrong. His hackles rose as his head began to dart this way and that.

<Sherlock, run!>

But he couldn’t. The wraiths were moving in, from all directions. Sherlock’s head swung around and he snarled in fright. He backed away from the grinning badger at his front and then skittered forward two steps as his eyes caught the lion.

And John couldn’t do a damn thing.

<Don’t touch him! I’ll kill you—all of you!>

But he was trapped and could only look down on the street where the horror was unfolding. His mind pounded against the barrier between him and Sherlock; he mentally threw himself against it, and then it finally splintered—except immediately John knew it was wrong. He could feel Sherlock now, but as he continued to call out, there was no sign that Sherlock could feel even a wisp of John’s consciousness against the skin of his mind.
But John could feel Sherlock. He could feel the terror—just in time for them to leap. John made an abortive movement towards the edge of the building, as if to jump, but stupid *fucking* instincts rooted his paws to the roof.

*SHERLOCK!*

But then they were on him. The pain was like his own as they ripped into his flesh. The soft blanket of white absorbed the sounds of violence.

The snow turned red.

And if John was anyone else he would have looked away, saved himself. But instead his eyes locked onto the play of his worst fear—and even if he wasn’t a wolf he couldn’t have begun to cry. He could only shake and feel his joints go numb.

*No… No, Sherlock… dear god.*

The agony washed over him as they tore at him. He collapsed, the few inches of snow catching him like a down duvet, but even in losing control couldn’t pull his eyes away.

Then the pain stopped. The storm in his head dissipated in an instant. There was nothing.

The monsters moved away. Sherlock lay on his side… eyes closed. The strange thing about the panthers pelt was that it hid the blood, at least until it seeped out into the snow. On his body, the wounds that killed him were hardly visible. He could be sleeping… unharmed on a bed of rubies.

An umber moon had hung itself above and John rose to meet it, knowing it was meant for him. Then he let go. The howls ripped out of his chest like a forest sprouting, growing old and then burning to the ground.

*John…*

He stood alone on the corner of an impossible building, calling to the moon; the cry of a wolf separated from its pack—except John’s pack wasn’t coming. The entirety of it lay on a scarlet canvas far below.

*John…!*

His howls rolled out through the city, lament floating down, to the ears of the one he couldn’t save.

*John!*

He sang him to sleep.

“John!”

John opened his eyes, like he was made of stone. He saw bars above his head and closed his eyes again, squeezing them shut, before turning to face the voice that had called to him.

Mary was there with her fingers clenched in her chicken mesh, looking like she’d been wishing she could shake him awake for a while.

“You’ve been calling out in your sleep,” Mary said, looking devastated. “I thought I should wake you.”

John pressed his lips together as he pushed himself into a sitting position, nodding at her, not
trusting himself to speak.

He placed a hand over his eyes, felt the cage at his back and let the feeling of utter uselessness nearly drown him. He couldn’t do anything.

He couldn’t do anything.

It was easy to find his way back to the clearing near the forest road, even in his human body. When he checked his phone, the time read 6:52 pm, and though the sun was approaching the west hills, there was still ample light screening through the silver clouds above, only just beginning to tint orange at the edges.

Sherlock paused when he saw the silhouette of a man leaning against a tree at the edge of a clearing. He narrowed his eyes and stopped for a moment. He’d half hoped to arrive first, but Moriarty had clearly been in the same mind set and the first move was made. Everything in their interactions was deliberate, calculated, even the way Moriarty didn’t look up at him as he approached, doing something on his phone instead.

Sherlock refused to look at him in return as he walked into the clearing, hands stuffed into his pockets. He only turned to face the man when he was in the centre of the clearing. Moriarty raised a single finger at him, and Sherlock didn’t let himself be offended at the lack of immediate attention. Instead he took in the new image of Jim Moriarty. If it wasn’t for the clearly identical bone structure, the same skin, Sherlock would have believed that it was a wholly different human being than Jim from IT. Molly’s boyfriend had been readable, just like anyone else. He’d seen a computer worker in the slope of his spine. A gin drinker in the direction of his eyes when they scanned the bar. Gay in the cut of his clothing.

But looking at Moriarty now… identical twins would have appeared more similar than this man to Jim from IT. Sherlock could barely get anything real from him. He wasn’t completely bare, though. He read pride in the lines of his expensive suit. Ease in his posture—but he knew not to trust those anymore either.

Finally Moriarty locked his phone and put it away, unbuttoning the single button on his jacket so he could slide his hands into his pockets. Then he looked up at Sherlock, giving him a sort of awkward smile and shrug before raising his eyebrows.

White goes first.

“So I’m guessing you’re not actually a Normal,” Sherlock began.

Moriarty pushed off from the tree lightly.

“No. I’m not. In either sense of the word.”

Sherlock watched him as he began to pace around the clearing.

“And yet you’re helping orchestrate a massive Changeling trafficking operation? Doesn’t it bother you? Betraying your own kind?” Sherlock said, voice low.
Moriarty’s head fell back and he let out a disgusted moan.

“Uhg, that’s John talking, Sherlock, not you,” Moriarty groaned. “This is exactly why we can’t play anymore.”

Sherlock pulled his head up, not moving his feet when Moriarty passed behind him.

“It’s not a game.”

Then Moriarty was right next to him, only inches away from the side of his face.

“Of course it is. And I won! I got John.”

Sherlock’s inside trembled and attempted to run towards the memories, to the emotions. But he couldn’t right now. For John’s sake he had to push the thoughts from his mind. He closed his eyes momentarily, lest Moriarty see what was passing through his head—because he was definitely watching.

When he opened his eyes he was ready. He turned partially to face the wide, piercing eyes.

“Right. And I assume you’re here to claim your prize. You must want something. Is it security schedules? Missile plans? Information on the royal family? You must know I could get any of it off Mycroft for you.”

Moriarty squinted at him, slowly shaking his head—almost disbelieving.

It was so strange, meeting this man after so long. Part of Sherlock knew that he should be feeling some sort of fear in the face of his power, at the overwhelming intellect throbbing behind his eyes, a fevered, angry thing. But… if he was being completely honest, there was something like excitement beating in his chest under everything else, just a wisp of it. It wasn’t ever chance that brought the two of them together.

“You just aren’t getting it,” he whispered. “If I wanted all your brother’s secrets, I could have them printed on brand new explicit photographs of Prince Harry and hand delivered to me in an hour.”

The leaves rustled in the tree tops as Moriarty spun away.

“It’s just all such a waste!”

Sherlock rolled his shoulders, only moving when Moriarty wasn’t looking.

“What is?”

“You!” Moriarty shouted spinning back and gesturing wildly. “I had such hopes for you…! And yet you let me down. You know, I had planned on killing you one day.”

Sherlock took a deep breath, pretending to be bored, feeling the sinking sun resting on his face.

“But you aren’t now?” Sherlock said dryly. “Lucky me.”

Moriarty pressed his lips together and nodded approvingly.

“Yes, you keep that wit up, Sherlock. But it won’t save you,” then he paused, looking Sherlock up and down. Finally he spoke again. “Maybe you were just too young. Bad timing. Maybe if you’d been older… but you’ll never get there now. You’ve been spoiled. Tainted in the barrel before you could age properly, ruined at the vineyard. You could have been a rich Valpolicella…”
Then Moriarty’s face went sour.

“But now you’re nothing but vinegar.”

Sherlock decided to try and move the conversation on.

“So you don’t want information. What do you want then?” Sherlock asked levelly.

Moriarty began to pace again, raising his eyebrow at Sherlock’s deliberate press.

“I don’t want anything from you, Sherlock. That’s the point! Don’t you see, doofus?!” he shouted, agitated, and screamed the last directly at Sherlock.

Sherlock elected not to respond, though it didn’t look like Moriarty was expecting a response. He covered his eyes with one hand, pulling it down his face, dragging at his skin.

“If anyone can understand it might be you, I guess. Only you might be able to understand my problem—the problem. All of the ordinary people running around, living, loving, laughing, hurting, crying, breaking, they just do it! But why?!?” Moriarty asked, looking at Sherlock again. “It’s agonising, living, isn’t it? And I’d hoped you would understand. I thought I’d finally found someone who understood what it was like—what it was like to always be bored.”

It did make sense to Sherlock. He knew that feeling. He’d known it was what they shared as soon as Moriarty noticed him.

“I had grand games planned for us, Sherlock,” Moriarty lamented, brushing his fingers against the trunks of trees as he passed them. “But then John came along and ruined you. I mean look at you!”

And his intensity ratcheted up again as he faced Sherlock head on.

“You come here, pretending to offer me all the secrets of the crown and that’s all you come with! You came here hoping to just deduce all the answers from me. Like we’d talk and you’d find your dear John?! Well how is that going, my dear?!” he looked furious and began to scream, opening his arms wide. “What do you see?!”

Sherlock didn’t say a word, didn’t react to his bluff being called, or to the wind beginning to pick up, finding its way under the collar of his coat.

Moriarty let his arms drop, anger morphing into calm derision. He walked close.

“You have nothing. You are—nothing,” he hissed. “Which is why I’m not going to kill you. In the beginning I had such special plans for you, but you’re not worth it anymore Sherlock Holmes. I’m bored of you.”

Sherlock narrowed his eyes at the madman, so close now he could smell his expensive shampoo. He backed away, stuffing his hands back in his pockets and laughing softly, chin dropping so he looked away for a moment.

“I’ve never been particularly careful with my things. I always used to break my toys when I was done with them,” then suddenly the smile was gone and his wide blank eyes came back up to meet Sherlock’s guarded blues. “Gave my mother fits, I did.”

And even Sherlock fought the urge to shiver. His mind was whirling at a million miles an hour, taking in every word, every movement, trying to get a single scrap of useful information from Moriarty. But it was like staring at the waves and trying to see the topography of the ocean floor.
“So you don’t get an epic death. I am picking a new moral for you. You’ve become ordinary, so you get an ordinary end—your story ends in heartbreak,” Moriarty explained and then rolled his eyes and made a series of mock gagging noises.

He wrinkled his nose up at Sherlock, false shame on his face.

“I know. It’s repulsive, but I’m going to do it,” he said, before the veil fell and everything that was dangerous about this man was prominent in his dead eyes and straight spine. “I’m going to burn the heart out of you.”

Sherlock didn’t look away.

“My heart was burned a long time ago,” he said levelly, refusing to turn away from the memories, from the darkness that had chased him for so long.

Moriarty pressed his lips together and shook his head.

“Oh, I know. I tried to remind you once,” he said, and Sherlock knew he didn’t fully stop the flash of rage from reaching his face if Moriarty’s half smile was anything to go by. The corners of his eyes wrinkled with scepticism, lips curling. “But we both know that’s not the whole story, don’t we, Sherlock? Someone has made you a new one… haven’t they?”

His voice jumped a number of octaves at the end. He bit his lips and curled his shoulders forward, a sham of a child getting caught being naughty, before his eyes darkened again. He turned away, towards a young oak which forked near the base. He quickly swung up onto a low branch, leaning against the trunk. He inspected his fingernails, as if to make sure he hadn’t broken any on his way up.

“You know, I will say that he’s touchingly loyal, your pet…” Moriarty smiled and stuck a fingertip between his lips, like he was biting off a hangnail. “He really believes in you, poor thing. Still believes you’re going to find him. Do you want me to carry an apology to him? I could say goodbye for you.”

The wind rushed in Sherlock’s ears, or maybe it was his own blood and he realised he was reaching the end of his rope. No matter how hard he looked, how closely he listened, he couldn’t—

“I know you probably feel bad. John-boy isn’t really made out for captivity, but don’t worry. He won’t have to suffer endlessly. No matter how good, fighters don’t live that long.”

Something that felt like acid was burning in Sherlock’s stomach.

“I’m not going to stop,” Sherlock said. “I will find the menagerie, and then I’m going to have you caught.”

Moriarty cocked his head to the side, looking down at Sherlock. His eyes turned pitying. He leapt down from the branch, spinning his arms once to regain his balance.

“Don’t be delusional, Sherlock. It’s pathetic. I know you’ve even recruited Scotland Yard, your brother, and none of them can find it. I’m just better than you,” Moriarty said apologetically.

The acid was eating through Sherlock now, and he was beginning to feel the yawning emptiness it was leaving behind. Sherlock looked towards the hills, which were greeting the sun as it lit the earth on fire. His throat felt tight, and his eyes stung.

I’m sorry, John.
“Finally getting it, aren’t you?” Moriarty observed, some sort of quiet glee on his face.

And Sherlock was. It felt like ribs were collapsing a bit and he couldn’t hold the image of John from his mind completely anymore. He was going to lose. He had no pieces to play.

He couldn’t—couldn’t just give up, though. There had to be a way. In the face of this impossibility, there must be something. He had to be missing something.

His eyes bored holes into the decaying leaves on the forest floor, but he was deep inside his own mind. Sherlock played their encounter over and over in mere milliseconds, looking and finding nothing. Searching and seeing—oh.

Oh. Wait.

He didn’t look up from the ground, dark bangs hiding his eyes.

“You… you said you’d deliver a message to John?” Sherlock said thickly.

Moriarty sighed heavily, annoyed.

“You know I mostly meant that as a joke, but fine,” Moriarty groused. “What do I care?”

Sherlock continued to stare at the ground… but then he smiled, lips curling up.

He’d thought Moriarty might insulate himself against that. Set up a precaution against that risk… but he definitely knew. Personally.

Sherlock chuckled, a low rumble bubbling out of his chest. Moriarty froze, narrowing his eyes. Sherlock looked up at him.

“So, you know exactly where it is,” Sherlock confirmed. “You’ve been there yourself.”

Moriarty cocked his head to the side for just second, inhuman and even confused, and then a smile broke out on his face.

“Oh. I get it,” Moriarty said, eyes alight. “Yes. I know how to get to the menagerie.”

Sherlock moved from where he stood for the first time, striding towards Moriarty, bounce in his step.

“You may not have left a trace, a trail, a clue, but I don’t need any of it… not when I have you,” Sherlock said, unable to keep the confidence out of his voice.

Moriarty didn’t look particularly ruffled. He walked past Sherlock.

“Not a terrible idea,” he said pushing the corners of his lips down, the expression equivalent of a shrug. “But you’re barking up the wrong tree.”

He spun on his toe, devils grin in place, shaking his head back and forth.

“You could get all the king’s horses and all the king’s men and not a single one of them could make me tell you where it is.”

Sherlock stepped quickly forward, pressing into Moriarty’s space, who held his hands up and made a calm down motion, which Sherlock ignored.
“Woah,” he murmured artificially.

“Who said anything about calling anyone else?”

Moriarty snorted, and raised a single eyebrow.

“What? You?” he said. “You’re going to capture me? Going to torture me and get me to tell you where the menagerie is?”

He pushed his hands deep into his pockets, walking away from Sherlock again.

“Nah,” he said. “You don’t have it in you, Sherlock.”

Sherlock glared at him but he clearly wasn’t done. Sherlock held his hands behind his back.

Moriarty threw his arms out and the wind caught his coat, making it flare out dramatically.

“You walk in the daylight!” he exclaimed and moved close. “You walk like a dog among sheep, declawed and defanged. Neutered! No… no you’re just as domesticated as all of them.”

He looked a bit sad, under the overt condescension—though, Sherlock knew he was the only one who would ever be able pick up on it.

But he didn’t care. Not anymore. The emptiness in him had filled up with stone.

He wondered if he could even be with John after what he planned to do. John would surely smell the darkness on him, the black that he hid deep in his soul. But if it was what needed to be done, Sherlock wouldn’t hesitate. He let the cold wind seep into him as it threw his hair this way and that. He wouldn’t hesitate to follow Jim Moriarty into the void.

He’d follow him to Hell without a pause.

Sherlock would fall into the flames with pleasure.

He stood tall and got right in Moriarty’s face, holding him by his eyes.

“Maybe I live in the sun, but don’t think for a moment it’s where I am home. Don’t think I can’t still see in the dark, that I couldn’t smell you through the black—and perhaps I do walk among herbivores, but if you believe that my claws have been filed, that my fangs have been pulled, if you can look at me for one minute and believe that… then you’ve come here woefully vulnerable. Look at where you stand… this is my forest… this is my night.”

The sky had gone dark in the east, sending a looming indigo wave above them, which was slowly smothering the remaining embers on the west horizon.

Moriarty had stopped breathing and watched Sherlock with narrowed eyes as he leaned in, to speak softly into Moriarty’s ear.

“I am may walk among sheep, but never doubt that…” Sherlock turned his head to purr. “I am a predator.”

Fire burned in Sherlock’s eyes as Moriarty pulled back to meet his gaze, blown pupils calculating. His mouth was open as he looked, taking in every detail, delving inside him and Sherlock opened up the gates. Moriarty stared, trying to find the bluff.

His eyes narrowed and Sherlock didn’t look away. He wanted him to see, feel the darkness pour
And finally Moriarty smiled. Wonder bloomed on his face, and his cheeks flushed with pure happiness.

“You… you are, aren’t you?” he murmured, not seeming to be able to look away from Sherlock. “You mean it. You’re… like me. That’s… wonderful—thank you, Sherlock Holmes. Thank you.”

He looked like he might cry, eyes glassing over, and Sherlock would admit his mind was moving ahead, debating whether Moriarty would give the info over willingly, now that Sherlock had proven himself, or if he’d make Sherlock go through the process of forcing the information out of him.

He felt Moriarty’s hand on his arm, sliding down until he could take Sherlock’s hand in his own.

“No, but really. Thank you,” Moriarty said warmly. “You’re right. As long as you have me you can find John. You can find them all. So…”

His fingers tightened around Sherlock’s hand and that’s when the leopard realised something was happening—just a millisecond early, eyebrows dipping in confusion.

“I’m sorry about this.”

It happened in slow motion, except Sherlock couldn’t move at all. Moriarty’s free hand flashed into his coat and Sherlock’s instincts screamed to get away when he saw the gun—but it wasn’t aimed at him and Moriarty wouldn’t let him get away, held him close, held his eyes as he put the barrel of the gun in his mouth.

“NO!” Sherlock screamed.

And for a moment Sherlock swore he could hear the cackling of the madman—then he pulled the trigger.

The gunshot exploded through the forest and Sherlock flew away from the man and the blood, gasp on his lips. Moriarty’s body hit the ground as Sherlock was still scrambling away, totally lost.

This hadn’t—it wasn’t supposed to—Sherlock’s shoulder slammed into a tree, and he grasped at it to keep himself upright, breathing heavily, in shock.

Moriarty had landed on his back, gun still clasped in his fingers by his side, and though he couldn’t see it, Sherlock could smell the blood seeping into the forest floor. His eyes were open… and a smile was frozen on his lips.

The victor’s smile.
It was Greg Lestrade who found him in the end. Sherlock had been sat on a grassy knoll, staring at the heavy clouds rushing towards Baker Forest from over the low English mountains, backs bent and worn with the ages. A trail of clothes was scattered behind him, ripped from his skin when his human body began to choke him—after he’d run from that place. Tenuous strands held the memories, thoughts, images, from view. Right now he was just empty, unmoving, one with the voice of space as the crescent moon seemed to laugh madly down at him, with a familiar voice that worked its way inside and began to rip at the very fibres of his being.

<Sherlock! Worry.>

He must be able to smell the blood. There had been some splatter, Sherlock thought absently as the shepherd ran to him. The thought of blood was thrown into the deep pit of monsters in Sherlock’s mind. The beasts leapt to try and claim him.

<Sherlock, what happened?! Someone saw you walk into the woods—when Mycroft heard he made us launch a search. Intensity. Confusion.>

Of course. Mycroft would have figured out Sherlock’s plan as soon as he heard. Shame he was far too late.

<Sherlock!>

Sherlock realised he hadn’t even looked at Greg yet. He turned his head to the white face, seeing flattened ears, chocolate eyes. There was an earthquake beginning to shake in the world in Sherlock’s head and the things in the pit began to escape. Sherlock cocked his head and blinked hard.

<He… he shot himself…>

Sherlock finally spoke. Greg’s ears swivelled forwards as his head jerked back in shock.

<What!? Who’s been shot, Sherlock!?>

Greg had stood up as if to run to someone’s aid, clearly calling out to a search party that was too far away still to hear him.

<Moriarty… he shot himself in the head. I didn’t— Disjointed.> Sherlock continued, eyes narrowing. <Why would he—>

His tail had begun lashing back and forth as the suspended truth began to fall. He knew why. He’d been there. He knew what it meant. His gaze dropped wide to the ground—horror seeping into his being as the temporary shock that was protecting him began to dissipate.
The clouds rolled in and blocked out the moon above them.

<He won. There’s no—no way… I can’t—>

The words came unbidden, no matter what Sherlock did to try and ward them off, no matter what he did to keep them in the black hole inside his head, no matter how desperately he clung to the emptiness.

<I can’t find John.>

Greg didn’t say anything. Though he didn’t know the whole story, the whole story clearly didn’t matter. The words of the last page were written in the trembling body in front of him. What could he ever say? His ears lay flat against his neck and he was losing a friend and watching another fall apart completely. Sherlock realised that pained sounds were eking out between his teeth as his eyes drilled into the earth and there were no more words—no words for this.


The wind blew harshly over the knoll, but Greg’s shoulders were hunched against a different storm. He weathered it as the rain began to fall.

It started to pour, heavy drops striking Sherlock’s pelt, sinking in. It didn’t take long for it to saturate and rivulets began to slip down his low slung head, bowd in grief, into his eyes, down his muzzle—and he shook, but still the leopard didn’t move. One last emotion pulsed from his mind before everything went dark.

<Heartbreak.>

Turns out Moriarty had been right.

You had to have a heart for it to shatter after all.

. . .

<He figured out all that… just because she was wearing her shoes? Awe.>

John was curled up next to the bars, on the side of his cage that was closest to Trev’s enclosure, telling the story of a fake suicide Sherlock had uncovered. It hadn’t taken long for Trev to be able to effectively communicate with him, even though he was young. It seemed that spending so much time in shifted form with only the other captives for company meant that even the younger Changelings in the Menagerie were better than most young people at Institutes.

In that same vein, even though the only people he could talk with at normal volume were Mary and Trev, the word of John’s stories had spread like wildfire through the expanse of Pryde’s Gardens. The younger captives had even picked up on the seed of hope that John held onto, and even the older Changelings seemed to be interested in John’s stories. It had started with Trev passing on stories of Sherlock to his neighbours, then they on to their neighbours, then Trev had insisted that John was the only one who could tell a certain story, and suddenly John had an audience. The first day it was only Trev, Mary, plus David Harrow and Lisa Jones, a ring-tailed lemur and tamarin respectively, but the next time Trev insisted, it was their neighbours, too—and by the fifth time it
had become almost routine. At noon, when the sun was highest in the sky, Trev would ask John to tell a story, and silence would fall on the Menagerie. When it was that quiet, all John only had to raise his voice a bit for it to reach the far corners of the menagerie.

<Like I said, he could tell from her carpet that she never wore shoes in the house> John confirmed.

Trev was his only real listener for this story, as it was still morning and he often told Trev extra stories, if the boy looked down, or if John just wanted to remember…

It was just luck that the news reached John first hand that morning. They would have all heard eventually, as the word would have spread quickly, but thankfully for John, the news came to Pryde while he was observing his collection.

<That’s amazing. How does he do it?>

John huffed an almost-laugh out of his muzzle at the rapt otter’s adoration. The stories about Sherlock’s ridiculousness never stuck for Trev.

John was going to respond but then Mary called his attention.

<John. Something’s happened.>

He turned quickly to look at her. She was perched in her tree, staring, laser focused on the door, where one of Pryde’s men had strode quickly into the courtyard. John’s interest was definitely aroused as he saw the intensity in the man’s face.

“Sir,” the man called to Pryde, and they weren’t far down the path so it wasn’t difficult to see and hear them when the man came to a stop.

“What is it, Handsford?” Pryde asked, eyes narrowing.

John’s ears pricked forward and Mary watched with sharp eyes. The man stood with a straight back as he delivered the news.

“Mr—Mr. Moriarty is dead, sir.”

John nearly flinched in shock.

“Are you sure?”

The man nodded sharply.

“Yes, sir,” he answered. “He shot himself in the head, sir.”

Moriarty shot himself in the head. The information washed over John in disjointed waves, not quite sinking in at first.

Pryde seemed to be thinking, and John realised the emotion he was experiencing was happiness. He was dead. The mastermind who sold out his own kind. The man who’d separated him and Sherlock, who was at fault for the taste of blood in John’s mouth. The man who awakened the nightmare of Sherlock’s past. He was dead.

Pryde spoke again.

“Well… it’s probably for the best. The Garden is completely stocked now, and replacements can
be obtained in the old ways. Moriarty was a liability. He was unpredictable—a sot knowing
where we are? Helping us? I was never completely comfortable with it,” he said. “It seems it’s all
worked itself out though.”

And the floor opened under John, all traces of happiness gone as the horrific implications of the
news began to take form. Pryde was right… about all of it. He stood stiff as a board and Mary
noticed.

<Concern. John. What is it? What’s wrong?>

Moriarty was dead. His gaze had turned away from Pryde and pressed into the distance as the
realisations began to take form, like weights attaching themselves to his body. He didn’t answer
Mary, not even as Pryde continued his walk, as if the whole world hadn’t just changed irrevocably.
John didn’t even look up when the man stopped in front of his cage.

“What? No stare down today, wolf?” Pryde asked.

No. There wasn’t. John didn’t hold the man’s eyes defiantly like he had every other morning since
he’d arrived at the menagerie, even on mornings after fights when his muscles ached and his
wounds screamed at him to lie down, but he didn’t today. Even if he’d been cognisant enough to
register Pryde’s words, what would it matter? The spark would have been gone, the fire that said
he’s coming for you.

Because he wasn’t. Moriarty was like the ropes holding up the bridge, but now he was dead and all
that was left were wooden planks dangling into the mouth of the chasm, leaving no way across—
with John on one side and Sherlock on the other.

<Joh… Pain.>

And she was beginning to realise, too. She was cleverer than John, after all. It wouldn’t be hard for
her, and that was good, because there was no way he could make himself say it, even in shift
speech.

He couldn’t say that Sherlock wouldn’t find him, that there was no way for him to—that there
didn’t seem to be much chance of him seeing Sherlock ever again.

It hurt so badly, like the lion ripping him open again, claws in flesh, but on repeat, flaying deeper
and deeper.

John hadn’t even noticed the way Trev had begun to shake by the bars of his cage, fear growing
even if he couldn’t hear Mary’s life line words. He could see the wrongness in John’s stiff form, in
every hair on his body.

<Scared. John…? What’s wrong?>

The small, frightened voice was probably the only thing that could have reached John in that
moment, for it did reach him. His head turned, desolate eyes taking in the crouched form of the
otter, holding his own tail in his paws like a child holding a teddy bear. The image hit John almost
as hard as the news. His dark eyes were so sad, so vulnerable…

Trev was just a kid—and John’s heart was breaking, yes, but this loss didn’t just belong to him.

He looked around, at each caged form he could see. He’d seen their eyes so many times, both from
behind his bars and the broken gazes that followed him to the fighting pits, so sad and lonely… but
he’d also seen the flash of hope in some of them when stories of Sherlock Holmes brought rapt
silence over the menagerie. It would have been one thing if John had kept his hope to himself—if he’d kept Sherlock to himself. The genius, refusing to eat, stripped bare, snickering at John’s unending lack of respect for Mycroft, that was John’s Sherlock. But Sherlock Holmes, the one from his stories, who could read you like a book and solve crimes as easy as they used to do their coursework, they’d all lost him today, even if most of them didn’t realise that’s what Moriarty’s death truly meant.

John glanced back at Mary, at her warm golden eyes and high-held head, and he let himself borrow her strength. There wasn’t room for him to break down. Sherlock couldn’t find them? Okay, John thought, letting the inescapable truth settle. Fine... that meant it came down to John. No more waiting.

John walked back to the barrier between his and Trev’s cage, sticking his muzzle through the bars, and Trev matched the motion, pressing their noses together comfortingly. It normally would have been an awkward gesture from John, but he was channelling Mary, thinking of Sherlock, and it felt right.

<Solemn. It’s alright, Trev. Everything is going to be alright.>

The vial in his pocket was cold but quickly warming to his touch, long fingers curled around the glass, knuckles pressed into the lining of his coat. Sherlock wasn’t going to his room, as his sitters were checking on him on a nearly hourly basis now—and though he could predict their checks, what he had planned was ideally going to take longer than sixty minutes. Some manoeuvring was required. He’d waited until he knew it was Mike’s turn to play sniffer-dog next—he was the least passionate about babysitting duties, and his desperation to not have to deal with Sherlock would slow his response, ideally, unlike Greg who would be on high alert instantly, and could predict Sherlock’s movements better—and by that Sherlock meant that he had Mycroft on speed dial. Plus, when it came to sniffer dogs, Greg’s shepherd was much more apt than Mike’s raccoon, if it actually came to sniffing. Anderson was too enthusiastic, and would tell Greg and begin looking immediately.

It had been easy to cover his scent trail, just in case they did take the sniffer-dog route. A simple detour through the crowded cafeteria would leave Greg clueless, Sherlock was sure.

He could have waited for Molly’s turn, as she was rather optimistic and that would work in his favour… but for some reason he really didn’t want this to fall anywhere near her. How he’d changed, Sherlock thought bitterly.

Sherlock’s phone buzzed in his pocket, the one without the glass vial, ringing. He cursed under his breath. Someone must have checked on him early. Sherlock didn’t bother to take his phone out until he felt the double buzz of a text message.

From Lestrade: Where are you?

Sherlock locked his phone and slipped it back into his coat. He’d hoped to have them find out later… the chances of them finding him were still incredibly small. He’d chosen his venue carefully, he thought as he pushed open the door to the draughty back stairwell in Baker Grand Hall. His phone buzzed again and he took the stairs to the very top floor, then higher. He felt
another series of vibrations that indicated a call as he pushed the picked the lock on the roof.

Ah. Greg must have called Mycroft. Lovely.

Once again, not ideal, but he still had ample time before they located him. He pulled his phone out again as he stepped onto the roof, the sun was still high and warm on the summer evening, but it was starting to sink.

*From Molly Hooper: Are you okay?*

*From Lestrade: Sherlock?*

*From Mycroft: Where are you? – MH*

He ignored them all as he picked a sheltered spot next to an air vent to sit down. He set his phone beside him so he could see the text feed. He wanted to ditch it completely but he thought he should keep it close just in case Mycroft threatened something dramatic. It wouldn’t do to be wilfully blind to his enemy’s movements.

Sherlock took the glass container out of his pocket and held it up to the sun, index finger pressed into the sealed rubber top, watching the clear liquid inside slosh around under the white clinical label. It hadn’t been hard to get. Mycroft had made an effort, new locks on the stores, but it wasn’t like he could have the entire Institute reworked on account of his aspiring addict of a younger brother. Even Mycroft’s power had limits, as Sherlock had been consistently reminded of in the recent months.

*Sherlock, tell me where you are. – MH*

Sherlock pulled a padded black sleeve from inside his coat. He let the sheathed hypodermic needle and coil of rubber tubing slide out onto his palm before laying them gently on top of the pouch on the roof.

*Think about Mummy, little brother. What would she think? – MH*

Sherlock rolled his eyes. Mycroft wouldn’t tell their mother, and at this point Sherlock wouldn’t even care if he had. Sherlock picked up the vial once more. Last time he’d used the substance it was about stopping the fear. His mind had cannibalised, turned many possibilities to life in his skull and he’d needed it to stop.

Mycroft was calling him again.

This time it wasn’t about his mind running out of control. He almost yearned for the million paths to let his mind run, because this time it wasn’t about possibilities, it was a dead end that brought him here. He’d kept it momentarily at bay with this planning and analytical tracking of his guard’s movements, but he sat here with a derived opiate for a reason. He cursed the days he spent mocking the emotions of others, as if they were below him. He’d mocked the idea of loss, claimed himself to be above it. But it felt like someone had driven a rib slitter into his chest and cracked him open then left him to bleed, but unlike the reality of such a thing occurring, his body wouldn’t do him the common decency of letting him die. He simply continued to exist within the unending state of swallowing grief.

His phone buzzed and buzzed against the roof as Sherlock’s hand’s shook and his breath started to come in gulps, like a fish trying to breathe above the surface of the ocean. It sent the liquid medicine into a chaotic storm within its container.
Then Mycroft hung up, giving up on calls again.

A text message flashed across the lock screen and Sherlock made the mistake of glancing at it. Sherlock never felt more hate for Mycroft Holmes than he did in that very moment. It was low. It was lower than low and Mycroft must have known. It wasn’t a fair move. Rage poured through his open chest cavity before evaporating without anything to hold it in as he took in the simple words, now clutched in his trembling palm.

**John wouldn’t have wanted this, Sherlock. – MH**

Sherlock wanted to scream that it didn’t matter—*because John was gone and he’d never see him again.* The words blurred as the thought came unbidden. That was why he was up here, because he’d never see John Watson again. His body split open even wider and he tried to reach for the morphine again, swallowing air, but the problem was that it *did* matter—because all Sherlock could see now were memories wrapped in a haze of opiates, still agonizingly discernable. The fear in his face, the warmth of his hands when he’d held him close and ground out promise after promise, stopped Sherlock from falling apart.

*“Never again, Sherlock.”*

He’d been so frightened, so sad. Sherlock had felt it against his mind, where now only cold emptiness was ever felt.

*“I promise I will protect you. I promise, Sherlock...”*

And John had kept that promise—but who had protected John? Sherlock buried his face in his hands. It wasn’t fair—it wasn’t *fair*. He hadn’t asked for this. He also remembered the promise John had been able to rend from Sherlock’s lips, to not do exactly what he planned to do now.

John’s voice throbbed in his head.

*“I promise—I won’t let anything happen to you. Do you hear me? I won’t. Never. Again.”*

But that and so many promises since had never been realistic. So much had happened to both of them—and promises lay shattered around their memory.

And John was *gone*.

Sherlock gasped and ripped at his coat. It crumpled and folded behind his back as he tore at the buttons on his cuff, yanking the sleeve up his arm. He grabbed the vial and the syringe, gulping air as the pain throbbed through his system.

He just wanted it to go away.

The needle pierced the seal, and then the liquid began to rise, past little lines marked with little numbers. He pulled it free and the vial hit the ground with a threateningly loud *clink* that Sherlock couldn’t care less about.

He didn’t ask for this.

Blue eyes flashed and faded in and out in his head as the knot was tied on the surgical tubing. The syringe was in hand.

The veins in his arm rose against his pale, unmarked skin, and the needle hovered, just there, nearly vibrating with Sherlock’s anguish. His hand shook and Sherlock was frozen—millimetres
away from relief.

“Because I care about you.”

He’d never asked for this.

He didn’t want it, the pain, the heartbreak, the loneliness. A blind man doesn’t know when he’s in the dark, and he wished his sight had never been restored. The light had been blinding and beautiful, but now it was gone.

And now Sherlock remembered he was terrified of the dark. He wasn’t strong enough for this.

He just wanted the pain to stop.

“I’m—John, I—I’m so sorry.”

The needle pierced his skin and the barrel emptied into his bloodstream.
Sacrifice

When John first told Mary his plan she had refused flat out.

“Mary,” John said in a pressing whisper. “We have to.”

She was on her knees, fingers curled into the chain link, eyes both devastated and defiant. John mirrored her pose. His brow was furrowed and his jaw was set. Mary shook her head back and forth.

“No, John. Not like this,” Mary pleaded. “You know what they’ll—”

“I know,” John cut her off.

He held her gaze as she pressed her lips together, face heavy with sorrow, knowing he was right. She shook her head but this time it was in defeat instead of defiance. She dropped her face, shoulders curled in, and John glanced over his shoulder to make sure that Trev was still asleep, wrapped in his blanket. If there was one thing that he and Mary already agreed on, it was that Trev didn’t need to be worried by this.

John looked back and caught Mary quickly wiping her shaded cheek with the back of her hand. John didn’t know what to say but he tried.

“Hey, um, it’s okay,” John said, and it was the wrong thing to say but Mary looked up and laughed softly anyway, eyelashes damp and clumping with moisture.

“No, it’s not, you daft—” she huffed, wiping her eyes dry. “It’s really not.”

John’s eyes softened.

“I know,” he agreed—if everything was already they wouldn’t even be here, but they were. “So you’ll do it?”

She didn’t answer at first, as if she were seriously considering saying no, but instead she took a deep breath and he watched her eyes glass over again, all traces of amusement fading from her features.

“Of course,” she said, and John gave her a tight smile she didn’t even attempt to return.

... ...

Their plan took time, as the first stage required tools that they only had very limited access to. They were lax on cups and bowls for water, but the staff always counted silverware, the spoons and forks, as they were never given knives. Using the utensils and quickly blistering hands, Mary and John began to work a slowly-widening hole into a spot in the back corner of Mary’s cage.

This part was obviously impossible to hide from Trev, so they told him a story about slipping past guards and getting the police. It was actually a great story, and John had to admit that it had a beautiful appeal. He didn’t blame Trev for wanting to believe it so badly that he didn’t bring up the sensors on every door, the ever present security, even beyond the Garden, or the guns that sat on
each of their hips.

They worked as quickly as they could, switching off during each meal, one pressing, twisting and warping the thick metal wires while the other kept an eye out for guards and staff.

Days went by, and sometimes there would be no noticeable difference, but they didn’t stop and, bit by bit, millimetre by millimetre, the hole was growing.

John grunted as he was thrown bodily into his cage by the two guards who had hauled him away from the platform where Pryde’s “doctor” had stitched up a wound from his latest fights. They’d doped him as soon as they pulled him from the ring, and it didn’t last long but John was definitely still drifting. His head spun with a cocktail of drugs, pain, and excess adrenaline.

He heard the ghostly sound of a violin and let it carry him away from the throbbing in his bones.

As soon as he had the will, John dragged himself over to the straw stacked in the corner, clumsily pulling his blanket around his shoulders, ignoring the pain it caused to his wounds, more concerned that the tremor in his chest would shake him to bits. He closed his eyes and leaned into the corner, trying to fall back into the sound of strings, hearing the chorus of traffic in the background, but no matter how he reached for the music in the distance, all he could see was the poor bloodied creatures, remember how he knew the exact moment their hearts stopped beating, when the pulses of blood stopped spilling into his mouth. Furrows appeared between his brows as he screwed his eyes shut tighter and his abused muscles twitched intermittently.

“John,” Mary said from close by. “Talk to me.”

He opened his mouth and tried to think of something but there was nothing, nothing to say. He shook his head.

“I… I can’t.”

“Yes, you can.”

And she was right, of course—he didn’t have the luxury of giving up yet. They were almost there. John glanced down at the chain link near the back corner of Mary’s cage where there was a hole about the size of a fifty pence coin, close enough that he could reach out and stick two fingers through if he wanted to. It was mostly covered by straw, so you’d only notice it if you were looking for it.

It wouldn’t be long now. John hoped they’d finish before the next fight night… he dared to hope he’d only have to go into the ring one more time. The thought was bracing, strangely enough.

Once more time… one last time.

It was comforting and the sounds of the violin became clearer. John knew that there should have been a part of him dreading the quickly-approaching day, but he couldn’t find it in himself to feel anything but relief for himself. He let his eyes drop closed and wondered what Sherlock would do when he found out, wondered how he would react. He hoped Sherlock would understand—but at the same time he knew it was a false hope.
The thought brought a regretful half smile to his face.

“What are you thinking about?” Mary asked, hugging her knees to her chest.

“Dancing,” John replied.

Mary raised an eyebrow.

“Dancing?”

Yes. He’d finally been able to recall the images. The cars rushing by outside the alley, the violinist on the corner of the road, streetlights cast on Sherlock’s cheekbones.

“Don’t be offended, but you don’t exactly seem like the dancing type,” Mary said and once she would have smiled, but Mary hadn’t been smiling almost at all since John told her the plan.

John smiled easier these days, even with the pain.

“No, not me. Sherlock,” John said.

Mary’s eyebrow rose higher, even more disbelieving.

“I know, but it’s true. Sherlock Holmes loves to dance. He’d be lost in a club, but that posh git can waltz… ridiculous,” John assured her.

A grin tried and failed to land on Mary’s lips, though it showed a little bit in her eyes. John let his eyelids slip closed again and leaned his head back against the bars.

“So, what dancing were you thinking about?” Mary murmured, and John sometimes thought she was an evil manipulative person—as if helping him remember would have changed his mind.

John kept his eyes shut, willingly falling into the memory anyway. If there was one thing that meeting Sherlock Holmes had taught him, it was that he was a bit of a masochist.

“There was this one time when we were in London, not long after we first…” John began, quickly trailing off, not able to talk about it. He was so bad at talking about that, but the memory of that hesitant kiss floated like a warm bubble in his mind. “Anyway, I convinced Sherlock to stop by a pub before catching the last train home. We were just a little bit sloshed if I’m being completely honest… Sherlock doesn’t usually drink, but in the right mood…”

John took a deep breath, remembering the way his ears were flushed with the alcohol, whiskey and beer lighting pleasant fires in their bellies.

“There was man playing on a corner,“’ John continued. “Beethoven or something… we ended up in the alley—dancing. We almost missed our train.”

John gazed down through his eyelashes, recalling the pale stars above and the way Sherlock’s long fingered hands felt holding his, leading. He remembered the tenner that Sherlock had put in the man’s case as they tumbled, giggling, from between the buildings.

He briefly recalled the burn of jealousy that he hadn’t even recognised when he had watched Sherlock and Irene Adler twirl through the Baker Hall auditorium, both more beautiful than anyone else in the room.

The smile dropped off John’s face when he wondered who Sherlock would dance with now. His wounds throbbed and he bit back a groan, taking a deep breath and forcing the pain out with the air
“John,” Mary’s voice called him back to the present, and he looked at her, quickly sensing the near urgency in her tone.

She sat stiffly, as if she were almost scared. She opened her mouth and closed it again, and while John was back, Mary was anywhere but in the moment.

“What is it?” John asked.

Mary looked up and stared deep into John’s eyes, strangely beseeching and desperate. Maybe it was the drugs but John was totally confused, convinced he’d missed something. Had he said something?

“I want—there’s not much time left and before—” Mary said, struggling with the words; John was patient in his confusion, waiting. “John, what would you think if I told you that I wasn’t everything you thought I was?”

“What?” John asked, completely baffled at the sudden turn their conversation had taken.

Mary chewed her lip, and while John was lost, this was something Mary had clearly been thinking about for days.

“I don’t want—when we—what if I told you I had lied to you? What if I told you that I wasn’t a late shift like you? That I’ve been flying since I was barely eight years old. John, what if you found out I wasn’t always a good person, that I’d done things before the Institute?” Mary said and there were tears on her face.

And John was a bit dumbstruck. His forehead wrinkled as he stared at her.

“So are you saying all of this?” John asked quietly.

Mary’s face twisted in sorrow and she turned her face away.

“I… I don’t know. I… because you, John, deserve the truth, before—” she said before the words failed her.

Something small and soft burned painfully in John’s chest. He was lost and dangerously close to hurt.

“Is anything you’ve told me been true?”

“Yes!” Mary said quickly, distressed. “I really did go to the Lange Institute. I really did want to be a nurse. My friends, the stories I’ve told you, all of that was true.”

She hiccuped out a self-deprecating laugh.

“I’d finally settled in… I had finally got out. I had friends, a future, when Moriarty took me. He used them against me… I know, what irony. Sometimes I think that I was meant to be here, that this is somehow a punishment.”

John’s scowl was still in place and he had no idea what he was thinking.

“And I love you, John Watson. You are my friend. I never lied to you about that,” Mary said, voice contradictorily pleading for someone who had brought this up themselves.
John looked at her, at Mary Morstan, cheeks stained with tears and shadows heavy in her eyes. She had done bad things, she said.

*I’ve been flying since I was eight.*

*I had finally got out.*

John had seen shadows like the ones in Mary’s eyes before; maybe it was why he’d trusted her so quickly. Maybe she’d done bad things, but bad things had been done to her, too. He could see it in the sadness and wariness that seemed more at home on her face than even the other menagerie prisoners.

Mary had scars, probably many that John couldn’t see. The image of a panther, hiding his wounds in the dark, shielding them from the eyes of a stranger, floated back to him. That seemed so long ago now.

“It doesn’t matter.”

John didn’t recall deciding to say the words, but they felt right on his tongue.

“What?” Mary said, eyes going wide.

John’s face was serious as he looked down, letting his finger trail absently over the scars on his chest, the ones that were much older than the smaller, shallower wounds that marked his body of late.

“If what you said is true than I’d say it doesn’t matter. We all have things in our past we’d like to forget, some of us more than others,” John said, looked back at Mary and thinking of a dark haired Changeling who still had nightmares in his ice blue eyes.

Mary held back a soft sound that may have been a sob.

“You don’t even know my real name,” Mary choked out.

John smiled at her, pulling his blanket tighter around himself.

“I have this really good friend who I call Mary,” he said. “If she likes that.”

And finally Mary Morstan laughed and a bright smile graced her drying face.

“Yes, of course,” she said. “Yes.”

It was two weeks and three days after the news of Moriarty’s death reaching the menagerie that a Seychelles kestrel forced her way through a small hole in a fence and beheld the closest thing to freedom that any of them had experienced in months.

<**Urgent. Quick, before a guard comes by,**> the wolf watching close by urged, elation mixed with worry as his eyes raked the area around them.

A young otter stood on his hind legs with wonder in is eyes as the little falcon spread her disused
wings. She didn’t take off, only gazed longingly at the sky. The glass ceiling was so clean; one could almost forget the barrier between prison and sky.

<Mary. Regretful.> John pressed, bowing his head closer, trying to shield her from potential enemy eyes.

His muzzle was through the bars, ready to nudge her towards the hole but he stopped when she folded her wings. She looked at him, tearing her gaze from the sky.

<I know.>

<It won’t be long now. Assurance.>

It seemed to have the opposite effect on Mary though, as her shift-brown eyes filled with sorrow. She hopped forwards and pulled a tuft of fur from John’s ruff—just because she could, before she wiggled through the fence.

Despite John’s best efforts to engage her, Mary spent the rest of the day tucked into a branch on the far side of her cage, looking anywhere but at the sky above.

The fight night approached quickly, menagerie captives forewarned by the gossip of the staff. It was going to be a big one. Preparations had to be made.

John didn’t sleep the night before the event. He lay on his side and tried at first, but gave up quickly. There would be no rest for him yet.

He pulled his blanket tighter around his body and felt the straw beneath him poke his cheek. The memories throbbed behind his eyes like physical wounds, and with only hours perceived ahead of him and the others sleeping peacefully—as peacefully as any of them could—John finally let himself wish things were different. He let himself board the dangerous train of thought that he’d avoided so far, knowing how easily it could derail him completely, but, so close to the station, what could the harm be now? For a moment John allowed himself to curse everything that had happened. His chest rose and fell sharply as he braced against the pain of it.

He let himself admit that it wasn’t fair. He let himself think of the beds he’d probably never wake up in again, under warm blankets with his nose buried in black fur or dark hair.

John wasn’t a fatalist, but he wasn’t delusional, and he knew how tomorrow would probably end—and that was if he was even successful.

The wolf shift’s contemplation was interrupted by someone pulling his blanket from him. John gasped and pushed himself up to his knees, immediately taking a defensive stance. A hand quickly covered his lips and he heard the shush. Mary.

She was tucking the blanket around her body with her free hand. She took her palm away from John’s face, pressing one finger against her lips.
“Mary, what are you doing?!” John whispered, looking around for a guard in the dark but they hadn’t moved from their night posts by the doors.

He was on such high alert for the climate outside the bars, he wasn’t really paying attention to Mary, and he froze completely when he felt her arms wind around his neck. She was hugging him.

“Tomorrow is—I just needed to do this before tomorrow,” she said, sounding like she was close to crying again.

John was so taken aback he didn’t respond at first. He wasn’t naturally one for public displays of affection, and he was clearly a bit under-socialised of late—but then this wasn’t public, and it wasn’t just about affection, was it? It was two scarred and scared Changelings who had to say goodbye. John understood and lifted his arms, embracing Mary tightly.

“I’m sorry,” she said desolately into his shoulder.

Neither of them let go.

“It’s alright. I’m alright,” John said.

She squeezed him tighter.

“Liar,” Mary said. “I can tell when you’re fibbing, John, and you don’t have to lie. Not to me.”

John pressed his lips together and Mary made no motion to let go. John had realised a while ago that he loved Mary. If it wasn’t for Mary, John would have slipped away weeks and weeks ago, but she wasn’t the one that he wished was in his arms.

“I wish I could have said goodbye,” John confessed.

Mary pushed deliberately away, taking him by the shoulders.

“You stop that. Right now. Don’t act like—” she scowled at him, tears barely held back, and John looked at her sadly. “Promise me.”

She tugged him forward again, tight enough that his breathing was restricted.

“Mary, I can’t breathe,” John said, refusing to make any more promises that he wasn’t sure he could keep.

He’d already be breaking too many promises tomorrow.

She loosened her grip but not much. John put his arms around her back, taking a moment to steady himself.

“Will you tell him—could you tell Sherlock…’ the name burned in his throat and John felt a tear fall onto his neck. “That… he meant everything to me, and I’m so sorry.”

John’s own tears stuck in his eyes; he’d never been one to let them fall.

“I want him to know… that he was the best—the best person I ever met. I’m happy that I Changed, that I came to the Baker Institute—I’m happy the open bond helped me find him. It was an honour to know him… and I owe him so much,” John’s voice broke repeatedly over the words. “Tell him—tell him it was worth it.”

Mary’s fingers dug into his back and he let himself press his chin into her shoulder as she
swallowed any more tears. She leaned back, familiar defiance under her utter sorrow. She put a hand on his cheek.

“Tell him yourself,” she challenged, one last time.

They led John out like he was a champion. He’d yet to lose a fight and his reputation had spread among the viewership. It was a large fight night, and so John wasn’t the only Changeling participant. He used to fear the possibility of facing another Changeling in the ring, but time had assured him that Pryde and men like him spent far too much time and money procuring their gladiators, so pitting them against each other was just a waste.

The other Changelings were chained and muzzled. They weren’t part of Pryde’s menagerie, but instead were other victims of human trafficking. There was a badly scarred mastiff that growled at anyone who came close as well as a younger looking black bear with its head bowed towards the ground. The sight of them filled John with rage.

He held his head higher as he walked between the disgustingly posh, repulsive patronage of Pryde’s arena, the ones who were currently sizing him up, making bets. He wondered who would collect tonight…

John’s muzzle chafed against the bridge of his snout and the collar pinched, but he didn’t react. He didn’t snarl or growl this time; he didn’t snap, or bite, or fight, only walked unflinchingly towards the pit. The only time he stopped was near the other Changelings. He stopped to look at them.

<It’s going to be okay.>

Neither creature responded, but he saw the shadows in their eyes when they looked at him and it fuelled his resolve. The ‘handlers’ yanked him forward again.

<Wait for my signal,> John had said to Mary as Pryde’s men had come to take him from the cage.

Mary hadn’t acknowledged his words. She seemed not to know what exactly to say at all, but the pain and regret that she broadcasted held a clear message that cut straight to John’s core.

<Find him! Desperation,> John had called to her as they dragged him out.

<I know!> she said, wings beating against the cage as she followed them.

<Make sure he knows—>

<I know! Misery. John!>

Then the door to John’s cage had been slammed shut and he was made to march towards the men and the ring, where cages filled with wild animals awaited him. Mary’s talons clacked on the glass as she flew along the barrier, as if they could find another plan if she just keep him in her sight for another second.

<J ohn! John!>
Mary’s voice called out desperately but he refused to fight this time.

Soon the ring gate was in front of him. A guard pulled the slide door open as the two men holding John steered him into the fenced lead-in. He felt them drag the collar and muzzle forward, ripping them off in one practiced motion before moving out of biting distance, not that John would have bothered at this point. Then he was shoved forward. He regained his footing and jumped down the metre into the pit; dust puffed up in little clouds around his feet and his heart began to beat faster. Despite the way his body flooded with adrenaline, John felt more in control. His tail was stiff. His ears swivelled slowly as he looked up at the faces looking down at him, and felt a realisation settle right down into the marrow of his bones. He would kill these men without hesitation if he had to, with as much conviction as a soldier on the battle field. It was a strange thing, that knowledge, almost stranger in that it didn’t bother him, but instead brought him an odd sort of peace.

A high pitched clamour drew John’s attention to the opposite gate. With a bang it was hauled up and a tawny, spotted creature flew into the pit, thudding to the ground and screaming out an awful ruckus. It was a hyena, and John quickly assessed it as an opponent. Starving, not enough to make it weak, but well enough to make it drool for John’s blood. He thanked his lucky stars that the beast was male. He’d seen the females take out bears.

John let out a ripping warning growl, locking eyes with the hungry thing. Even starving, the hyena seemed to sense that John wouldn’t make an easy meal and hesitated, skittering back at first. They began to circle and John felt pity for the animal. He probably would never have another meal.

But for the first time since John had been brought into the ring, it wouldn’t be him ending the creature’s life. For the first time, an opponent’s blood wouldn’t be on his hands.

John drew the match out, playing it up, letting the hyena come at him a few times, snapping and snarling. He listened closely to the viewers’ bated breaths—he hoped that they choked on them.

John’s eyes raked the crowd, locking onto the closest guard. His pulse raced and it was time.

*Are we going to do this together, mate?* John thought wryly at the hyena trying to kill him.

John threw his head back and howled, short and loud. The sound filled the Gardens.

The hyena lunged and so did John, except the wolf missed. He felt teeth from a turned head rake through fur around his neck, like the tines of a deadly comb, as he flew past the hyena. His front paws hit the ground and his spine curled, muscles coiling, tightening. His haunches compressed, like a spring, and then John’s back paws slammed into the dirt on the floor of the pit like a comet hitting the earth. He was airborne, and the men didn’t even have time to process what was happening. John’s hope had been riding on that and by the time they started to figure it out, the hyena had long discovered his potential dinner had escaped.

John landed in the crowd and the shouting started, accompanied by the rattling sound of the fence as the hyena scrambled out of the ring. It was utter chaos and John was the eye of the storm, wholly calm as the moved at his target.

His target, which wasn’t a man or a door. It wasn’t Pryde or any of the other Changelings. His path led him to the feet of an unprepared guard only just having pulled his gun from his holster—*the gun*.

John lunged and snapped his jaws around the man’s wrist, once, *hard*. He felt the bones fracture under his teeth but John left with the gun, knowing he had but seconds as the firearm clattered across the flagstone. John leapt after it, and he was shedding the wolf as he jumped. His palm, now
rough and hairless, curled around the cold metal and John rose, rolling and pushing himself to his feet. He heard a gunshot and a yelp and John knew his unwitting brother in arms had fallen.

John stood and the grip of the gun was strange in his hand. He’d never held a gun before, of course, but it felt right in his grasp. His hand didn’t shake and his heart finally slowed.

“Put the snot down!” someone screamed.

The shouting continued, but John barely heard it. His universe had shrunk down to the firearm he was raising above his head. He inhaled, exhaled, and pulled the trigger, eyes to the moon. There was a second when time stopped, as if everyone simultaneously stopped to think, ‘Was I shot?’

They all deserved it, but none of Pryde’s friends, associates or employees were John’s mark.

The glass began to shower down like crystal raindrops. A single panel… shattered.

John watched the shards fall in slow motion, glinting like diamonds in the lowlight. It was almost as if John could see the night pour in, and he didn’t smile, but a feeling of contentedness washed over him.

Another gun fired and John’s right shoulder jerked back a few inches. It was hardly as climactic as his own shot, but both bullets had found their targets and John watched the gun tumble from his fingers as he began to fall, bed of glass awaiting. Even though cerebrally John knew that somewhere deep in his flesh a bullet burrowed deep, the pain hadn’t come yet. Even when his back hit the ground and the ruins of the window bit his skin, his head was still clear.

“I’m sorry,” John whispered slowly as blood began to bubble up from the hole in his body—severe haemorrhaging, the medical term floated up in John’s head.

The blood began to pool below him, flooding the glass, turning the diamond fragments into rubies on the earth.

John gasped as he saw the wings. He wondered if any of the people in the chaos noticed, but it didn’t matter. Even if they tried to shoot her down, she was too fast, too agile for them and as John watched her pale feathers flare against the bright stars, catching wind, John finally realised how desperately he wished he was in her place. So much that he gained no real pleasure from the knowledge of their victory. He wanted to be the one flying, flying to find arctic eyes. John knew he would have found him anywhere, no matter where they were.

I wish I could have said goodbye.

No. He didn’t. That was a lie. He didn’t want to say goodbye. He’d never wanted to say goodbye. Heavy tears slid from the corner of his eyes and mixed with the blood from the little cuts that the falling glass had left on his face.

He didn’t want to die. He didn’t want to say goodbye.

“Ah!!!” John cried out as the pain finally found him, radiating from his shoulder like the blast of a bomb.

A new bout of adrenaline flooded his system, temporarily clearing his eyes as his body recognised the one single fact that mattered: John Watson was dying; he really was.

He gasped for breath and with each desperate lungful of air a new wave of agony pulsed through his system and his lifeblood continued to flee his veins. Some removed part of his brain realised that he was going into shock.
John couldn’t bring himself, even in that moment, to regret any of the choices that had brought him there, that had led to the reality of him lying in a pool of his own blood, far away from his home, far from everyone he loved most, alone—but that didn’t mean that a fierce desperation didn’t grip him, that in his last moment he didn’t fight, admit that this wasn’t the way he wanted it to end—that a dying man’s prayer didn’t pass his lips. It was too early. He wasn’t done yet.

_I want to see him again_, the plea throbbed in his mind as painfully as each feeble beat of his heart pushed more blood from his body and onto the earth.

“To *please, God—let me live,*” John cried, but the black was closing in on him now and the pain was beginning to dull.

The stars blinked out one by one above him and John was left alone in the dark. It was warm there, and there was no hurt, only a beautifully familiar presence in his mind. A hallucination… of course, but John didn’t care. The tears fell as the warm presence caressed him. John’s left hand twitched up as if to reach out for him, but he was far too weak.

_I’m sorry_, he murmured into the dark. _I had to. I’m so sorry._

The silent shape curled closer and John focused on that instead of the agony. It felt like with each passing second another weight attached itself to his body and he couldn’t stay on the surface any longer.

_I loved you… you beautiful, clever thing._

The memory of that brilliant form glowed brightly at the centre of his being and John didn’t let it go, and just before John Watson was wholly lost to the dark, he whispered one last sentiment to the memory, like a child, lost alone in the blackest wood.

_Find me._
Someone saved John Watson’s life. He felt the blood moving through his veins, clearly drugged into sluggishness, but definitely staying inside his body. For a second or two John wondered why he was alive, why they had saved him, but then he remembered the bars and the fur and the rich feathers and thanked Pryde’s all-consuming greed. It had been part of his and Mary’s plan after all; John just hadn’t been sure that that level of possession would extend to the rabid dog, but luckily for John his status as champion had apparently earned him his life.

He was in human form, laid out on a cold surface, restrained, velcros around his wrists and ankles; and there was a tube stuck down his throat. It was hard to think and John knew that he was in a haze of sedatives, apparently more thoroughly administered than pain killers if the burning ache in his shoulder was any indication. A single mental press told him they’d put him on shift suppressors. It wasn’t that John would dare shift when they’d clearly set his wounds in one form—everyone knew that it could have catastrophic results early in the healing process, torn sutures, re-broken bones—but he wanted to see if they’d known what they were doing. Clearly they had known at least enough to put him on suppressors, and that was comforting. Maybe he really would live through this, the loopy thought passed through his head.

The surface that John lay on rumbled and he deduced he was in transit. He cracked open bleary eyes and it was too dark to see much, but the light from the heart monitor hooked up to his index finger revealed that he wasn’t alone. He was on a stretcher on one side of a van, or perhaps it was a small truck. On the other side there were familiar eyes, bound, and John very nearly smiled before he lost the battle to keep his eyes open.

Pryde was reacting just as they had thought he would. John let himself sink back towards the blissful darkness.

_Run_, he thought. _Run as far and as fast as you want._

If Mycroft had ever put restrictions on Sherlock, he’d never worked so hard to keep his brother in as he did after what he’d taken to calling Sherlock’s ‘little roof incident’. Sherlock had no idea how he had found out the details, and no matter how often Sherlock insisted that he’d taken the correct dose for someone of his size and that it wasn’t a big deal, the event had turned Mycroft into Sherlock’s personal devil—the bane of his existence. Mycroft had swooped down on him like a horrible, insufferable eagle and somehow dug his talons into Sherlock’s flesh. He felt like a puppet.

Mycroft hadn’t hesitated to play every card in his hand. Not this time.

“If you do not attend your Autumn classes, sit your exams, and keep on the path that will earn you a degree from a reputable institution—as well as stay clean—I will remove my support, the Institute’s, and Scotland Yard’s. I will actively prevent and prohibit you from your continued investigation of the disappearance of John Watson. Do not test me this time, little brother.”

No matter how much Mycroft had claimed it was in Sherlock’s best interest, no matter how _truly, sincerely_ Mycroft had apologised, the young genius knew that he would never, not until the
moment he died, be able to forgive Mycroft for this. There were some wounds that didn’t heal and they both knew it.

But that didn’t mean that Mycroft didn’t get what he wanted.

So when autumn term came, Sherlock picked four classes at random and attended them religiously. Days were spent in lecture halls or staring at the wall where names and faces and convoluted lines had returned to their places in Sherlock’s room. At night he walked through the forest, like a wraith in the dark, and when he absolutely couldn’t stay awake, it was under the trees where he rested.

Sherlock hadn’t slept in a bed since Moriarty put a bullet in his brain.

There was nothing peculiar about the morning of September twelfth. Sherlock had come out of the woods at dawn. He’d gone to the A Wing to change, donned the coat over his uniform like a set of armour, and then made his way down the stairs to be intercepted by a scruffy, familiar member of the student body. Sherlock thought Anderson was starting to look more like one of his homeless acquaintances from London than a member of a decent Institute lately—which he hadn’t hesitated to mention when the rat-shift handed him tea in a to-go cup and a napkin full of biscuits.

“Well maybe I do need a bit of a shave,” Anderson said with a painfully awkward chuckle. “But it said on the telly that beards are fashionable right now.”

Another product of Molly’s television habits, Sherlock was sure. He sighed heavily and made his way to the main door of A Wing, deciding that it wasn’t even worth his time to mention that the scraggly, spotty collection of hairs sprouting from Anderson’s chin in no way qualified as a beard. Anderson jogged to catch up. Sherlock took a sip of the tea and curled his lips in disgust. He never made it right. The tea that appeared on his nightstand some mornings was better, not as good as John’s, but still better than the weak, milky mess currently swilling around in the mug in hand.

Sherlock dropped the biscuits in the bin by the path but did keep the awful tea. Caffeine wasn’t nicotine, but it was something.

“So,” Anderson began stiltedly. “Are you liking your new courses?”

This was why Sherlock liked it best when Greg or Molly was babysitting. For the most part Greg was comfortable with silence—and when he did speak it wasn’t utterly grating. Molly had a tendency to chatter nervously, but Sherlock found her voice to be much less annoying than most people’s.

“Oh, yes. Young adult literature is fascinating. Nothing like the outright profound analysis of the human condition produced in novels about teenage cliches,” Sherlock replied seethingly, but as always Anderson didn’t rise to the bait.

Sherlock ignored the path and made to cross the grass towards the humanities building.

Neither young man saw the falcon land. They didn’t see her all but fall from the sky, crash landing on the roof of Baker Grand Hall. Her wings hung like lead weights away from her body. A few feathers in each wing were cracked along the shaft. Many barbs were split apart, unzipped in several places. She hadn’t stopped to groom them back into repair. Raptors weren’t meant to fly long distances, and the kestrel had fought the wind and the night, and hadn’t stopped. She’d flown so far… and after being cooped up for so long. Her tiny chest rose and fell rapidly and her heart
was beating faster than the wings of a hummingbird.

She exhaustedly flutter-hopped to the top of a parapet, wings screaming in protest and her vision momentarily blacking out as she teetered, only a firm grip with small talons keeping her from tumbling right to the earth below.

They’d discussed the idea of going to the nearest town she could find, stopping at a police station, but there she’d find bureaucracy. They’d need warrants. They’d need to assemble a team—and that was only if they believed her. That was only if they believed one young Changeling who was telling them that dozens of supposedly wandered students were being kept in cages in a big castle. Pryde would have had them all shipped off within an hour of realising that Mary was gone. He’d burn the castle to ash as long as he was out with his pets. Mary and John knew that.

Sherlock would know how to find them though. Sherlock would be able to track them all down. John said he’d call his brother. His brother was high government—MI6 and Bond stuff. He had the power to stop Pryde.

It was as the catastrophically weary kestrel considered her next move, half thinking, half trying to keep herself standing upright as her vision kept darkening and lightening again—taking in the Baker Institute. She’d finally found it. Did she go find a main office…? John told her where he lived. She scanned the campus with radar eyes, looking for a building labelled A Wing—even defective with fatigue they picked up the sight of a young man with curly dark hair and a long coat worn over his school uniform crossing the lawn.

His cheek bones were high and smooth, and even from atop the main Hall, Mary Morstan could see that his eyes were an arctic blue—and sad. So very sad under such practiced indifference.

Sherlock!

She couldn’t believe it, but deep in her heart she knew that her journey had come to an end. She spread her failing wings and directed herself towards the earth.

Something feathery hit Sherlock in the chest. At first it was a light thump and Sherlock’s arms went out reflexively as he gasped in shock. With a downward glance, Sherlock ascertained that it was a kestrel, but before he could determine the exact species, it disappeared and Sherlock was thrown violently back, stumbling to his knees, arms suddenly filled with a naked young woman.

“Oh my God!” Anderson gasped somewhere behind him.

The blonde woman and Sherlock struggled to untangle themselves and Sherlock could already tell that she wasn’t well. She gasped for breath and her movements were feeble, and she was trying to talk but didn’t seem to be able to have enough air to form the words.

Sherlock finally got his hands onto her shoulders and she used one hand twisted into his lapel to raise her head—and Sherlock’s own breath stopped as he realised he knew who she was in less than half a second. Even flooded with desperation, Sherlock knew that face, and he knew the bird that had flown into him was the endangered Seychelles Kestrel.

Her head dipped and her eyes fluttered. Sherlock realised she was close to fainting.

“Mary Morstan,” Sherlock said as his heart began to pound against his ribs.

“You know her?!” Anderson asked from above him but he sounded far away.
At the sound of her name, Mary forced her eyes back open and Sherlock put a steadying hand on her cheek. She locked her eyes with his, sorrow blazing somewhere deep inside.

“Sherlock,” she finally uttered, one single word, and then Mary Morstan passed out.

She knew.

She knew who he was… which meant—

“Anderson! Help me up! We have to get her to the clinic,” Sherlock barked and soon he was on his feet, carrying the young woman as fast as he could towards the training hospital.

. . .

John floated in a semiconscious void, filled with a haze of movement and pain. He was back in his little boat on the open ocean, except this time great sharks swam around him, rocking him. He could see their fins and he knew that they could smell his blood in the water, and with each passing hour they swam closer.

John knew he’d taken a turn for the worse when the water began to boil. The real world was fog around him and he only vaguely registered it when they moved him from the back of the truck. For just a moment there was blissfully cool air against his flushed skin and then he was back in the dark.

. . .

“Yes. They’re trying to bring her around now,” Sherlock said in a rush as he paced madly in the corridor of the Baker Institute’s training hospital; he’d been dialling Mycroft as soon as Mary Morstan had been taken from his arms. “And I need you to pull up records of any trucks rented in the last week, as I don’t know how long it took Mary Morstan to find me—narrow the results to rush requests. The trucks would have been rented without reservations.”

“You think he’s moving them?” Mycroft’s deliberate tone filtered into Sherlock’s ear, and he could hear shuffling sounds that meant his brother was already in motion.

Footsteps rapidly approached and Sherlock turned to see Greg and Molly rushing down the hallway.

“Sherlock, what—”

Anderson, who sat in a waiting chair outside the room where the nurses had brought Mary Morstan, must have texted them. Sherlock violently waved the question away and nodded at Anderson. He could explain.

“Yes, Mycroft. If he realised one of his prized possessions had escaped, he’d know that she’d lead authorities to the menagerie. He’s spent years and years building his collection; he’ll do everything in his power to retain it,” Sherlock said into the receiver.
“Stands to reason,” Mycroft agreed. “I’ll have a comprehensive list sent to you within the hour.”

There was a second of silence. Sherlock stared at the open door where Greg and Molly hovered. Mycroft spoke again.

“She said your name before she passed out?” Mycroft confirmed one of the rapid-fire details that Sherlock had spouted at the beginning of the conversation.

“Yes.”

“And you think that means…”

“Yes,” Sherlock said with confidence, and if Mycroft was going to continue he never got the chance.

“Sherlock, she’s waking up!” Molly’s voice sent him whipping around, coat flaring.

He hung up on Mycroft without a goodbye. Sherlock heard a breathless voice talking to the nurse as he rounded into the room.

“I need to talk to Sherlock Holmes. Where is—Sherlock!” she said as she spotted him, pushing herself up and almost falling back as her arms buckled. “You have to find them. You have to find John.”

“What do you know about John?! Is John okay?!” Sherlock fired off as he strode to her bedside.

She was completely distraught and her eyes filled with tears. The poor nurse tried to soothe her but Mary only pushed her away. Her words caught in her throat and terror brewed in Sherlock’s stomach, too scared of the answer to press her anymore.

“It was his plan. We heard about Moriarty and he came up with a plan that would let me escape—to find you. But he had to… I didn’t want—” Mary was staring down at the bed, tears beginning to overflow as she seemed to remember. “It had to be during the fights and he—they—”

She was losing it, horror on her face and hand quaking as it rose to cover her mouth, as if it could hold back hysterics. It was like finding John’s marker in that changing booth all over again—but Sherlock needed to know.

“Mary, tell me. Tell me what happened to John,” Sherlock said, surprised at the evenness of his own words.

Mary bent, fingers curled into shaking claws over her lips as she stared unseeing, head shaking back and forth, failed denial.

“I think they shot John,” she said, as if it was the first time she had let herself admit it—as if she wouldn’t have been able to make her journey with that weight.

Sherlock was already spinning away, dialling and pressing his phone to his ear.

“Sherlock?”

“Get a team together, Mycroft! We need to find John now!”
The ocean had frozen. It spread out from John’s little boat like someone had coated the surface of the entire earth in blue hand-blown glass. Except it was so cold, and little flurries of snow twirled around the solid waves.

When John could pull himself out of the wasteland in his mind he found himself alone in the dark there too. He was by himself in a small room. He could work out that much, and since they arrived a man had come to see him only once. He’d taken a look under the bandages and muttered indiscernibly and John wanted to look up at him and say, “Yeah, it’s pretty bad, innit?” But the blood-loss and possible sepsis had locked him back into a cage in his own mind.

He shivered in the bottom of his boat, good arm wrapped around his chest. He stared up at imaginary stars and thought about how Sherlock didn’t know any of their names.

Sherlock…

The ice was the exact shade of his eyes and John felt his heart beat a bit stronger in chest. He couldn’t move. He couldn’t fight this… but he dared the ice to crack. He dared the sharks to rise out of the depths.

John Watson kept breathing.

The warehouse was on the outskirts of Cardiff.

“Sherlock, are you sure?” Mycroft had pressed. I can’t just order another raid on a hunch.”

Mary had told them that the menagerie was in a castle in northern Wales. Mycroft had had a team out there within the hour and they’d found the place all but empty. Strangely they’d just had a fire in their courtyard—it was a blessing the whole castle didn’t go up. The master of the castle had also been conveniently out of the country. Mycroft had Thomas Everett Pryde’s passport pulled—but at the moment he was low on Sherlock’s priorities.

“I don’t have hunches, Mycroft,” Sherlock snapped. “Five trucks were rented from a company in Rhyl. No name was on record—”

“Alright,” Mycroft cut him off. “Text me the location of the warehouse.”

“Have me picked up,” Sherlock had said by way of goodbye.

Now the Holmes brothers stood side by side a block away from what was once an old Woolsworth’s storage unit. It had been abandoned for years—but it wasn’t abandoned now.

Mycroft’s PA, currently calling herself Anthea, stood close by, phone to her ear.

“Sir, a Changeling officer did a fly by and didn’t get any response. If the victims are in there, they’re in human form,” she reported.
Mycroft crossed his hands over the grip of his umbrella and squinted his eyes in the direction of the warehouse.

“Well, looks like our collector isn’t completely witless,” Mycroft mused.

“Only just,” Sherlock murmured back, voice sounding positively deadly. “He may as well have left us a set of neon tracks to follow.”

“Not everyone is a hunter, brother dear.”

“I am,” Sherlock said, words solid as stones.

The image of Jim Moriarty’s taunting smile spun through his head and he remembered the pool of blood, but with a flash the body wasn’t Moriarty’s but John’s.

There was a flurry of activity as a full on SWAT team mobilised. Anthea spoke again.

“Officers have confirmed the presence of at least fifty, up to sixty five, people within the warehouse. Only around ten show signs of mobility,” she reported.

“He should have hired more guards…” Mycroft said; looking around at the thirty-man team he had assembled.

Sherlock was quiet. He’d retreated to the small steady space in his mind, ignoring how everything else was ready to collapse completely around him, based completely on what they found in that building. It took everything in his power not to start running at that very moment, to break in, to find John. Mycroft seemed to sense his growing desperation.

“You will go in behind the SWAT team. You will not compromise their procedures. Remember, there are consequences to your actions, as I’m sure you’ve learned,” Mycroft said.

Sherlock didn’t even grace him with a glare. They both knew that the bomb had struck home.

“I know,” Sherlock growled.

Mycroft took a bullet proof vest from an officer and turned to Sherlock, who shed his coat quickly, allowing Mycroft to help him pull it over his head. He put his coat back on over it.

The SWAT team split into four units and began to quickly move down the alleys towards the warehouse. Sherlock was told to follow the last group, and stayed exactly where he was directed. He noticed Anthea was with a separate group. Apparently Mycroft was being picky about who got to be his eyes. Sherlock’s recount of events would have normally been sufficient, but he would admit his vision was unusually narrow at the moment.

The men at the front of his and Anthea’s group threw their hands down in a ‘stop’ gesture as the other group moved to the small side-door next to the loading bay. Most readied guns and torches as the others hefted a compact, modern battering ram. Two men swung the black metal object back and when they slammed it forward, striking home just under the lock, the bang was like the explosion that signalled the beginning of a race—and everyone was moving.

Hand signals had the micro-army moving inside the building and instantly fanning out. Sherlock heard the shouts from inside before he even made it past the door, and when he did there was chaos.

Sherlock believed the term for the force used to secure the warehouse was colloquially known as
overkill.

Inside it was dark except for the manic movement of the torches. Huddled in groups near the walls were the Changelings. They sat up, looking around wildly, the cuffs around their wrists and the chains keeping them together clinked loudly, adding to the cacophony shaking the rafters of the warehouse. It was over in seconds flat. No shots were fired. The all clear rang out as soon as the last guard’s knees hit the ground, almost drowned out by the continued bedlam.

But Sherlock heard it, and he stared shouting. It burst from his chest, the pure desperation that had been ripping him apart as he’d had to hold it in.

“Yes!” he shouted as he began to run, abandoning his unit.

His head whipped around wildly, scanning, scanning, and finding nothing.

“Yes!”

No, no, no. He had to be here.

“JOHN!”

He couldn’t be—gunshots rang out in Sherlock’s mind, one remembered and one imagined and it just couldn’t end the same. John wouldn’t—he couldn’t—can’t be—

“Sherlock!”

Someone called his name. He stopped and spun.

“Sherlock Holmes?!?” the voice was like the bleating of a lamb.

Not John.

The floor seemed to disappear for a moment. Not John, but someone. A young boy with dark skin, terrified-hopeful eyes, staring at him. Sherlock rushed to him, knowing what his name on the boy’s lips meant.

“Where is John Watson?!” he demanded, grabbing the boy’s shoulders.

The kid’s lips trembled but he didn’t hesitate.

“When we got here they took him to somewhere in the back. When he—they lied to me. I didn’t —” the boy had dissolved into tears and Sherlock had no idea what he was talking about after the initial sentence but he didn’t care; he was already gone.

He ran towards the back of the warehouse and found the single door there. Once it may have been an administrative office. Sherlock ripped it wide open and then he froze for a second.

Blond hair, longer than he remembered. Round nose and broad shoulders, bonier than normal. And though they were closed, he knew that under the pale lashes were warm blue eyes. He was on a stretcher. Bandages had been wrapped over a large part of his upper torso. A heart monitor beeped in the corner.

A heart monitor beeped in the corner.

And Sherlock could feel him. Faint in this form and in John’s state but after months of silence—after 2 months, 2 days, and 23 hours—one could hear a pin drop from miles away. And the pin was
dropping. Like a little flickering light, and Sherlock could even feel its heat.

His breath caught, turning into a strangled gasp and he was there, next to the stretcher and his hands were on John’s face—John’s skin, warm and alive—pushing the fringe away from his forehead and Sherlock was talking, calling, reaching out with his entire being.

“John! John!”

... John shook in the bottom of the boat. He was so cold and the stars had long blinked out above him, leaving a void all around. Each breath was measured and deliberate, as if he’d stop breathing if he didn’t think about it. If he didn’t keep telling his heart to beat it would surely cease its pumping, but John couldn’t let that happen.

“I can’t,” he whispered with blue lips into the dark. “Find me… find me… find me…”

I’m waiting.

John looked back at the sky and that’s when he saw it. The North Star. It was back, like someone had punched a pinhole in the black. Then there was another; and one more, and suddenly the sky was awash with stars. They twinkled and danced and the Milky Way painted a heavenly stripe from horizon to horizon.

His heart beat stronger once more and his lungs retook the job of pumping air in and out of his body and John scrambled. Something was happening. A wolf stood and threw his head back. He howled, long and clear. It rolled through the endless night, and it wasn’t sad, but rampant.

<Find me! I know you’re out there!>

And when he opened his eyes, the wolf realised that the night wasn’t so endless after all. It came like fire, burning the darkness away—and John watched as the sun rose over the horizon. It painted the frozen blue-white with great swaths of yellow and gold, cast shadows from icy waves and that’s when John saw it, the shape running across the frozen ocean.

It got to the top of a great swell and stopped, still so far away, but they gazed at each other, and distance was meaningless. John was sure he must have been glowing with a kind of exultant grace.

John broke softly out of his dream world, fading into consciousness.

“John!”

The ice faded and John knew that voice. He clung to it, used it to pull himself out of the void.

“John!”

There was hurt in the real world, sharp and jagged, but that didn’t matter.

“John! Please!”

He opened his eyes, slow, just breaching the surface.

And he saw the sky instead of the ocean. Not ice, but a dripping sky, sharp cheekbones washed with tears, only centimetres away. All he saw was him. It was him.
You found me.

“John?!” Sherlock said frantically as blue met blue.

He sniffed sharply and John had never seen him like this, eyes rimmed with red and John felt a tear land on his cheek and, even in this state, he was beautiful. More brilliant than any sunrise.

“You should say please more often,” John rasped.

Sherlock paused, hearing John speak, and then he registered the actual words. The smile broke on his face like the dawn and he laughed, shocked, wet and blindingly perfect.

John pressed his face into the palm on his cheek and let his eyes fall closed.

“John!?" Sherlock’s voice was spiked with fear again but it was for naught.

“It’s okay,” John murmured. “Just tired…”

The weights were reattaching themselves to his body.

“It’s okay, Sherlock…”

He went under willingly.

“Sherlock…”

And he fell back into the abyss, except this time he wasn’t alone in his little boat. He let himself rest on the calm sea, a wolf curled into the body of a panther, and the gentle sun shined down on them as the boat floated slowly but surely towards land.

... ... ...

When John opened his eyes again, it was to the smell of antiseptic, and the glow of fluorescent lights. Even with privacy curtains surrounding him, he knew exactly where he was. He’d scrubbed these floors. He’d disinfected these counters. There was a tenuous tremble of disbelief deep in John’s belly.

There was a clear ache in his shoulder but the pain was easy to bear. Clearly he’d been properly medicated this time. There was a weight pressing down somewhere around his upper abdomen and John looked down to see a mass of dark brown curls and the tremors in his stomach intensified. Sherlock was half on the bed, half sitting in a chair. His breath came and went slowly, and dark lashes cast shadows on his sharp cheekbones.

John wanted to reach out but his right arm was completely immobilised and a pair of long-fingered hands wrapped around John’s left. So he very slowly brushed a thumb over the cool ridges of his knuckles, a bit terrified that if he moved too quickly he’d wake up. That he’d be back in the dark… or back behind bars.

But it didn’t happen, not when John twisted his hand to thread his fingers through Sherlock’s, and not when Sherlock squeezed his eyes closed, scrunched up his nose and his lashes fluttered open.

He seemed confused for a second, eyes on their linked hands, and then he glanced up.
“John…!” he said, sitting up, and his mouth opened as if he was going to say more but he had no idea what to say.

They stared at each other and it was totally surreal and neither young man had the vaguest clue as to what could be said. What do you say? Two halves of a whole had been ripped violently apart and they didn’t even know all of each other’s scars anymore.

Nothing seemed like it would be enough. I missed you. Thank you. You saved me. It’s good to see you again. There weren’t words. John’s brow furrowed and his eyes were warm pools and Sherlock’s fingers tightened and twitched around his and it was all too much. They were together again. They both had new scars, yes, but they were alive. John could feel Sherlock’s mind in his own again, that warm, clever brilliance and his throat worked. Sherlock seemed completely frozen and finally John knew what to say.

“Just come here, you ridiculous—,” he said as he took his hand from Sherlock to cup his jaw and Sherlock all but lunged forward.

Their lips met and every cell in John’s body nearly hurt with it. The warmth against him was overwhelming. They didn’t move or deepen it, but just held onto the contact desperately, pouring all those things there weren’t words for into a single fervent kiss. It was all the pain and the longing of those lost days; it was all the promises that they weren’t sure they could keep, but leapt to make anyway.

The kiss softened to a close and Sherlock pulled back a few centimetres as John idly traced a thumb over Sherlock’s cheek bone. John wasn’t sure how long they just looked at each other but in the end it was Sherlock who moved away, gaze drawn to the bandages around John’s chest.

“I should go and get the doctor,” he said, standing.

A brief panic gripped John.


“You don’t know that,” Sherlock pointed out.

John’s lips twitched with amusement.

“Am I going to die?”

“No,” Sherlock said.

“See, you know. You can tell me. I’m sure the doctors will come of their own accord,” John pressed.

Sherlock narrowed his eyes but then went back to his chair, pressed close to John’s bedside. The knot loosened in John’s chest and he realised that he did need Sherlock to tell him. There was so much to tell between them. Sherlock pulled his knees up, tucking himself into the corner of the chair.

“So… tell me. What happened?” John asked; face serious and Sherlock seemed to know that he was asking about more than his medical condition.

“Mary found me,” Sherlock began, starting with the easier stuff John expected, but the mention of his friend had him sidetracked.
“She did find you then? Is she okay?” John asked.

Sherlock nodded.

“She basically fell out of the sky on top of me. She was heavily fatigued upon arriving and quickly passed out, but a night in the clinic, and some fluids, and she was fine. She’s still on campus. Police have wanted to talk to her and she’s been under the care of Dr. Mortimer until he can liaison with the councillor at her Institute. She also didn’t want to go until you woke up. She’s been by a number of times. I like her.”

John had been so focused on his relief that Mary was okay, that it took a minute for Sherlock’s last comment to register.

“I—you like her?” John said, eyebrows approaching his hairline.

Sherlock didn’t like people. For the most part he was either repulsed by them or acutely neutral. He did occasionally find people he found tolerable, and that tolerance took a long time to resemble anything similar to like. And even if he did, the idea that he would just say it aloud, willingly, was shocking.

“Yes,” Sherlock cut into his reeling. “She’s clever, and unlike most of the blundering masses, she doesn’t just look. She knows how to see. I enjoyed conversing with her.”

John grinned teasingly.

“Wow. Sounds like you two really hit it off. Should I be worried?” John asked.

Sherlock’s lips twitched with muted mirth, but then he sobered, a frown marring his face as he cast his gaze down.

John could feel the mixed emotions against his mind and for a whole few seconds, he got distracted by their presence, breath quickening as he tried to soak up every minute echo of emotion, staggered by the feeling of not being completely alone in his own head anymore.

“She also recounted much of what occurred in Pryde’s Gardens,” Sherlock said quietly, using the given name of the menagerie.

The smile dropped off John’s face. The fingers of his good hand twisted uncomfortably in the sheets as the dark memories leapt at him. He was glad that Mary had done most of the explaining. The details from John’s point of view could come later.

“And you found the others? They’re all okay?” John redirected.

Sherlock looked back up at him with a bit of fire in his eyes. Something like triumph. It had been so long since John had seen it and it filled him with warmth and strength.

“Yes. All of the Changelings from Pryde’s menagerie are safe,” Sherlock said but didn’t stop there. “And with the taking of the Gardens, even with Pryde’s attempts to cover his tracks, the lid has been blown off the entire British arm of the Changeling trafficking industry. Mycroft and I have already started finding things. Without Moriarty to tie up the loose ends, the entire operation is unravelling.”

John had no idea what to say. He was happy, of course, but it was too much to wrap his brain around in that moment.
“Sounds like you’ve been busy, and I thought you’d been waiting by my sickbed,” John said.

Sherlock scowled.

“I haven’t left once,” Sherlock said, nodding towards the laptop on the side table.

“I’m just teasing, Sherlock,” John said warmly. “Speaking of my sickbed, how long have I been here and how’s…”

John gestured to his shoulder. Sherlock rested his chin on his knees.

“You’ve been out for a little over a day since we found you in Cardiff. They took you in for surgery and the doctors say it went well. There was the beginning of an infection but it seemed to be mostly kept at bay by antibiotics. They said you show signs of having been on low levels of antibiotics for a long while,” Sherlock said, looking utterly miserable.

“I suspected they were putting them in my food,” John said and Sherlock nodded.

“So now you’re on a particularly strong course of antibiotics to make sure any remaining infection is fully eradicated. The damage done by the gunshot itself includes a nicked subclavian artery and some blood vessel damage, which the surgery addressed. The bullet missed your scapula and the surgeons think that any nerve damage is minimal. With some physical therapy and proper time to heal there should be no permanent damage.”

“Good,” John said and let out a breath he hadn’t realised he’d been holding. “Good.”

He knew that he was lucky to be alive, but he was only nineteen and if he was being honest he’d like to play rugby again someday. In spite of the shadow on his face, Sherlock let a half smile settle on his lips.

“You’re going to be fine.”

His eyes were unusually sympathetic, and once again John was reminded of the time they’d been apart. How much must have changed? There were even physical differences. Sherlock was skinnier than John had ever seen him, clearly having lost weight he couldn’t afford to lose. His face was thinner, almost gaunt, and it made John instinctually want to start shoving biscuits down his throat. And though it was impossible to tell while Sherlock sat, curled over himself in the hospital chair with a curtain backdrop of china-blue flowers, John swore he was taller, that the disparity between their heights had only widened in his absence. That was only what he could see while Sherlock was cloaked in his uniform, wearing his coat, collar turned up so it brushed his ears when he sank into it.

Sherlock had been filled in on much of John’s story, but John had no idea what Sherlock had been through in their separation. He was equally full of dreaded expectations and complete confusion; there was a whole list of questions.

“So, you know my track round the bend, but what about you, Sherlock? What happened?” John asked, re-memorising the way that Sherlock’s curls laid against his forehead. “What happened with Moriarty?”

Of all the questions on John’s list it was probably the biggest. There were many parts of Sherlock’s story that John felt he’d be able to predict, many parts that inspired waves of worry and fear, but Moriarty’s death had been completely baffling.

“We got word that he killed himself. Why would he do that?” John clarified, and Sherlock’s
expression turned grim as a fresh grave.

Sherlock looked away, but his gaze frequently turned briefly back to John’s face, as if he had to keep checking to make sure that John was still there. Honestly, John couldn’t blame him. There was still a small part of him that kept expecting him to wake up back in the Gardens at any minute.

It was only slightly stronger than the part of him that thought that he might have just died and Heaven was real. He thanked the intermittent pain in his shoulder that discredited the theory. John bet Heaven would have better morphine administration.

“Sherlock?” John said again, when the panther shift still hadn’t said anything. Sherlock looked back up at him.

“I tried to find you without him,” Sherlock began and then looked away again, something like a mix of shame and fury flashing against John’s mind. “But I couldn’t. He was too good, too careful.”

John sat up straighter and unconsciously shifted towards Sherlock, staying very quiet.

“Even Scotland Yard and Mycroft couldn’t find a single thread. He’d sent me a letter, though,” Sherlock said and John’s eyebrows knit. “After you were taken. At first it seemed to be merely a taunt.”

John scowled viciously, and for a minute John was angry that he hadn’t been the one to put the bullet in Moriarty. He kept his breathing steady though as Sherlock continued.

“But of course it wasn’t. In my… emotional state,” Sherlock said with a guarded glance up at John that tore at his heart. “I ignored the clear call to arms. The letter gave away the fact that we’d met Jim Moriarty before.”

“Molly’s boyfriend,” John confirmed, and then something occurred to him that he hadn’t been in a position to think about before that moment. “Does she know?”

Sherlock paused and then shook his head.

“No. I thought it would be… kinder… not to say,” Sherlock admitted.

John nodded as an overwhelming surge of affection flooded him.

“I think so, too,” John said, which earned him a brief half-smile from Sherlock.

“Anyway, with that knowledge I knew how to contact him,” Sherlock continued.

“The phone number,” John breathed before he really registered coming to the conclusion.

“Yes,” Sherlock confirmed. “We met in the forest.”

The thought of them meeting made John’s throat constrict with fear. He hated the idea of it. Every last bit.

“It was the final stage of his game, the epilogue of his story. He wanted to burn me,” Sherlock said, eyes narrowed. “He wanted to get back at me, make sure I knew it had all happened because I didn’t live up to his expectations. He wanted me to know that’s why he… took you.”

The background noise of the hospital had all but faded out to John’s ears. He was in a forest, a forest where he had been powerless to help Sherlock.
“So what did you do?” John asked, cursing himself repeatedly for not being there, for being the one Moriarty used to hurt Sherlock.

“I lived up to his expectations,” Sherlock said, voice deadly, and if John had been distracted by his own self-deprecation he was fully present once more. Sherlock continued before John had the chance to ask what that meant. “He realised that I wasn’t bluffing. That as long as he was alive, I could find you…”

Sherlock trailed off and John’s eyes turned into saucers as he slowly processed the implications.

“No…” John said. “Who would…? Just to stop you from—?!”

“James Moriarty would. I don’t expect you to fully understand, but he was happy to do it if it meant that he won,” Sherlock said. “And, as you know… the two of us knew that without him I’d have no way to find you, the menagerie, or even a clue… he had won.”

Sherlock’s eyes were distant, haunted. John pressed his lips together, jaw twitching, without any idea what to say. He could feel the shadow of Sherlock’s despair, but then something bright and defiant sprang to life. He didn’t look up but John could see the flames in his eyes as he glared at the floor.

“But he was wrong,” Sherlock said.

“What?” John asked, once again totally confused.

Sherlock’s head snapped up and John was a bit taken aback by the silent intensity turned on him.

“He was wrong,” Sherlock said, speaking slowly, but strangely triumphant. “He miscalculated, and I made the mistake of thinking he was infallible. But he was. Don’t you see, John?”

“No…” John said honestly. “What was he wrong about?”

Suddenly Sherlock was right here, palms on John’s cheeks, surprisingly gentle for the wildness in his eyes.


John was still lost. A shocked laugh escaped him, dying quickly at the seriousness in Sherlock’s face, at his pride.

“What?”

“He made the mistake of treating you like a card to play. He took you for granted, treated you like a mere pawn in his game,” Sherlock said, and John felt the rage of being used as a weapon against Sherlock flair hotly in his veins again, jaw setting. “But you were never a pawn, John. You were always a knight, and he forgot that knights can move behind enemy lines. He thought he could kill himself, remove my line to you and you’d just sit eternally in your cell. It was the most glaring mistake he—either of us—could ever make.”

There was an apology there, but John was too floored to respond to it.

“Moriarty made his greatest mistake when he didn’t account for you, my most brilliant, most amazing, John Watson,” Sherlock said, and his whole face was positively radiant, so sincere, so—

John didn’t remember the smile blooming on his face, but he did remember the beautiful pain that
came when Sherlock pressed his lips to John’s forehead. He remembered when he decided to use his one good hand to bring Sherlock in for another anchoring, spark-igniting kiss. And he remembered the moment he started believing it wasn’t a dream.

They were actually okay.

They were free.

In the end John was very, very happy that Sherlock hadn’t immediately gone to get the doctor, because after the nurse came by to check on him and found him awake, he and Sherlock had barely had a minute alone since. In the wake of the doctor was his family, and John had simultaneously balked and felt overwhelmed with happiness when he saw them. His mother was crying a lot. His father had a look of immense pride on his face, and it turned out that they’d met Mary, too, who had told them the softest version of the story she could craft, much to John’s gratitude. Even Harry was there. She stood in the door, all teenage awkwardness and stiff with discomfort. Then she’d stomped over to the bed and leaned down for a silted hug.

“So, did you really get shot?” she asked and then poked him right in the shoulder.

“OW! Yes!” John nearly shouted. “You bloody—”

John bit back the rest and Harry’s lips twitched. She stayed the morning before she escaped back to town where his family was staying in a hotel. His parents hovered for nearly the entire day. His consistently weepy mother even embraced Sherlock tightly once, thanking him over and over while Sherlock mentally screamed for help and John stifled giggles.

Mary also appeared in the morning and everyone but Sherlock made themselves momentarily sparse. They didn’t say much.

“Have you talked to Trev?” John asked.

“Yes. He’s with his family. He’s angry that we lied to him but mostly he’s just happy you’re okay… we all are,” Mary said, meeting eyes with Sherlock for a moment.

Then she taught Sherlock how to play two truths and a lie while John rested and laughed at their strangely easy discourse.

In the afternoon, after their classes, Greg, Mike, Molly, and Anderson, of all people, poured through the doorway. There wasn’t anything really important said, but it was damn good to see them.

In the evening Bill Murray had even stopped by. He’d started with a few stilted lines about Sebastian. John had sent the word about Seb with Mary. The gorilla shift had been detained before the Gardens had even been raided.

“So! When can we expect you back at practice?” Bill asked, returning to his usual jovial self after the required sentiments had been expressed.

The joke did its job and John laughed, raising his eyebrows pointedly at the arm held in a sling
against his chest.

“Sorry, captain, but I think it’s going to be a while.”

“I’ll be holding your spot on the bench,” Bill said. “So don’t skimp on physio.”

Then he’d left, leaving John and Sherlock, who had been a shadow in the chair next to the head of John’s bed while the visitors came and went, alone for the first time since the nurse came in that morning.

“Shame… I always liked watching you on the pitch,” Sherlock said lightly.

John’s eyes crinkled around the edges.

“I know you did,” John said. “Now go to the washroom and shift. Then join me on this bed and growl at anyone who tries to come in. I’m exhausted.”

Sherlock complied with a wry smile, and John spent that night in a deep sleep, a heavy head on his good shoulder, a warm body pressed into his side and his fingers buried in obsidian fur.

Then next morning even the doctor’s orders weren’t strong enough to keep the mix of police and even a few members of the press out of his room. When Mary came by around nine, Sherlock said there was something he wanted to check on and slipped out. Luckily, with Mary there, some of the questions could be split between them.

She left with the last journalist around noon and Sherlock appeared back in the door as if on cue. He shut it behind him. He came over and sat in his chair. The wolf shift relaxed as he settled, not realising how tense he’d grown in Sherlock’s absence.

“Were did you get off to this morning?” John asked conversationally.

“I went to see Mrs. Hudson,” Sherlock replied, checking John’s chart to look at what the last nurse’s check had concluded.

“Yeah?” John said as Sherlock put the chart down, apparently satisfied that nothing was amiss.

“Yes. I feel like I’ve quite grown out of the A Wing dorms, John,” he explained.

John was lightly confused, but for the deliberately casual air Sherlock was putting on, he knew there was more coming.

“There’s not enough room in there. I need more space for my experiments,” Sherlock said. “So I talked to Mrs. Hudson about a shift in accommodations, and it just so happens that there’s an opening in B Wing.”

Now John had an idea where he was going with all this, and a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth as he let Sherlock continue with his theatrics.

“It’s a two bedroom flat-style accommodation, so I would need a flat mate, and I thought, especially considering the Institute put another student in your room at the beginning of term, that you might be interested in it.”

Sherlock finished and raised a brow at John. His face was falsely serious, and his impish delight danced just behind his eyes. John laughed, cheeks flushing happily, and he leaned over and kissed Sherlock square on the mouth, feeling his self-satisfied grin bloom under his lips. He pulled back,
just enough to lock eyes with the young genius.

“It definitely sounds like something I’d be interested in.”
Behind a door marked 221B in a building on the western border of the Baker Institute’s campus, two young Changelings currently resided—a wolf and a panther. Though if you asked him, he’d say melanistic leopard.

The wolf, who was less picky about terminology, currently sat in an old armchair in the small, main room which served as a living room. He was the only one in the flat at the moment and was definitely using the time to his advantage, biology textbook open in his lap, and journal opened beside him, in reach of the only hand he had proper use of. His right arm still throbbed and twinged when he stretched it or moved it in an awkward fashion.

Also in the living room was another chair, a small sofa, and two side tables, making it rather cramped but homey. John’s chair faced the window and, only a few feet away, Sherlock’s sat in the pool of its light each afternoon. The flat also had a tiny kitchen, which they admittedly didn’t use for much more than tea, and the occasional horror in Sherlock’s case. There was one washroom and two bedrooms, though only one of them had a bed in it. The other had been converted for Sherlock’s purposes and in only a few weeks it had turned into a mad science laboratory, the contents of which would probably not just get them kicked out of the flat but possibly expelled from the Institute. Luckily the only school official who ever visited was Mrs. Hudson and they kept the door firmly closed when she was there.

Still, the most interesting thing in the flat—even including the human skull perched on the windowsill—was probably the great number of newspapers on the side table that John wasn’t currently using for his coursework. It wasn’t their presence, but their contents that were so extraordinary, and John could read a few headlines even from where he sat.

They were the front page headlines after all.

**Eighteen Year Old Institute Student Discovers Mass of Faked Wanderings**

**Teen Genius Blows Lid Off British Changeling Trafficking Ring**

**Institute Students Uncover Modern Changeling Menagerie**

**Soul Mates: Two Young Changelings Overcome All**

*The Sun* had definitely taken a different angle than most of the other papers, but no matter how cringeworthy their coverage was, John couldn’t bring himself to toss it out—Greg had the entire thing memorised and liked to quote it regularly, so it wasn’t like he’d have even been allowed to forget it anyway.

John’s attention was drawn towards the door as he heard the knob turn. He looked over the back of his chair to see the other resident of the flat toeing off his shoes by the door. John looked back down at his biology text.

“How was class?” John asked, lips already twitching in anticipation of the scathing response that this question unfailingly inspired.
“Professor Holt is an idiot and his teachings on criminology are shallow and agonisingly dated,” Sherlock groused as he went to divest himself of his school jacket in the bedroom.

John chuckled and didn’t bother to respond to the sentiment.

“We got a parcel from Mary,” John said as Sherlock exited the bedroom, down to his school trousers and white button up. “She sent some of those biscuits you like.”

Another grin curled John’s mouth as he heard Sherlock’s bare feet padding directly towards the kitchen.

“Put some water on while you’re in there, would you?” John called as he turned the page.

Sherlock didn’t respond but John heard the clatter of the kettle. A few seconds later Sherlock reappeared in the living room and collapsed into his chair, shimmying down so that he could wedge his feet between John’s leg and the arm of his chair as he nibbled on honey-flavoured biscuits.

John closed his book and put it on the side table, knitting his fingers together and looking up at Sherlock, whose dark hair looked almost reddish when lit by the sinking sun.

“So…” John drew out the word. “Did you read it?”

Sherlock licked a crumb off his finger and grabbed the laptop that had been leaning against the side of his chair.

“Yes,” Sherlock replied as he opened the computer in his lap.

“And…?” John pressed when nothing else seemed forthcoming.

“I’d suggest you continue on your premedical course,” Sherlock said without looking. “I would cut your losses when it comes to prose.”

John sighed heavily and rolled his eyes. He pushed himself out of his chair, hearing the water boiling in the kitchen.

“Dr. Mortimer wants me to do the blog. Thinks it will help me process everything,” John said, as he pulled two mugs down from the cupboard one by one, as to not stress his injured shoulder. “Mary’s doing one, too.”

He’d been seeing Dr. Mortimer twice a week since he left the hospital. Their progress was mediocre at best, he knew, but the therapist had insisted on the blog, recommending that he start with the Wanderers’ story. It had taken him a while to get it all down from the beginning, but he’d finally finished it.

“It’s got over two thousand hits since I posted it last night,” John said, adding a teabag to each mug.

The school had been absolutely buzzing since John and the other false Wanderers’ shocking return. They’d read the papers, but apparently they were actually quite eager to hear John’s version of events.

“The general public did seem to have a lot to say about it,” Sherlock commented from the other room.
John couldn’t help but giggle when he thought of all the people that had probably tried to talk to Sherlock about the blog today. If it was anything like the attention John received in class that day, the prickly panther must be livid. The reason for Sherlock’s aggressive disdain was becoming clear.

“I’m sure the Wanderers’ Hero was happy to receive their questions,” John joked as he added two spoons of sugar to Sherlock’s mug.

“Oh, yes. I was happy to tell them what the H stands for.”

The smile dropped off John’s face and he nearly slopped the boiling water from the kettle all over the counter.

“You wouldn’t,” John called, futilely craning his head around to try and see into the living room.

There was no response as John quickly splashed milk into both mugs.

“Sherlock?!”

He wouldn’t. John carried both mugs back into the living room, stopping when he realised that Sherlock’s chair was empty.

“Sherlock?”

There were sounds coming from the bedroom and when Sherlock reappeared he had his blue scarf twisted around his neck, his favourite coat donned, and his shoes on. In one hand he held a full backpack. John’s brow furrowed.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“We are going to London,” Sherlock said, approaching John with a mad twinkle in his eye.

“Tonight?” John asked, confused, as the young genius took the mugs from John’s hands, one by one, placing them on the side table.

“Yes. And tomorrow,” Sherlock said. “We can break into Mycroft’s place and sleep in his guest room.”

“It’s not breaking in if you have a key.”

“It is if he forbids us from visiting because he knows we’ll have sex on his thousand-thread-count, silk guest sheets,” Sherlock said, voice low and deep, in John’s ear.

John laughed as he felt a flush creep up his neck. He took a step back.

“I have a session with Dr. Mortimer tomorrow morning,” John said.

Sherlock was unfazed.

“I know,” Sherlock said. “Do you want to skip it?”

There was no pause as the two sets of blue eyes held each other, one sparkling like stars and the other glowing softly.

“Oh, god, yes,” John said and he was grabbing his coat from the back of his chair.
Sherlock grabbed their bag as John pulled on his shoes and then one after another, the two Changelings slipped out of the door.

Two mugs of tea began to cool on the side table.

Chapter End Notes

I just wanted to take a moment to say THANK YOU to everyone who stuck with me on this, readers and friends alike--some starting as the former and becoming the later. It's been two years in the making and I just wanted to say how amazing it's been.

A special thanks to Hayden, who betaed for plot, and read crappy un betaed versions of chapters for me.

And an enormous thank you and declaration of love to my dear Kathe, who had been with this story since I posted a journal on LJ over two years ago looking for a beta for "a new big project I've been thinking about". She has not only been an integral part of this story's conception and life, but has also become a truly dear friend. I will never be able to express my gratitude fully. Thank you darling.

So, one last time, thank you to everyone. I hope you enjoyed How to Build a Heart out of Ashes, and the changeling!verse, as I know I have, and I hope this isn't the end of it for you guys, as I know it isn't the end of this verse for me.

If you have any questions, thoughts, comments, ideas, anything, I can be contacted at heartoutofashes.tumblr.com.

--Teumessian

Please [drop by the archive and comment](http://www.het writeFile) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!