Darkling, I Listen
by You_Light_The_Sky

Summary

COMPLETE. No one who enters old London ever comes out. They say that the beast devours them. When his sister disappears, John ventures into the dead zone beyond the wall, and finds a brilliant madman under a terrible curse...

Chinese, Spanish, German, Russian, Italian Translations Available

EDIT Sept 2016: Podfic now available, please look at related works at the bottom of the work!

Notes

This story is loosely based off of beauty and the beast with nods to various fairy tales. The title is a line from the poem “Ode to a Nightingale” by John Keats. This will have 7-8 parts.
Part 1: Before The Fog

Chapter Notes

Graphic originally from yesnotoaster on tumblr.

Pencil Fanart of the fog originally from [here](#) by Atisenia.

Graphite Fanart of John and the Wolf originally from [here](#) by pawspaintsthings

MORE DARKLING FANART ON TUMBLR [HERE](#) BY MANY TALENTED ARTISTS. Thank you so much!

**CHINESE TRANSLATION** done by qinwuxin1978 and fay2205. You have to log in and register on this website first to view it.

**GERMAN TRANSLATION** done by Jibi-jibi

**SPANISH TRANSLATION** done by FranskeFlickan

**RUSSIAN TRANSLATION** NOTED UP ABOVE (done by the talented WinterSnow)

**ITALIAN TRANSLATION** done by Sharon
“The fog is coming!” One of the soldiers scream. But his cry is drowned out by the cacophony of gunfire, lines of explosions just sounding off in the air, scattering dust and sand in every direction.

He can hardly see anything beyond his own hands, struggling to stitch up a bloody tear in his comrade’s side. Blood is spilling from the wound, deep and almost as dark as black, onto his fingers and over his clothes. It soaks through the material in stains that will never really wash away and make the needle slippery in his grip. John curses as more sand slaps against his face, harsher than the coldest frost bite. He blocks out the sounds of battle from his ears.

Focus, Watson, focus. He weaves in the thread again through skin (it isn’t the same as mending clothes, flesh is so much softer, frailer, it haunts his dreams when he sits still enough to let it, so he has to keep moving, keep fighting, keep from remembering.) Just a bit more and the wound will be closed, he can drag Private Ryan towards the nearest truck and move on to the next soldier.

But he can feel the sudden dip in the air, as the harsh desert heat sinks into a rare night chill. He can see his breath forming in soft clouds of vapour, the goose bumps forming on his patient’s skin. It is getting cloudier by the second and there’s some numb feeling on his shoulder, draining his
energy slowly...

“Fog is coming!” His friend Murray yells, while holding up one of their assault rifles (an L85A2, his memory recites calmly from training, with 5.56 calibre rounds, effective for close quarter combat, disadvantageous when reloading.) He is towering over Watson, blocking out what little light they are seeing from the dusty clouds. For some reason he is shaking John, trying to pry John away from his patient. “Leave him, you’re done!”

But John refuses to leave. There are only a few stitches left, can’t Murray see? Only a few stitches and then John can use his gift. “Buy me more time, Bill,” he is saying, babbling now, the loud triggers of rounds are echoing inside his skull and he can’t remember where his medical kit has gone. He can’t let go of Private Ryan. He was a nice bloke, just graduated from college, has a girl he wants to marry back home. John needs to get him home. “It’s fine. It’s fine, I can save him!”

“John, we need to leave,” Murray is saying. The sky is darkening and John can see a wall of thick and black mist edging from the enemy lines towards their position. Their platoon is falling back. Bullets can do nothing against the fog.

“Wait, my patient...”

“It’s too late for him, just run, John!”

Murray grabs his arm, jerks him away from the patient. John wrestles his grip away and makes one last dash to close up the wound with his remaining thread. The rounds are growing louder, landing closer, blasting more bits of sand and stone in John’s face but he can’t feel it. Murray is shouting and John’s gloves nearly slip but then the wound is closed, John feels relief.

“Just one more moment—” He tells Murray.

But the soldier is shouting, “We don’t have another bloody moment!”

John closes his eyes, places a hand on his patient’s jagged wound and concentrates, tunes out all other distractions. He urges a calmness to run through his limbs, wills it down his shoulder and through his arm, to the tips of his fingers and into the broken flesh of the wound.

When he opens his eyes, the injury has vanished and Private Ryan is staring up at John in wonder. John feels dizzy, his vision blurs, but there’s no time to focus on that now because—

“Everyone duck!”

There is an explosion. John feels someone push him into the sand. Grits of it get stuck behind his eyelids and on his tongue. Some of it burns his cheeks. John begins to cough it all out, strains his muscles as he tries to get up and realizes that Murray had covered both him and Ryan with his body.

“Bill—” He attempts to say.

Murray gets up, grabbing John as well. “Not now... it’s—”

“What is that?” Private Ryan yells from the ground, staring up in horror at the darkening sky (but it’s always dark, just not this dark, like God is painting the whole world in black and they are the dots of imperfection in the way.) They’ve read about this phenomenon, but they’ve never been this close to seeing it.

John can feel the desert heat drop dramatically into a colder night chill than any of them have ever
experienced on this tour.

There are more shots. John jumps in front of Murray, taking the line of fire. He can hear them all calling his name and the fog is coming closer. Something has his shoulder, he is telling them to leave him here but hands are pulling at his torso nonetheless because they’re loyal idiots (“Leave no man behind.”) and they can’t see, like John can, how close the fog is coming.

“Leave them!” He hears someone else shout, “We’ll all die if we stay any longer.”

“Murray’s been shot,” Ryan is stuttering.

No, John thinks, not Murray. He needs to go to him, to sew his wounds back together and then heal him with his gift, just need to move...

“Where’s Watson? Get him to heal—”

“—No time, you idiot—”

“Watson is down!”

“Shit! Grab him, leave the dead. Just run!”

No, no, take Bill instead, he wants to say, I can still use my gift. I can still heal. But they are not listening. They are running.

He hears more gunfire, frantic steps and yells. He stares in the distance at the wall of mist, rushing closer and closer to them, only the rush of the wind betraying just how close. There are whispers in his ear. Spells, he thinks, the spells of the witches (the voice of the fog.)

A curse on you, it whispers.

Then it all goes dark.

It is the fate of every human being to be blessed and burdened with one particular gift, no matter how great or small.

It is simply the way that it has been since the turn of the century, since the witches and demons came out of hiding and catalyzed the two (three, if you considered the cold war to be one) great wars that rained the planet with blood and patches of dead zones.

Since then the skies have always been perpetually grey. What little sunlight reaches the earth is barely enough to sustain plant life. Temperatures are colder and the fogs are things to be feared now rather than the phenomena of air patterns. They mark the coming of curses, sometimes they are the prelude to a new dead zone, a new place where none but demons and the cursed can walk.

Hardly anyone remembers what the sun looks like, though John has heard stories from the older ranking officers describing what it must be like, pure warmth on your face.

(He remembers asking his mother once, when he was very young, after reading a storybook together, “What is sunlight?” and then watching her fish helplessly for answers. He did not ask again.)

They’ve been fighting wars against each other, against the witches and demons for so long that they’ve forgotten what it means to be warm. It is only ever grey. It is only ever cold. John Watson
only knows how to heal, how to kill and how to survive.

Gifts can vary from person to person. Some bitterly call them punishments for crimes in previous lives. Others refer to them as curses (like those that might be cast by witches.) John has met a man who could breathe fire out of his mouth but could never be kissed, lest he burn his lover’s face off. It was a useful power, he supposed, in combat or if you were in need of heat, but he can see how this power can be more of a curse than a gift.

His mother had the gift of empathy. She could tell what other people were feeling but couldn’t recognize her own emotions for the life of her. In the end, she went mad and resorted to drink, an example that Harry follows in later years. It broke John’s father to see her this way. His gift was, literally, his heart. Once he gave it away to one person, he couldn’t bring himself to love anyone else. Unable to watch Helen Watson waste away, Gordon Watson buried himself in his hospital work until one day, so absorbed in the work, he failed to register a fire alarm and died in the resulting fire.

Harry is a different matter entirely. Her gift is on the mental plane. One look at her eyes, and she can persuade you to do whatever she wishes (unless you are immune to such things, for which John is endlessly glad that he is, much to Harry’s disappointment.) But this makes Harry question herself more. Do people surround her because they genuinely like her or because she has compelled them to? Did Clara love her for herself or did Harry compel it? Once, John asked Harry why she didn’t just blindfold herself and see, but from the look in Harry’s eyes, John guessed that she was too afraid to, didn’t want to lose Clara.

It is ironic, that this fear is what drives Clara away, rather than the gift. But Harry blames her so-called gift anyways, turns to drink and withdraws from society. He rarely gets letters from her when he enlists in the army. Those that he does receive are Christmas cards mailed three months later, signed with a messy scrawl that shows how intoxicated she was when she wrote them.

Some gifts seem harmless. A child who can change the colours of flowers (amusing, adorable even, until John witnesses an incident where that same child changed the colours of the Taliban uniforms so that they resembled allies rather than enemies and he lost several comrades....) or an old lady whose every dish tastes heavenly no matter what it is made of (less appetizing to think of, when John encounters another man with the same power but told John that he had to use it for more disgusting ingredients like bugs or urine when he was starving alone in prison.)

John’s gift is healing.

A few stitches and one touch, then the wound is gone but John’s energy is depleted. The more serious the injury, the more of John’s energy (life force, his mentors had called it) is traded in exchange. He dies a little each time he saves a life, but he doesn’t mind. He can’t heal his own injuries either. Never could. He can brave a few cuts and bruises as long as he has the power to save others. What is his life to the lives of many?

He never calls his gift a curse or a blessing. It simply is. In this world of perpetual darkness, he must accept that or the doubts will swallow him up.

Then he gets shot.

His world becomes as bleak and grey as the one that he has lived in since the fog swallowed up the real one.
They tell him that he’s being sent back home to England. They tell him that his shoulder was shot, that he has a tremor in his left hand (the one he uses for stitching, not that it matters, he could heal things completely with his gift but it takes more energy from him.) He has a limp but he wasn’t shot in the leg. It only happened when John saw Murray’s body before being taken to the closest hospital, a body missing its head, littered bite marks and missing one leg.

The fog took it. You never know what the fog will leave behind when it comes. Sometimes it leaves nothing. Sometimes the beasts and demons that travel within it devour everything, leaving nothing but rubble and empty space. He’d never been so close to a fog until this mission.

It took his friend... and it took his spirit.

He is useless now. Every time he tries to heal, he can’t. The calm that he needs to wash over him is gone; instead he hears the echoing voices of his nurses and his superior officers. You are relieved of your duties. Another translation for you are useless to us now.

His dreams bring the sounds of his men shouting for him to heal them, only to be shot down when the fog swallows them. He sees their faces staring at him accusingly while the eyes are lined with red veins, bleeding red tears that fall on his hands. The fog is always there, and in it, John hears the whispers. The fog seems to reach for him, calling for him...

A curse on you... it says. A curse on you until you return...

They say he screams, thrashes in his sleep and that when he wakes up, he looks as if he is searching for something that isn’t there, asking for the fog to come and take him away too. They say he screams out a name they don’t recognize (not yet) but it’s so slurred that they can’t tell what name it is.

It’s no surprise that they send him to New London a week earlier than scheduled and that the first person he sees is his newly assigned therapist.

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“Tell me something about yourself, Doctor Watson,” says Ella in a clipped and professional tone. Her gift lets her disconnect from emotional situations. Therapists that are hired often have this gift, “Anything that bothers you, any concerns, your nightmares, your leg, the war.”

“There’s nothing to say.”

John stares out the window at the (always) dreary sky, at the construction sites that are trying to build up new flats for people to live in. New London is full of construction since the dead zone appeared several years ago in what was once Central London. Most people call it Old London now... or Dead London. It’s a huge dome of black fog, encompassing the whole area in shadow.

No one who dares to enter the dead zone ever returns. If they do, it’s usually in pieces of flesh. Though, John has heard rumours of a powerful man in the government, who pays millions of pounds to finance expeditions into Dead London. The men and women who take that offer never return alive.

When his therapist continues to prod him for responses and then proceeds to lecture him for the rest of their booked appointment, John often takes in the details of the buildings. Absentmindedly, he wonders if Old London is still standing beyond the impenetrable black fog that surrounds it. He always wanted to live in London, before a major section of it became a dead zone.

Now the fog here seems to whisper to him too. It creeps into his head, sending images of badly lit
streets, of the Big Ben and Parliament buildings, of rooftops and an eerie moon that still manages to shine through the mist. It shows him shadows of beats lurking within, of a figure in the center, calling for his name.

_Come inside the fog, John Watson._

“—inform me of anything abnormal... John? Is there something bothering you? Your attention seems elsewhere,” Ella says in the same monotonous way.

_I think I’m going insane, he thinks of saying, I think I’m going insane and that the fog is talking to me._

“I’m fine,” he lies, keeping his face blank.

He doesn’t tell his therapist.

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Harry lives in the grittier area of New London, the areas that are closest to the wall of black fog. The rent there is so ridiculously cheap that John could probably buy three flats for himself and not have to worry about his pension. No one wants to live so close to the borders of the dead zone, where they could accidentally wander in if they were intoxicated. There is something sinister about waking up in the morning and then having to look at the dead zone through your window. It frightens them.

Naturally, John seems to thrive on it.

At first he was reluctant to choose a flat so close to where his sister was residing. The rooms were hardly well-kept anymore. The wallpaper was stained from age, with traces of scratches and doodles which suggested that once a family with children had lived there. The furniture was still covered with plastic and heavy layers of dust. He saw cobwebs that still lingered in the corners despite a hasty sweep of the area.

But when he had looked out the window and saw the proximity of the fog, heard the _whispers_ rumbling like the gunfire he heard in his dreams, John received a rush of _something_ in his veins and replied that he would take the flat. The landlady, Mrs. Turner was overwhelmed with delight and immediately invited him downstairs for some tea.

(Her gift is in making the perfect clothes for whoever she doted on. The next day, when John moves in, Mrs. Turner gives him three newly knitted jumpers which were so comfortable that he wore them as often as possible.)

He spends his days wandering outside, walking close to the edges of New London, staring at the fog and wondering what might be hidden beyond it. Sometimes the fog’s whispers mute in and out like faded radio signals. Sometimes John can hear growls and groans on the other side.

At night, when he sleeps in his creaky bedroom, he can hear screams that carry on the wind. Mrs. Turner tells him that they occur every night and that they come from the fog. She always has a weary look in her eyes when she gives any information about the dead zone, as if she is expecting him to throw up his hands and walk out of the flat.

He doesn’t. Eventually Mrs. Turner loses her resigned outlook and begins to chatter on about all of the fog’s oddities. She finds John’s morbid interest in it endearing rather than concerning and
doesn’t mind coming into his rooms to do the cleaning.

“Rest that leg, dear, I’ll take care of the dusting today,” she says when John protests.

When John ventures further into New London, looking for employment his spirit feels drained. Everything feels more dull and pointless away from the fog. The same dreary skies, the same streets and monotony of life. Nothing happens to him save for his strange dreams. He can’t connect to any of his old friends (not that he has many after Bill, and he can’t bear to speak to any of his old platoon.) He works at a clinic, healing what he can and trying to counteract any curses that are inflicted by witches (but it's difficult, when he's missing the calm necessary to use his gift, he heals the old fashioned way.)

New London is a city of lies. The buildings are modern and new. People smile, greet each other for work and bustle past each other with hidden grimaces. They do their best to ignore the black dome of fog that takes up the horizon. They pretend that it’s not there. They ignore the grey clouds that cover the sun. It’s like there is no such thing as demons or curses. It’s like there are no wars being fought all over the world to prevent the fog from swallowing them all.

They don’t know the fog, not in the way that John does now.

*Come inside the fog, John Watson.*

He wonders, sometimes, if he is really living or if he is wandering in some twisted nightmare.

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His sister is not answering any of his phone calls. It’s been three days, and though Harry has told John to stop giving a damn about her, he can’t help but worry about his older sibling. She may be an irresponsible and crass alcoholic but she always answers his texts within a twenty four hour period, whether it’s with a butchered spelling of ‘piss off’ or a polite ‘yes, I’m fine, now go piss off.’

Something slithers down his spine and John just knows that something has gone wrong.

He rushes down the stairs and tells Mrs. Turner not to wait up. His cane clatters by his side, hitting his knee, but John can’t be bothered by it when his mind is screaming, *don’t take Harry, don’t let it take Harry, please no, don’t be an idiot, Harry!*

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His mother had always whispered to him, in her rare bouts of sanity, that the gift was like a cancer that would choke the living out of you in the end, something that the fog brought on every living soul.

Seeing the fate of his parents, John Watson had to agree.

But despite everything that Harry had done to him, he couldn’t lose his sister too.

*You won’t take her from me,* he thinks towards the fog as he rushes to Harry’s flat and begins interrogating the poor gnarled landlord as if he is a terrorist.

He swears that he hears a deep chuckle, in a low baritone. He thinks that the fog is actually *looking back* at him but he sees nothing but the same black mist rising miles up into the clouds.

(But that isn’t possible... and yet...)
Harry’s landlord is glancing at him tentatively as John has paused in his fierce line of questions.

“Is there something wrong, lad?” The old man’s eyes are kind. “Don’t sorry. I’m sure your sister will turn up soon. She does... arrive home at different hours... intoxicated.”

John breaks his stare from the fog and gives a shaky smile. “Yes... I’m sure she does.”

He thinks that the fog’s ghostly laughter follows him all the way up the street as he steps into the main street of New London.

_Come and find her if you wish. Come to me, John Watson, it says._

“Hello, this is Rogers and Davies Insurance Company, how can we help—ah, I see. Let me check the company directory here.”

The sound of leisurely typing. A pause.

“I’m sorry sir, but Ms. Harriet Watson hasn’t been in attendance at the office for the past few days. Are you a relative—?”

The long wail of the dial tone.

“Hi, you’ve reached the voice mail of John Watson. Leave a message and I’ll get back to you. Probably.”

_Beep._

“John, it’s me. Clara. Harry was here the other night. She was... she was drunk, more than usual. She kept trying to come inside the house, muttering about voices in her mind. I was scared. She wanted me to come into the fog with her, whatever that meant, and when I didn’t open the door, she threw her bottle through the window and tried to break in! I called the police but by the time they showed up, she was gone. I just thought you might want to know—”

The shuffling of papers (contact information, a list of acquaintances that he thinks Harry might have had contact with, a list of places where she could have gone.) A mug smashes into pieces as it slips out of his fingers. He scrambles to the phone and puts it against his ear.

“John?” His former sister-in-law whispers on the other end of the line. Her voice is like a ghost come back to haunt him, a ghost of more hopeful times, when he had thought that Harry could be happy, that she could give up her vices.

She didn’t. And good, sweet Clara had had to pay the price with him.

He fights to keep his trembling hands still.

“Tell me everything you know, Clara. _Did Harry really go into the fog?_”

Several harsh breaths. It’s difficult to tell who is more terrified from the conversation and for what reason. Clara’s gift lets her know where the people she has met are at every moment of every day. She can give your coordinates exactly, better than any tracking device or satellite (but those never work in the fog, and John isn’t sure if Clara’s gift does.)
“...I don’t know, John...” she breathes, and he feels as if he’ll stop being right then, “but I think she did.”

The phone drops. He sinks to his knees, ignoring the spasm of pain that comes with his limp. He hears Clara’s tiny voice echoing through the emptiness of his flat, asking frantically if he’s alright, but that’s silly, because he’s anything but and...

He looks at the window, its glass now stained with condensation but unable to hide the picture of the black fog rising up beyond the buildings at the end of the street.

*You can’t take away my sister away from me too,* he thinks.

The fog seems to darken against the grey sky.

*Then come inside, John.*

He packs his pistol, puts it in a leather gun hoister that he kept from his army days, and several supplies of food, a medical kit, a few jumpers for warmth, a sleeping bag, rope, a knife, a compass (not that it would be of any use in a dead zone, but no one has returned alive to tell) and his phone. His bag is sturdy and will hold all the items as compactly as possible.

John is halfway down the stairs, cursing how his cane keeps bumping against his knee, when he almost bumps into Mrs. Turner. His landlady takes one look at him, before she ushers him to sit down at the sitting room, where she’s already made tea for two. Before he can protest, Mrs. Turner has shoved several biscuits into his hands and he can’t think of a polite way to refuse.

But Mrs. Turner has an iron grip on his wrist and there is an urgency to her movements that worries him.

“You’re going, aren’t you?”

John is unsure what to say.

“To the fog,” his landlady clarifies. “That’s where they all go eventually, people mad enough to live close to the dead zone’s borders. It speaks to them until they go insane or they surrender and walk into the black mist.”

His fingers crush the biscuits into broken pieces. “I’ve never heard of that before.”

Mrs. Turner’s gaze is all-knowing. “That’s because they don’t want you to know.”

His brow is wrinkled. “They? Who...?”

“The governments. Those in power. The witches. They’re all the same,” Mrs. Turner whispers.

John isn’t sure why he’s encouraging this, maybe because he’s lost his grip on reality or the fact that his landlady’s story rings true for the nightmares and strange obsession he has with the fog. But he has to know, more than he has to breathe.

“Does the fog whisper to you too?”

Her lips curve into a haunted shape that isn’t quite a smile anymore.

“It doesn’t want me... Not yet. I’m not interesting enough for it.... wasn’t then, and not now,” She
hasn’t touched her tea yet, but she swirls her spoon into the liquid anyways. “I was there, in Old London, when the fog first came. It cast the city into complete darkness. People were screaming but I couldn’t tell if they were ten feet away or inches before me. There was no light. Electric lights simply didn’t work. I couldn’t see my hands in front of my face and then... then I was here, on the other side of the fog, along with hundreds of others. The fog didn’t want us. It said we were too boring for its game, and so it has been for the last few years.”

Her hands moved to grasp his tightly.

“You’re a good boy, John Watson. But heed my warning, if the fog wants you, and you walk in, there’s no coming out.”

The streets are empty of any other living presence. Only John, his cane and his backpack stand at the edge, where the road meets the smoky entrails of the great wall of mist. He looks back, only once, to survey the stained windows and broken rooftops, wondering what this section of the city must have looked like before the dead zone appeared. It was probably bustling with people and traffic, cabs winding in and out like blood cells on a circuit. Now it is a ghost town (the fog has taken all life from it.)

He turns his gaze back to the fog.

“Well then,” he says conversationally, “I suppose I should just invite myself in. Just going to pop in and find my sister Harry, and then leave, just so you know.”

It’s crazy, talking back to the black mist as if it is a person, but he feels that he has to. He can’t get rid of the strange feeling that perhaps the fog is staring back at him, that it watches him.

He should be trembling, shaking, and feeling anything right now. But John’s head is clear. He moves automatically, as if he is back in Afghanistan following orders when told to or reacting instinctively when he has to save a life.

There is no clear line to where the ‘wall’ begins, where New London becomes Dead London. Every step he takes feels ordinary, as if he is only walking through ordinary air. But he isn’t fooled. He can see how the area around him seems to darken. Slowly the mist gets thicker, blurring his vision further. The whispers in his head grow louder and more incoherent. Sometimes, John thinks that the fog is brushing against him softly.

Twenty steps in; John can still see New London behind him.

The next step, casts him in complete darkness.

It is exactly how Mrs. Turner had described the coming of the fog. He can see nothing, only black everywhere. The black has swallowed him whole, until the only proof John has that he is alive is the sound of his own breathing and the feel of his backpack still hung against his body.

Breathe Watson.

He keeps one hand outstretched in front of him in case he bumps into anything and takes medium sized steps that echo around him. The fog is silent for once, but he thinks, maybe, he can feel it shifting forward and back, like it is matching his own breaths. His other hand holds tightly to the cane.
For a long time, he walks. It seems like hours or forever. He isn’t sure. After a while, he thinks he might throw up his head and scream for something to happen, because he’s tired of walking blindly in the black.

“This is getting a bit ridiculous,” John speaks up. He hasn’t tired yet. They used to trek great distances when their caravan or trucks broke down, just to reach headquarters or a mission objective. “I heard that people appear out of Old London in pieces. I don’t think you tire them to death. I was expecting demons to pop up or something.”

He doesn’t expect an answer, which is why he is surprised when the black seems to lessen, so very slightly, so that John can see his hands are silhouettes against the grey. There seems to be the outline of trees, spread far apart from each other in the distance. The fog seems to vibrate around him, like the whirl of bees rushing angrily out of their smashed hive.

John takes out his gun with his free hand, aims it straight ahead, just in case.

The fog is chuckling at him, words swirling around him (“then let the games begin, John”) and then, he sees it.

Shadows, rushing out towards him, like fast brush strokes of ink in a Chinese painting. They resemble beasts of some sort, larger than any wolves John has ever seen. He can hear their snarls, more chilling than any of the wildlife he had encountered in the war.

Automatically, he shoots the first blurry creature, aiming for the heads in rapid succession.

The creatures let out pained yowls, worse than hearing his patients screaming in pain during an operation in the middle of battle. John doesn’t linger on that thought, only shoots again, feeling the familiar recoil of the gun as it shoots off its rounds in his hand. His left hand is shaky, he’s used to holding the pistol with both hands, but he needs the other for his cane and yet...

The creatures are getting closer, and John can see that they nearly tower over him. He hadn’t estimated their size well. One could probably swallow half of his small statue in one bite.

Despite this knowledge, John feels only a rush of adrenaline. He brings up his other hand to steady his hold on his gun and fires off more rounds, hitting each beast in the head, watching the shadows interplay with each other in various shades of grey.

Yet they keep storming towards him, even though John can see that their silhouettes are missing heads and limbs, the creatures are still pursuing him.

“Demons,” John whispers.

The fog is laughing.

They are gaining ground. John can hear their heavy steps, the growls and hungry rasping. He hears loud howls, like wolves but more dissonant and unearthly. He isn’t sure which direction he’s going or if it’s the right way, but he needs to get away if only to create a new plan.

There’s the outline of a tall and bare tree in the distance. The branches are spread down and symmetrical, like an awkward step ladder that’s been broken into two and realigned on opposite sides. It’s perfect. John increases his speed, the thump-thump of his heart keeping record of his steps.

The fog is still laughing and the creatures are getting closer, closer, closer... he thinks that everything is returning to complete black again when the tree’s shadow begins to blur with the
John stumbles, over something large and heavy. He nearly falls flat on his face but is able to regain his footing, out of breath. He looks around wildly, seeing only shadows and hearing the things that are after him.

“Who’s there?” John asks, though he knows he shouldn’t. His voice will only attract attention, direct those shadowy things closer to him.

He hears a pained whine by his feet. He drops to his knees instantly, though his self-preservation is screaming for him to keep running, that those creatures are going to eat him alive if he stops.

But he can’t abandon whatever he tripped over. It’s alive. And it’s hurt.

John is groping around on the ground when his hand brushes against something wet. He knows instantly that it is blood, and, alarmed, moves closer. He realizes that the blood is stuck against lines of fur and as his hands move upwards, he feels the outline of furry, sharp and pointed ears, a wet and velvety nose, sharp canine teeth...

Eyes are glowing when he meets its gaze. Intelligent, grey-blue eyes that do not leave his.

It’s a wolf, a large black wolf whose species and size John has never seen before. It is large enough that John could ride on its back if it were at full health. But it’s also large enough to snap John into two if it wanted to.

“Beautiful,” he whispers, in spite of the situation.

The wolf lets out a little whine, but he feels it lean closer to his touch.

He tries to find the wound again, so that he can heal it with his gift. Just as he attempts to find his focus, the snarls from earlier are louder than before. John jumps up. He keeps one hand on the wolf’s head and points his gun forward.

The goose bumps on his spine are tingling. John doesn’t need any light to know that they are surrounded. He can see the eerie, yellow eyes in the dark, staring at him in a circle. His blood is rushing in his veins; he cannot possibly defend himself from a dozen of these things at once. They will rip him apart.

He moves instinctively in front of the wolf, hoping to protect it from the other beasts. He can feel its gaze on him, like the wolf is eating him with its eyes. He fights back a shiver. Since he’s going to die, he will die trying to protect this animal, he will die fighting.

“Well?” John says to the shadowy creatures around them. “Come on then. Attack me.”

There is a hush, the moment when the fog stops laughing at him.

They leap for his throat from all sides. John throws himself over the wolf’s still body, tries to heal the canine’s wounds despite the fact that his gift has never worked when he is panicked (but please, god, let this work, let this being live) and he shoots blindly into the black.

“What are demons?” He remembers asking his father once, because his mother had relapsed into another bout of insanity. Gordon Watson hardly cared for much unless his wife was involved. John tried not be hurt by the indifference in his father’s gaze when he stared at him. It was the fault of
the gift. He knew that.

Gordon answered things clinically, keeping his attention fixed on his drugged wife on the bed.

“Creatures of darkness. They came when the fog did. They’re often correlated with the fog phenomenon. It’s speculated that the fog is their natural breeding ground. Some hypothesize that the reason the dead zone exist is so that witches can summon the demons more easily to do their bidding.”

“Oh,” John had answered, pleased he could understand most of what his father had said. “Why do witches do that?”

“To curse people, to cause suffering.”

“But why?” John wrinkled his nose. He couldn’t understand how anyone could intentionally cause such things.

“It’s their nature. They don’t need a reason.”

He screams when he feels the creatures, several of them, claw at his front. It’s like being shot all over again, but all over his body and with more consciousness slipping away with skin. But before he can do anything, he is flipped over on the ground, the blood pooling in his wounds and slipping over.

There are pained growls and grunts. Something (or some thing) has jumped in front of him. John hears the sound of many bodies falling on the ground, the unmistakable ripping of flesh and squelching of blood. He holds himself still, squinting at the shadows and realize that there is only one left standing.

The wolf that had been by his feet is not there anymore. It is before him, eyes fixed on John’s next reaction. Apparently, his gift had worked. The wolf appears fully healed, if its confident strides have anything to do with it. It looks ferocious, the very picture of a demon from the storybooks he read to himself when his parents were slipping into madness.

He lets out a breath and begins to laugh, almost hysterically, but not quite. (His gift is working again. There is a beast in front of him, one that could tear him apart within seconds.) He can hardly believe it and he can’t look away from the wolf’s grey-blue orbs.

“You saved me.”

It has now inclined its head, as if John has done something very interesting. Then it rushes over to John, its teeth bared out in a low growl. He realizes that it is licking his wounds and when he tries to move, it barks at him with a sharp reprimand.

He slumps backwards, wheezing and wondering if he’s to die here in the fog after all. It is silent now, like a group of mourners when a coffin is buried. He hadn’t realized how nervous he’d been, caught up in the adrenaline of the moment and the thoughts of protect protect protect... He slowly raises his hand and brushes it against the wolf’s ears.

“Thank you...” He says weakly.

He blacks out.
Part 2: The Madman

It is always dark in his dreams, not that he would call them dreams anymore. They occur so often that he doesn't recall what it is to have a normal dream, only nightmares of black and fog and screams.

He’s always back in Afghanistan, running, sometimes staying behind to heal the fallen, sometimes taking more bullets for Murray. But the end result is the same. Murray dies and John is lost in a spiral, unable to get up again.

They stare at him.

He can see their faces drawn in the air with wisps of smoke. His parents, his comrades, Murray, Harry, they all look at him in the darkness with accusing eyes. They’ve become one with the fog and they’re reaching out with skeletal hands, missing eyeballs and lacking bits of torso, clawing at his arms, pulling him towards the blackening background of nothing.

“You could have saved us with your power, why didn’t you save us, John?” They accuse, parts of their teeth and lips peeling away.

John can only plead with them and say, “I’m sorry,” infinite times over but it is never enough.

They begin to tear him to pieces and he doesn’t struggle, only yells himself so hoarse that his vocal chords feel like they are bleeding into his lungs. He can only see black, and smoke, and their hatred for him, hatred so well-deserved...

There is a howl in the night.

The last thing John sees is a pair of grey-blue eyes, shining brighter than any light he has ever seen. Siraj, he calls it.

The screams come, but they are not his own. They continue for a long time, with the addition of snarls and vicious growls. When they stop he feels himself pressed against soft fur and begins to drift away into oblivion as the caresses shift into those of long fingertips...

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His body is stiff against the cold hard pavement. John rolls to his side, pleased that his head is at least lying on his pack rather than cement, and mentally catalogues the damage. He keeps his eyes closed, using his gift to monitor the pain. Though he cannot heal himself, he can at least keep track of how bad off he is.

The slashes on his chest have been stitched up, John is surprised to note. He opens his eyes then and wonders who (or what) might have saved him. His muscles protest his movements but John sits up and surveys his environment. There is still fog (and it still whispers, and now caresses, his ears.) But the fog is slightly lighter. John can make out the haze of buildings on either side of him. He’s lying on the pavement of a street.

In the distance, there hangs an eerie orb that radiates soft light that is enough to lighten the fog to a tolerable shade of grey but not enough for John to make out the details of the street. The orb, John realizes, must be the picture of the moon that Mrs. Turner mentioned.
The rest of the street is half cast in shadow for the lamps do not work. The only source of light comes from the not-moon which seems to hover in the center of what must be Old London. The city is still engulfed in shadows. John wonders if one step in a dark alleyway could take him back to where he was before, the terrain of black fog and demons, of miles of nothing with a few brave trees alone with the mist.

The wolf must have dragged his body into Old London since these constructed dwellings hadn’t been there the last John checked. Before, he’d been running for his life from shadow demons in a sparse wasteland of black fog. Or maybe the dead zone had shifted landscapes, from sparse cement to the familiar buildings of a city. He isn’t sure. Witch magic is a tricky thing and John has never tried to understand it.

Where is the wolf? He realizes.

John slowly gets up and moves his head back and forth. There is no sign of the animal that saved him anywhere. The cemented roads prevent any tracks from being made. But John does see traces of fur on his clothes and, when he leans in close to it, the ground. The fog prevents him from being able to see anymore fur. Even if he did try and find the wolf, it would be a waste of what precious time he has.

He needs to find Harry.

Silently, John says a thank you and hopes that somewhere, his sentiments are known to the wolf he has decided to name Siraj.

Quickly, John puts on his pack and feels for his cane. When he finds it, he begins to limp as fast as he can down the blurred street. He feels for his gun and is content to know that it is safely in his gun hoister.

As John continues along the line of buildings, he notices that he only needs to stand a metre from the side of the nearest shop to see the hazy door and indecipherable sign with his eyes. He is along one of the shopping areas, rows of shops parallel from one another. They are empty and John can’t tell if they are dusty from years of vacancy. The mist shades too much of his sight.

He walks right past the corner and doesn’t realize it for several long moments when he no longer sees the outline of buildings along his right. John doubles back, and in an instinctive decision, decides to turn left (the sinister way, in fairy lore) because it’s more likely he’ll run into more demons and maybe they have Harry (if they haven’t torn her apart, but John can’t think of that right now.)

Quickly, he tells himself, and goes further into the grey, trying to ignore the sensation that he’s being watched from all around.

He probably is, he reminds himself, but doesn’t let it bother him (much.)

The fog here is slightly different than it was when John first entered. It seems almost gentler and even cautious with him. The whispers are muted now, like subtle gushes of wind.

He still feels watched. It’s an instinct that is yelling itself hoarse at him that he needs to triple check all areas. But every time John darts his eyes nonchalantly he only sees the grey and nothing to indicate that his suspicions are true.

John walks along the seventh turn. His internal map notes how far he must be from his original
spot. He is heading towards the barely glowing orb in the air. The mist doesn’t let up; despite how closer John is progressing. In fact, the orb seems fixed in the same place, as if John hasn’t moved from his former place.

When he almost walks into another stop sign, John lets out a string of profanities under his breath. He wants to call out for his sister, but it would be a stupid move. Not only would it draw attention to his position but John might attract something worse than demons… a witch.

The last thing he needs right now is to be cursed to be blind or immobilized in a dead zone.

So he stumbles forward, utterly lost in a city he doesn’t know anymore.

There are shadows in the distance, moving towards each other. John tenses and gets out his gun, pointing it straight ahead but he doesn’t shoot… Not yet. The silhouettes are not nearly as large as the monsters that had tried to eat him before. In fact, they appear human sized. Yes… as John squints he can make out the unmistakable shape of a man’s head and torso.

*There are people* here in the dead zone, still miraculously alive and (hopefully) sane enough to help him.

John dashes towards them and then slows down, doubts entering his mind. They could be witches, rather than fellow victims. But he needs to take the risk. Wandering around, lost in the dark, will not help him find Harry. If he doesn’t act, he’ll be stuck here until the demons come back for him.

“Hello?” John calls out.

The ‘hello’ echoes down the street like a ghostly wail. John keeps that in mind for the next time he hears something like it. It might be another person, shouting for help.

The hazy outlines of the two men don’t stop. In fact, they are standing on the side of the street, where the pavement would be, as if they’re just… chatting.

John feels so bewildered by this possibility that he nearly drops his cane. It hits his knee hard in retaliation but John can barely care for it.

He rushes closer to two figures, and is surprised, when he gets close enough to see through the mist, that he recognizes one of them.

“Mike,” John blurts out, taking in the sight.

It’s difficult to see, but Mike is dressed casually, as if for a walk. He is wider than he was in their days at St. Bart’s and he has two chins. He has his hands shoved in to his pockets and has a checkered shirt tucked in neatly to a pair of dark trousers (John can’t tell the colour, blasted fog.) His companion is another man that John doesn’t know, shorter than Mike with a long beard. He’s wearing a lab coat which is easier to see in the dark, perhaps a professor or scientist of some sort.

They’re both grinning at each other with no care in the world, like the fog is not there and nothing strange has happened.

“Mike?” John waves a hand and shifts closer. “Hello?”

His old acquaintance continues asking the other man, a Professor Doyle, about his day.

“Lovely weather, isn’t it?” Mike is saying, making John question his sanity.
“Oh yes,” the professor replies, “almost sunny.” It’s an expression that is used to describe grey days that are so much lighter than usual that they could be sunny. John has never used it. His mother used to throw things at her children when they tried to use that slang and so the words have been taboo to him ever since. He has no idea what possesses the professor to use it now of all times.

After all, it is almost pitch black in the city.

“Hello?” John attempts again, stepping so that he is almost between them. “Can you hear me or not?”

“Did you hear about those serial suicides? Awful, isn’t it? Waste of every body’s time to off yourself like that,” Mike continues.

“Oh yes… I have a newspaper here.” The professor pulls it from under his arm, showing Mike (and John) the headlines.

_Five Deaths. No Notable Pattern. Police Claim Serial Suicides?_

There is a distasteful picture of five different bodies that are self-mutilated along the wrists and torso. John supresses his shivers as the Doyle puts the paper away. Whatever that photo shows, it is not suicides. A careful doctor would be able to tell.

He thinks, for a moment, that it might be the demons. This is Dead London. No one knows what happens here save for the ones who live in it (if they are alive at all.)

But before he can put much thought to the issue, Mike and Doyle are off, saying something about dinner. John walks after them and waves his hands in front of their eyes. To his dismay, they keep going as if he is the ghost invading their reality.

(And perhaps he is.)

“You really can’t see me…” He breathes with dawning horror, watching as they sit down at a vacant café and begin using utensils to dig into a plate of… nothing.

John has an urge to throw up and a panicked moment of _am I dead or alive? Is this a dream or reality? Have I become a ghost or am I real?_

But he sees something as he stands closer to look properly at Mike and Doyle, abandoning the pretenses of personal space altogether.

Though their facial expressions and movements illustrate a casual and happy air, their eyes are wide, moving back and forth at John pleadingly. Their eyes are alive still and John has the disturbing realization that these men are trapped in the daily routines of their own bodies, unable to say or do anything else.

He remembers what Mrs. Turner said.

(... _Then I was here, on the other side of the fog, along with hundreds of others. The fog didn’t want us. It said we were too boring for its game..._

What had happened to the people who were still in the fog?

John is looking at the answer.
They are stuck, repeating the same day, over and over, while still aware in their own minds, yet incapable of commanding their bodies to do anything else…

“Oh god, Mike…” He puts a hand on his old acquaintance’s shoulder and bites back a sob. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I wish I could do more.”

It kills him inside to walk away.

- 

John remembers the first time he saw someone who was cursed.

His mother had been coherent enough to take him to the clinic for a check-up. John always liked talking to the doctors that were working there, especially Doctor Hardwicke who always explained everything he was doing in a way that was easy for John to understand.

He had been reading a magazine for medicine, lent to him by one of the secretaries, and reading out the words he had problems pronouncing. Other children’s mothers cooed over him, saying that he was adorable when all he wanted was to know how to say “diarrhea” and “osteoporosis.” His own mum had just smiled politely, trying to tune out the emotions of everyone else.

Then a distressed father nearly broken down the door, holding his child and shouting, “Someone help me! My boy’s been cursed by a witch, please cure him!”

All the other parents in the waiting room recoiled from him. The secretary picked up the phone to call the police. Security guards (all clinics need them for this type of situation) came from the doors and the hallways to restrain the man who was screaming for someone to help his son.

John had tried to speak up, ask someone to listen to the man, because couldn’t they see how much he was hurting? And didn’t they know that the man’s distress was making his mother hurt too?

But his mum, using all her self-control, wrapped her arms around him, “No, sweetie, we can’t help. Doctors can’t help the cursed... only witches can...”

“There then another witch! Ask one of them to fix his baby!” John said amidst the chaos and screams.

One of the security guards had grabbed the infant and nearly dropped him in shock, once the swaddling cloth had been removed from the boy’s face.

The baby had no skin, only raw red muscle protected his little organs from being exposed to bacteria and air. Even worse, John remembered, was seeing the baby’s eyes... there were none. Only empty raw red sockets that seemed to stare at everything and everyone with empty accusation.

Helen Watson covered John’s eyes and hugged him close.

“Witches don’t take back their curses, not until the proper terms are filled, not without a bargain.”

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Whenever John is brought another patient, in Afghanistan, one who is cursed, he tries to heal them anyways.

His energy, his life force, is depleted.
But it never works.

He barely knows where he’s going anymore. He emptied the contents of his stomach (not that he’s eaten, he just can’t when he thinks of Mike and Doyle eating... nothing) into an alley way. He’s sporting many bruises from tripping into postage boxes and phone booths. He barely knows what to think or do. All he can see in his mind is the picture of Mike and Doyle’s eyes, looking at him pleadingly in the prison of their own bodies, asking him to do something... and yet all he could do was walk away.

If I find that witch... John entertains the thought and lets it go. If he found the witch what could he do against him or her? He’d be cursed like the rest of this city and he wouldn’t be able to save Harry.

(But, oh, how he wishes it…)

Now that he is deeper in the city, he runs into more people, all going about their errands, shopping or going on dates, all looking at him with their pleading eyes and John being able to do nothing. He wants to hang his head down in shame but it would dishonour their suffering. So he walks with his head up and forces himself to look each one in the eye, to remember their face.

(He’ll never forget.)

John feels cold against his neck and his cheeks and realizes that he’s been crying since he left Mike and Doyle behind in the dark.

(And when John turns his head, he misses the eyes that seem to flicker in the fog, eyes that haven’t left his form since he woke.

John, he thinks something whispers again.

He doesn’t care who or what is talking to him anymore. He just wants to cry.)

God, where are you, Harriet Marie Watson? Answer me, damn it! He wants to yell.

But he doesn’t.

He keeps going.

The orb in the sky is in the same position as before, and he keeps going.

Eventually he really does fall flat on his face, his foot slipping on something soft and his cane flying down until it hits him in the stomach. John groans and tries to feel for his cane. Instead, he touches something cold and angular... something that feels like human fingers... only the arm that they belong to is missing an entire body.

John does what any normal bloke would do, he cries out in shock but he does not let go of the body part. Instead, he stares at it with mute fascination and racing thoughts. When he tries to get up, his hands find another missing piece, this time, a person’s foot.

It is only because he has already thrown up once that he doesn’t this time.
There is liquid by his thigh and John realizes that this must be blood.

The day that the dead zone first appeared in London was the day before John was sent to war. He had watched the aftermath of the disaster on the telly, gaping like the rest of his colleagues at the hospital. Back then, John’s only experience with the fog had been the stories told by ear or the warnings his dead parents had given.

It had seemed so alien and otherworldly, watching the one and only city he wanted to live in since childhood, swallowed up by a black dome. He’d watched the interviews of those cast out of the dome dubbed Dead London with vigour.

Even when he was in Afghanistan, John listened to any news that his commanding officers could give about Old London. He bought newspapers and listened to the radio eagerly for more news about the strange fog that had eaten parts of the world.

There were rumours passed on from soldier to soldier.

They said that those trapped in Old London had turned into cannibals, monsters. They said that those trapped in Old London had become stone. Or they said that those trapped in Old London were cursed with something so horrible that to speak it would mean that you would be cursed too.

Yet one story persisted above the rest.

In Old London, they said that a beast wandered.

And this beast, worse than any demon that a witch could conjure, devoured everything in its path.

“...need to gather all the parts together... need to connect them all now... bury them again and again...” John hears a tiny mutter.

He looks up and makes out a white coat in the blackening mist. After more indecipherable words, a woman emerges. Her reddish-brown hair is easy to make out. It is tied in a pony tail and John sees that she’s in a lab coat, carrying heavy plastic bags with her gloved hands.

She freezes when she sees him there on the ground.

“You... you’re an outsider,” is what she says to him.

John gapes at her, “You... you can move...?” Then, realizing how stupid that sounds, he repeats himself, “Sorry... what I meant to say is... you’re not... stuck in the same movements like everybody else?”

The woman seems to flinch when he speaks, and she hovers towards him as if he might attack her if she makes any sudden movements.

“I’m chosen,” she says. “Those chosen... can move as freely as they wish, only within their roles.”

He frowns, confused.

But she doesn’t elaborate, instead grabbing at the leg and arm that are by John’s hands. She shoves them into the plastic bag, her shoulders only relaxing when they are safe in her possession.
"...Is that your gift?" John wonders aloud, "Collecting body parts and putting them back the correct way?" He’d had a mate back in university who had the same gift. John remembers that the bloke had gone to work at the morgue but hasn’t heard from him since.

Again, she jumps before she nods shyly.

"Yes."

"Um, listen," John shifts uncomfortably, "have you seen any other... outsiders? Another woman, perhaps? She’s taller than me by an inch and has long blonde hair down past her shoulders... and, I guess, a nicer face than mine? Likes to wear men’s trousers and tight shirts? No?"

There is a loud ringing in the distance, like the bell of a clock and the woman almost drops her bag. The bell is ringing one, two, three, and on when the woman grabs John by the wrist and whispers, "I’m sorry. I can’t tell you that. That’s not my role."

**Gong! Gong!** The bell sounds. Now on six, seven.

"What?" John wants to ask.

But the woman keeps going. "I’m the messenger, the warning. That’s all I am. I can’t say anymore. But *listen to me*, outsider. If you want to live, you’ll hide like the rest of the outsiders do. Don’t go out after midnight. Just stay hidden, unless you want the beast to hunt you down—"

**Gong!** Eight rings now.

"—So that’s real, the beast? Christ... I..."

"—And don’t talk to Sherlock Holmes, not if you want to keep your freedom."

**Gong!** That’s nine.

There’s another sound, footsteps. A man with a high voice is singing out a name, "...Oh Molly? Molly, my darling, where are you, poppet?"

The woman, Molly, squeaks and pulls John up.

**Gong!** Ten.

"Run," she says, when John tries to get more information from her. He pauses, picking up his cane and half wanting to stay and help this terrified girl, but the look in her eyes is fierce. She pushes him towards the alley cast in shadow. "*Run! And remember, what I said! Don’t let the beast find you!*"

**Gong!** Eleven o’ clock.

Molly runs in the other direction, carrying her bag of body parts as if it weighs nothing at all.

He stays pressed against the wall, ignoring the way his instincts are screaming that ducking in the dark alleyway will get him killed.

There are footsteps again.

For a moment, John thinks that the person that Molly is running from might turn and find him.
But the steps go past him and John lets out a relieved breath.

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“Afghanistan or Iraq?” A voice asks from behind.

John jumps immediately to his feet, aiming his pistol at the intruder. To his surprise, there is a thin man in a long black coat, considerably taller than John. He can make out the stranger’s head of curly black hair and a pale face. The man’s blue scarf barely stands out amidst the grey fog, but it catches John’s attention nevertheless.

Meeting two coherent people in the fog, it must be his lucky day.

Or an unlucky one, depending on the perspective.

“It’s the only thing I haven’t deduced from you yet and I’ve been following you for hours,”—John splutters at this admission, wondering if the man is a serial killer or a witch, warlock, thing because John should have noticed someone following him, he’s a soldier, damn it—“Or perhaps you were in a different war that I haven’t heard of in the years that I’ve recorded.”

“Who are you?” John demands.

The man steps closer, so that the tip of the Browning is pressed against his chest. John opens his mouth to swear or tell him off but the man merely leans down until they are nose to nose, studying him intently. John steps back with surprise, but the stranger only steps forward.

“Hm... no, definitely Afghanistan or Iraq, you won’t get that tan elsewhere,” what’s-his-name is muttering.

“...What are you talking about? And who are you anyways?” John frowns. He’s close enough to see the man’s pointy cheekbones... and the blindfold wrapped around his eyes.

John steps back again, wondering if he ran into one of the poor fools who went insane in the fog or if this stranger is blind (but then, why cover his eyes?) He has a sudden (and disturbing) urge to run his fingers over the cloth and feel if the man’s eyeballs are still in place.

The blindfolded man lets out a low laugh that is not unpleasant.

“Don’t play coy. You must have some idea of who I might be. My brother sent you here, didn’t he?”

He begins to feel annoyed. “What are you talking about? I don’t know your brother—” Unless the man was related to Murray, who he knew was an only child, “—and I certainly don’t know you.”

“Of course you do! The only idiots that I’ve recorded who have come here are either hired by Mycroft or depressed little souls that want to wander off the face of the earth!”

“What? You’re daft! I told you that I don’t know who you are at all!”

The stranger stills, his lips shaped in a big ‘o.’

“Wait, you really don’t know who I am at all, do you? It’s in your facial expressions. No man that expressive could lie convincingly in front of me. No, you came to the fog freely but not for money. You’re a military man, judging from the way you’ve packed your things. Systematic. Extremely organized. Only the necessities. Plus your dog tags and the way you pointed your pistol at me the
first moment you heard a potential threat gave your former occupation away.

“You follow orders; you don’t follow greedy ambitions, so you wouldn’t have been approached by Mycroft to come here without an honourable reason. Your reactions to seeing Stanford, Doyle and Molly were rather telling of your compassion. Yet Mycroft didn’t approach you at all with a tragic story; that would have appealed to your sense of morality. Why not? Ah, I see it now.

“Your limp, psychosomatic, easily cured by adrenaline but you forget sometimes. Mycroft didn’t think an invalid could successfully infiltrate the fog and return alive. You must have a therapist, for your limp, by the way. Fire her. She’s worse than incompetent, a dog could diagnose your leg better than her pathetic attempts to.”

John’s jaw drops. Facial expressions? How was what’s-his-name able to see them through the blindfold? Was it his gift?

The man continues, gesturing so wildly that he almost hits John in the face. “You’re looking for someone, but it’s clearly not me. Perhaps a girlfriend or boyfriend (more likely, seeing your indifference to the former and blush at the latter). Relative? Ah, yes, your face tells the story clearly. Brother? Sister? Right then. Probably not on good terms with her, hence why she disappeared into the fog rather than seek help from a close relation.

“But you’re extremely loyal or suicidal to go after her. Perhaps a martyr complex. You do have a surgeon’s hands. That’s a correlation that matches the evidence and your profile, Doctor Watson —”

“—My name, how do you...?”

“The dog tags,” the stranger briskly replies. “I did read them before I patched you up, good doctor —”

“Wait, you’re the one who did my stitches? Well thank you for—”

“—Though I am curious to know what the initials J.H. stand for, you will surely enlighten me.”

“Uh... John,” he stammers, “John Hamish Watson... and you...?”

But the blindfolded person keeps spilling out different details about John’s life from his possessions and the way he holds himself. It’s as if he doesn’t notice that John is there and he is only speaking to fill up the silence.

“...obvious how you survived the first wall of the fog. You’re a soldier, you fought back and when bullets had no effect on the demons, you found shelter. But I wonder how you survived the beast; surely it must have found you. The claw marks show that. It always finds outsiders. But you’re in one piece so you must be hiding some sort of hidden talent, something interesting—” The stranger is rambling in a strangely endearing way.

“...Totally mad...” John shakes his head, unable to fight back the childish grin on his face, “...but completely brilliant.”

The man stops speaking and faces John abruptly, “...Really?”

“Amazing. Just... amazing. All that from just observing me. You’re a genius!”

“Well of course,” the stranger preens, before his shoulders slump, “...but that’s not what people normally say.”
“What do they normally say?”

He frowns, “Recently? I can’t recall. But usually it’s something along the lines of *piss off.*”

John can’t help it, he giggles. “Well, they’re idiots.”

The stranger glances at him incredulously, like he’s a different species altogether, before he says a quiet, “… Thank you.”

They grin at each other for several more heartbeats when John coughs to break the silence. The stranger walks beside him as he goes into the street, looking for any clues that might lead him to Harry. It’s odd but John feels completely at ease with this man, as if they’ve met before somewhere fleeting and yet somehow significant to him. There is truly something familiar about this person. But John isn’t sure what, as if he dreamed it up and then forgot it when he awoke in his other life.

“So, do you have a role here too then? Ms. Molly was saying something about roles… I didn’t quite understand it…?” John trails off. “For that matter, have you seen another woman wondering about —?”

“I wouldn’t remember,” the man interrupts. “Pointless data is deleted from my memory and never written in my notes, so I don’t bother. And yes, I suppose you could say that I have a role in this game, but I’m not allowed to tell. There are rules.” He wrinkled his nose at the last statement and if John could see his eyes, he would picture them to be glittering in disgust.

John deflates, “So you haven’t seen my sister then… and I’m guessing that you can’t tell me more about the dead zone here.”

The man opens his mouth to say something, when he freezes.

That’s when John notices that the fog around them is shifting… is becoming *darker* like before, ever since the clock had struck eleven. The whispers are different now, having become shouts in a different tone, something unhinged and not known to him. But now that god knows how much time has passed, the darkness and the return of the blackening shades is more noticeable… and it’s getting faster.

He hears howls in the distance… and the beginning of tortured screams.

“It’s beginning again, the coming of the witching hour,” the stranger whispers.

Suddenly John feels himself being manhandled down the streets. He is unable to keep up with the man’s long strides, his feet stumbling against his cane.

The stranger makes an impatient noise and then picks John up like he is a bride. John splutters, “What are you doing?!”

But the man is running, running while carrying John, and muttering his thoughts out loud, “This is faster. We need to get you to Baker Street, *now,* before the demons sniff you out… or worse, the beast comes out. I will *not* allow you to be eaten, not when I just found you—”

“—What?”

*The witching hour,* John! The hour before midnight, before the beast comes, the demons pick off any outsiders that they can find, and I won’t let them have you, not yet, not when you’re so
The snarls are getting louder. John can hardly see as the world is being painted black again, yet somehow this blindfolded person can sense the coming darkness. Somehow, he knows exactly where to go and when to turn and it’s so brilliant that John can barely breathe.

The bells are ringing again in solid and ominous gongs. John has started counting them in his head. He’s on one.

He sees only black, and the only proof that this madman is still here with him, is his warm arms, lifting him up.

Gong! Two.

There is the sound of a door being slammed open. The stranger is shouting into the darkness, “Mrs. Hudson! Take John and lock him inside, knock him out if you have to keep him in! It’s imperative that I meet him tomorrow, he’s the outsider!”

Gong! Gong! Three, four.

A soft gasp, more footsteps and then other hands, more frail and soft, moving to take him from the stranger.

“It’s going to be alright, dear,” the owner of the other hands whispers.

“What is going on?” John demands.

Gong! Five, six.

“Stay inside,” he hears against his ear, “and don’t be offended if I don’t remember you in the morning. Here, take this.”

A piece of paper is shoved in his hands, and John hates the fog for making him unable to see what it says.

Gong! Seven, eight.

“Show it to me in the morning,” the stranger says one last time against his ear.

Then the warmth of the man’s body is gone and John is spluttering once more, “Wait! Where are you going? I don’t even know who you are!”

Gong! Nine, ten.

The other hands are pulling him inside. He hears the door being swung closed and the muffled answer that comes in reply.

“Sherlock Holmes,” says the stranger.

Gong! Eleven, twelve.

Witching hour.

The door is snapped shut and then locked. He hears shouts outside, the man, Sherlock’s shouts accompanied by a chorus of snarls and ripping flesh.
John rushes forward to the door and tries to open it.

But the person behind him, murmurs, “I do apologize for this, dear, but it is Sherlock’s orders.”

He feels something hit his neck, at the exact pressure point, before he falls into unconsciousness.

- Interlude: Sherlock -

He is busy with his deductions. Thoughts and different observations come together as he voices them out loud. He has abandoned the silly notion of keeping his deductions to himself. Now he is always speaking, he needs to, because the silly people around him don’t listen to him anymore and those that do are tired of him, they want him to disappear.

Watson is an interesting puzzle, a new one.

Sherlock found him bleeding in the streets, out of one of the entrances from the demon breeding grounds of the fog into Old London. How is it that a soldier like Watson had gotten harmed by the demons? Surely he could have hidden from them and figured out where the entrance to city was? Was an old injury responsible for slowing him down? And if so, how had he survived? Once hurt by the demons (or the beast) they could smell your blood.

You couldn’t escape then.

Yet Watson is alive, which means he has something hidden inside, some secret lurking within his ordinary statue that Sherlock needs to dig up and expose for himself.

He follows Watson, watches the ex-soldier and army doctor trip and stumble in the dark. It is appallingly plebeian and normal. Watson has a useless habit of caring for every unfortunate soul that he meets and it should make Sherlock abandon his trailing and just leave the man to be eaten by the demons, but Sherlock stays transfixed.

He tells himself that it is because it is so rare to find a man so genuine with his moralities and that he finds this fascinating. He ignores the other voice in his mind palace, one that is insistent and is tearing up his carefully placed thoughts so that it can be heard. He tries to smother the growing suspicion (and hope) that had grown since he found the Doctor bleeding (surviving) under such questionable circumstances.

What are you hiding, Watson?

Then Molly speaks to him, warns him, and Sherlock feels a stab of I found him first, you can’t speak to him which prompts him to reveal himself to the outsider.

He thinks, as he lists off his deductions that this will be the end of his intrigue for Watson (for John) once the doctor sees who he really is and is disgusted (as the other outsiders must have been, he quite doesn’t remember but he knows.)

But then Watson (John) says, “Mad and brilliant.” John says, “Amazing.”

And Sherlock knows, before his memories come rushing back during witching hour, that this man is (impossibly) the one.
The first time John heals someone, it is his mother and she is dying.

He is only eight and it is a few weeks after he saw his first curse at the clinic. Helen Watson is driving the car down the road. They’ve just picked up some new clothes for Harry and himself. He is enjoying the comfortable silence between himself and his mother. Helen is humming a lovely tune that is light and soft, like something of Debussy. She often hums what she can hear of other people’s emotions, their auras.

His mother likes the noise of John’s aura the most, because it is calm. She has often described it, in her periods of awareness, as the pleasing sound of a lone piano with notes that flow like a gentle brook. It’s nice and John doesn’t really believe her when she claims that such soft music is coming from him. He wrinkles his nose and looks away with a blush, not wanting to contradict her. He likes it when she hums; it means that she’s his mum again.

The silence is what frightens him.

“....Mummy...?” John whispers when the dull absence of noise hits him.

She is not humming anymore. Instead, she is suddenly slouched against the seatbelt, her head hanging low as if she has become a sack of flesh.

It is one of the first signs of the madness returning... The silence taunts him. It is deafening.

“...No...” The boy shrinks back. He looks around wildly, searching, searching, for what has tipped Helen’s empathy off the scales. Perhaps he can stop it, make the emotions shut off somehow or get his mother away, but how will he drive the car...?

They are already driving off the lanes. There are few cars around them as it is only noon on a weekday. Then John sees it.

There is swerving truck that has crossed the intersection, even though the light was red. John doesn’t have to look at the driver’s seat to know that the man controlling the truck must be drunk (like how his mother becomes when she is silent, mouthing words he doesn’t understand; at least, when she is sober, she yells inane profanities upon occasion, it reminds him that she is alive.) The other driver’s intoxication, his emotions, is bleeding into his mother’s mind.

He is eight and there is something concerning (something wrong, not normal) about how he is able to analyze the situation with such detachment, but it’s too late to think of anymore because then—

The two vehicles collide. There is tumbling. John is screaming for his mother but she’s out cold, she can’t hear him anymore—

Fire, fire everywhere and John, little John, pulling his mother’s heavy body from out of the wreckage.

There is blood, blood everywhere, staining her pretty white dress and John’s white shirt. He knows, as soon as he holds her hand, that she is dying. Somehow he knows exactly where she’s injured (torso, midsection, bleeding heavily, fatal wound) and how (impact brought pieces of metal into her skin) and there is still that rush of calm, calm, calm...

Heal her, says something, some instinct, inside him.
And he does.

Later, Helen will look at him sadly as he awakes in the hospital from physical exhaustion, a perfectly healed and healthy Helen. But instead of looking proud of him, she is holding back tears.

“Oh John,” she strokes his head, “I’m so sorry that you have this gift.”

He feels as if he is being watched.

Someone is cooking something. The scent of butter and warm bread wafts through the air and tickles John’s nose. It reminds him of a time long before, when he was quite young and his mother would bake pastries as a surprise. She said it was an old Watson recipe from back when her great grandmother was a girl. John can almost taste the toast on his tongue.

He sits up warily and finds that he has been lying in a lush king-sized bed with silk (real silk!) blue sheets. The pillows are perfectly soft, as if no one has ever slept in this bed before. The room appears spotless, with no trace of dust or signs of being lived in, only a drawer for clothes and a closest crammed with suits.

And yet, there is something eerie about this room, a feeling that he is not quite alone. He glances around in paranoia, seeing nothing.

John looks up at the ceiling, seeing a poster of the periodic table there. There are other posters, of blood splatters and corpses surrounded by white chalk in a crime scene. He thinks that he should be wary and disturbed by these gruesome portraits after finding body parts in the streets yesterday, but instead he has a morbid curiosity as to who posted them up and why.

Then he remembers the other night, the demons, the cursed Londoners, Molly’s warning echoing in his ears, meeting a madman and the walloping pain throbbing at the back of his skull.

“...Sherlock...!” John gets up.

He is marching to the door before he realizes it, pleased that his backpack had been placed at the foot of the bed and that his gun is still safe in its hoister. The cane is against the doorknob and so John takes it with him as he steps forward.

His head is still throbbing as John rushes into a narrow hallway and rushes down unfamiliar stairs, hand twitching against his side, brushing against his Browning. He scans the area below from the middle steps, noting that there are two ways of escape, through the window or through what looks like a sitting room. Likely a door on the right.

His eyes stray to the groundwork of the room, how much space is there and what objects clutter his way of escape. There’s a kitchen, objects lying everywhere—papers, beakers, little microscope slides, petri dishes and abandoned dishes and wrappers. It’s like a dump, only without the nasty smell though John thinks that he sees hints of mould, green tinged on some of the clutter.

The walls are covered with papers, maps and sticky notes. John sees a series of lines (Day number 981, 982, 983 and so on) and newspaper articles. Ink covers any blank spaces between the pages, connecting different pages together. Words like, “Serial killer” and “Pink” are littered across a span of ten documents. John also sees other words, “Remember” and “Moriarty.” But the phrase that catches his eye is scrawled up from the top of the walls to the floorboards, painted on top of all the
intricate notes.

“You are cursed... There is Nothing”—and the ‘N’ is capitalized so that it seems to eat the wall with its enormity—“you can do.” John reads, looking at the menacing letters with a sense of foreboding. They seem to stare back at him, ominous and sad, whispering things just like the fog and he stills his breathing, trying to catch what exactly is being said when—

Bony hands grasp his right shoulder, John flinches and spins around, his pistol pressed against the forehead of his attacker, ready to shoot but—

His gun is gone.

John looks up and sees an elderly woman, smiling down at him with undeserved affection. She is tall and willowy, her white and greyish curls reach up to her neck and the way she regards him reminds him of his old landlady Mrs. Turner.

She is also holding his gun by gently with her thumb and index finger, right by the pistol grip and John reaches for it.

“Oh no, young man. You’ll be going down for a bit of breakfast first and then I’ll hand you back your weapon. We don’t want to upset the house with any accidental shots. It’s feeling anxious from your discomfort enough as it is,” says the woman, hanging the Browning high above his head.

Normally his first instinct would be to subdue the enemy in the most efficient way possible (in this case, hitting a pressure point in her neck to knock her out) and then take back his gun, but Mrs. Turner’s face appears in this lady’s presence and John just can’t bear to hurt her. Instead, he blurts out a sharp, “Who are you and where’s Sherlock?”

“Oh, I’m the land lady, Emma Hudson,” she takes his limp hand to shake it enthusiastically. “Oh, wait, I suppose that I’m not really the land lady anymore,” she wrinkled her nose, “just more of a housekeeper.”

A landlady? And she was speaking to him normally, as Molly had out in the fog. Was she chosen as well? And what of Sherlock? He had been left outside to fend himself from the demons in the dark. He needed to find out what happened to him, just needed to get his gun back—

Just as he moves back, it seems that the entire foundation of the building, seems to give a great creaking groan, shaking monstrously beneath him.

John is bewildered, staring at the walls and the floorboards like they might explode beneath his feet (and they might, he can only recall how many landmines he has lost good men and women to in Afghanistan.)

“Oh dear,” Mrs. Hudson puts a hand to her mouth. “Have we upset you? That won’t do, no that won’t do at all…” She mutters and then begins to steer a shocked John down the steps and towards the kitchen area. Half of the table is covered with glass contraptions filled with green and blue liquid while the other seems to have been cleared off to make room for a plate of toast and eggs.

“Now sit you down, dear, I’ll make you some tea,” she tells him, pushing John down into one of the seats (an armchair that should really be in the sitting room, he notices, with several deep claw marks littering it’s surface, like the poor thing has been spat out of a saw factory.)

“No, wait, where is Sherlock?” John tries to stand back up. But Mrs. Hudson has a surprisingly strong grip for her age and she pushes him back down against the back of the soft chair. John doesn’t want to sit, he wants answers and he wants his gun back. There is something odd about this
place and he can’t get rid of the sick feeling that something is watching them…

The building begins to tremble again, while John’s chair suddenly softens against his back, steady caressing his skin. He jumps out of it, spinning around holding the phantom of a pistol that is no longer in his possession. And when he looks back at the armchair, he notices that the plate of food by the table has suddenly moved forward and that there is a metal kettle sitting beside it, one that he swears no one moved yet.

“Oh dear, I’d sit back down, young man. The house doesn’t like it when you’re frightened; it’s become rather fond of you. It’s trying to cheer you up,” Mrs. Hudson tells him cheerfully when she returns with a teacup and saucer.

“Cheer… cheer me up?” John thinks that he needs a minute to let everything sink in. Suddenly the overwhelming sensation of being watched makes an eerie sense because if what he thinks is true then…

“Why yes, dear. After all, you’re our guest,” the landlady smiles, in the exact way that Mrs. Turner always does when John compliments her jumpers, pleased and affectionate.

But instead of being comforted, John feels slightly disturbed. He tenses, feet itching to get to the door so that he can hunt down Sherlock (and Harry, he can’t forget Harry, his sister, wandering in the dark, was she…? No, don’t think, just run, just keep looking—) His fingers only tense, ready to grab the pistol away from this woman if need be when the flat begins groaning again, in creaks and low guttural sounds of pipes running.

It sounds like the distant and painful wails of whales, stranded on the beach, like it’s crying and John catches sight of the foot of the chair, stepping on his pant leg, as if to keep him in place.

He sinks back down into the seat, feeling it tremble happily while the table inches closer to him and the plate of food moves so close to him that it nearly falls off the edge.

This flat is alive.

It takes only a few seconds for John to process this.

In truth, he feels like he has stepped into a twisted wonderland of sorts, following his drunken sister into the fog (“I’m late, I’m late, for a very important date!” But what date? What occasion?), discovering disturbing curses, demons and living flats. It isn’t as if he is unfamiliar with the topsy turvy nature of curses or with witchcraft in general. There are rumours; there are always rumours but coming face to face with a sentient building is something new entirely.

But like everything in Dead London, John can only accept this as a fact of life here. This isn’t the ‘real’ world anymore, if the ‘real’ world had been the truth in the first place.

He wonders then, if he is Alice in this twisted metaphor, then who is the Red Queen?

(“We’re painting the roses red…” The haunting song echoes in John’s ear, sung by a falsetto voice that sets him on edge.)

“Well,” John swallows and tentatively puts his hand on the table, “this is… this is very nice. Um, thank you, for breakfast… but I’m not… exactly… hungry now.”

The flat merely groans again, John can feel the tiles of the kitchen floor shifting insistently as the plate is pushed closer to him.
“Look,” says John, “I know you want to… to feed me, to… take care of me, and I’m very grateful, but I’m more worried about Sherlock… and my sister. I need to go look for them, so can you tell Mrs. Hudson to bring my gun back?”

John isn’t sure if that is the landlady’s gift, to communicate with houses and flats. But he assumes it may be the case from the serene nods and frowns Mrs. Hudson makes when this living building makes its guttural complaints.

Everything is still, so still, that John fears that perhaps the flat has rejected his proposal and he may be trapped here with its creepy hospitality for the rest of his life, but then the tray is pushed back and he hears a soft hum from the heater down below.

Mrs. Hudson hums thoughtfully and places John’s Browning in his lap. She is beaming at his incredulous face and she elbows him playfully, “221B Baker Street is very fond of you, young man. I’m so glad that she’s found another human she likes, besides Sherlock. Most people end up being thrown out the chimney sweep or drowned in the bathtub.”

John has no idea what to say to that and thankfully, he doesn’t have to make any comment for suddenly the door that leads out of the sitting room is slammed open. The flat begins to hum, a low whistle like a flute. Mrs. Hudson and John start towards the corner and see Sherlock storming in, his clothes only mere rags against his skin, hardly presentable, while his coat is miraculously undamaged.

He is also drenched from head to toe in dark crimson liquid.

Immediately the flat’s happy whistles become strangled, and the windows begin to open and close in harsh slaps.

John is by Sherlock’s side before he can think but Sherlock isn’t looking at him, speaking to him at all. In fact, the genius seems to be ranting on about taxis refusing to take his money and the insufferable tube with its sweaty and boring passengers. Sherlock is walking in circles in the sitting room, displacing a few stray blankets on the floor and stern clothes that might have been used as wash clothes.

“—and Lestrade still hasn’t come to me about the case, the fool. I swear, Mrs. Hudson, those insects at Scotland Yard are going to ruin all the evidence by the time I’m asked to look at the bodies. God, what are the murderers in this city doing all day? Having brunch? It’s so boring,” the man is rambling, his steps never lingering in one place. “Only yesterday did I get a request to find someone’s pet rabbit of all things, is that a joke? I don’t do little childish searches not for—”

“Yes, dear, of course,” Mrs. Hudson is nodding absentmindedly throughout the rant. She is tidying the table and giving John a stern look for not touching his food.

John is too busy worrying about the blood. “Mr. Holmes—” He tries to say.

But Sherlock brushes past him, shrugging off his coat and throwing it over a desk cluttered with jars of preserved eyeballs (John wonders how he had missed this collection of dismembered body parts before returning to the matter at hand.)

“Mr. Holmes,” he tries again.

“—informed Mike of my search for a flatmate. With any luck, I should be moved into 221B within the week. Mrs. Hudson, now—” Sherlock stops and notices the wall, plastered with different papers and the big painted words, ‘You are cursed.’ He hovers for a moment, hand half-raised to
touch the blackened lettering.

“Mrs. Hudson, what is this?” He demands sharply.

The landlady only shrugs and replies, “Exactly as it appears to be, Sherlock. You did post them up a few years ago since this all began.”

“Don’t be silly,” Sherlock snaps, “I wouldn’t have—but then…”

He is quiet, studying all the documents that he can.

John, still by the madman’s side, has no idea what is happening. He tries to catch Sherlock’s attention again, about to speak up, when Sherlock whirls to face him with his black blindfold making it seem that all his intensity is focused on him alone (and, John shivers, it probably is.)

(The flat hasn’t made a sound since Sherlock has entered, the air is stagnant.)

“You,” Sherlock says in a menacing tone that makes John itch for his pistol, “just who are you and what business do you have in my flat?”

John’s mouth falls open. “But I… we met yesterday!”

“A client then? No, of course not... no clients allowed inside 221B with this curse... not unless... but that’s impossible... Who are you really?”

“I told you, we met yesterday—”

Sherlock sneers at him, advancing until John’s back is against the wall and he can only stare up into an intimidating (fascinating) black space of the blindfold.

“Oh I’m sure that’s a likely story, a way for you to trap me, Moriarty. That’s very clever of you, but if this game has been going on for as long as I think it has, if it’s the game that I think, then I will find a way to end it even without the missing piece!” A twisted smile has formed across Sherlock’s face, and John thinks, that there might be insanity there as the genius leans down until their noses are only inches apart, “I will win.”

Breathing slowly, John can barely speak, much less think.

When his thoughts return to him, he finds himself upset and (irrationally) hurt.

He straightens his posture and scowls at Sherlock, “You’re the one who threw me in here and told your landlady to knock me out cold! Thank you so very much for that, by the way, there’s nothing more gratifying than being manhandled and kept in the dark while my new friend is being torn to pieces by demons in the fog! And now you claim to have no memory of me at all! I’m Doctor John Watson, just for your written records, Mr. Holmes, and certainly not this Moriarty fellow that you’re confusing me with!”

The corners of Sherlock’s mouth twist and if John could see his eyes, he thinks they would be (green? Blue? Grey?) blazing.

“A doctor? You’re a good actor, just as my notes say, but you can’t possibly expect me to believe you—”

“—This is insane,” John interrupts him. “You can’t have forgotten me... it’s not...”

But isn’t it?
John can’t speak then, remembering what Sherlock told him before shoving him through the doors of 221B.

(...don’t be offended if I don’t remember you in the morning...) Sherlock moves his hand, perhaps to tilt John’s chin up or to press him against the wall and immobilize him.

In either case, John’s built in reflexes speak for him and he grabs Sherlock’s wrist, to stop anyone from touching him (oh how he screamed in the operating room, screamed if anyone tried to come near, until they sedated him) and prepared to put the other man in a twist if Sherlock should try to attack.

His fingers brush against Sherlock’s pale skin and he is prepared to punch the man if necessary, when Sherlock freezes, the twisted sneer melting away into a confused lilt.

“…John…?”

He feels his shoulders relax at that familiar tone. (It’s Sherlock, something is singing inside, it’s Sherlock, his Sherlock again—no, can’t think.) His grip subconsciously loosens, about to slip away, but Sherlock brings up his other hand to leave it there, holding on so tightly that John can’t feel his fingertips.

“…John,” Sherlock whispers again, with more certainty.

His throat tightens, and he isn’t quite sure what is happening in that moment (nor will he ever know), but he just gives a choked laugh. And then Sherlock is laughing feverishly with him until their knees give way and they’re on the floor and John has never laughed so hard in his life.

There’s a paper, unforgotten and curled up in his pocket from when Sherlock threw him into 221B, the one that Sherlock wanted John to give to him.

It says, ‘Remember this man, John Watson. He is essential. –S.H.’

It isn’t needed anymore.

“You have questions,” is what Sherlock says once they’ve settled into the sitting room. The black cloth covering his eyes makes it difficult for John to tell if Sherlock is staring at him or now. He thinks that Sherlock is. But the feeling of being scrutinized could be attributed to the sentient flat that hasn’t made a peep since John and Sherlock had ‘met’ again.

It’s surreal, how they settle in a semblance of normality (or what could be normal in the fog, at any rate.) Yet it feels as natural as breathing, comfortable even.

Mrs. Hudson had left them alone for a few minutes but she’s returned, with two trays of eggs and toast. This time she gives both ‘her boys’ a stern look that prompts John to nibble at his portion. He doesn’t feel hungry, can’t remember if he ate anything the day before. But his gift urges him to eat and take care of himself, so he forces the food down.

Sherlock, however, seems to have finished his whole plate plus a second one in seconds for there are only crumbs left when John looks up next. Mrs. Hudson appears pleased as she takes away the
dishes, patting Sherlock happily while frowning at John’s barely touched eggs. “You should eat more, dear,” she tells John. “Heaven knows I had a time forcing Sherlock to eat before the curse and even after. You’re a good influence already, I can tell. But you really should eat.”

“Yes,” John fights the blush from Mrs. Hudson’s mothering, “I do.”

“Well, then Mrs. Hudson, you should sit down as well,” Sherlock gestures to the coach. “There are some things I won’t be able to say.”

“Of course,” she beams, settling down against several cushions and old newspapers.

John shuffles in his seat uncomfortably. He feels the chair move against him comfortingly and whispers a quiet ‘thanks’ to 221B, before he asks, “Just what happened before? Why didn’t you remember me and why do you know me now?”

For that matter, why were Sherlock, Mrs. Hudson and Molly the only human beings that could move freely in the fog, besides John?

Sherlock opens his mouth but nothing comes out. He scowls and crosses his arms. “I can’t say.”

“…The curse? Or the rules?” John remembers snippets of what Sherlock had tried to tell him before witching hour.

“Both, actually,” both heads turn to Mrs. Hudson who has her hands placed neatly together on her lap. Her back is slightly hunched under a heavy weight that John can’t see and her wrinkles are more pronounced than before.

John wants to walk over and throw his arms around her, keep her smiling and carefree, but he doesn’t because now is not the time. He still has Harry to find and some needed explanations about this twisted city.

“Do you mean that you are all cursed?” John asks.

“Obviously,” Sherlock grumbles and John only gives him an exasperated glare which is answered by a casual smirk.

“Yes,” says Mrs. Hudson. “All of this, Dead London, the people, the chosen, the beast and Sherlock, are the results of a powerful witch’s curse.”

“A witch?” John whispers. He has never met one before. But the stories, he certainly remembers. Human beings with no hearts, submerged in the art of demon summoning. “Who is she? Or he?” John frowns, his confrontation with Sherlock still fresh in his thoughts. “…Moriarty?”

They don’t answer, they don’t need to.

Sherlock’s lips have returned to a deep snarl, so livid that John imagines that it might be carved there on the man’s face forever. Mrs. Hudson’s eyes are glassy, no longer quite there, as if her soul has wandered as far away from the fog as possible.

“As far as I know,” is what Sherlock eventually replies while Mrs. Hudson nods.

“Tell me about him… or her,” John demands. If this Moriarty is responsible for the fog, for luring people in and trapping them… or ripping them apart with demons then he needs to know.

Mrs. Hudson shakes her head when John turns to her. “I’m sorry. I can’t say either. The rules say that I cannot aid an outsider in this manner. None of the chosen can tell you more about Moriarty. We can only tell you bits and pieces about the game, the curse.”

“Chosen?”

“There are three of us,” says Mrs. Hudson, “and then there’s Sherlock.” Before John can ask what is different about Sherlock, Mrs. Hudson explains the role of the chosen first, “I’m not sure why we’re selected, but we’re the only people who can give you clues and warnings about what is to come. Once an outsider enters the fog, they become players in the game.”

“…The game,” John repeats drily. He sneaks a glance at Sherlock, but the man is still, knees up against the armchair, blindfold obscuring everything. “So Molly… she told me she was the warning.”

“Yes, that seems to be her role. She’ll dissuade you and tell you the disadvantages of any moves you might make,” Mrs. Hudson says. “I’m the keeper of the home base, so to speak. 221B is the only place in Dead London safe from the fog and Moriarty’s influence. The demons can’t enter here.”

John’s brow furrows, “Then why don’t the other outsiders come in here?”

The landlady smiles, “Because they must be invited to play.”

He is quiet, something rushing through his veins that he can’t identify, and he doesn’t realize how tightly he is gripping the side of his chair until the arm rests push back, as if trying to reassure him. John lets go, mentally apologizing to the flat.

“So I’ve been invited then,” he says neutrally. “By who? And why? And to play what exactly?”

Mrs. Hudson shakes her head, “I can’t answer that. I can only confirm what you have discovered so far and give you explanations to clarify that information. That is my role. You’re meant to win the game on your own, dear. I’m sorry.”

John feels a shiver run down his spine at those words. 221B seems to creak in unison with his dread.

“…The game…” he says slowly, thinking then, of the newscasts showing bloodied feet and severed heads that were sometimes recovered from the fog, of interviews of distraught relatives crying for their missing (and likely dead) loved ones, of Harry. “Playing with all these lives… this entire curse… Is this really all game to him? What kind of sick person is he?”

“Everything is a game, John,” Sherlock speaks up suddenly, his voice as cold as it was when he stepped in that morning still covered in blood. “Life is a semblance and series of repeating routines and useless functions of transport. Humans move through their limited years making the same predictable mistakes, stuck in the same routines and insecurities. This is the only thing that makes life interesting.”

He feels like all the warmth has vanished from his body.

“…What?” John stands up, unable to believe his ears. “Killing people, subjecting them to this torture… it’s interesting? It’s funny?”

“No,” Sherlock snaps, and god, John wishes he could see the man’s eyes to decipher what he was feeling. “Games, John. The games, the puzzles—that is what makes life interesting. Moriarty is
sending a message. He’s toying with us, showing how smart he is.”

“Well I don’t care!” John is shouting before he knows it. “This, my life, my sister’s life,” and 
yours, he thinks, “is not a plaything that can be disregarded and wiped away from the chessboard
for the sake of some witch’s amusement. I won’t play. Once I find Harry, we’ll escape the fog on
our own.”

He has taken his gun and is moving towards the door. There is a crash; Sherlock has knocked over
a side table that carried pitches of red and green liquid, glass boxes of preserved fingerprints. “No.
John, where are you going? Stop, don’t leave!”

But he keeps going, hand on the knob.

The door stays locked, and John glares up at the ceiling. “Let me out,” he tells the flat, “I won’t be
a prisoner here.”

Sherlock has grabs John by the shoulder, his injured one, and with surprising strength, presses John
against the door. John is ready to drop kick the other man or flip him over, when Sherlock hisses,
“Don’t you understand? You have to play the game, John—”

“Why should I? Why should I adhere to his rules when we could break the curse another way—?”

“There is no other way!”

There is a hush, only heavy breathing and John staring at black cloth.

“…It’s you, isn’t it? You’re at the center of this curse, for some reason and he, Moriarty, has
involved the whole city in it. It’s why you can’t remember things day by day, and yet you can
move freely. Why you put notes on the walls… to remember whatever details you can, to break the
curse…” John trails off.

Sherlock inhales sharply, his body hunched over John’s form to prevent any escape. His mouth
slides into a self-deprecating grin that doesn’t suit him at all.

“…I cannot say…”

The rules, John remembers, everything inside him aching at this, at this helplessness.

“Sherlock,” He brings up a worn hand to the madman’s cheek, hesitant and unsure before settling
it there. It should be awkward, strange, but John only feels his chest clench and overwhelming
feeling.

“Sherlock,” he says again, unsure why. He thinks the other man is looking at him, but with the
black cloth, he can’t be sure. “I’ll help you, I swear, I will,”—to leave him here, this brilliant
person, is… is unthinkable and John can’t think clearly about why this burns in him so much
—“but my sister… please, you have to help me find my sister first.”

He watches Sherlock swallow slowly, the way the man’s Adam’s apple bobbles up and down in
uncertainty before the low, “Alright, I will,” escapes his lips.

The keeper of the flat pulls John aside when he limps down the stairs. Sherlock is still rummaging
in the sitting room upstairs, looking at his encrypted notes of words and numbers. (When John asks
if he could look through them, and perhaps glean a bit of information about the curse, Sherlock’s
hand freezes and the genius is forced to say that he isn’t allowed to give John any clues, spoken or written. He doesn’t ask again.)

“What is it, Mrs. Hudson?”

She is holding something in a plastic bag, the wrinkles around her eyes more strained as she pushes it towards John gently.

“This is for you, dear, in case you should need it.”

John peers into the bag and is surprised to find a dozen rounds for his pistol, all perfectly new.

“Where did you get this?”

Mrs. Hudson puts a finger to her lips, “221B provides for any needs that it possibly can for those it favours. It likes you... and let me tell you, dear, it's the first time that it has taken a shine to anyone besides poor Sherlock.”

He isn’t sure what to say. Instead he says a thank you to the flat and to her, knowing that the expression is not enough to express his gratitude.

But Mrs. Hudson seems to understand. She gives John a hug, whispering, “Be careful of whom to trust, John. I’m not sure who the third chosen is, but you should be weary of the any outsiders and their agendas. And take care of yourself, for Sherlock’s sake.”

He feels a laugh bubble up in his throat, half strangled in his thoughts. “Sherlock’s sake?”

She steps back and touches his nose in a teasing manner.

“He has his heart when you are with him, John Watson. He remembers who he used to be.”

And before John can ask her to clarify, Sherlock is rushing down the steps, a propriety arm on John’s back when they meet.

“This way, John, the fog awaits,” he announces.

John gives one final look to 221B’s keeper, in which Mrs. Hudson gives a kiss on the cheek to ‘both her boys.’ She pats him on the head affectionately as Sherlock drags him out, and murmurs, “I will be here during witching hour, dear.”

The flat groans, the door swinging with a stubborn squeak.

*Come back,* it says, *come back.*

- 

It is as dark as the unknown depth of John’s nightmares when Sherlock pulls him through what he presumes is an alleyway. It is colder too. His jacket isn’t enough to conceal his warmth inside. John feels his face beginning to numb. He moves to brush his hands together, in attempt to warm them, when Sherlock wordlessly hands him a pair of worn gloves.

John takes them, oddly touched and says, “Thank you.”

Sherlock only turns away and takes John’s wrist.

The fog shifts around them, like tissue curtains, brushing dangerously against skin. *Welcome back,*
John hears, *welcome back, would you like to play?*

“Stay close to me,” Sherlock says briskly though John thinks that the order is unnecessary. Sherlock’s fingers are wrapped so tightly around his, that John wonders if it will be possible to pry them off in the morning, if they will be brittle like bone.

He lets himself be led right and left, left and right. His questions for their destination go unanswered. It should annoy him, that he is being ignored. But it doesn’t.

Instead, Sherlock rambles and points at different landmarks. John can’t see them at first, but as Sherlock’s explanations grow more detailed, he begins to make out different shapes and imagine them in his mind. His guide’s speeches are erratic though, on and off. Sometimes he’ll go on speaking for minutes at length. Then he’ll be silent, so silent that it feels that hours have passed.

Sherlock moves through the shadows as if he is a part of them. Every step is filled with confidence, without wavering. Sherlock pulls them into the darkest paths without flinching at possible ditches or demons. It’s like he has a map of London inside his head. They are more than a dozen blocks away from 221B and John has memorized the number of twists and turns that it takes to return.

“Where are we going?” John asks again, if only to hear something other than the crooning of the fog, beckoning him to come closer, deeper into the city.

His companion doesn’t answer. At this point, John has stopped expecting him too.

“Alright then,” John replies to the silence. “How is it that you know where we’re going? No offense, but your blindfold...”

“I have eyes elsewhere, John,” he can practically hear the biting smile on Sherlock’s face.

He wonders what the madman means by this but figures that the blindfold and ability to see without his physical eyes must be part of Sherlock’s gift. He decides not to pry. This is something that John wants to solve himself.

Besides, he doesn’t think he’ll be able to handle another response of ‘I cannot say’ again.

There are people.

They move down the streets, in twos, threes, groups or alone, chattering away about the same insignificant things. John and Sherlock brush past them, Sherlock without saying a word, and John apologizing out loud if only to acknowledge to these people that he knows. He knows that they’re trapped in this spell.

It’s funny, that yesterday John couldn’t bear to say anything to them, could only look them in the eyes and picture the formless words he wants to say. With Sherlock though, sentences, apologies, heart-felt feelings flow out together like perfectly woven silk, where Sherlock is the instrument and John the weaver.

“There, do you see?”

John is unprepared for the hot breath against his ear, or the hand guiding him proprietarily from the back. He and Sherlock are pressed close together, hovering in the bustling street and he feels bothered that he hadn’t noticed it sooner.
“Christ, Sherlock,” he mutters, but does not attempt to move away, “don’t sneak up on me like that, I could have hurt you!”

A snort. “No, you wouldn’t have,” and before John can argue the point, Sherlock says again, “Do you see it?”

“See what?”

“Observe, John,” the whisper makes him shiver and his companion nudges him, “That woman.”

At first, he notes nothing odd than the expected parties of civilians going about their own business. He sees a mother and her children chatting to someone who isn’t there (a father, perhaps, taken out of Old London for being too boring when the fog came) and a junkie arguing with a few teenagers. Everyone is up to their own business, greeting each other and going about the same day like clockwork.

But then, after he squints to make out the details in the dark, he notices it.

There are two women, weaving their way through the passer-bys on the pavement. They keep their heads down low, (seeming to) avoid all eye contact with anyone but each other. John can see that their heads are low like they are speaking with each other in hushed tones, an act, an attempt at normalcy. But the slight missteps where they nearly collide into other civilians (and the lack of attention that they receive) confirm that they are not trapped.

“Outsiders...” John whispers. “But how did you know you that they’d be here...?”

“I didn’t, was hoping we might come across them in the busier districts of the city. Humans are comforted by being around other humans because of pointless social callings. It’s also safer, you avoid less attention from Moriarty, I presume, if you’re able to blend in... though these two morons aren’t even trying to make an effort,” Sherlock snorts.

He steers John forward, holding him by the shoulders, almost like a human shield except not quite. Sherlock keeps John to the left, near the buildings, as if to cover John’s body from the darting and pleading eyes of the civilians on the street.

“Excuse me,” Sherlock says when they are directly behind the two outsiders.

The women keep walking. There is no change in their demeanour or the pace of their footsteps. John wonders, then, how long they have also been trapped here with people who can’t speak with them (and demons that roam the night) that they would be so used to ignoring the sounds of other human beings.

A twisted frown makes its way to Sherlock’s face and before John can stop him, Sherlock has reached out with his free hand and pulled the taller woman away from her friend.

“Excuse me,” he snarls.

“Sherlock—” John tries to move him away.

But the woman (she’s tall, with cinnamon hued skin, brownie eyes and curly hair) takes one glance at Sherlock and shrieks, “Get away from me, you, you freak!” before she bolts away. Her companion (a brunette, not nearly as fazed but with dangerously wary reflexes and pale skin) has wide eyes, and they both rush away down one of the alleyways.

“Follow them!” Sherlock shouts.
And he’s off, dashing down the street, a black blur against the grey.

“Hey, wait!” John shouts, blocked by a group of skaters, who are about to go to the park.

John struggles to get past them without knocking any of the teenagers over, nearly stumbles because of his limp. He looks up at the fading figures of the outsiders and of Sherlock Holmes, thinks of his haunting nightmares and bloody limits.

He’s falling, the sharp pain of inevitable scabs all too present through his bones and knees. He can’t find his cane in the fog. The people pass him by and if they notice him, they’re too busy screaming in their own bodies to help. He’s back in the desert again, watching the clouds of fog roll in, devouring his men and women, calling his name, for him to join them and—

“John!”

He looks up, and sees Sherlock (he’s back, he’s back, he’s back) a few feet away, face half hidden by the black cloth, hand outstretched.

“Come on.”

He doesn’t say anything (no doubts, no pain, nothing but the order.) Merely fixes his stare at the brilliant man before him, gets up, reaches for those long fingers and then...

He follows him.

They race through the shadows, blood roaring in their ears, blocking out all of the crooning of the fog. They’re grinning like, like madmen, shouting cheeky comments at each other when they lose sight of their targets but it doesn’t matter, because suddenly it feels like the grey is slipping away and John sees colour for the first time when he looks at the fabric covering Sherlock Holmes’ eyes and imagines the hues that might be there.

He wants to paint it, craft words of poetry, run until his legs give out and never stop, not unless Sherlock told him to, not unless Sherlock were to stop existing (but then John would stop to and when did he start—)

“Welcome to London,” Sherlock huffs when they stumble into another square, watching the two women duck into a dark entrance.

Subconsciously, John reaches for his cane but instead moves his hand so that it isn’t hung from Sherlock’s iron grip, so that his fingers are intertwined with his.

“Best tour I’ve ever had.”

“Do you recognize this place?”

Their voices echo in the void in heavy breaths. John has to squint to make out the hazy outline of an entrance to the London Underground. He hasn’t seen one that isn’t boarded up with wood and nails since he was a little boy and his parents had taken Harry and him to a trip in Paris for a week (before the Paris Dead Zone happened when he was thirteen.)

New London’s tube entrances are blocked off. The underground and the sewage are the two things
that connect Old London to New London. John has heard from Mrs. Turner about the number of incidences and casualties involving policemen trying to close off tube entrances, only to be eaten by the demons lurking within. The government takes strict measures to ensure that the underground lines remain closed.

It’s strange, staring into an entryway that only promises more darkness. Even the fog seems still, listening to the hollow whistles of emptiness deep within.

“No, of course you don’t,” Sherlock is muttering to himself again, yanking John forward as he makes gestures in the air. “Mycroft would have had them blocked off and you haven’t been to London before in your life.”

“How did you...?”

“Your complete compliancy in allowing me to lead you through the streets, the way you gape at every building we come across, any that might be of historical and/or sightseeing significance, when we come close enough for you to see. Obvious,” is the reply.

“Fantastic,” John shakes his head, wondering why he didn’t think of that before. It must be frustrating, he reflects, to observe so much and wonder why ordinary people can’t just think. Hearing the straightforward explanations from Sherlock’s mouth make him feel like his own eyes have been opened and it’s simply amazing.

A pause. They are halfway down the steps.

“Do you know... that you say that out loud?”

“Oh,” John isn’t sure what to say. “Well, I’m just being honest. I could stop if you’d like”—he is about to offer, but he thinks, then, of Sherlock wandering in the fogs for years on end, speaking out into a mist that never answers back—“but I won’t.”

There is movement, but it is too dark for him to see clearly. Something hot (breath, perhaps) ghosts his cheeks before John feels only the lingering cold and Sherlock says briskly, “This is where I’ve recorded sightings of other outsiders. But I didn’t think that they would hide here of all places... What must be going through their tiny little brains?”

John frowns, “This is where the demons go when it isn’t witching hour, isn’t it? At least it is in New London. We have to block off the stations to keep the demons from coming out. It’s not where I would go to find safety.”

It’s suicidal, like walking into a pit of ravenous wolves. What would possess any outsider to live in a place where demons thrive?

“...John...” Sherlock pauses, sounding detached. “It could be dangerous...”

“Well then,” he nods, pulling out his gun and moving to step past the other man, “all the more reason to go in.”

He can’t make out the expression on Sherlock’s face, not when they are covered with hues of grey and black, sheets of vapour and whispers. But he can feel his own grin, a rush in his ears and as he is led into the tunnels, he thinks that Sherlock must feel the same euphoria.

They descend.
There is a steady drip, drip sound, the kind of sound that always puts John on edge. It makes him triple check his surroundings, lower his breathing so much that he’s close to forgetting how.

Somehow, it’s darker than up above, a black that is only slightly dipped in grey. The dark here is almost as oppressive as it was before witching hour, growing more so as they continue down the steps.

He can’t tell if the place is deserted entirely. But he can make out weak lights where the subways would have run, before the dead zone formed. It’s too dark to see anything other than that, but he has Sherlock, who guides him along with his hand.

Sherlock moves like a predator, every movement delicate and yet, there is something about Sherlock that screams of danger. It’s what compels John to rashly follow the man in the first place, that, and he thinks that he might have been born mad all along and didn’t acknowledge it until now.

Clumsy but rushed footsteps practically roar in the echoes in the tunnel. It’s them, the outsiders.

“Wait!” John calls out, “We just want to ask you a few questions! Come back!”

Sherlock hisses and clamps his other hand over John’s mouth, “Shut up, do you want the demons to hear us?”

“Mmmmf!” They’re sleeping, is what he means to say.

“Not in the fog. Never in the fog.”

He freezes, and he wishes he could see the other man’s face, distinguish his expressions (but would that change anything?)

“Sherlock—”

Then there’s a crash, screeching and the movement of several large silhouettes in shapes John remembers all too clearly from his entrance into the fog.

“Demons,” John is in front of his friend instinctively, Browning pointed straight into the black.

“Run, Sherlock! I’ll cover you, it’s alright—”

“No,” hands are on his face, his shoulders, his back, pulling him back towards the exit, “no, it’s not for you, it’s for me... God, I’ve lost track of the time, it’s nearly witching hour...”

“What? But—” How much time had passed between this morning to now? How many hours wasted in bed and then running around blindly through Dead London and its eerie source of light? Had the seconds gone by so quickly or...?

“It’s different here, John. Moriarty can change any factors he wants. And he has. He’s sped up the day again, damn it, he’s interfering, we can’t even hear the clock down here and I haven’t even solved today’s puzzle yet—”

Stumbling up the steps, being pushed towards the cement as soon as they’re free from the underground—

“Sherlock, what...?”

“Get back to Baker Street, John. Now. I can’t stay, I... I have to...” The other man’s hands are in the air in a complicated wringing gesture. “I have to go...”
“Have to go? Is this the curse? Sherlock? Sherlock! Sherlock, come back, wait...!”

But he’s gone, blended into the darkening fog as if he was never there at all.

- 

*Have you figured out how to play, John Watson?* The fog whispers around him.

“Piss off,” he says to it. “Piss off and *leave me be*...!”

- 

His limp is back and John resorts to leaning against the buildings until he can find something that can act as a makeshift cane. He is goading himself bitterly for ever thinking that his wounds, his limits could be cured in the first place.

John has counted the number of bells from the clock tower, knowing that it’s the eleventh hour only, not time for witching hour yet... but soon. He wonders what Sherlock meant by the puzzle. Whatever it was, Sherlock had clearly finished it yesterday, before he had tended to John’s wounds.

(He wonders why the wounds don’t hurt, except when the fog becomes pure black.)

“He wants you to leave,” says a voice from behind.

John whips around, pistol pointed towards Molly’s head. She smiles grimly at him, her white coat standing out in the mist and the plastic bag of body parts by her feet.

“...Good Lord, Molly, I could have killed you!” He breathes. “What are you doing out so late? Witching hour is—”

“The pieces aren’t allowed to die; John Watson,” she says ominously, “only the players do... and then they become pieces themselves.”

“...I... I don’t understand.”

Molly only offers another sad smile. “He wants you to leave,” she repeats.

His brow furrows. “Who?” He asks and just as he does trepidation fills him (*I’m the messenger, the warning*) and he already knows.

“Moriarty sends his admiration that you’ve come so far—”

“But I haven’t, I don’t even know how I survived the first breeding grounds... I haven’t done anything to participate in his sick *game*”—not yet, not when he promised Sherlock to break the curse no matter what—“So why...?”

“—but he’s not amused anymore, by your silly little antics,” Molly recites, in a monotonous tone that doesn’t suit her at all. There are little cracks in her speech that betray her emotions but she stands firm through it all. It makes John want to pull her into a hug.

“You can try to play the blushing heroine for so long before you realize this... Sherlock does not care for you. He is only using you to break the curse. Inevitably, he will get bored of you, as he gets bored by all humans, and when that happens, you will no longer have his protection. Moriarty’s demons will find you... and then you will be burned, from the inside out.”
Anger fills him. “That’s not true. Sherlock is a good man—”

“Stay away from him,” Molly repeats once more, just as the fog around them seems to solidify into black. “You’ve already lost what you came here to find. It’s over. Leave this place.”

But before John can retaliate, the darkness seems to swallow her. John screams, reaches for Molly, but she only shakes her head and then there is only black.

And snarls all around him.

John feels his throat constrict and he edges so that his back is to a wall, hearing them from all sides. 

Witching hour.

(Moriarty can change any factors he wants. And he has. He’s sped up the day again,” Sherlock’s voice echoes in his mind.)

It is a trap, all of it. Molly serving both as a warning and a distraction to the coming darkness, while John had walked right in like the naive fool he is (always, always, why can’t he just turn off his heart?)

They’re going to tear him apart, and John knows that his pistol can only take out so many of these creatures before they get back up again, but at least he will die fighting (isn’t that how he always wanted to go? To give his life meaning?)

“Sorry Sherlock,” John says like a silent prayer. “Won’t be back at Baker Street.”

He points his weapon straight ahead and begins shooting like never before, at every sound, he aims and fires, doesn’t bother to check if he missed. Only the thuds and shrieks of pain confirm his shots, and even then, John can’t pause. He keeps firing, thanking Mrs. Hudson and 221B for the ammo. He barely knows what’s there or what isn’t anymore.

Are the monsters real? Or is it in his head? He can hear them everywhere, like they are synonymous with his breathing and yet he can’t see them, can barely move for fear of running into one and being torn into pieces.

“God damn it,” He shouts, feeling teeth latch at his arm, before he shoots at the thing that has him and begins to stumble away from the wall.

Now he doesn’t have any cover, he has to watch his back, keep checking over his shoulder for things that may or may not be there...

The fog is cackling, a completely different voice from before, in high pitched and mocking song, falsetto giggles and lilted taunts. Can you shoot them all, Johnny boy? Can you find them? Or will your hands be bitten off, dragged away from your screaming body while they feast on your insides?

“Shut up!” John shouts, though he isn’t sure if he’s talking to the madness personified in the darkness, to the hungry breaths of the monsters or the frenzied, blurred roars of PTSD in his thoughts.

Something lashes out, cutting open the stitches at his side and John bites his tongue to prevent his scream. He won’t give Moriarty the satisfaction. He’s sure that the witch is watching, from somewhere in the dark. He refuses to play this game as some cut-out player.
John grabs at the creature, dwarfed by its larger figure and nearly crushed by its weight, when he wrenches his hand forward and aims for where he thinks the head is. A loud shot rings out, but the creature barely flinches, only spits at him in burning agony and pins him down.

“No!” He tries to wrestle free. He can barely feel the blood gushing from his side in the flood of adrenaline and fear. The gun is slipping from his grasp, but he has to hold on to it...

*This is the way you end, Johnny boy, like the helpless being you are,* the mist surrounds him.

“No,” He grits out. He made a promise (*Harry, Mike, Molly, Mrs. Hudson, Sherlock, Sherlock, Sherlock*, all trapped.) He can’t fail now...!

And then there is the howl.

All of the demons go silent, a tense and very present terror sinking into the air.

The creature is thrown off of John in mere milliseconds after.

John gasps, taking in air gratefully. He hears the ripping sound of flesh torn apart. Loud strangled noises, howls, more whimpering and the retreating stampede of steps (can demons scream?) Something splatters on the pavement, some of it landing on John’s face and clothes. He can’t make out the shapes but then...

He sees the glowing grey-blue, grey-green eyes again.

“...Siraj...” It’s the wolf from before, he’s sure of it. They stare at each other, scrutinizing, just breathing. The eyes come closer, the only light he can see in all of this fog and...

There is a shift of metal (one of the sewer caps?), something grabbing John by the elbow. Siraj lets out a growl, running towards John, as if to snatch him up as his next meal or carry him off as some sort of prize and—

John is pulled down the manhole.

- Naturally he refuses to be captured without a fight. John is kicking and throwing punches at the bodies trying to hold him down. He knows that he has landed a few well placed blows on the man holding him from behind and the woman who has his legs.

“Let go of me, you bastards!” John shouts.

“Calm down,” an Irish accent rings out, not one of the people pinning him down. “We’re friends, not enemies.”

The woman says nothing.

“Stop struggling! You’re welcome for saving your arse, mate,” the man, who has now forced him on the floor, spits out sarcastically. “We could have left you to be eaten by the beast and its hoards of demons. Would have been more fun.”

He stops, blinking suspiciously at these people... who have... light? Where did that come from? He stares at the trio, specifically, at the Irish man (carrying many bags) who has light pouring from his fingers (His gift?) He hasn’t seen such bright light since he left his flat and Mrs. Turner, since electricity. It hurts to look at it.
“Who the hell are you?”

“Outsiders, like you,” the woman finally speaks. John, eyes stinging from the bright light, can see that she looks like the same brunette that he and Sherlock had tracked down hours earlier. He wonders where the other woman went, the one with cinnamon skin. “We live in the sewers and the underground, occasionally we save others like us, like you, from being eaten alive.”

“That’s not possible,” John breathes. “You can’t survive down here; it’s where they live...”

“Moran’s gift is most helpful in that regard,” the woman indicates to the tall, built man who had wrestled John to the ground. Moran gives him a feral grin and it gives John the chills.

“He keeps us unseen by the demons. It’s a sexy gift, isn’t it, Sebby?” The Irishman is caressing Moran’s cheek proprietarily. Moran is still, smirking down at the blood spilling from John’s wound like it excites him more than any affection. John doesn’t like that at all. He looks away, trying not to think of how Moran seems more demonic than any demon he’s come across so far.

“Jim,” says the woman, “Enough. We should look at his injuries.”

“Oh very well, Anthea,” Jim tosses her one of his bags. It’s a med kit and Anthea catches easily. She kneels by John’s side and begins to stoically clean up the blood. Jim says something about keeping watch, while Moran sits down, staring at the blood hungrily again. John looks away, still trying to figure out how he came into this mess, into a world where the rules are unknown and he’s fallen into the sewer lines (was Sherlock alright?)

“Are you one of Mycroft’s agents?” Anthea asks him, just as she begins to sew the wounds (she apologized for the lack of painkillers but he doesn’t mind.)

John winces, holding back his groans, “Sorry? Who’s Mycroft?” It’s a name that seems to ring a thread of familiarity to him but he can’t recall...

Her expression is blank again, “Ah. You don’t know him. Why are you here, in Dead London? Another straggler? Looking for oblivion?”

“No,” John shifts. “Looking for my sister. Harry Watson, have you seen her?”

Anthea freezes, raw emotions slipping on her face for the first time, while Moran seems to have burst into laughter, his deep chuckles echoing down the tunnels like the devil’s laugh before his fall. Jim, who has turned around, shakes his head sadly.

“Oh god,” Jim whispers. “I’m so sorry, mate...”

“What?” John demands, his heart beating in his chest, thoughts screaming out, no, god, no, “What is it?”

“You came here for nothing, you fool. Your sister,” Moran sneers, looking particularly at Anthea’s broken gaze, “is dead.”

- Interlude: Mrs. Hudson -
She remembers everything since the fog came; that is the curse of the chosen. They can remember and they can act. The others remember too, but they can never act. They’re stuck in a loop, repeating that same day, forever.

Sherlock is different; he’s the center of this. He’s the only piece that can move freely and yet will never remember anything the next day.

She knows it and she isn’t allowed to reveal anything to him, anything to the players, unless they figure it out themselves.

It’s painful, being trapped in with only 221B for company. They are both lonely, they want to speak to another person again, someone who doesn’t forget what happens day by day.

Mrs. Hudson can’t bear to watch Sherlock struggle with questions (why is there fog outside, Mrs. Hudson? No one is speaking to me, Mrs. Hudson. What’s happening? What are these notes here for, Mrs. Hudson?)

For the longest time, Sherlock only shows reaction to the notable differences in his day, or to the name Moriarty. Otherwise, he is indifferent now, he moves through the curse and dead London as if it were normal or worse, exciting. Occasionally he speaks to outsiders, but they never interest him long enough for him to invite them into the flat. Never.

Sherlock only lives for the daily puzzle; nothing else attracts him or speaks to him. He is a shell of who he could be, worse than how he was before the fog, worse than when he was on cocaine (but he never needs it now, no food, no drugs, just the game, and she hates Moriarty for that.)

After witnessing the same behavior, month after month, year after year, with no sign of any other outsiders or chosen, she fears that Moriarty will win, just as he said he would. She doesn’t know how she’ll survive another year, she considers trying to force her way out of the house, running through the myriad of demons in the night, just to be free.

But 221B comforts her, it is her only constant left besides Sherlock and she can’t leave them.

And then... one day, Sherlock is back. He’s shouting, with more desperation than she’s ever heard from him before.

“Mrs. Hudson! Take John and lock him inside, knock him out if you have to keep him in! It’s imperative that I meet him tomorrow! He’s the outsider!”

A short man is pushed through the door, one with kind blue eyes and worry lines on his face. He looks fragile and stern at once, a being of opposing opposites that shouldn't be possible (and yet it is.) John is rushing to the door, concerned (actually concerned!) for Sherlock alone.

She and 221B are fond of him immediately.

They observe, in the morning, how Sherlock and the doctor interact. They’ve never seen their consulting detective so animated, so fixated on another human being. Sherlock is tolerant of a select few individuals, even fond at times, but never so... so...

So alive with one.

It gives Mrs. Hudson hope. She thinks that John must be the one, sends them both off to look for the doctor’s sister (but she and Sherlock know what will inevitably befall all outsiders, without protection, in the end.) John will free them from the fog.
But during witching hour... John doesn’t come back.

And in the morning, Sherlock returns alone, saying the same things, remembering nothing of the wonderful doctor who had changed him.

When Sherlock asks Mrs. Hudson why she isn’t answering, she only gets up and locks herself in her room downstairs.

It was too much to hope, that Sherlock might be capable of caring for another human being. And now John Watson is probably dead.
“There is no point in any tears, any sorrow or guilt for your patient’s death,” His father tells him once, rather clinically, when John has thrown himself into a graveyard, collapsed into the dirt after running for so long. It isn’t far enough. It never is. He can still see young Bennie’s eyes, glassy and round, staring up at him like a porcelain doll.

John knows that his father feels nothing, no emotions, now that his mother is dead, but he can’t help but scream at him, bang his fists against Gordon Watson’s chest, “What is wrong with you? That was a little boy and he died because you chose to operate on his mother instead!”

Gordon doesn’t flinch or move. He is like marble, immovable and without vitality. “She had a greater chance of living,” he replies monotonously, a robot where his father should be. “The boy had less than ten percent.”

“It doesn’t matter!” John screams. “You should have tried to save him anyways. You should always try, even if you can’t, you should try—”

“And waste precious energy, resources, trying to save a lost cause when you could be utilizing that time to save a greater number of lives?” Gordon looks down on him.

His fists stop and John begins to shake, unable to return his father’s empty gaze. He can only glare at his father’s tie, tears welling up with the immeasurable screams and shouts balled up inside his heart. It hurts so much that sometimes he wishes that he didn’t care, but then he remembers his father and he takes the wish back, rips it into two.

“You cannot save everyone, John.”

He breathes out a shaky sigh, refuses to wipe away the streaks on his face.

“I know that,” he says.

Caring is not an advantage. Caring will not bring them back. Caring will only obscure your skill. You cannot care if you wish to become a doctor, or your emotions will blind you every time that you fail. Your patients are just subjects to operate on, nothing more.

They don’t matter.

He knows this, has memorized each of the empirical and cold arguments that his father has laid out in front of him over and over again.

“But they do matter,” is what John always whispers in response. “They matter to me.”

And so he cares.

His heart breaks every time he fails.

“That’s ridiculous,”—but nothing is anymore, not in the fog, but John can’t think of that right now—“Harry’s not dead. You haven’t even met her, how can you possibly—”

“Oh, she’s dead alright,” Moran grins widely, his teeth gleam dangerously in the light emitting from Jim’s hands. They remind John of the demons... and the wolf. The shadows are angled...
sharply around the contours of Moran’s face, making his chin sharper, the creases and lines on his face harsher. Men shouldn’t look like that, John thinks, so at home in the darkness, eager to watch other people burn.

John tightens his jaw. “I don’t believe you,” he says, feeling how dry his lips have become, the remaining adrenaline in his veins still pumping and screaming at him to run away before the demons find him again.

Moran laughs and it is nothing like John has ever heard before, a baritone chuckle that seems to make every shadow flicker. “Harriet Marie Watson... has a brother called John, always begging for a drink, crawling around the tunnels looking for a way out... She’s not one of us anymore. It’s a miracle that she even survived this long here, her type rarely does. Anyways she’s one of them now, dead.”

The word echoes down the tunnel and travels towards the pipes, bouncing off every surface before rippling back into his ears.

“You’re lying,” John begins to sit up, ignoring the unfinished stitches and his bleeding side. He bites his tongue before showing his pain, lets the blood well up in his mouth so that he can taste it (and remember that he is alive.) The sharp jolts keep him alert. His senses take in the position of all three strangers, their possible danger levels and what weapons they may be holding.

There is something off putting about these people, especially Moran. The man keeps staring at him as if he is a piece of meat, something to devour. He doesn’t trust him and he hasn’t forgotten Mrs. Hudson’s warning about other outsiders.

(Besides, as another side of him has suspected since the ambush only a few minutes earlier, what if one of them is the witch?)

“I don’t need to stay here, I have to go back,” to 221B, to Mrs. Hudson and Sherlock, he gets up on his feet. “Thanks for the save; I’ll take it from here.”

The rounded ceiling of the tunnel and the long metal pipes threading parallel through it begin to spin when John takes his first step forward. He feels warm liquid trailing down from his shirt to his pants, staining his boots and his footsteps. He wonders what the tunnels will look like if they are ever engulfed in light. Would the demons be chased away? Would his red stained footsteps still be there?

His limp is still there and John can only tighten his grip possessively around his pistol. He can crawl if he has to; he’s not staying here where the demons breed.

“Wait!”

A hand reaches out and John spins around fast enough to stop it from touching him with a protesting arm lifted up. It’s Anthea, her tanned face looking grey in the dim lighting and her brown hair like a black curtain behind her. She looks tired but determined.

“You can’t spend the witching hour, or even the night, here alone. You need people who know the tunnels and can keep the monsters away or you’ll be eaten alive.”

John hesitates. While it isn’t wise to trust anyone in the fog, anyone exempt from the game that Moriarty has set up, he knows that it is suicide to wander these demon breeding grounds alone. He’ll die if he goes into the dark by himself. There might not be a wolf to save him again, at least not in these underground passages. He doesn’t even know the way out. These strangers have
effectively trapped him here in their company.

Anthea sighs, “Please. I knew her. Your sister. She and I were... friends.”

“Know,” He replies tersely, wanting very much to be as far away as possible from the lunatics who are convinced that his sister is dead (but what if she is, what will John do then, but no, no, Harry isn’t dead, he would know, he’s her brother, he would know—) “You know her, you are friends,”— but if they are, where is Harry now?—“and if you don’t mind, I’ll be going now.”

“Are you afraid?” Jim finally speaks, his expression unreadable from all the light he is holding.

Strange, John thinks, that they all yearn for sunlight only to be so blinded when they are faced with it. Would the entire human race become blind with happiness and sorrow if they saw the sun again?

“I’m sorry?” John bites his tongue again. His whole body feels numb, like the knots tying his mind to it are being loosened.

The shadows are flickering again and the light glows brighter. He can barely make out their faces, only blurry shapes against screaming white, voices that are thinned down as in a dream.

“To find out if she’s really dead, mate,” Jim replies bluntly, his tone sad and sympathetic. He recognizes that tone. It’s the tone that those who came to his mother’s funeral, and later his father’s, always use.

“I’m not afraid because she’s not dead,” He snaps at them, swaying slightly on his feet. “You’ve got the wrong Harriet Watson.”

“Then you’ve got nothing to lose if we take you to see her.”

The light stings and he has to close his eyes. Never has the darkness felt so welcome, so peaceful. He’s not sure when he fell onto his knees, or when Anthea started to clean his wounds again, placing his head against her lap, whispering to ignore Moran and just think of home (that makes him laugh because he doesn’t have one anymore.)

“You mean her body...?” He mumbles, imprints of dancing lights flashing in and out against his eyelids.

“No, I mean to see her die,” answers the Irishman.

This is when alarm should awaken him once more, but John can’t seem to open his eyes. They’re heavy, not his anymore. Voices murmur within his mind for him to relax, to doze off and think of peaceful things. Aren’t you tired? The familiar fog crones. Rest, Johnny boy, rest. We can play tomorrow, my dear, we can play tomorrow with the newest toy.

He groans, trying to focus back. Anthea shushes him and begins to sew up his wound again. He thinks Moran is still staring at him hungrily, can feel the eyes burning into his flesh.

“To see her die...,” John can barely say. “I don’t... can I really see her?”

“Oh yes,” Jim’s voice seems far away now. “I promise that you can see your sister soon and then you will know the truth.”

He wants to ask what Jim means, what these outsiders want with him and why they’re toying with his mind with lies. He wants to know how long they’ve been here, likely eaten away by bits of insanity, bits of hallucinations that never happened. But the voice whispering is so gentle now,
such a contrast to the usually glee he hears at his expense.

_Sleep now, my dear... tomorrow we can play again._

He does.

There he is, running again in the darkness, crashing into trees and having his clothes caught on branches. They grasp at him viciously as if to encage him in their roots forever. John rips at them and tries to reach the running shadow in the dark.

He shouts a name (but he can’t quite hear what it is) but the figure ventures farther and farther away. He shouts until his voice is hoarse and it feels as the flesh in his throat will rip apart if he speaks anymore. But he has to keep trying, has to, has to—

“How can you do this, Harry? This is what mum turned to; this is what killed her—”

“No, what killed her was her damned gift and it’s killing me too, goddamn it John, just let me have my escape while you go rushing into wars! I hope you get blown up just as you’ve always wanted —”

“No, no, Harry, that’s not what I want—”

A smash. Broken glass against bits of skin and crimson. He grabs her hand—“Harry,” he says desperately (feeling so tired)—and she slaps him away.

“Don’t fucking touch me, John, don’t even come near me!”

“Harry, please, see some reason—”

“You’re supposed to be my brother!” She screams. “You’re supposed to save me when I need it, you’re supposed to fix me!”

“I’m here now,” he is saying to the ghosts that surround him. The trees crowd closer together, rattling as they move. “Harry, please!” He yells at the figure that is barely even visible in the fog, “Come back, Harry, I’m here, _come back!_”

They wrap further around him, until the branches press into his skin, embedding scars and digging further around him. He feels the tips like thorns cutting into his throat, his wrists, his waist and his mouth in a choking embrace. They close in, until he can’t breathe, can’t even keep his eyes closed.

And suddenly the branches are arms and the trunk behind him is body.

She whispers to him, “You couldn’t fix me.”

There are a million things he wants to say (_I’m sorry and how could you expect one person to bear all your mistakes? And I just want my sister back_) but none of them come out. Only a harsh breath, hardly a whimper.

(But it’s close enough.)

Her touch cuts his skin, creating careful trails and scars along his arms in senseless swirls and shapes.

“Come back,” John says as he feels the cuts bleed.
She looks at him, half sad and half amused. It’s her sisterly look, one he hasn’t seen since grade school when she used to threaten those who bullied him with scissors. She used to dress in silly dresses and shave her head bald, run around in the mud with her dolls. She used to be a radiant girl until the drink (the gift) took that glow away.

“I can’t come back, John.”

Her hand strokes his cheek, leaving a scar of blood slipping down his neck. He sees her form words with his mouth, but he can’t quite make out what they are, such a crucial few syllables and he can’t see it—

A wolf howls in the distance.

Everything shatters.

“—shouldn’t have knocked him out, Moran—”

He shifts on his side, feeling groggy and heavy. He tries to recall what he was dreaming but nothing comes up. It’s gone. There is a light ringing in his ears, next to the eager whispers that have begun in his ear again. Good morning, the fog says gently now, a different voice than the one during witching hour, welcome back.

“...would have been out before anyways...” A voice he recognizes as Moran jeers, “I just helped him along... besides his injuries are better, aren’t they, little spy?”

“Shut up. I don’t take orders from you,” He hears Anthea’s cool reply.

John winces and slowly props himself up on his elbows. It’s still dark, but the light from Jim’s hands and several other orbs of light, floating like fairy lights along the tunnels cast shadows in different directions. Some silhouettes cross paths, showing the same object in contradicting sizes, long and tall or wide and stout.

There are tents of plastic sheets and abandoned rubbish bins set up along the slick tunnel walks. The sheets are held up by makeshift poles of sticks and metal bars. It’s odd, but John notices huge claw marks cracking open the bricks that hold the tunnel together. Some of the tents appear hastily assembled, with more torn flaps and some sticks that have been tied together again. It’s as if wild creatures have run through here.

And, John reflects, perhaps they have.

Small fires are set up within old rusty pots and pans, with a small group of people gathered around it. John squints and sees that they are dressed in grubby garments, stained from the mud and sewer water. Ash smudges their skin and faces, making them blend in with the darkness.

Other outsiders, John realizes, or what’s left of them in the dead zone. He remembers what Sherlock told him during his first witching hour, how the demons pick off and target outsiders if they are not carefully hidden. He’s seen the long list of those missing on his walks through New London or during the anniversary of Dead London’s formation, when all the soldiers would line up and salute for three minutes of silence. There are hundreds of names on the list.

Here, John sees about six.

“Of course, always staring at your little phone,” one of the figures, Moran, is gesturing, “hoping
against hope that you can send a signal back towards your beloved employer... well wake up, Ms. No Name, you’ll never get your phone call! He’ll never get your texts. You’re stuck here, forever, until someone wins the game... and no one will, ever.”

There is a pause and only the random drips of water from the pipes can do anything to fill the tension that John can feel in the stagnant air.

“Then I suppose someone should break the curse then,” Anthea’s reply is like a dying echo.

One of the other women, who John recognizes as the other part of the pair that he and Sherlock had chased through the city and into the tunnels, scoffs, “No one will. There’s no chance that anyone will ever...”—John can’t hear this part of the sentence, as if it’s been blotted out by an invisible hand—“...that freak. It’s bad enough that the beast has been attacking our camp for the past two nights since you brought the doctor here. I wouldn’t be surprised if the freak...”—another blank, John shifts closer—“...for his own sick twisted amusement.”

There are murmurs of agreement that seem practised, out of habit. There seems to be no one in their little group who believes that the fog will disappear someday.

John takes this opportunity to clear his throat, prompting only five of the six heads to turn towards him. He sits up; swallowing down a groan of pain at his recently sewn wound and manages a stiff smile.

“Hello, which one of you knocked me out and took me here against my will?” He asks, his throat feeling dry from being unconscious for so long. “How long was I out anyways?”

He’s not sure how they will act to his glaring. But he feels gratified that there are some guilty expressions though none from Moran.

“Oh my goodness, I should apologize on behalf of this idiot here,” the woman with cinnamon-toned skin punches Moran in the arm. “I’m Sally and that’s Soo Lin” she gestures to the Asian woman who smiles hesitantly.

“Hello,” she says and John manages a quick of lips in return.

Sally turns towards him, “Apparently Jim wanted to get your wounds treated so he told Moran to stop you from leaving into the tunnels by yourself. They brought you to the camp two days ago.”

“Two days?!” He thinks of Sherlock, wandering the city with a day’s worth of memories. Did any part of him still remember John? Will John even be able to find Baker Street again from the tunnels? He has no idea where he is and what these people are capable of.

“You were bleeding very badly, mate,” Jim nods. “I’m not going to apologize for saving your life... besides... you wanted to see her, didn’t you?”

“But Jim doesn’t have to answer. He doesn’t have to because the seventh person at the fireplace stands up, and in the glow of the flames John can make out her face.

“...Harry...”

(“I can’t come back, John.”)
She doesn’t respond to her name. “Harry!” John says again, jumping up despite Jim and Anthea’s protests that he should rest. Moran is grinning with mirth while Sally and Anderson look like they would rather be anywhere but here. Soo Lin turns her head down, expression unreadable.

He doesn’t understand. His sister is looking dully into the distance, as if she cannot see her companions or John at all. She is like one of the mannequins in a shop’s window display, frighteningly pale with and eerie gaze. Then she turns and begins to walk.

“Harry,” John moved towards her, bypassing the fire and grabbing her arms. “Harry, please, look at me.”

But she goes away from him, away from the tents and down towards the end of the tunnel. Even when John tries to pull her back, it is like she’s one of the clockwork figures made in a clock tower, designed to move only as she’s been created to do. John steps in front of her but is nearly knocked over as she continues forward.

He catches sight of her eyes, pupils moving around wildly and desperately as they look at him, but her body continuing despite her thoughts. She is trapped, like one of the ‘pieces’ Molly described, stuck in her own flesh and with no control, just like Mike and Doyle.

There is a stack of makeshift weapons at the corner of the camp, stockpiles of kitchen knives, crowbars and, John thinks, two illegally confiscated pistols.

That is where Harry walks.

“No,” John whispers when he realizes what is happening. “Not Harry... please, not my sister...!”

John tries to stop her from moving towards the weapons but Soo Lin and Sally grab him, their grips digging into his skin, drawing blood. “Don’t be a fool!” Sally is shouting while Anthea moves in front of him, shaking her head, “It’s too late, you can’t stop this—”

“It’s already happened, John, she’s already dead, just reliving it—”

“Let me go!” John shoves Sally and Soo Lin away.

He runs past Anthea, rushing forward just as Harry grips one of the knives, holds it to her heart, looking at him pleadingly with unspoken words (“You’re supposed to fix me!”) while he thinks, god, no, please, I’ve failed her in everything but not this time, not this time!

His fingers reach the blade. He grabs it, feeling the blade cut at his fingers, tries to pull it away from Harry, but there is something trembling in her gaze now, a softness he has not seen since he was little, when she was his only friend as they played tag in the fields.

The knife goes into her heart, ripping deep scars into John’s hands.

Harry looks at him one last time, the spell on her body broken, and with one trembling hand on John’s cheek, whimpering, “…You came...”

Her body falls over, a ragged doll of flesh and blood, and John falls with it, holding what once was his sister in his arms.
Anthea and Sally try to pull John away from Harry. They give up after awhile, when they see that he only responds with cold glares and holds on to his sister even tighter. He's not leaving her, not this time. He wasn’t with her enough in life and so he will be with her in the moments after her death.

Moran’s taunts barely capture his attention. He can only focus on the cold corpse in his embrace and how he is always too late.

The only one who comes to sit with him is Soo Lin. She has a quiet presence and doesn’t try to intrude in his fresh grief. In fact, she shares the same pained eyes (not nearly as devastated as Anthea had been) and she murmurs some Buddhist prayers for which John is grateful. He’d stopped going to church when his father died, but after he was sent back to England after Afghanistan found it comforting to sit in the church pews and listen to the music. Soo Lin’s quiet words are just as soothing.

He thinks that Harry would have liked it, despite her misgivings about organized Religion. He tells this to Soo Lin and she smiles at him.

“I’m glad to be of service and to lighten your sorrows, even for a short while,” she lifts her head from her bow. “I’ve also lost a brother to the fog.”

When she sees John’s devastated expression, she shakes her head sadly. “No, I came into the fog to escape him... He was going to kill me—it’s a personal tale, one I don’t wish to share, but, I remember finding him in the city, thinking that he was going to finish his job... only for him to be torn to pieces by invisible spirits in front of my eyes.”

John doesn’t know what else to say but, “...How...? And why...?”

It isn’t the most articulate of phrases but Soo Lin understands his meaning nevertheless. She puts her arms around her knees and tells him, “Anyone who is an outsider... and dies in the fog becomes one of those trapped in their bodies. They relive the day of their death again and again, in the same area and nothing will stop it... until the fog is gone, if ever.”

His mouth goes dry again and John swallows. “That’s not right. You shouldn’t have to... your brother, my sister, no matter who they are, you shouldn’t have to suffer through your death every day like that forever... God, what must it be like...?”

He can’t imagine it, the pain that he saw there in Harry’s broken gaze. She’s only been stranded here for several days. He’s not even sure which date she died.

Soo Lin shrugs grimly, “It is the fate that awaits all of us here in the fog. We followed the whispers and promises of dark spirits and now we are to be punished.”

“The fog never promised me anything,” He admits. “It asked me to come inside and I did.”

Soo Lin stares at him strangely, “It never tried to pull you into a contract?”

He shakes his head.

“Never offered you a miracle, salvation to your troubles?”

He shakes his head again, wondering what this means. Soo Lin only appears disturbed and she avoids looking into his eyes.
“It just... asked? And you came?”

“Yes,” says John, remembering the way it crooned in his ear, how the fog had wanted him to come play (it still does) and it had only taken his sister in the hopes of coaxing him inside... “Does that mean anything to you? Do you know what it wants from me? It hasn’t stopped whispering since I came...”

She doesn’t answer, only backs away from him slowly, murmuring something softly in Chinese which John recognizes as protection against evil. Soo Lin retreats into one of the ruined tents, despite John’s protests. She doesn’t come back out.

“Well then, look who’s decided to join us,” Moran drawls, taking a drag off his cigarette, when John comes to the fire, holding Harry in his arms. He’s wrapped her up in a few stray sheets he had found lying around and closed her eyes. He made sure to clean her wounds. She looks beautiful, even in death, wrapped in soft blue and white covers, as if she’s only asleep.

Jim perks up and pats the seat next to him, a friendly smile on his face. The light of the fire and the orbs hovering around them makes his expression brighter. “John! Are you feeling... better now?”

“Right, because that’s what you ask when a bloke sees his sister kill herself,” Sally glares at them. “Give him some space.”

Anthea doesn’t even acknowledge him. Her brow is furrowed in deep concentration as she types out on the keypad of her blackberry. John knows that technology doesn’t work in the fog and judging from the frustrated frown on Anthea’s face, her handheld device still isn’t giving a signal. He wonders if she does this every day in the fog, hoping that something has changed.

John ignores the pleasantries and goes straight to the point. “I need someone to lead me out of the tunnels. I’m not staying here with you people. I’m going to find Sherlock and I’m going to break the curse, then I’m going to go bury my sister.”

Once more he finds himself the target of bewildered (and one hysterical) stares.

“Are you daft?!?” Sally yells at him just as Moran bursts out in laughter, muttering about the insane ones and what delicious emotions they have.

“You can’t go back out there. It’s almost witching hour, only a few more minutes before it begins,” Anthea points out without looking up from her phone. She tilts her head and tries another combination of buttons.

“I don’t care,” John says simply, holding his sister’s body tighter. “I’m going to find Sherlock, whether you help me or not. I don’t care about the fog and I don’t care about the demons. I’ll find a way to avoid being killed, it’s just a matter of returning to the street where you kidnapped me so that I can retrace my steps.”

“No,” Jim stands up, “You can’t leave. It’s too dangerous.”

“Why would you even want to seek out the freak anyways?” Sally shivers. “He’ll just,” she opens her mouth and no sound emerges.

Everyone around the fire, save for John, freezes.

“The little soldier doesn’t know yet,” Moran chuckles, “what his detective is hiding...”
“Detective?” John frowns, “Do you mean Sherlock?”

“We can’t tell you,” Sally tightens her jaw. “If you don’t know yet, even from being in the fog for this long, than we can’t tell you anything. The curse doesn’t let us.”

John glances at her quickly, “Alright. Well then, I guess I’ll be off...”

“Are you stupid?” Jim’s voice deepens and takes on a dark tone. He glares at John, the soft light making his flared nostrils and wide eyes more manic and threatening. “You’re safer with your own kind. To venture out during the witching hour is to go looking for your own death! And for what? This Sherlock character? What does he mean to you? This madman you met only a few days ago? Do you think he cares about you at all? If anything he sees you as a tool to use to break the curse, he does not care, he is not capable. He has—” Jim’s lips move, but he stops when he sees that the words do not sound.

John glares up at him, “I will not abandon Sherlock.”

“Well he’ll certainly abandon you, once he gets bored,” Jim tells him, and though his expression is not livid, John thinks that his eyes want to burn him.

“He’s a freak, John, he’s not worth it,” Sally tells him. “You’re better off trying to survive.”

“Look, he’s not a freak and I’m not leaving him alone in this godforsaken fog!” John shouts. “Now if none of you will help me, then I’m leaving and I’m not coming back.”

“Are you even listening?” Jim’s voice resonates loudly in the tunnel walls. “The beast has tried to come here for the past two nights. It’s looking for you. It’ll find you tonight and it will devour you. I suppose that’s how you want to die? With the beast in your arms?”

“Just what are you talking about?” John turns aback around. “I haven’t seen a beast in the dead zone at all. There’s no such thing. There’s only demons and crazy outsiders like you running around causing trouble! Leave me alone, I’ll find my own way.”

John turns his back on them all, while Jim is yelling, “You’ll regret this! You can’t survive without us. You’ll perish within seconds!”

Moran is still laughing (does that man do anything else?) when John hobbles past him. His laughter reminds John of the dissonant chords of an organ in an abandoned church, sharp and powerful. He still doesn’t know why but he can’t stand to be near Moran, the way that man stares at John... it’s disturbing.

“You’re an interesting soul, Watson,” Moran blows a puff of smoke down at his face. “Maybe you’ll ripen instead of going rotten like all the others...”

Fighting back an urge to shiver, John glowers at him, “Piss off, Moran.”

He is about to limp away, feeling the weight of his gun against his trouser pockets when Anthea stands next to him, offering to carry Harry’s body.

“I’ll lead you to the surface,” she say, her hands tender as they hold his sister’s hands. “There is something I need to discuss with you anyways—”

Anthea never finishes her sentence.

Because then they hear the scattered stampede of footprints, claws and screeches and among them,
the howls of a wolf.

The fog has changed voices again. It’s taunting him, are you enjoying the game, Johnny boy? Because the endgame begins now!

It’s not witching hour yet, John thinks at first. And then another thought, what happened to the bells? But they’re underground, perhaps the clock tower’s chimes don’t reach so far below the city. It hardly matters now, not with the vicious growls growing closer.

“Run!” Sally yells, rushing into the tent to get Soo Lin. Her warning is drowned out by the snarls that rumble and shake the ground. The fog around them blackens so darkly that the fire is extinguished and Jim’s floating orbs of light are like dull fireflies trying to navigate through thick clouds of mist. There is barely enough illumination to help them see where they are running, but it is enough to see the features on the demon’s faces.

For the first time in his life, John thinks that it would have been better to be left in the dark, because the creatures are the most grotesque things he has seen in his life. He doesn’t think he will ever be able to describe how they look, a combination of red flesh and bone for skin, constructed together into menacing and towering monsters with sharp teeth and glowing eyes. Even as he glances up and sees hints of skeletal limbs peeking out of the demons, like they are personifications of human corpses.

Then John blinks and they no longer look that way, they are serpentine-like things, with black and rigid scales that resemble human thumbs, their eyes ooze out crimson. When he blinks a second time, they are humanoid figures with skull faces and human heads making up the rest of their bodies. He feels like he’s going to be sick from the flashing and contradicting images.

“Don’t look!” Anthea yanks on his arm and forces his head away. “Jim can’t turn off the lights once they’re made but if you stare for too long, you’ll go insane!”

He still feels as if he is going mad, but his mind is clearer without the distraction of demon images flashing through it.

“Right, we need to run, John. Do you understand? Don’t confront them in the light. Just run. And remember,” she pulls him close to hiss in his ear, “the only way to kill a demon or a witch, is to use a weapon that’s been touched by their blood or tears. Don’t try to fight them. Just run.”

She pushes John away and he wants to ask her how she knows this and why she didn’t mention it sooner in front of the others, for surely they could use the life saving advice? But then he sees Moran in the distance, his own gaze also oozing crimson... and he knows.

“Find Sherlock!” Anthea’s voice echoes in the flickering of shadows and light. “Find him and break the curse!”

“Anthea—”

John catches sight of her rushing to the weapons pile, pulling out the two pistols with both hands, her phone safe in her bra. Several of the creatures (don’t look, John, don’t look) swarm around her, but she just shoots at them consecutively and for a minute, John thinks that it won’t work. The demons grab at her, tearing at her skin but then they go rigid and they... and they...
And they fall.

It’s the first time John has seen a demon fall without specially regulated government weapons (weapons that the soldiers so rarely get access to, that the notion that demons are immortal and unable to be killed became accepted as fact.)

*A weapon that’s been touched by demon/witch blood or tears.*

They advance on John while he’s distracted and he shuts his eyes to avoid becoming caught in their appearances. He rushes away from the thundering stampede, the litany of screams (*and laughter, there is so much manic laughter*), growls and ripping of what he hopes is not flesh and skin. Harry’s body is heavy in his arms but he refuses to let go.

The demons are faster than he is. John hates his limp more than ever when he hears them all around him, surrounding him for the third time in the fog. His fingers itch for his gun and he resists the urge to lift his eyelids, to peek at the world in red and black.

If he has to charge through the line of creatures—of things—standing in his way, then so be it, John decides, but he’s not leaving without Harry.

His hands grab the edges of one of the sheets curled around his sister’s legs and he throws it up at them, hears the cloth fluttering for just one frail heartbeat in the air before it is torn to pieces and he is running again (always running.)

But his sister isn’t there anymore. He feels the weight of her body lessening and when he glances down, he is horrified to see that it is shrinking away, bits of her face and lips already faded like dunes of sand. Her corpse slips away into bits of dust—the day is over, of course, and the dead don’t really stay dead in Old London, they’ll be back again...

He thinks he can hear them now, the bells, sounding out from all angles and surfaces around him, pointlessly trying to give tempo to the unharmonious sounds of the monsters chasing him, the monsters that tear at his back as he ducks past them, squinting only barely so that he can see where he is going.

*Hello again, Johnny boy,* the fog cackles.

*Piss off,* he replies furiously, *piss off and give me my sister back!*

The noises are everywhere; they surround him so that he cannot tell where the next creature will be. It’s the damn tunnels and ricocheting noises. He can’t tell which snarls are real and which are mere ghosts of something already said. The gunshots are faint, but it tells John that Anthea is still alive. As he shuts his eyes again, to avoid going insane from staring at the demon’s true forms, he’s reminded insanely of Sherlock and his blindfold.

The random thought makes him almost laugh aloud. What he wouldn’t give to have Sherlock’s uncanny ability to move without his eyes right now—

“It’s the beast!” John hears Sally screaming from far behind him, while Soo Lin has shouting the most profane insults in Chinese at the monsters. “Don’t let it touch you! Run as fast as you can—”

*The beast?* He nearly turns back, morbid curiosity burning in his mind, but the soldier in him orders John to keep moving.

“John, look out!”
His eyes blinks open in surprise, blinded by the dancing shadows and light, the haze of demonic forms at in front of his sight. But he doesn’t focus on that. They are unimportant, blurred away because—

The wolf howls when it lunges at him, and the next thing John remembers is staring into Siraj’s jaws, the teeth clamping down on him.

“I keep hearing these rumours,” John tells Mrs. Turner, the third day that he has moved in, “about the dead zone.”

His landlady tenses. It’s the first time that he has brought up anything to do with the sphere of black fog that has swallowed the center of the city. John remembers that she is still half-convinced that he’ll change his mind and move out.

“I’m just curious,” he adds quickly. “ Didn’t hear too much about Old London back in the army.” He’d only heard about the hoards of demons, increasing reports of soldiers picked off in the desert.

Mrs. Turner fiddles with the next two rows of her knitted jumper that she is making. “Well I suppose there’s no harm in it. What would you like to know?”

“The beast,” John says. “People whisper about it... and I’ve never heard reports of a beast in other dead zones. Why in London? And how do we know it’s there?”

Mrs. Turner turns around, checking conspicuously around the corners, as if there might be eavesdroppers listening in. Witches are tricky and with what little information the world has of them, the old superstitions are never frowned upon.

“That’s because the beast came first,” she whispers to him, the hollows in her cheek more pronounced.

His eyes widen. “I’m sorry, what?”

She starts to knit furiously, her head shaking as she replies, “I won’t say anything more, but that’s what they all say. The beast appeared before the fog and they say it still roams there to this day. The folks that used to live in this area would talk of howls in the night... demons don’t howl, not like the beast does. It’s an eerie sound that inspires nothing but dark things. That’s all I know.”

He nods slowly and thanks her for telling him.

“Why did you want to know about the beast, anyways, darling?” She pauses in her knitting.

“No reason,” John says, “just heard some things when I was out walking.”

What he doesn’t tell her is that sometimes the fog will keep whispering until he begins to scream. Sometimes the fog whispers so much that the only noise that seems to make it stop is the blood chilling howl that sometimes echoes in his dreams.

The wolf holds him in its mouth, throws him up in the air and catches the back of his coat with its jaws so that John is hanging out from its teeth like a cub. John gasps, feeling uncomfortable that his collar is pressing up against his neck while his legs dangle a few inches from the ground.
“Siraj,” he gasps out, “Siraj!”

But the wolf does not respond to John’s name for it (not that it knows that it’s been labelled as Siraj yet) and instead growls at the line of demons blocking both ways of the tunnel. John can still hear Moran laughing, remembers that man’s eyes flashing like a cat’s—

Then suddenly the wolf plunges forward, knocking over the creatures as Siraj rushes into the calling darkness, Jim’s lonely spheres of light left far behind. They are back in the dark again but Siraj seems to know where they are, because within a few moments, John is breathing fresh air again. The stagnant taste of the sewers is gone from his mouth and he can feel the fog more strongly here, pressing against his skin.

It is still cackling at him, cackling like the mad hatter.

And John cannot see through it. Everything is pitch-black save for the wolf’s grey/blue/green eyes.

They are still moving. Siraj turns swiftly, left, right, right again, left. John can hear the demons still pursuing, can still picture the way they had looked (no, don’t, don’t think of that again, Watson, or you’ll claw your eyes out—) He wonders if Soo Lin, Jim and Sally managed to survive. He wonders how far Anthea can run before her bullets run out. And Harry (no, don’t think of her, just find Sherlock, find Sherlock, he had promised—)

John chokes again, feeling his coat collar being pulled on as Siraj leaps down another winding road to the left (the sinister path) and he yells, “Stop! Stop, Siraj, stop!”

The wolf doesn’t listen, or maybe it hasn’t heard him and so he reaches up to pull on the wolf’s fur and it growls at him.

“Let me go,” John chokes out, “I’m not a wolf like you. At this rate, I’ll be accidentally strangled by my own coat!”

Siraj moves left once more, his growls more pronounced in what John thinks may be a narrower alley. It’s difficult to say with all of this running in the dark. John thinks he might have to try to communicate with his companion again when the wolf drops him against a pile of soft trash bags.

The noises and demons are getting louder, closer.

As John is coughing, the wolf nudges him with its nose towards its back. When he gapes at it, Siraj glares at him and barks sharply, pushing him as much as it can with its head. The hoard is coming.

John looks up and meets its eyes, transfixed by their odd colouring before he climbs on.

Riding the wolf is different from anything he has ever experienced. Siraj moves with such speed that John feels like he is hugging onto the wolf’s back for his own sanity, his cheek pressed against surprisingly soft fur. He can feel Siraj’s pulse matching up with his own, beating faster and faster the longer that Siraj runs. John can barely catch his breath; there is nothing but black and noises.

The only thing that is real to him is the wolf and so John holds on.

He hears familiar creaking and groaning of wood boards and metal pipes when Siraj takes one final right turn. John would recognize those intense and deliberate creaks from anywhere. Its 221B
and the flat sounds like she is humming a horrible medley of one of Bach’s fugues combined with Beethoven’s fifth symphony. Somehow the strange mixture of creaks and bangs is fitting and, John finds, oddly comforting.

There is also the startling conclusion that the wolf has deliberately led him here of all places...

“Siraj,” He begins, voice muffled against the wolf’s fur.

But the wolf is growling menacingly at something in front of them. John can’t see it (and it kills him, not being able to help, being so blind) but he pulls out his pistol anyways, aims it straight ahead despite how useless it will be.

There is nothing but silence, silence and breathing and Siraj’s protective snarls before—

It attacks from the side, hitting Siraj and consequently knocking both wolf and man to the ground. John hisses, his fists scrunched tightly against his companion before Siraj jumps up, running again, the thing, whatever it is, rushing behind him.

Siraj gives out a loud howl, this one on a different tone than the others and then John hears a door slamming open, Mrs. Hudson shouting, “Sherlock, John, in here!” while 221B makes the loudest crashes and bangs John has ever heard—

They crash into the floor, against the rugs, knocking over little tables holding various vases. There is the sound of wood snapping, probably the railings of the stair case and somehow John has ended up sprawled underneath the wolf, hidden from sight as the wolf lashes out at the thing/demon/creature/god-what-is-that that is tearing into the front lobby, ripping out bits of wallpaper.

“Mrs. Hudson!” John sees her unconscious, probably knocked out when Siraj charged into the hallway, by one of the candles (why is there light in the flat?) trying to crawl away from the thing that has grabbed her leg. He tries to get up, fumbling for his gun but the wolf snaps at him, pressing him down on the floor with its paws.

The entire flat seems to revolt, that is the only word to describe it, because suddenly all of the ceiling crumbles down on top of the demon. The tiles on the floor lift up and tie the demon down on the ground, wrapping around it’s (Skin? Scales? Fur? Flesh?) body and squeezing tightly. John hears 221B’s clatters and shouts as the tiles move the contained demon against the wall.

He sees knives floating in the air, glinting in the candlelight and then—

There are screams and there is blood, but none of it human.

The door closes shut as the flat calms down; its favourite residents and only humans safe inside. 221B seems to sigh as the blades float back into their proper drawers and a calming hum seems to echo in the flat. Only the thing that is dripping and nailed to the wall with kitchen knives serves as proof that they had nearly been eaten by a demon.

John only listens to his harsh gasps, staring up at the wolf who regards him neutrally.

In the candlelight, he can finally see what his wolf really looks like.

Siraj is huge, just as he thought it would be, with black fur that is not ragged per say, but wild and untamed with familiar curls. He can see how its face would be menacing, with the sharp creases of
its forehead, the enormous ears and the way it is quick to bite down one of the demons, tearing it apart with its claws. Drool slips down from its mouth as it bares those gleaming white rows of incredibly sharp teeth.

The wolf continues to stare at him, waiting for something but John isn’t sure what. He raises his hand; it isn’t trembling anymore, and brushes the wolf’s cheek, feeling the familiar curls. He hasn’t looked away from those eyes yet. They are so bright and familiar that no matter how hard John tries to dig up the memory of where he’s seen them before, he can’t.

He remembers Sherlock, those blindfolded eyes and hair the same shade as this wolf’s fur. He remembers how Sherlock appeared in 221B that morning, covered in blood but mostly unharmed (not my blood, John), recalls how Sherlock had to be outside during witching hour...

His mouth dries and all John can do is wet his lips.

“...Sherlock...?”

The wolf flinches and tenses, a growl already forming from his throat. But his eyes, oh, his eyes, are so intense like John has been laid bare in front of him.

“It’s you,” He whispers, lifting his other hand up. “It’s really you, isn’t it?”

They stare, some kind of tension that John can’t name building up between them until—

The wolf nods, his legs bent as if to crash through the door if need be. But John presses his forehead against Siraj’s nose, wrapping his arms around his neck. He thinks of everyone reliving the same day, of Harry, of Soo Lin’s prayers against evil, of Anthea and of Sally’s warnings. He thinks of 221B, Mrs. Hudson and Molly and the witch that is watching all of this for his own amusement.

“Its fine, Sherlock, it’s all fine,” he whispers. “Everything is fine.”

He feels the wolf stiffen at such gentle contact and then he hears the soft whines as Siraj (no, Sherlock) wraps himself around John protectively, and that’s how they stay until they drift off to sleep.

- Interlude: Soo Lin -

“Now don’t run now, I have a job for you two... a very special job,” that bastard laughs as he walks towards them. The demons run after them, they always chase.

Soo Lin and Sally do not stop to look back. Anything is better than becoming a piece in Moriarty’s sick game.

Sally drags her into an empty corridor, where the sewers lead to the London Underground. They’ve memorized the routes months ago (though it feels like several centuries) in case of a demon ambush. But they’ve never had to use it, not with Sebastian Moran’s gift to ward away the demons.

Soo Lin berates herself again. She should have known. There is no such thing as a gift that can make the demons go away. It was too good to be true. She was a fool to trust any other outsiders. But as Sally guards her back, Soo Lin retracts that thought. Not all of the outsiders here are like
Their breaths intermingle. It’s strange how fear is heightened when all you can see is black. Soo Lin had thought that she could grow used to it, the witching hour, but she never does. She is as blind and terrified as she was the first night she spent in Dead London.

Her large shovel and pocket knife stay clenched in both hands. There is nothing else that they can do now. Only stand in the dark and listen.

Listen and pray.

There are demons that walk around in human skin, her old boss Shan used to tell them. You must never trust anyone you meet. You never know if they are monsters in disguise, excellent mimics of human emotions. There are very few ways to distinguish between a demon and a human client. Memorize them well.

How do you know? Her brother (oh how she loves and hates him) had demanded.

Shan had smiled eerily. A witch has no heart, no heartbeat at all. A demon... well, demons have no human desires. They only want enjoy the thrill and pain.

“How did you fake it?” She asks foolishly, “How did you fake a pulse?”

The witch clicks his tongue at her.

“There is so much you can do with a demon at your side, my dear, including... borrowing his heart. Such a simple spell, really, all witches use it. Shame you humans have never picked up on that...”

“You bastard...,” Sally says from behind her.

“What was the point of this?” Soo Lin demands. “Pretending to be an outsider? Helping us survive for the past few months? I don’t understand what you have to gain. Your messenger told us that we were disqualified from the game! We didn’t beat you—”

But they’d lost, apparently, though Soo Lin isn’t sure what they lost at. And as the losers, they run from the demons until they are eventually killed by them. But last that Soo Lin checked, the witch has never gotten involved in the chase.

He is laughing, high pitched and gleeful. It reminds her of General Shan, the way that woman’s eyes lit up with pleasure when Soo Lin screamed.

“What other reason is there?” He drawls before he suddenly shouts, “I was bored!”

Soo Lin points her knife in that direction, startled by the ferocity in the witch’s voice.

Something slithers past her leg and Soo Lin slashes down her knife. She only meets air. Sally, likewise, is attacking at nothing but empty space.

“What do you want, you fucker?!” Sally screams into the black.

“Oh nothing,” the witch sings in a falsetto tone, “just to use you to destroy the latest player, to kill John Watson.”

“But why?” Soo Lin breathes, remembering her conversation with the ex-army doctor, his far-off eyes. “You invited him to play. I thought you were having fun with him, another one of your demon friends.”
A flash of light blinds her and Soo Lin gasps as the witch grabs her throat, a cruel glint in his manic eyes, “I didn’t invite him!” He roars, while Soo Lin can barely register her own surprise (What? But the fog... then who...?) just as he throws her to the floor.

Sally is shouting, trying to stab the witch herself and the only thought that runs through Soo Lin’s head before she feels something hit her across the face, is—

The witch is afraid of Watson.

Then darkness.
“You should never let a witch near you, Johnny,” Harry tells him as they curl up under the covers, sock clad feet tangled with one another. The lights are off and John can’t make out anything but the plump round of Harry’s cheek from the subtle sheen of the silver moonlight. Above them, the wooden wind chimes begin to sound as a creeping breeze brushes through the open sliver of the window.

John hugs himself and the little stuffed dog that his mother bought for him. Its name is Gladstone because the stuffed animal’s fur is grey like the little pebbles that he likes to collect from the river and he likes to think that his friend is happy. He can hardly make out anything other than the gleam of Harry’s eyes from beneath their checkered quilt.

The rain is steady, a light drizzle at the most, keeping rhythm with their breaths.

“Why not?” John asks, because Harry is six now, much more wise than himself by two years. “Are witches bad?” He wonders, because he’s noticed how tense his parents become at the mention of such creatures. No one seems to like the very mention of them. It seems rather lonely. “Can’t we make friends with one?” It would be amazing, he thinks, having a friend who could levitate things or change your eyes to different colours.

Another gust of wind blows through the window, letting a light layer of cloudy rain dampen their heads.

Harry leans forward, whispering in hushed urgency, “No. You mustn’t ever befriend one.”

“But why?” He holds Gladstone more tightly, finding comfort in his soft fur against his cheek. “I don’t understand.”

His sister bows her head so that their foreheads are nearly touching. “Because they’ll steal your heart away, John, and... eat it for their own.”

John recoils back, little legs nearly dangling off the side of the bed. “Eat it?!”

“Yes,” Harry nods gravely.

He shivers, curling in against himself, as if it will protect him. Gladstone is pressed so tightly to his chest that the little stuffed dog can probably hear his bones trembling. “I don’t want anyone to eat my heart, Harry. Why would anyone want to do such a thing?”

His sister shifts closer to him, putting her hand against his so that their fingers are intertwined.

“I don’t know, John,” she says while the rain begins to fall in heavier beats against the roof,
“Maybe because they have no hearts of their own.”

He feels warmth wrapped up all around him, breathing in tune with his heartbeats. It’s nice. He’s surrounded by the light scent of cigarettes, sweat and pine-scented shampoo. There is something crisp and fresh about the combination muddled with a masculine husk. He hasn’t dreamed at all, only a steady darkness around him that is comforting and not at all frightening like the fog. He hasn’t slept better in years.

John shifts sleepily. His lips brush against something smooth and cold at the touch. The enveloping warmth wraps around tighter and John hears a familiar baritone murmur from overtop his head, “I see you’ve awakened.”

Instinct makes John move to push back, but as he opens his eyes he can see Sherlock’s signature coat there, wrapped around them both as a warm layer. The man in question has one thin arm wrapped proprietarily around John’s waist while the other is studying one of John’s hands with intense scrutiny.

Or, at least, it would be intense, if John could see Sherlock’s eyes.

He blinked up at him in confusion. “Sorry, what did you say, Sherlock?”

“You are wearing my gloves,” the man says instead, his head craned low as if he is looking down at him. There are scars on his cheeks and rips in his shirt, claw marks from the demons.

John has that familiar rush in his veins, like he is back in Afghanistan, a needle in hand while his gift flows through his hands, gunshots in the air. “Um, yes. You gave them to me to wear. Yesterday. Sorry, wait, I guess it was a few days ago...” He frowns, the events from the past few days slowly flowing back, though he is still groggy from slumber. That’s unusual. He’s usually wide awake. “Do you want them back...?”

“No!” The outburst is sudden and the gentle touch on his hands tightens into a death grip. “No,” Sherlock says again in the familiar and aloof tone that John is more familiar with though the grip remains. “I gave them for you for a reason. You... you are something else entirely if I gave them to you.”

Part of John is wondering if Sherlock always asks the men he wakes up with these questions. But the idea of Sherlock Holmes lying with anyone disturbs him and John dismisses the thoughts. His brain catches up to the implications of Sherlock’s words and John draws his face away from the other man (or at least tries to, Sherlock is strong for a scrawny looking one), saying, “You don’t remember me?”

He thinks he can hear 221B’s tiny creaks, as the flat listens in, it’s breathing in tune with theirs. He doesn’t think that he has ever so anticipated an affirmative answer.

But Sherlock says, “No,” and it vanishes like a passing wisp of smoke.

“Oh.”

John tries not to let his shoulders drop. He feels all of his wariness, the stresses of the day come flying back. He’s been injured, attacked by demons, he’s met outsiders and... (what else?)

“You’re disappointed,” Sherlock whispers, his words tickle against John’s cheek.
He doesn’t try to shift away.

“I suppose so,” John replies as casually as he can, in this position. “Being forgotten can do that to a person.”

Sherlock tenses around him. “You know me.”

“Well, yes.”

“No, you know me. You must know what I am if I’ve given these gloves to you. The way you speak to me implies familiarity with my personality, my vices. You’re comfortable enough with me that your old war wound doesn’t act up until you’re disappointed or worn out by old traumas. Despite knowing what I am, you are still here and you look at me as if… Just what are you?”

The question stays in the air between them. John feels pinned to the wall, a butterfly with clipped wings. He parts his lips, tries to think of a retort, when finally the events from the night before come rushing back.

John sits up abruptly, or at least tries to. Sherlock’s arms squeeze around him tighter but John shakes his head, pushes back against Sherlock’s chest and shouts, “Mrs. Hudson! Is she alright? I saw her fall—god, I’m such an idiot, should have checked up on her—but,” he turns his head, wiggling in a mess of limbs, “where is she? I saw her land over there...”

But the space is empty. No sign of Mrs. Hudson. Everything has been straightened out, no thread out of place from the carpet. The candles are back on the mantels, each peeking string unmarrred from fire. In fact, the demon’s whole body is gone, vanished, with only the deep knife marks on the wall as the only evidence that anything monstrous was in the building.

There is a shuddering sound and John realizes that it comes from himself. This time when he tries to get up, Sherlock’s arms twist him around so that the other man is on top of John.

“Where are you going?” The infuriating man demands.

“Sherlock!” He very much hisses up at him, “Come on, we need to find Mrs. Hudson. She’s hurt —”

“No, she’s fine for the most part, some bruises here and there but 221B has assured me that she’ll make a full recovery. 221B’s moved her to the bedroom upstairs—”

“Well then I need to see her, I can help,” John turns his head towards Mrs. Hudson’s kitchen at the end of the lobby.

Sherlock’s hands grab the sides of his face and move his gaze back. “Don’t be ridiculous, John. 221B will take care of it—”

“I can heal, it’s my gift! She’ll be up and about if you just let me heal her so—” John stops, mouth left open in surprise. “You said my name.”

The madman snorts. “Of course I did. Even I know that it’s custom to refer to others by their birth names.”

“But you don’t remember me and I never introduced myself to you... again.”

Sherlock’s body tenses overtop of John’s. He sees the madman’s lips open in a quiet ‘o’ before Sherlock jumps off, pulling John up by the wrists. The coat falls off of them, prompting a shiver
from John. It’s drafty in the flat, the chill of the fog lurking out their door. It makes him think of dark shadows, of Harry, looking at him just before the knife—no, stop, no.

The temperature warms up a few degrees automatically. John says a quick thank you to 221B before he is yanked towards the staircase.

“This is it!” Sherlock rambles in excitement. He has his coat draped carelessly over his shoulder. There are crumpled pieces of paper falling out, with notes of ‘Moriarty’ and ‘fog’ and ‘curse’ written on them. John supposes that this is why Sherlock didn’t immediately attack him when he woke. He must have seen the gloves, been curious and looked for clues in his pocket. He knew himself well enough to have the foresight to place the clues there. John can’t help but marvel in the simple genius of it.

He is stumbling after the madman, being dragged by the wrist. John almost trips on the last two steps, narrowly missing drawers and knocking over vases of dead twigs.

“I looked over my notes,” Sherlock is saying as he leads them to the wall covered with papers and clues, “but there is no mention of your name in them. Yet I knew that the name John Watson just seemed... right, natural somehow, for you. When I woke, I felt at ease with you despite the fact that you look very ordinary and mundane—oh, don’t glare at me; you know it’s true with that jumper of yours—”

“I like this jumper, Sherlock,” Mrs. Turner put her heart into making it. John is proud to wear it. But that isn’t the point. “Shouldn’t we be getting to Mrs. Hudson...?”

“No yet, John,” The man continues, dismissing John’s inquiry.

But John can hear the promise in Sherlock’s tone and so he waits. If Sherlock and 221B say that Mrs. Hudson isn’t gravely injured then he should listen to Sherlock’s explanations.

“The curse is a complicated one. There seems to be two spells at work. I have a suspicion of what they are but without knowing what the daily ‘puzzle’ I’m to solve is, I’ve no idea. There are no notes on that area,” Sherlock purses his lips in irritation, throwing himself down on the sofa. He still has an iron-like grip around John’s wrist and so John ends up crouching awkwardly by Sherlock’s face.

“Hang on,” John frowns. “How do you know what spells might be at work? I wasn’t aware that anyone knew anything really on witch magic.”

“Don’t be silly,” Sherlock snaps though his answer is muffled against the plush red cushions. “There are a lot of papers published on the subject that the public isn’t privy to. Even without that, it’s quite easy to deduce and learn the way magic works if one merely observes and knows where to look. Before the curse, I was a consulting detective for Scotland Yard. I made it my business to make my mind a store hold of all information necessary to solve my cases, knowledge of magic was a necessity. Quite obvious how to recognize a curse once you know the signs.”

John is gaping again. “Brilliant,” He says honestly, relishing how wonderful it is to be around Sherlock again. He could listen to that baritone speak for hours. “And,” now that he thinks about it, “That’s more information than you were allowed to tell me last time we saw each other. What do you suppose that means?”

Sherlock shoots up; his nose almost pressed up against John’s, “Really? So the effects of the curse are already beginning to wear away... my memory, the strength of the rules... John, do you see what this means? You could be the one, you could. All you have to do, if my hypothesis is right, is
—” But Sherlock stops, his animated gestures paused in midair. He frowns, “But you don’t know what I am, do you?”

He tilts his head. “You mean that you’re what they call the beast?”

John isn’t sure how the curse works. But he suspects that Sherlock turns into a wolf during witching hour... that maybe, he even hunts. If it’s demons or outsiders that he hunts, well, John isn’t sure. His mind is numb at the latter, disbelieving. Sherlock can’t be the one sending body parts to the other side of the fog; he can’t be the one eating and devouring souls, not if he saved John.

It’s the demons. (It has to be.)

But John doesn’t ask.

The detective twists his fingers over joints of John’s hand. He appears to be deep in thought, his brow furrowed and again, John wishes that damn cloth wasn’t covering his eyes. Maybe then, he could read the other man.

Sherlock laughs darkly. “They called me a beast even before the curse... It doesn’t matter. Come, we should attend to Mrs. Hudson.” He gets up, tugging John forward again but John stays firmly in place.

“You’re not a beast,” he breathes (believes, believes it so much), “and anyone who says otherwise is a prick.”

The grip around his wrist tightens.

“That’s because you don’t have all of the facts, Doctor,” Sherlock replies clinically. “If you did, then you wouldn’t jump to such conclusions about me.”

“Well fuck the facts,” John snaps. “They’re not important.” He ignores how Sherlock’s mouth falls open in indignation, “I know you.” It’s presumptuous to say so when he’s just met the man a few days ago, but he feels it in his blood. He knows him. “And I know what it is to be around real beasts. I fought in Afghanistan, for god’s sake. The monsters are the witches and demons, people who get off on killing and torturing others. Not you.”

Sherlock’s lips tighten into a thin line.

“...You have too much faith in me. You’d do better to leave it all behind.”

“Well, I won’t,” John replies.

They stand there, hovering next to each other, before Sherlock slips his fingers down to intertwine them with John’s. The layer of glove is the only thing that separates them.

“...This way,” he says, voice with a rasp. “We shouldn’t keep Mrs. Hudson waiting.”

There are a lot of things that John wants to say. He just doesn’t know how to.

Mrs. Hudson’s room is decorated with various fabric petals and roses in vases set on embroidered silk. They almost see vibrant and are a welcome change of colour from the dreariness of the outside world. Her room is simpler compared to Sherlock’s with photographs of herself and various
friends. John sees a grumpy Sherlock standing in one with arms crossed. There is another where
the detective is smirking with his arm around his landlady.

To John’s surprise he also catches sight of a photo with Mrs. Turner and he wonders, if he had
asked, would Mrs. Turner have told him about her old acquaintances in Old London? Sherlock
ignores all of the pictures, muttering something about sentiment, before he kneels by Mrs.
Hudson’s bedside. The keeper of the house is lying under a mountain of soft knitted quilts. White
cushions are gathered around her head as a guard from all things.

John can’t help but think of his mother and father, lying against the white of the coffin box, as if
they are sleeping.

“Her pulse is steady, breathing’s normal,” Sherlock says though his teeth are bared when his
fingers trail over the dark bruises around Mrs. Hudson’s arms. That’s where the demon grabbed
her, made her fall.

Silently, John leans in, puts his free hand above Mrs. Hudson’s. He can feel Sherlock observing
him intently, the way 221B’s walls are quivering with anticipation. It should bother him, break his
concentration, but John finds it soothing to listen to. As in a trance, listening to the lulls of his gift,
his fingers touch skin.

He can sense every vein, every artery and capillary flowing through the patient. He can feel her
hormone levels, how she hasn’t been eating properly for the past few days (and she should be, John
berates himself for not being here earlier.) His gift stretches out and finds the crushed blood
vessels, the bruises that have barely begun to repair themselves. They are so intricate, every pattern
of interwoven red lines.

John sees the tattered ends of each blood vessel like a scar on his own heart and he reaches out
(there’s no other word to describe it really) with his gift to bring the broken ends back together. His
gift is gentle, coaxing piece by piece into weaving itself back together.

He is whispering. He does that, says soft things and murmurs of encouragement. His gift doesn’t
force anything to heal without the patient’s permission. If anything, he only encourages the healing
process to happen faster, gives it the energy (his) to come back together. It’s as natural as breathing
to him.

No one liked it when he talked to their injuries. Some found it soothing, in the end, but most of the
time, he is given hard stares. “Do you always have to... whisper like that?” They ask him,
especially in medical school, when he had assumed that was what everyone did. “Healers don’t
whisper, Watson,” his professors had said, “they only put the veins back together.”

The students took it as an omen at first, avoided him for the most part, but since he was a damn
good doctor, they didn’t have much to complain about other than “he whispers like a witch.” In the
army it didn’t matter. In the army the soldiers need the whispers, need a voice to ground them back
to earth.

His sister used to look at him fearfully when he did this, going into a trance, staring off tenderly at
a scrape while whispering for it to get better.

“It’s like you’ve gone away from me, Johnny, I don’t like it,” she had explained the first time she
refused to let him heal her.

(Would he have been able to close up her knife wound if he had been on time? Would he have
been able to save her if he had looked hard enough, hadn’t been entranced by Sherlock, had tried to
Stop it, Watson, focus on the patient, his gift tells him. There is nothing else but the patient."

Of course. John shoves all thoughts of last night, of outsiders and witches, of demons and curses, of sisters and glassy eyes, into the farthest corners of his subconscious as possible.

He heals. That is all he can do.

When he is done, it is as if ages have passed but John knows from experience that it’s only been a few moments. He stares at Mrs. Hudson’s unmarred skin. He can feel the delighted trembles in the floor beneath, 221B is overjoyed. John offers a small smile. Fatigue seeps into his demeanour as always after he uses his gift but relief overpowers it, makes John slump backwards on the carpeted floor.

Only he doesn’t fall. He ends up leaning against Sherlock, who is saying his name over and over in hurried panic.

“I’m alright, I’m fine...” More importantly, Mrs. Hudson is fine, alive unlike his sister, wandering around in the fog, walking and then... John swallows. “It’s just been a rough few days,” he says. He remembers then that he was wounded earlier in the side. What little energy he had left has gone to Mrs. Hudson. A cup of tea would be nice.

The shutters snap open and closed at least a dozen times.

“You are not fine, Doctor Watson,” Sherlock snarls at him and for a minute, John sees the wolf, growling at him to get on his back. He remembers its eyes of shifting colours. Such big eyes you have... such sad eyes... It’s a shame to have to cover it up.

“...I’m sorry...” He says then, hand crept back up to brush against the detective’s cheek. Sherlock freezes at the touch of gloved hands.

The detective leans forward and then away, mouth hovering on the edge of unformed words. “...John...?” His voice is oddly hushed, unsure.

“...I’m sorry that you’re cursed... Sorry that I can’t seem to figure out how to break it...”

“No, no, John, that’s not true, you are... you are....” Sherlock makes a sound of annoyance moving so that he has his arms around John’s shoulders. John drops his hand and looks up. “What happened?” Sherlock asks in a controlled and neutral voice.

The dismissal of emotion should hurt John, make him feel more isolated. But it doesn’t. Sherlock’s clinical manner has a very calming effect on John’s tired mind. It lets him lay back and just spill out his thoughts when he wonders if he shouldn’t do the same for Sherlock. But the detective makes an impatient noise so John tells him.

“I came here to find my sister.” He blinks back the burning at the back of his eyes. “She’s dead now.”

It isn’t like his sessions with his therapist.

John tells Sherlock everything from the day he got shot at Afghanistan up to the point when the wolf came into the Underground to fetch him from being devoured by demons. Part of him knows
that Sherlock won’t remember this tomorrow morning. Sherlock will forget like he does every night when witching hour comes unless John can recreate whatever happened that second day in the fog, when somehow Sherlock’s memories from the day before returned. But John has no idea how that had happened.

But this Sherlock, this one seems to trust him. This one listens, doesn’t even comment negatively when John feels that he wants to. His fingers clench against John’s wrists painfully when John tells him about his injuries, about the demons and strange run-in with Moran and Jim. His lips twitch dangerously when he hears about how Mrs. Hudson got hurt. But he lets John speak freely and openly, probably cataloguing all of the information into his brain for later.

John doesn’t cry, nothing of the sort, though he wants to. He’s not afraid to admit that he wants to. Sherlock doesn’t offer any additional comfort other than a body to lean against.

They are two people, sitting in the dark, leaning in with each other, breathing in the things left unspoken while 221B creaks and listens.

When John reaches the part in his story, where he discovers that the beast and the wolf are Sherlock, Sherlock bolts up, almost making John’s head bang against the wall as he shoves past him to pace back and forth.

“I don’t understand!” He shouts, pulling at his hair. The flat throws several pillows at him. “Shut up, 221B, I know Mrs. Hudson is sleeping. She’ll be fine. She’s a deep sleeper.” He doesn’t stop pacing. “You’re illogical John. Completely illogical.”

He stares up, uncomprehending. “...I’m sorry...?”

“No, you idiot, don’t apologize! Just explain, explain what it is you are. Why, where, what, how is it that you’ve come to me and... and you’re the one but you can’t be, because no one accepts the beast, how could they? How could you? And even if you could, you can’t possibly accept—”

“Sherlock—” John begins to stand.

“Stop it, you dolt! Sit down, you’re exhausted! And don’t try to offer me your pity. I don’t need it. I don’t need anything. You should be angry, angry at me, the curse. It’s because of all of this that your sister is dead.”

John stops. He’s not sure how he’s still able to breathe. His veins are screaming, emotions running rampant in his mind (Harry, Harry come back, you’re not really gone, are you...?) Even 221B is quiet, no creaks or trembles to be heard.

“...That was a bit not good, wasn’t it?”

“Sherlock, this isn’t your fault,” John says instead. “It’s the witches. It’s Moriarty. I would never blame you, not when you’re the victim in this as well. We’ll find a way to break the curse. Didn’t you say that it’s already fading?” John adds desperately. “What more do we have to do to make it go away? What do you think?”

They are at an impasse, so close (but to what?) Sherlock’s jaw clenches, he moves towards John—

And then the doorbell rings.
“Who is that?” John reaches for his gun, just in case. The only ones it could be are the outsiders (but they don’t know where the flat is, not in the fog), the chosen (but are they allowed to come here, besides Mrs. Hudson?) and then... the witch.

For a ridiculous moment, John hopes that it is the witch, so that he could shoot a bullet through Moriarty’s brain and enjoy the look of surprise on his face. But then the witch would just come back. He doesn’t have the right weapons (not yet.)

Sherlock is striding out of Mrs. Hudson’s bedroom and towards the stairs before John can speak. He follows him closely, bringing up the rear while a series of fire pokers and other sharp objects seem to float after them. 221B, it seems, isn’t going to risk another demon coming into her territory again.

He almost walks into Sherlock’s back when the detective stops suddenly. Sherlock whirls around, pushing him back towards the foot of the stairs.

“Stay inside, John.”

Before John can argue, Sherlock dashes to the door. The detective looks briefly through the eyehole, though it’s rather useless in their situations. Outside the dead zones, on the good days when it is ‘almost sunny,’ one can make out the details of their guest’s face. But on the bad days, it’s a blur, only menacing shadow. John imagines that in the dead zone, it looks darker.

But Sherlock mutters, “Male, about five foot eleven, doesn’t seem to be carrying anything heavy. Desperate movements. Seeking shelter or help perhaps. Wait, I recognize the shape of his silhouette...” He shouts, “Inspector? Is that you?”

They wait but then, half a breath later, a muffled shout replies, “Yes, god damn it! I know you probably don’t know what the hell is going on yet Sherlock, or maybe you do being the bloody genius you are, but you need to let me in. Hell is running through London right now!”

“How do I know this isn’t a trick? That you aren’t Moriarty in disguise? Or being threatened by him so that he can gain entrance into the house?”

“For fuck’s sake, Holmes. Your mad flat would eat me if I was a witch, not that it hasn’t already tried to drown me once, you remember the last drugs bust. Now stop being a prick and open the bloody door!”

Sherlock frowns, turning his head towards John. Without the benefit of eye signals, John has to whisper quickly, “Can we trust him? Is he one of the chosen?”

“My notes indicate so. There is only three: Mrs. Hudson, Molly and the inspector.”

“But we don’t know if the witch uses the other two, since Mrs. Hudson is safe in 221B,” John concludes. Molly had certainly been used as a distraction to trap him before. She called herself ‘The warning’ but John can’t help but wonder her real role in all this...

“Let’s see what he wants.”

Sherlock is still. “We could be playing into Moriarty’s hands.”

“Well, it’s better than sitting here feeling sorry for ourselves, and in my case, not knowing the hell I’m doing. Not very interesting,” John readies his pistol, points it at the crack where the door will open. Behind him, 221B keeps her knives and fire pokers in midair.
The detective shakes his head, a smirk on his lips. “Very well then.”

He opens the door.

They don’t need to attack anyone because as soon as the inspector gains entrance, he points outside, “Look. Just shut up, and look.”

The orb of light that is floating above the city has fallen. It looks to be on one of the towers, maybe even the Big Ben, but John can’t be sure. It’s... darker now, even though it’s not witching hour. This fog is steady and several shades darker than before. John can’t see across the street anymore.

But he can hear them.

The people, all of the people who had been stuck in their bodies repeating the same day over and over again are...

Well, they’re running, running and screaming.

John can’t see the exact shapes, only blurs and definite human-like figures running and crowding against each other. It’s a madhouse accompanied by the sounds of broken glass and blaring cars.

Some are trying to find their children, muttering that they need to find the edge of the fog and run away. Others insist on finding their old homes and boarding them up so the demons can’t find them. Then there are those who shout and scream and cry because they don’t know how to react any other way. Years of being trapped, now suddenly able to spout out all that suppressed agony? John can’t blame them.

And then there are the few who are clamouring about, shouting that something needs to be done. They have to get out, get out, in whatever way possible...

“Find the witch!” Someone shouts. “The witch and the beast! Burn them both!”

“Kill the beast!”

“Kill the witch!”

“Burn them both!”

The inspector shuts the door behind him just as John sees the eerie faded glow of fire being lit on shadowy sticks.

“You see the problem now?” The inspector demands.

“Yes,” Sherlock replies.

“Alright, then what the hell is going on then?”

“It means, Inspector Lestrade, that the spell is beginning to fade... and Moriarty is going to start his counterattack.”
They retreat upstairs. John takes that time to quietly observe the inspector. Lestrade is taller than John by a few inches, appearing to be in his late forties or so. He has silver hair and an honest look which is more than John can say about most people. The way Lestrade holds himself is casual at first glance, but John can see the weight on his shoulders, the bags under his eyes.

This is a tired man who has soldiered on for a long time.

221B has tea ready for them on a tray when they get to the sitting room. The tray floats towards Sherlock who ignores the tea entirely and takes the pot of sugar to pour some down his throat before wiping it on his sleeve in a wolfish way.

“This never gets any less creepy,” Lestrade eyes the hovering tray suspiciously before reaching for one. The tray trembles in happiness which makes Lestrade jump back a bit, nearly colliding with John who is last up the steps.

“221B is just happy that someone is getting nourishment around here,” John tells him gently.

Lestrade turns towards him, as if just noticing him and blurts out, “Who’s this then?”

John straightens up, offers a hand, “Hello, I’m—”

“He’s my doctor,” Sherlock interrupts, ripping notes off of his wall and rearranging them as if it will stimulate a connection in his brain. It probably will (at least they hope.)

“John Watson,” he says his name so that the inspector won’t be confused.

But Lestrade doesn’t shake his hand. Instead he seems to be gaping at him, looking back and forth from John to Sherlock. “Don’t tell me that you’re... you’re the outsider? Are you responsible for all this?”

He hesitates, “Well, I’m not really—”

“Inspector,” Sherlock snaps, “tell us exactly how this all came to be so far, every detail.”

Looking annoyed but all too used to this kind of behavior, Lestrade gives John one final suspicious glance before he moves to stand by the window. John, deciding that he might as well take a cuppa as well, sits down on the sofa. Sherlock is as still as a mannequin in a shop display, waiting.

“Well,” Lestrade begins, “I’m not sure how much you remember, Sherlock, or what you’ve written down...”

“Assume that I know everything about the spells.”

Another irritated twitch makes its way to Lestrade’s brow. The inspector takes a deep gulp from his cup. “I’m one of the chosen. I bring you to the location of the puzzle every day and I watch the...” He glances at John again, frowning, “...the beast, make sure that... it... doesn’t try to end the game before all the requirements of the curse are filled.”

Lestrade appears ill at admitting this role when John knows that this situation is anything but the inspector’s choice. Nevertheless, Lestrade glares hatefuly at his feet.

“Anyways,” he goes on, “it’s been normal for the past few weeks, at least normal for the dead zone. I can’t leave my office except to lead you to where the puzzle is or when its witching hour and I have to find the beast. But the past few nights the beast has been, well it hasn’t reported back to me. I can’t find it no matter where I look and then today, this morning I saw people moving
about freely, screaming, running. That’s when I tried to step out of my office... I thought I’d get knocked out or turned into a frog or something but... nothing. I could just... walk.”

Slowly the inspector lifts his head back up, the tired lines on his brow more pronounced than ever. “The fog is still out there and the light, well, it’s fading. I thought it was a bad sign, so I went to find you.”

John feels his throat go dry and any lingering appetite for tea vanish. Lestrade seems very sincere about his motives. But there’s something else, something that the inspector isn’t telling. John isn’t sure what but he senses that it’s personal and that it haunts the inspector as Afghanistan (and Harry) will always haunt John. Maybe it’s the reason why Lestrade seems so determined to help Sherlock.

“Do you know what the puzzle is?” Sherlock asks bluntly, his tone cool.

The inspector opens his mouth but no words come out. “Damn it!” Lestrade slams the cup on one of the drawers beside him. Several knick knacks and Petri dishes fall off onto the floor. “I can’t say.”

“The curse seems to be holding strongest at the center this puzzle. If you can’t tell us about the daily puzzle, when you’ve broken other rules today, then that tells me that the puzzle might be the key,” Sherlock frowns.

“Well then we should go and solve it,” John says.

Lestrade and Sherlock turn towards him, Lestrade’s face wide-eyed while Sherlock scowls at him. “Don’t you think that I would have solved it already for the past thousand days I’ve been trapped here? There’s something about this puzzle, it’s not an ordinary one. That would be too boring for Moriarty, too boring for me. He would do something dramatic, something to ruin me completely until I was backed into a corner...”

“Well that’s why you need us then,” 221B rattles her pipes in agreement with John’s words, “a wild card, something Moriarty isn’t expecting—”

“Absolutely not!” Sherlock roars at them. John and Lestrade gape at him. Sherlock storms towards John, piles of reports and glass cases falling and shattering on the carpet, but he doesn’t care. He grabs John by the shoulders, “Don’t you see? That’s what he wants. He wants you to see it. He wants you to see it and then go away, and I won’t let that happen. There has to be an alternative, some other way of defeating him and I’ll find it, I swear that I will—”

“Sherlock, I can help—”

“If he’s the one,” Lestrade also intervenes, “then you have to let him—”

“Well I don’t want your damned help!”

John has no idea what to do, what to say, to make things right between them again. Sherlock won’t let him in, won’t tell him what is truly bothering him about the Moriarty puzzle. Or maybe he can’t say but John knows this isn’t the case. Oh, Sherlock could tell him if he wanted to.

He just chooses not to.

“Sherlock...” John puts a hand against the detective’s chest, “...Please just—”

“No, John,” is the soft reply. “I refuse to play in Moriarty’s games anymore. I am not a dog that
This change in plans makes John pause, makes his blood quicken with adrenaline. “...How...?”

His detective bares his teeth again and John sees the wolf. “Moriarty’s rules are crumbling because of you, John. He can’t force me to solve his puzzles again and with Lestrade here, he won’t have anyone else come to fetch me. No, he can come to us...”

Sherlock brushes his finger against John’s cheek.

“We wait.”

“221B,” Sherlock says to the air, “make sure that our defenses are still strong. I don’t want there to be any gaps that Moriarty could sneak through and attack. Check the traps in the front lobby. They may be damaged from that demon intruder from last night.”

Lestrade is on his feet. “Demon intruder? But you don’t get intruders!”

“Well we did,” Sherlock snaps. “And have no worries, its dead now.”

John frowns in the midst of Lestrade’s protests that demons cannot be destroyed, at least by human means.

“Last night... how did 221B kill that demon...? I thought that only...” He waits, unsure if he should repeat Anthea’s words. Only weapons dipped in a witch’s or demon’s blood can kill them. "Come to think of it,” he recalls, “I thought only Mrs. Hudson could communicate with 221B. How are you able to understand what she is saying?”

Lestrade seems to want to say something but Sherlock makes a violent gesture towards him that makes the former inspector stop. So Lestrade gives a glare and returns to peeking out the window every five second interval.

Sherlock gives John the same biting smile from before (How is it that you know where we’re going? No offense but your blindfold...) only this one is more menacing. But maybe John just can’t see Sherlock without seeing Siraj as well anymore, maybe he doesn’t want to. “We have a bond, 221B and me. She is a special dwelling for which such a bond is necessary, that is how I am able to understand her.”

“Right,” it probably has more to do with the spells that Sherlock researches. John has a ridiculous picture in his head of Sherlock pouring random chemicals into a test tube and then feeding them to the pipes, only for the flat to come to life because of his antics. It’s an amusing scenario, one that almost makes him burst out in giggles. 221B is a living flat, it somewhat make sense that her tenants would need to have some kind of magical link to her.

“What kind of flat is 221B?” John asks. He feels awkward and a bit rude for talking about 221B when she’s present with them but he has no way to ask her the question himself. Maybe she could write on the mirrors or something. “I mean, you don’t come across sentient flats every day, do you?”

Now John finds himself wondering if London, both New and Old, is filled with different living buildings. It’s a city rich with history. John wouldn’t be surprised now if this were the case.

He thinks that Sherlock is about to answer, or would have, if not for the abrupt and collected...
knocking at the door.


They tense, all three of them, before they hiss, “Moriarty” at the same time. Then they are rushing to the window, jumping over clutter and piles of books to pull back the curtain. Lestrade beats them to it, having thrown them as far apart as possible.

Fog greets them on the other side of the glass. But the shadows, the figures of human shapes and things, gathered by the door of 221 Baker Street are unmistakable.

Tap tap tap.

“Little beast, little beast,” the witch’s voice sings from the fog, “…let me come in.”

John has never wanted to shoot something as he does in this moment. His finger is twitching on his gun. 221B rattles her knives. They surround the three of them protectively and, John suspects, are crowded in front of the door.

“Alright, what do we do?” Lestrade whispers. “He’s here, right on your front step!”

“Don’t open the door,” Sherlock orders, “or the windows. Just ask him what he wants.”

Lestrade nods and leans against the glass. He yells, “Tell us what you want!”

For a moment, there is no answer. The fog on the other side deepens and slithers. It whispers to John but now, he can’t make out the syllables. Yet perhaps his pulse is beating too loud in his ears for him to hear anything else but Sherlock right now.

There is a high-pitched laugh, one that is hauntingly familiar to John. He frowns, goes to window to get a better listen but Sherlock pulls him back behind him.

“It’s rather simple really. Someone is ruining my game. I do hate it when people cut in. It’s awfully rude,” the witch laughs, though the sound is muffled through 221B’s walls. It sends shivers down John’s spine, how normal the witch sounds, and yet on the edge of that laugh is a chord of insanity that John has not encountered before in any human being.

“Cut to the chase,” Sherlock snaps.

The witch pauses. “Well, your little pet has certainly dulled you so, Sherlock darling. I don’t think I like this. I don’t think I like this one bit. In fact... I might do something very bad, something that might hurt the city you tried so hard to save...”

“Oh for fuck’s sake, get on with it,” Lestrade mutters with John’s agreement.

“Give me John Watson, Sherlock,” Moriarty says in a pleasant tone. “Give me the intruder and I will let your city live another day.”

John chokes on his breath. 221B shakes the floor in anger while Lestrade splutters that there is no way that they can possibly give in to those demands. Sherlock only points two fingers up, in the shape of a pistol, in Moriarty’s direction.

“I’m afraid the answer is no.”
At first they don’t hear an answer. There is a hush, so subtle that John thinks that the fog is holding its sighs, its moans, just for this one moment.

“Oh dear, you’ve made me angry. You won’t like me when I’m angry...” The witch hums. “Very well, I suppose I’ll have to get my dolls to come fetch me my prize... tenete corda eorum (1)"

Sherlock tenses, “That spell!” Before he turns around to the doorway, hands wild and grasping for John, “Leave immediately—"

John barely has time to protest when Lestrade turns on them with a knife hidden up his sleeve. The inspector’s blade cuts Sherlock across the chest, a bright red scar trailing after the wound.

“Sherlock!” John shouts, rushing towards him. He needs to heal him, make him whole again—

“No, John! Don’t come any closer! They’re under another curse, all of the Chosen. I should have seen it, I should have known...” The detective hisses out in pain.

“What are you talking about?” John wants to ask, to yell. He thought they had this under control. He thought the Chosen were on Sherlock’s side. They seem to be old acquaintances, friends even, of Sherlock before the fog.

But when Lestrade tries to grab John, to drag the knife over John’s side, he can see it. There (just as with Harry in her death) in Lestrade’s eyes are true fear and self-loathing. His lips are moving in the shape of ‘I’m sorry’ while he tries to resist his body’s movements.

His hands are trembling, clutching so tightly that his nails dig into his own skin. Lestrade is struggling with his jaw, trying to say something, anything besides what Moriarty wants him to do.

“...Behind... you...” Lestrade pushes out from stubborn lips. “...Behind...”

John turns then, pistol pointed forward, ready to shoot but he can’t.

Because it’s Mrs. Hudson (can’t hurt her, not can’t, impossible) and the sight of her, using one of her knitting needles to cut him where his wound is makes his weak leg crumble. It’s one moment’s falter but that is all she needs really.

She knocks the gun from his hands to put handcuffs over them but she cannot stop crying, her eyes just as glassy.

“I made Clara kiss me,” Harry tells him one day, when he is finishing up his medical degree, when the whispers linger (but these days he can’t tell if they are the whispers of his colleagues or those in his dreams.)

John perks up, a smile breaking over his weary face. “That’s wonderful! I was wondering, I mean, with the way you’ve been tiptoeing around her instead of just using the direct approach as you always do... I suppose that’s why she’s been grinning all day?”

Harry is uncharacteristically silent and it makes John nervous. Harry is only ever this silent (like their mother) when she is thinking of the gift, of the drink. She’s been sober for over a year now, more like the little girl who used to hold his hand and tell him stories at night. He’s frightened of losing her again.
“...Johnny?” Harry whispers. She doesn’t move from the kitchen table. There is just something so lost heartbreaking about her expression that John sits up and walks to her, lets her lean her head against his jumper. It seems so long ago when she did the same for him.

“...What is it?” He asks cautiously.

His sister lets out a long breath. “Do you think that these things we can all do... these gifts... make us some sort of witch as well...? Do you think that we’re just as inclined towards bigotry and mayhem and sadism, an urge to hurt others because we’re not really human, we’re witches?”

John nearly backs away from her in shock. But he doesn’t, because she needs him to lean on. “Don’t say that! It’s not true, who told you that?” He’ll give them a talking to; no one says that to his sister. God, he knew that people were frightened by Harry’s ability but they’ve never actively persecuted her before—

“But it is true!” Harry shouts. “I made Clara kiss me. I looked into her eyes and I wanted it and I don’t know if she did or not, but I thought it, I thought kiss me and she did! Doesn’t that make me just as monstrous as those things out there? We think that the gifts are so useful, but they’re just a sign of our sins. We are witches—”

“No!” John throws his arms around her and buries his head against her shoulder. “No, no, no, no, that’s not true. I talk to Clara. We’re friends. She’s wanted to kiss you for a long time. In this case, even if you did use your gift, you were helping it along. And I know you don’t mean to use it to abuse others. That’s what makes you so good, Harry. You’re my sister. I’d know if you were a witch.”

He’s babbling. He knows this. But he needs to find a way to convince her, to show her that it’s alright.

John reaches for her wrist, has her feel for her pulse, the steady beats that are there.

“See?” John says desperately. “You have a heart. I’d know if you didn’t. I’d know.”

“We can’t have the demon house interfere,” John hears Moriarty say from outside the flat. “Burn it to the ground.”

“But Sherlock, he’s still inside, and what about John, Greg—” Molly, she’s there, asks.

“Oh, Sherlock won’t burn. He can’t,” the witch laughs.

Moriarty doesn’t mention a thing about the rest of them.

That’s when the smoke drifts up towards them. John can smell it growing stronger, spilling into each room and ravenously eating any air that is there. The heat rises up, smothers him in the face none too gently. He thinks that they have about five minutes before the whole flat is consumed in flames.

221B is screeching. The knives she had are quivering. They had been ready to skewer Lestrade in a heartbeat, but not Mrs. Hudson, certainly not her... Sherlock is shouting hoarsely at the flat, telling it to move away before the enchantments and safeguards break, before everything is revealed but the flat stubbornly brings all the furniture it can and gathers it around Mrs. Hudson and Lestrade.
The Chosen are still being controlled. They try to get away but 221B moves quicker. The floorboards rip from their nails and wrap around each person. More and more floorboards, chairs, plates, gather up in a protective dome around them both.

John is dragged to the side, struggling to get the handcuffs off. He looks up hopelessly, sees Sherlock pounding at the walls wildly.

“Get away from here, you stupid flat!” The detective shouts. Fire has begun to poke out of the door, it’s hungry limbs bleeding orange on the walls. “You can’t protect them from Moriarty’s spell; they’ll end up hurting themselves under his power no matter what you do. You have to get out or everything will be ruined!”

But 221B doesn’t listen. She creaks and groans some sort of response, dust falls down in fragile wisps, as if to run through Sherlock’s hair one last time.

The detective’s eyes widen.

He whirs around. “John. John, you need to get out—”

That is precisely when Sherlock Holmes collapses, clutching at his chest.

It’s like seeing Harry die again and John isn’t even aware of how fast he bolted towards the detective. There is a raw ache at the back of his throat, but why? Oh, he’s been screaming, screaming so much that his vocal chords are feeling the strain.

His hands find their way to Sherlock’s shirt. He sees the blood from Lestrade’s knife, its bright red but something has darkened it, mixed it with black. A poison?

(\textit{It’s going to be fine, Sherlock, everything is going to be fine}, he is whispering to the broken cells and veins, \textit{I’m going to sew you back together, you’ll see—})

John tears off his gloves with his teeth (stupid handcuffs!) He reaches for Sherlock’s wrist just as the detective shouts, “Don’t!” just to feel a pulse, just to know that Sherlock is \textit{alive}.

Skin touches skin.

Sherlock’s eyes widen, not just in horror, but \textit{remembrance}, as memories and memories of the past few days with John Watson come flooding back.

John is staring at him with numb shock, trying to comprehend how all of this came to be.

Because he is holding Sherlock’s hand, he is a doctor; he is trained to know how to do this. Because Sherlock is still breathing in front of his very eyes, despite the tremors and gasps.

But there is \textit{no pulse}.

\textbf{Interlude: Lestrade}

Lestrade remembers, he remembers everything.
“You can’t be serious about hiring that... that freak to work with us at Scotland Yard,” Sally crosses her arms.

“Well he found the murderer, didn’t he?” Lestrade asks. “We finished up the case at least three times faster with him helping out. Sure he’s odd and completely unbearable to work with, but he gets the job done.”

“But... but he knows things,” Sally protests.

“Yes, about your affair with Anderson, we all know that—”

“Not just that!” His friend grits her teeth. “I mean about spells. He knows an awful lot about curses for a normal bloke, don’t you think? Isn’t that a bit odd and suspicious? No one knows anything about witchcraft and yet here he is, a walking expert on the subject.”

“Well maybe he used to be a researcher for the government. You know how it is with political blokes. They have to know everything. They probably know more than they let on to the general public,” Lestrade shrugs. “Nothing wrong with that.”

“You can’t be serious, sir. What did you see when you shook hands with him?” She demands.

Lestrade scowls and puts down his mug. He swings his feet up on the desk and grumbles, “Nothing different than what I usually see. Some shoplifting as a kid. Unpaid rent. That sort of thing.”

“You always see the good in people,” his first wife shakes her head when he walks in on her in bed with another man. “I just don’t understand it; how you can trust me, trust anyone with that bias in your head. There isn’t any good anymore. Not in the fog. You shouldn’t look so betrayed, dear. This was bound to happen.”

And maybe it was.

It’s gotten him beaten up and almost killed on more than one occasion. Lestrade can feel things in people when he touches their hands. He can see the most horrible things they have ever done (shoplifting, lying, fraud, murder—) but he never wants to believe it. He used to think those images were nightmares when he was little but he knows better now. They are crimes of the past, present and future.

He saw his first wife cheating on him when he met her. But he was convinced it was a trick, a lie, some side effect of an insane gift he’s never understood or asked for.

This is the moment where everything falls into place for Lestrade, and he walks away.

He lied to Sally about what he saw when he shook Sherlock’s hand.

Lestrade sees nothing, nothing at all.

Instead of becoming apprehensive about the anomaly, Lestrade is instead pleased that he can act normally around another human being without knowing his or her darkest secrets.
Though it is odd, how much detail Sherlock will reveal about some of the most baffling curses he’s seen in his life. It really is. There’s a morbid glint in his eyes as he talks about the victims splattered on the ground, an excitement, almost...

Sherlock’s just a weird one, that’s all. An unbearably weird one.

Lestrade is tired of knocking on the door only to receive no answer. He lets himself in (ignoring the shriek of protests from the hinges on the door, nearly tripping over furniture towered in front of the door. Sherlock is probably doing more experiments.)

Running up the stairs, Lestrade wonders how Sherlock can live in such a messy home. All of the colours for the walls and drapes are dark and crimson. They seem to rustle as he brushes past but that’s just his imagination.

“Hey Holmes, I have another case for you!” He says, prepared to break down the next door if he has to.

It’s already been left ajar.

Lestrade frowns and walks into the sitting room. He gives an unimpressed snort at the mess before he looks up and there he sees it.

Sherlock is crouching on the ground, finishing up a large circle drawn in red, one that Lestrade recognizes from so many different cases and murders. It’s a spell circle, used by witches alone to cast more powerful curses. There are even candles and Sherlock is muttering something in Latin. The lights turned off so that only the glow from the candles provides any light.

Something falls behind Lestrade and he stumbles back right when Sherlock’s head shoots up to look at him. There is a wild glow to his eerie grey eyes, and why didn't he notice that before? How Sherlock’s gaze seems to flip back and forth between different colours?

“Inspector?”

“Don’t come near me!” Lestrade shouts, practically runs out of the flat altogether.

He regrets that decision ever since.

...Because the dead zone formed later on that day.

Chapter End Notes

(1) Latin to English (translated by vedri): hold their hearts
Part 6: Witch

Chapter Notes

Unedited

The soldiers play a game, in the nights when they have nothing to do in their tents but stare off into space and think. And thinking is dangerous territory after you’ve seen endless mounds of bodies scattered in the sand. Thinking puts many of John’s men into shock, some into asylums or hospitals, muttering to themselves about demons and angels.

(But that’s silly; there aren’t any angels in this world.)

There are cards and some beer (if anyone has any.) They try to ignore the moans of the wind outside; try not to think of the constant fear that perhaps the next winds will bring more demons, more spells (or worse, the fog.) But for now it’s just sand, sand that wisps at their fingers for a taste of human skin. If John closes his eyes, he thinks that he can hear the desert moaning with the wind.

They quietly go through a few rounds of cards, bodies tense despite the smiles on each other’s faces, before someone will say, “What do you think a witch looks like?”

The newcomers will blink slowly, having never really wondered. Witches are blurry figures in their imaginations, things that exist in tales told in the night and in the dead zones. They exist in curses but no one who’s been cursed ever has a consistent description other than brightly changing eyes, shadows enveloping their bodies.

“A demon with lion’s teeth,” one of them will say.

“A skeleton with organs trailing from its feet.”

The descriptions get more and more ludicrous as the game goes on. It helps to laugh about it, to make up the most bizarre life form as possible if only to chase away the fear. John never participates, never adds in his own comments. He had asked his fair share of questions when he was younger, to his parents and his sister. They always answered with stories (empty looks or stories.)

But one day, Murray turns to him and nudges his shoulder, “What about you, Watson? What do you think a witch really looks like?”

He peeks behind him, to the outside of the tent, to where the fog is waiting beyond the desert. He thinks of Doctor Hardwicke, trying not to crumble, telling yet another patient that there is nothing
he can do against a curse. He remembers wondering how anyone could be stupid enough to make a willing contract with a witch, how anyone could bear to look at them if they appeared to be monsters.

“Like anyone of us, I suppose, they just hide whatever unique attributes they have.”

The game doesn’t go on after that and no one looks him straight in the eye for several more weeks at hand.

- 

Everything is burning but John can’t stop staring at the wrist clutched in his hands, trying to feel for something that just isn’t there. He’s back at the first day he touched a corpse, felt its cool and hard touch, bones that would never move again. Lungs paused in anticipation for the beat that would never come. It wasn’t until his father told him to breathe that John realized he had been waiting to hear that pulse.

But this isn’t a corpse. These hands are warm and…

No, his gift is wrong. There has to be a different explanation, some kind of circulatory problem or maybe John is imagining things, maybe the tremors in his hand are interfering (yet they’re not shaking, not at all, not in this stress) but—when you eliminate all other possibilities all that remains is the truth.

His vision is getting blurry. John feels so light-headed but he can’t help but cling to Sherlock, to touch his face. 221B is screeching and screeching, her walls are falling, crumbling into dust and grime around them. It falls on Sherlock’s face, covering the pale skin and rains against John’s back. John thinks he can hear Moriarty’s laughter growing closer and closer.

(He laughs like the fog, during witching hour.)

John blinks, snapping out of his haze. They need to get out. Find some water. Put out the fire. But Sherlock’s safety comes first; he needs to get Sherlock out. John looks around, trying to find pins, something, to pick at the handcuffs. He needs them off.

Sherlock spasms, clutching at John’s wrist so tightly that it might fall off. “John,” he gasps.

“It’s going to be alright,” he says out loud, searching, always searching.

“...John... stop it, don’t be stupid! Get out, you idiot, I’m fine—”

“No you’re not!” John shouts, wrenching his hands from Sherlock’s grip entirely. The detective’s hands seem to freeze in midair, lost without something to hold. “You, you’re bleeding with some kind of poison that I can’t recognize and you’ve collapsed from blood loss. I can’t even heal you; my gift isn’t even working properly. And... and I can’t even feel for a pulse, my hands have to be shaking or, or—”

“—John—”

“No, Sherlock, just let me take care of it. I just need to,” he coughs, smoke caught in his lungs and poisoning his insides, “just need to—”

“Don’t be obtuse, John,” is the low murmur he hears.

“What?” Dizzy, he looks down at the hard frown that has made its way to Sherlock’s face.
“There’s no need to pretend anymore,” Sherlock continues, his voice growing harsher by the second, “you know what I am now. You are like the rest of them. You can put two plus two together, can’t you? Or is that too difficult for your tiny, little brain?”

John pulls back his hand, feeling the sting of Sherlock’s words curling uncomfortably in his gut.

“But no, you can’t be—it’s a lie, a, a misunderstanding or—”

*When you eliminate all possibilities all that remains is*—no, stop, it’s not true. Just a mistake. His medical training screams at him to perform CPR, resuscitate the patient in some way but his eyes can see that Sherlock is breathing… breathing… and yet Sherlock is so perfectly still that John isn’t sure if he’s hallucinating, mind playing tricks...

He’s yanked down by the collar of his shirt. “Don’t be an idiot, John!” Sherlock practically roars into his ear, the smoke seems to expand at the sound of his voice. “You can see it and now you’re *observing* it, you know what I am. Don’t deny your instincts!”

One of the light bulbs from the ceiling comes crashing down between them, spilling jagged glass over them both and scratching them with cuts. But John can’t react. He can only stare at Sherlock’s form, thoughts jumping up at him, each demanding attention.

He should run now, shouldn’t he?

Fire licks at their boots. The air around them is boiling, should have burned them alive by now but 221B must be protecting them, still trying to use her own brand of magic to shield her humans. It’s all John can do not to crumple in the heat and grime but he can’t (won’t) move from his spot.

“Oh get it through your thick head,” Sherlock growls when he realizes that John refuses to react. “I am your enemy. I did all of this. *I made the dead zone!*”

John recoils, hands against the floorboards as he subconsciously backs away. The handcuffs cut into his wrists, make him hiss. Glass digs into his skin and his fingers brush against the abandoned gloves on the ground.

“No, no, you didn’t. You wouldn’t—” His throat is dry, clogged up from smoke and this, this feeling that is ripping through his chest, his head, and he wishes he couldn’t feel it. He wishes he didn’t *feel* so much and maybe it wouldn’t hurt—

“I know you,” John tries again. “You wouldn’t do this, make this, this *hell*. Not for anything—”

“Well you *don’t know me*, John Watson. You have *no idea* just what I am capable of, no idea of what I’ve done to this city,” Sherlock’s tone darkens as he slowly gets up, a shadow against the bright flames. “You should run while you have the chance.”

“You’re a witch,” John finds himself saying, surprised that he can even say that much. *Obvious.* All of London might be burned to the ground at any moment and yet he’s sitting here stupidly, waiting on an answer he already knows.

The blindfold seems to darken, despite all of the grit smudged against the fabric. Sherlock’s lips twitch to say more but—but then—

The fire stops moving. It’s still there, so very present, but it does not jump hungrily for more fuel. It lingers in midair as 221B’s screeches are suddenly wrenched away from the background.

“Now that’s awfully rude and ignorant of you, Johnny boy,” drawls a voice from behind. The
flames seem to pause in time at his words, waiting upon his command. ‘‘Witch’ is such a general term, don’t you think? We’re called warlocks because we’re male... though ‘witch’ does have a nice and chilling ring to it, I do like that. Witch. A word to drive a human into tears. Yes, I can see why humans default to that term...’’

He pauses.

“WITCH!” Moriarty roars at them all, delighting at the sound.

John turns around quickly, manoeuvres his handcuffed wrists to his gun, ready to shoot. But then he sees who is there and his eyes widen in surprise.

“...Jim...?” He whispers. “But I thought... Moran...”

But said man is standing next to the witch (not Sherlock), keeping a tight grip on poor Molly’s wrist. The girl is shaking but she keeps her gaze pinned straight ahead so she can ignore the demon holding her. He is smiling dangerously at John. Moran watches John with a spark of madness, licking his lips. The shadows seem to weave back and forth around him in the same madness. John suppresses the urge to shiver. Moran hasn’t changed at all.

It’s Jim who has. The polite looking man from before is dressed in an expensive dark suit and tie. Though he stands unassumingly, there is no mistaking him for an average business man (Death in a suit, John starts to think hysterically.) While Moran’s eyes are alive with madness, Moriarty’s eyes survey the building paused in fire with calculation and amusement. The madness is there, John has no doubt, but it’s cleverly hidden in the obsessive way Moriarty regards Sherlock.

(And the way his eyes glow red.)

“Moriarty,” Sherlock snarls from behind.

Jim (Moriarty, the witch, the one who caused all this but what about Sherlock?) tilts his head. “Hi,” He sings out. The flames flicker once but remain still. Everything is still, frozen, breaths held in anticipation save for the two witches, the demon and John.

“You missed our last date,” Moriarty pouts, but the undercurrent of a threat is ever present. The flames flicker once more before pausing. “I was so disappointed, Sherlock dear.”

“I have more important things to do then participate in your silly little games now,” Sherlock growls. This time, the smoke seems to slither closer around them, blackening the space between the two witches.

“Oh really...?” Moriarty steps closer, the red tint in his stare gleaming brighter than before. “And why is that I wonder? Have you found someone cleverer than me to play with? Is that it? No, that’s impossible. I’m know that there’s no one on this pitiful world more brilliant than you and I. Are you bored of me? Are you?” Moriarty’s soft and pleasant tones become a shout. “Or maybe...” He looks at John, “...you think you’ve found the one.”

John scowls at Moriarty and raises his pistol up towards the witch’s chin. His arm has never been so steady in his life. He can’t kill any of them without spilling witch’s or demon’s blood on his bullets but he can make sure that this will hurt.

“Step away from us,” He says, “or I will shoot you.”

“John,” Sherlock says in a warning tone.
“Oh do keep your mouth shut, Sherlock dear, or you’ll ruin my fun,” Moriarty snaps his fingers. The fire resumes its task, viciously eating up the walls of their flat, climbing higher and higher. John and Sherlock yell out in protest and then Moriarty raises his hand for the fire to pause.

“Unless you’d like 221B to be utterly destroyed now rather than later, I’d zip it.”

Sherlock swears under his breath but stays quiet. John glowers up at Moriarty and spits at his feet.

Moriarty laughs. It’s different from Jim’s laughter (all high pitched and melodic) now in a slower and deliberate tenor.

“Oh, you’re such a cute little pet, aren’t you? So loyal. So obedient. You humans are a real ignorant lot, always assuming you know all, especially you, Johnny boy, you pitiful and lost little thing.”

He doesn’t react to the jibe, keeps himself as impassive as possible.

“Trying to play the brave hero,” Moriarty hums, “but never able to save anyone. Oh, you tried. Yes, you did. You heard that your sister was missing. You searched... and you searched... trying so hard to find her. You even went into the nasty fog, how noble of you. But,” Moriarty smirks, “maybe not so noble after all. Silly and whiney Harriet, always going on and on about how unfortunate she is, how horrible life is to her.”

John almost drops his gun. “Wh-what...?”

“Oh Johnny!” Moriarty scrunches up his face in imitation, but another voice comes out. A voice he knows all too well, “Why do we have to have these nasty gifts? Why can’t I find someone who loves me without my power? Why did Clara break up with me? Why don’t you ever make it better, Johnny? Why don’t you take the booze away? Why? Don’t join the army, Johnny. Stay with me. Make me better, Johnny. Make me better!”

If he wasn’t on his knees already, he would have collapsed. “H-Harry?”

“You abandoned me the moment you had the chance! It’s all your fault, Johnny, all your fault that I’m dead!” Moriarty finishes before letting out a stream of suppressed glee. “How precious, the relationship between siblings. How much they say the love when all they do is hate. Isn’t she the most annoying tart? Oh,” Moriarty sees John’s clenched fists, “I made you angry. So sorry. But I’m right, of course. Didn’t you run off to be a toy soldier to get away from her and her nagging and her drinking? Didn’t you run away from her? Leave her? Kill her?”

“Stop it!” John yells, “Just stop it!”

He shoots, or he almost does, before his training kicks in and he regains control of his grip. His fingers are trembling again in slight tremors. He can hear her voice even now, accusing him.

Harry, Harry, I’m so sorry.

“Oh,” Moriarty pouts, leans in closer with a soothing tone, “seems I’ve hit a nerve. Let me make it better. Of course you didn’t kill her, Johnny boy. You only wanted her dead, gone. What difference does it make? You got your wish in the end. She waltzed off into the fog and then we witches had her killed. Sherlock here made the dead zone. I made the demons. It all goes hand in hand, no wonder she went mad. No wonder she died. Hm, seems that we did you a favour.”

Something inside him (whatever has kept him grounded, calm, somewhat stable) breaks.

“Shut up!” John yells, dropping his pistol, “Just shut up, shut up, shut up! I want nothing to do with
your kind. You’ve ruined this city, fucked up so many people’s lives. Harry’s dead because of you,” but is she? Or maybe she would have been driven to... to... No, just keep going, Watson, pull yourself together—“Why should I have mercy for you?”

He’s out of breath, all of his hate and bitterness thrown into that last outburst. All is silent and John closes his eyes, certain that this is the moment when Moriarty will lose his temper, burn them all but—

Moriarty starts to laugh. But this time, it’s unbridled mirth and triumph. It’s the laugh of a mad man who has won everything (the mad hatter who married the mad queen of hearts, off with their heads, off with their heads—)

“Do you hear that, Sherlock? See? He’s just like the rest.”

John gasps and he whirls around, sees how pale Sherlock has become, how his fingers clench and dig into his skin, the tight set of his mouth. “No, no, wait, Sherlock, I didn’t”—but he made the dead zone—“I didn’t mean—”

“Oh, but you did and now I think I shall let everything burn!” Moriarty bellows. “Sherlock is mine now!”

“NO!” John shouts, standing up to tackle the witch.

The fire returns. So do the screams.

“If you could kill one, how would you kill it?”

It is several months after that night of cards. Some of his soldiers still cast him skittish looks, bothered by the honesty that John always projects. “People don’t like to talk about witches,” he remembers Harry telling him, when he’d been scolded by one of his teachers for being too nosy about ‘rotten devilry.’ When he had asked why not, Harry had replied, “Well, because it’s easier to pretend that they don’t exist if you don’t admit that they’re real.”

John looks up abruptly, eying the private sternly, “Excuse me?”

Private Collins, a shy bloke who likes to read Shakespeare before he goes to sleep, flushes but bravely continues, “I mean, if you could capture one, a witch. Wouldn’t you want to make it suffer? Want to draw out how it dies, make it remember that it can’t prey on us like we’re insects —”

“I’d shoot it,” John says sharply. “If it was threatening me or another human being directly then I’d shoot it and then run because there is no way to kill a witch, private. And even if there was a way, what you’re talking about is torture, do you understand?”

The young man stares up at John as if he is seeing a demon in front of him. He splutters, reaching out to him, “But they’re not like us. They don’t deserve mercy; you can’t torture something that isn’t human! It deserves to be punished!”

“Yes, well maybe I’m tired of seeing torture everywhere in the fog, have you ever thought of that?” John demands. “They cause so much despair, so many people to suffer. We don’t need any more of that, especially if we all claim to be as human as you’re saying.”

Collins clenches his fists and says, “Don’t tell me you’ve never thought of it. Wondered.”
John holds his gaze, one hand fluttering over the hold of his gun by his side.

“There’s nothing to wonder about. Just shoot them and run. That’s all you can do.”

At this moment (just for one stupid, weak and horrible moment) when 221B begins to splinter and the floor sinks down into the lower levels (into more heat and fire), when he hears Molly crying out his name, hears Moran shouting for more blood and Moriarty just breathing, he wonders.

Then John hits Moriarty with the back of his gun and rolls off of him without checking for unconsciousness. Glass presses against his cheeks before he jumps to his feet and looks wildly for Sherlock. Sparks catch against his jumper. He can’t breathe with all the smoke and the heat pressing (slamming) against his body.

The fire looks as if it is beckoning to him with hungry sharp lilts of embers. It’s already taken all four walls. John doesn’t know where Mrs. Hudson and Lestrade are. He only hopes that 221B has kept them buried enough (but the flat is still screaming, shrieking, holding on so desperately that he just doesn’t know anymore.)

“Sherlock!” John shouts, coughing as more smoke invades his mouth. There’s only fire now, bright, bright fire. It stings at his eyes, suffocates him. He feels like he’s already on fire even though the flames haven’t tasted him yet. He wants to go back into the dark, back to the fog where it was cool and whispered to him. This light is too much, too much...

“John,” He hears.

Suddenly something has grabbed his ankle. John panics, kicking at the unknown presence before arms yank him down, backwards and he is pressed back against a familiar chest.

“Sherlock—”

The detective (witch) slams his hand against John’s mouth, shutting him up. John tries to say something, tries to struggle, but nothing about the blindfold gives away Sherlock’s expression. Only the snarl and the growled ‘stay still’ hints at the anger in him, as Sherlock shoves something against John’s hands, something leather and soft... wait, what?

John stares down at the gloves now covering his hands, Sherlock’s gloves. He casts another desperate and questioning look at said man, but Sherlock only snaps, “Now you can run!”

“But—”

He shoves John through the away into the flames. John screams out, tries to crawl back towards Sherlock but another grabs his jumper, pulls him up—

It’s Moriarty, blood dripping down his forehead from where John hit him. The crimson streaks glisten in the wild firelight, heighten the absolute loathing present in that gaze. He’s the flames of insanity encased human form, letting John dangle just above the ground.

“I think that you’re done playing this game, Johnny boy,” Moriarty smiles, teeth stained in scarlet. “It’s time for the grown-ups to talk alone now.”

“Put him down!” Someone shrieks. (Is is Molly? 221B suddenly speaking English? ...Sherlock?)
Moriarty blinks slowly, as blood trails into the white of his eyes. “Alright, I will.”

The floors crumble into the eager flames that are one floor below. They jump up, nipping for John’s boots. The subtle crackles of long orange tongues fill John’s ears. He can see the hues of orange, yellow and deep crimson all coruscating around them, writhing and reaching, so hungry for more food...

And Moriarty throws him in.

He doesn’t know who is screaming anymore.

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He always wondered what the sunlight might feel like, if the fog and the darkness ever went away. He’d asked his mother and father that question countless times *(What is the sun? What is sunlight?)* and receive mixed responses, changed every time.

They thought that sunlight might be just warmth—warmth by a fireplace, warmth when wrapped up in bundles of quilts, warmth of a nice cup of tea when snow touches the earth. His father proposed that sunlight was just a layer of that warmth on skin, nothing too phenomenal or special. “It’s pointless to wonder,” Gordon Watson had said. “This is the world we live in, we must accept that.”

But John always wondered. He’d curl up with his stuffed dog Gladstone by the fire, close his eyes and just imagine.

“This is sunlight,” he’d say to himself, “this is what it feels like.”

Now he falls into fire, thinks back to the story of Icarus who flew too close to the sun, the foolish soul who couldn’t appreciate the wings he had, the foolish soul who let them melt.

Maybe this is what falling into the sun will feel like— infernos exploding, roasting his skin, eating up his flesh until he is nothing but unrecognized char. Maybe this is punishment for curiosity, for asking *questions*, for wanting the sun (because now he has it, now he can scorch into smoke from *too much* heat.)

*Sherlock*, he thinks. Even now, that’s all he can make out in his thoughts. *Sherlock.)*

The flames wrap around him greedily, lick around his limbs and chest.

It’s warm. So very... very...

---

The fog whispers faintly, leaving a lingering caress on his cheek before the sound of sparking fire replaces it.

“Over here!” A familiar voice shouts. “I found him and, gods, he’s alive!”

He groans, pain demanding attention all over his body. There is darkness everywhere or perhaps that is because he hasn’t tried to open his eyes yet. They are heavy, too heavy for him to pry open. There seems to be so much pressing down on him, layers and layers of weight. He tries to move his feet, but they’re trapped, as are his fingers.

“Come help me dig him out!”
Some of the weight is lessened, moving away from the surface. He hears yet another voice he recognizes, swearing. “Fuck. This is heavy,” the second presence is panting. “You wouldn’t happen to have a gift that could help us out, would you?”

“My gift is useless in the dead zone,” the first once replies, “and Soo Lin can’t help us with this either.”

“Alright, then we go back to hard labour. What fun,” the second grumbles.

The weights begin to shift again and he assumes that they’re resuming their work. He frowns, tries to recall what happened to him. He’s a soldier (or is he a healer?) and now he’s no one. He’s looking for his sister (but she’s gone now) and he met... he met someone... someone important... there was light, so much light, trying to devour him but the warmth...

“Don’t worry, Doctor Watson,” the second voice reassures him, “We’re going to get you out of here.”

He knows them. Yes he does. It’s... Sally? And... and Anthea, the first voice. They found him. He met them in darkness, he fought monsters with them... he...

And there was a beast.

Not a beast, never a beast. Just someone that he...

The flames are still crackling from all around but the warmth is gone. Is the world still on fire? Did he turn into ash?

“...Watson... Doctor Watson... can you hear me...? Watson... come on...”

John opens his eyes and breathes in the cool air.

He starts to choke when he feels smoke returning to his lungs. A hand steadies him, thumps on his back to clear his airway. It doesn’t really take away the poison from his throat and makes him splutter out in dry heaves. Two pairs of arms grab his shoulders and pull him up so that he can regain his footing against pieces of charred wood and plaster.

“Steady there, Watson,” Sally tells him from his right. “You were just buried under all that rubble since the fires started. Just take a breather. You’re safe.”

For now at least. But Sally doesn’t mention that.

John blinks slowly, sees Anthea’s tired smile and Sally’s concerned expression. They’re standing on the foundations of 221B or at least... what’s left of her.

“Oh god...”

With a strangled cry, John pulls himself out of Anthea and Sally’s grips. He falls on his knees, running his hands through the pile of ash and charred glass. But he can’t feel anything. Those damn gloves, still so pristine and smudged, prevent from being able to touch the flat’s remains. He wants to wrench them off, wants to shout and scream but there’s nothing. Nothing emerges but this dull feeling in his mind—

221B is still screeching in his mind. The sound of metal scratching against the blackboard, turned
up to maximum volume. His eardrums throb at the

“I should be dead,” John says, seeing what the fire has taken (almost everything) and what is left (almost nothing.) “I should be ash, so why... why am I still alive when...?”

“Oi, don’t say that!” Sally yanks on his sleeve. “You should be glad you’re alive, though god knows how you even survived.”

“But that’s just it!” John tries to shout at her, but his voice is hoarse from all the smoke. “I shouldn’t be alive. That fire wasn’t normal, it was something Moriarty made. Somehow, it killed 221B. She was supposed to have the strongest defenses against magic. She was supposed to be the one place that Moriarty couldn’t enter!”

“...You talk about that flat like its alive or something...” Sally mutters to herself.

“Well she is!” His shouts begin to crack and John’s says shakily, “...She was...”

And now she’s gone. Just like Harry, another victim of witchcraft, of the fog...

Someone kneels beside him and presses something into his hands. John looks up to Soo Lin’s sad gaze.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,” she tells him.

He looks down at what she’s given him and finds his throat constricting achingly when he sees the golden numerical plates that used to be nailed to the brick wall of the flat. The numbers ‘two’ and ‘two’ and ‘one’ plus the capital letter ‘B’ gleam back at him in a pile. He closes his eyes and remembers the fond creaks of the flat, the way she smashed the pipes to show her annoyance or affection.

“Me too,” he admits.

“221B protected you, to her last breath...” Soo Lin explains in the same soothing tone. “It’s why we found you buried under rubble. Even when she could have run away, left Baker Street to set up as a different house, she didn’t.”

She should have, he thinks. You stupid, noble and amazing flat. You should have left.

But he can only imagine the response that the flat would have. Perhaps she would shake the floorboards to remind him that she protects her humans because she wants to. (Because she was so fond of them.) Perhaps she would make him sit down and make him recover before jumping into another dangerous situation. John can almost feel her now, in his head, smashing the pots and pans together, telling him to save their detective and landlady.

He clutches the numbers until he feels the edges cutting through the leather of Sherlock’s gloves into his skin. He presses a kiss against the first number ‘two’ that is stained with his blood and puts them all reverently into his jacket pocket.

I’ll stop him, he promises her then, and I’ll bring Sherlock back to you, 221B.

Then he stands up, helping Soo Lin to her feet. (She seems to have gained a broken ankle. Clinically, John makes a note to heal that soon.)

“Where’s Sherlock?” John asks them all.
Pained silence answers him.

Sally turns her face away with a scowl but there is distress in her eyes while Anthea frowns and looks back to her blackberry again. Soo Lin stares at her feet before she says, “Moriarty took him. Moriarty took all of them.”

John almost stops breathing.

“That can’t be. What about Mrs. Hudson and Lestrade? 221B was protecting them at least. Have you found them?”

“No, Moriarty took them too,” Sally says. “He needs them for his game.”

“What game?!”

“Just look around you, Watson, and tell me what you think!”

It occurs to John then that they have more lighting and visuals than usual in the fog. Normally the air is several shades darker. He always has a hard time seeing his hand as more than a shadow when he stretches out to reach for something. He can see the buttons on Sally’s jacket and the key pads on Anthea’s blackberry with reasonable clarity, even from where he’s standing. Soo Lin, who is leaning against a makeshift crutch, looks like a faded noir photograph that has slowly regained a hint of its colourful tinge.

It’s as the fog is shrinking away, retreating to whatever world it comes from. But John knows that is not true. He can feel the fog still, tickling at his skin, his lips. He can hear the desperate (but now distant) whispers in his ears, barely distinguishable.

John opens his mouth to ask but then closes it when he sees the line of angry orange glow shining over the next line of buildings.

London is on fire.

-“Oh my god.”

He can see those same hungry tongues of angry orange climbing higher than all the towers and buildings in the streets. They light up through the fog, almost outshining the round moonlike orb that still hangs at the center of the city.

There are distant cries of terror, ones he didn’t notice in his numb grief. They are everywhere, echoing around them, deafening the dying whispers of the fog. The strangled cries are accompanied by the haunting growls and ripping of flesh. John thinks he can even seen smears of red along the pavement, another lone body part peaking behind an abandoned car.

“He’s turned this whole place into hell,” Sally says grimly. “There’s nowhere to run. We would have been turned into one of those people if Anthea hadn’t saved us last witching hour. Soo Lin got her leg busted up really bad when we escaped Moriarty. He’s just letting his demons loose, letting them run around and eat who they like. It doesn’t matter if you’re a player or an outsider or just one of the pawns now. The demons are coming for all of us and there’s nothing we can do.”

John gapes at her in horror.

“Then we need to find Sherlock, save him! We can’t let Moriarty do this; we’ll have to stop him!”
John shouts, searching around for a weapon. Maybe his pistol survived the fire too.

“Save the freak?” Sally exclaims, hands on her hips. “I’m sorry if no one’s told you yet, Watson, but that man is one of them, a witch!”

“I know he’s a witch—”

“Then what the hell do you think you’re doing? Why are you still trying to save him? He made this all happen. He made the dead zone. He’s probably laughing it up with his pal Moriarty, enjoying all the destruction he’s caused and you want to rescue him?”

“No, Sherlock’s not like that. He’s not Moriarty, he’s—”

“They’re all like that!” Sally roars, taking him by the shoulder and shaking him. “Every last one of them! They’re all the same. They want to see you suffer. Those sick bastards get off on it, enjoy it. They take away the people that you love, make you watch them suffer...” Her voice falters, “They take everything away from you until there’s nothing left! All witches are the same, everyone knows that!”

“Then I’m wrong!” John roars back, “Everything that I, that we, know about witches is wrong and we need to get over it, rescue Sherlock, stop Moriarty, stop the curse... stop...”

Soo Lin embraces him then, presses his head against her shoulder and whispers soft words in Mandarin. He wants to push away, but he doesn’t. Instead he marvels at the wet spot on her jumper, wonders where the rain must be coming from.

God, is he crying? He didn’t think he could anymore.

“...I know he’s a witch,” John settles on saying, “...but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t care.”

“He doesn’t care. Sherlock Holmes doesn’t care about anyone.”

But he does.

Sherlock’s saved John’s life more times than he can remember. He searched for Harry with John even though he wanted John to break the curse first. He tried to save 221B and Mrs. Hudson and Lestrade... He held onto John so many hours ago...

Except—

(I made the dead zone.)

“Sally,” Anthea says quietly, “221B wasn’t the only one protecting John from the flames.”

Said woman raises her eyebrow in question.

Anthea points at the gloves. Sally goes still, watching them with an expression of disbelief, as if lead has been turned to gold. “He gave those to John.”

John wants to question what they’re talking about but a mysterious shake from Soo Lin tells him that they shouldn’t interrupt the moment. Sally is shaking, looking more vulnerable than John could ever have guessed the strong woman to be.

She clenches his jaw and nods, “Alright, Watson. Fine. I’ll help you. But I’m not doing this for him. This is payback. Moriarty is going to get what’s coming to him.”
He doesn’t know what to say to this change of heart, only—

“Thank you. Thank you so much.”

Another howl interrupts them and Sally pulls out a pistol, “We need to get moving.”

The light from the flames eating the buildings parallel to them casts an inhuman orange glow on their faces, makes them look possessed.

Each woman, John notes, is armed with a gun of some kind, probably from the underground. John wonders if they’re all loaded with bullets dipped in witch’s blood, if they’ll kill a demon. When he asks, Anthea only smiles.

“You’re from the British Government, aren’t you?” Because John remembers the rumours of someone in Parliament paying millions of pounds for volunteers to go into the dead zone, Sherlock mentioning someone named Mycroft hiring people to find him, Mrs. Turner whispering about witches in the government...

Who else could know how to kill one besides the witches themselves?

To that Anthea smiles again and hands him his Browning.

He doesn’t ask how she found it.

―

“What will Sherlock be?” John asks.

Anthea points to the orb of light that hangs from the center of the city. There, John can spot a swarm of dark and murky creatures flapping around the orb, surrounding it. Demons. “That’s where we saw Moriarty and Moran heading with the hostages, when we were spying on you. We think it’s the center of the spell, since it’s was impossible to get there before on foot.”

John recalls that. On his first day in Dead London he’d tried to reach that orb but it had always stayed the same distance away, no matter how much he walked.

“But now the curse has weakened...” Soo Lin adds.

“...It’s possible to get there now,” John realizes.

―

After John heals Soo Lin’s ankle, they all move quickly through the streets. Sally takes up the rear, eyes darting for any attack from behind. Soo Lin supports John, putting an arm around his shoulder since he’s been having trouble breathing (damn smoke) and his hands won’t stop shaking. He’s no good as a shot if he can’t make his body stay still.

Anthea leads the way, her steps quiet and deliberate. They all seem to move according to the rhythm of their heartbeats, as fast as possible before something strikes.

It’s their luck when they seem a dark (indescribable) shape, thing, monster leaping towards them against the hue of orange in the background. John yells at them all to get down but Anthea pulls out an assault rifle from her bag (AK-47, John notes numbly; he hasn’t seen one of these since the war) and lets out a stream of gunfire which hits the demon across the chest.
The demon roars, one huge arm slashing towards them before it falls against the road. It bleeds out black and red, red and black. The colours swirl and change, making John’s vision spin.

“Don’t look,” Anthea orders them. “You’ll go insane and it’s not quite dead yet.”

Soo Lin tugs at his arm and Sally pushes them both forward, covering their backs with a hunting rifle. They rush down the street, ignoring the groans of the thing left behind, the thing that is groping around and yowling after them.

_Don’t look._ John thinks of shapeless things, things too grotesque to describe and just shuts his eyes. _Don’t look._

There’s more gunfire. Anthea is frighteningly efficient with a soldier’s weapon. Her face is blank as she shoots each demon in the vital areas. Her bullets stick and do not slip away from the demons. They leave the monsters struggling on the road, in bits and pieces or crawling helplessly after them. Sometimes John thinks that he sees demon parts scattered in half, still dragging their way towards future victims.

(They see a woman and her children unable to escape the monsters, screaming as they are torn apart and just as Sally and Anthea shoot it down.)

He tries not to think about it.

As Soo Lin throws a knife a yet another shadow that creeps up on them, John can only think about running.

_—_

“You said Moriarty captured you before,” John says in between pants, when they’re two blocks away from the orb. It’s huge, a large sphere of eerie light, more luminescent than the moon. The trails of light radiating from it feel like misty threads of pearly fog, reaching for John’s face. It hangs above St. Bart’s hospital (of all the places) hovering over the rooftop.

He has to pry his eyes away to prevent himself from being held within its haze.

The demons are all concentrated on the rooftops of the buildings, hoards and hoards of them, all writhing and changing forms of black. They jump down on the few remaining civilians that haven’t run from the area. Blood stains and body parts litter the streets. There’s no fire here, only monsters. The fire is behind them now, setting the entire city alight in infernos.

Anthea leads them behind one of the shops, where they try to think of a plan.

“Yes, he did,” Soo Lin shivers, remembering her ankle. “I blacked out but Sally was with me too. Anthea rescued us.”

“How did you get away?”

“We almost didn’t,” Sally grumbles. “I remember fighting back while Moran was pinning me to the floor. They tried to give us this pill. I don’t know what the fuck it was for, but Moriarty was going on about how this would make us help him kill you and how he’d have Sherlock all to himself, win the game finally... Then all of a sudden, Moriarty froze. He shouted at Moran to stop, that something was wrong; the curse was lessening or something. That’s when Anthea came in with her gun and distracted them. I carried Soo Lin out of there and we all ran for it.”

John’s eyes widen. The curse was lessening? John couldn’t remember what could have possibly
happened during witching hour to lessen the curse. He had found out that Sherlock was (is) Siraj and said that it was fine... then he’d fallen asleep...

“They didn’t send any demons after you?” John questioned.

“No,” Sally shook her head. “I think they were distracted by whatever was messing with the curse. That’s when Anthea suggested we go try to find you. Strength in numbers and all...” She peeks back outside to where the hoards of demon are prowling on the rooftops, waiting to pounce on whoever tries to step towards the hospital, “...but the odds of four to hundreds of demons is a suicide mission. We’re never going to make it!”

“Well we have to do something,” John insists. His mind runs through several different battle scenarios and tactics, none that would be remotely successful under these circumstances. He wishes Sherlock was here, if only to tell him that he was being an idiot.

“What?” Sally throws up her hands while Soo Lin frowns, “Should we walk out there and run for our lives, while the sky rains down monsters to tear us apart? I don’t know about you, but that’s a stupid plan.”

“Then what should—”

“Quiet,” Anthea orders, her stance tense.

They all look to her, confused. But Anthea puts a finger to her lips before she points out to the open, where she has been watching the demons on the rooftops.

Slowly, John, Soo Lin and Sally peek their heads out and see it.

Every demon on the buildings surrounding St. Bart’s has stopped moving. They are completely still, as black and inky statues made of silhouettes, still taking on horrific forms in the backdrop of fog and firelight. But they aren’t moving, aren’t howling or growling into the air. They’re absolutely quiet.

They’re watching them. The demons are watching them, every head craned to their position.

Anthea loads up her rifle. “Right,” she pets her pocket, where her precious blackberry is, “We might have to walk out there after all.”

They walk.

The demons just watch them; their eerie and glowing gazes seem to pierce right through John. The demons seem to breathe in harsh subtle growls, hungering for flesh. John thinks that they might pounce on them at any moment, surround and eat them all before they can ever reach St. Bart’s.

But they don’t.

The monsters just watch them... just breathe on them...

Soo Lin holds on to John’s shoulder, supporting him the best way she can, while Sally presses her hand to his back, watching the skies warily. Anthea keeps the lead at the front and tells them not to let go of each other, not to take their eyes off the monsters that watch them.

“...What are they waiting for...?” Sally hisses quietly. Anything could trigger them.
John doesn’t answer. His hands quiver slightly over his pistol. He tries not to look at the demons for too long. He’s has enough madness in his own head.

“...They wait on the witch’s orders,” Soo Lin guesses. “Perhaps the witch wishes to deal with us personally because we’ve escaped and defied him.”

Nonetheless, they keep walking.

The monsters just watch.

That’s all.

They watch.

They’re just two metres away from the front doors when all of the monsters come to life and begin swooping down on them all, a dark cloud of ravenous locusts.

“Run!” Sally yells and they bolt towards the door. There’s gunfire, yelling and scrambling. John nearly trips but Soo Lin holds him upright.

Somehow they reach the doors but they’re locked shut. Anthea shoots the lock open and the four of them push in, shutting the entrance though they know that it will do no good.

“Where are the stairs?” Sally asks.

“This way,” John remembers, leading Soo Lin with him.

Quickly they go past the lobby and towards the stairs rather than the lift. They can hear the screeching and echoing snarls outside. The doors slam down and now the demons swarm into the building, faster than human legs can escape.

“Fuck!” Sally shouts, shooting away at them, trying not to let Soo Lin or John get taken. “Hurry up and go!”

They don’t need telling twice. John rushes ahead, since he knows the layout better and points to the entrance for the staircase. “There!” Automatically, Anthea slams the door open and then shouts at Soo Lin and John to head in first. Sally follows after, shooting like crazy.

Anthea closes the door, but when she turns around, they’re not in a staircase.

They’re on the rooftop... and Moriarty is leaning back on his heels with the most dangerous red in his eyes.

“How, how did we get here?!” Sally looks around. The orb is even brighter in person. It hovers ominously a few feet in the air, stretching out misty tendrils across the burning city. (Come to me.)

Up close, John can hear the whispers as if they are being spoken into his mind, twisting through his head. He wants to step closer, wants to reach out and—

Demons flap around the light, screeching when too much of it hits them. They stay a distance away, watching predatorily.
Off to the side, Lestrade, Molly and Mrs. Hudson are standing like statues in a great hall. Their heads are pointed straight ahead but John can see the panicked looks in their eyes, trapped in their own bodies. A table is set up in front of them, with a pair of pills settled in front of each Chosen.

Moriarty and Moran stand just in front of where the orb hovers, shadows twisting around each of them, Moran in particular.


“Where’s Sherlock?” John demands, seeing nothing of the detective anywhere. He forces his features to remain blank but on the inside, everything is shouting, yelling Sherlock’s name and the whispers from the orb, they’re so damn loud now. *(Come to me.)*

“Oh,” Moriarty shrugs, “Sherlock? Well, let’s see... he jumped.”

All of the colour leaves John’s face. “W...what?”

No, he couldn’t have heard that correctly. There’s no way that Sherlock would... (He has an awful image in his head, of Sherlock standing on the roof of St. Bart’s in world with a blue—actual blue—sky. His madman is saying something about a note into a phone, his madman makes him watch just as he says, *“I lied”* and then in the worst moment of John’s life, he watches his mad man fall —)

But no, that’s not possible. That *didn’t happen*—

Moriarty sneers at him, “You heard me, Johnny boy. Sherlock decided to fucking *JUMP* which means that he’s *GONE* and it’s all. Because. Of. You.”

“You’re lying—”

“Oh no,” Moriarty shakes his head. “Sherlock didn’t want to play anymore. He *NEVER* wants to play anymore because of *YOU*. So instead of indulging in our last run together, he decides to *JUMP* and now he won’t come *OUT!*”

No one says a word, only watches the witch pace back and forth, something unreadable in his movements. John almost recognizes it as something... something that...

“Oh but I have a plan... I was just going to let you all get ripped apart by Moran and his kin but I have a better use for you now, Johnny boy. I’m going to make you pay. I’m going to make Sherlock come back out to try and *save* you again when you come crying... oh yes... and I have the perfect way to make you suffer...”

Moriarty steps towards them, Sally and Anthea raise their weapons, preparing to shoot but then Moriarty says that spell again, the same one from before—

*“Tenete corda eorum!”*  

Instantly, Sally and Soo Lin go rigid. John puts a hand on Soo Lin in alarm, shakes her, “What’s wrong? What is it?” Anthea’s eyes are wide, like she recognizes this. She steps forward. But Soo Lin only shakes her head as she slowly picks up her knife...

John jumps back, remembering how Lestrade and Mrs. Hudson were turned against Sherlock and him before. It’s the same spell, but Soo Lin and Sally aren’t Chosen, aren’t one of the pawns. They’re outsiders, aren’t they... unless...
“You made them eat the pills,” John begins to connect the dots.

“Oh yes,” Moriarty cackles, “Clever of you, Johnny boy. I cast a spell, made them think they were still struggling so I could lure out Big Brother’s little agent but then you had to interfere, Johnny. You had to go muck things up with Sherlock’s curse just by existing. I don’t like that very much, no I don’t... now here’s what’s going to happen...”

He snaps his fingers.

Sally, Soo Lin, Mrs. Hudson, Molly and Lestrade all hold out daggers, have them pressed up against their throats. Anthea is grabbed by Moran and twisted in a tight hold. John cries out in outrage.

Moriarty giggles, “Oh, I’m going to have so much fun watching Moran tear you apart, Johnny boy... but first, I want you to do something for me or all your friends die.”

John trembles with rage. The article that Mike and Doyle were talking about, those serial suicides that were so grotesque and impossible. The way Harry tried to tell him with her eyes what was really happening... “You’re controlling them with the pills. That’s how you made Harry kill herself.”

“Ding, ding, ding! Another point for the loyal pet. Now to the fun part... unless you want your friends to follow little Harriet so soon?”

He can feel pleading eyes from all five of his friends, telling him not to do it. But he can’t let them die... he just can’t.

“What do you want?” John’s voice comes out.

“There,” Moriarty sings, “that wasn’t so hard, was it? Now I want you to fetch Sherlock for me. Drag him out like a lunatic, if you have to. Bring him back to me and your friends can live a little longer before I let Moran play with you.”

John feels faint. “But you said that he jumped... that he’s gone...”

“Oh yes, he jumped into there,” Moriarty points at the orb. It seems to shimmer all the more. (Come to me.) “Clever of him, really. But then that’s what I should expect from my other half. It should drive a human insane to go in after him. I’ll enjoy the results. Your insanity will bring him rushing out here and back to me....”

John looks back up at the orb again. It calls to him, more of the luminous and foggy strands seem to stretch out to him (but perhaps that is his imagination.) Its song irks and steadies him a combination of a violin’s scratchy strings screeching at the night and a comforting nocturne in the night.

This is where the fog comes from, he thinks, from something so bright...

He is stepping towards it, tuning out Moriarty’s monologues and taunts. His fingers rise, he’s too short to reach it, that orb. He won’t be able to reach it and then—

John is burning, he screams. From the inside out, he is burning, all gone, all white and red and blue and then, all the images, so much, so much—

John Watson jumps.
Interlude: Sally

Studying (and then practicing) witchcraft is what kills her mother, makes her destroy herself in the constant pursuit of more power, more knowledge, more, more, more—

“The dark arts aren’t something you just... learn,” her father would say one day, when Sally asks why her mother abandoned them, why her mother changed. “There’s something evil about them. You learn them... and then you want to experiment with it, want to try it and then you start casting spells. Curses. You want to do more—”

Sally hates that word.

She remembers tugging at her mum’s skirt, asking her mum if they could do something together. Maybe they could play checkers or watch the tellie. But her mum would be so absorbed in her magical texts. “Just a minute dear, I need to learn more about this interrogation spell... makes it’s victims internal organs explode if they’re lying... brilliant... imagine if we used that at the Yard... how efficient we’d be...”

Horrified, Sally would flinch away. But it got worse. Her mother would start bringing in skeletons dug up from their graves. She’d get pig’s blood and goat hearts, make circles of red in the candlelight and chant strange words.

At night, when her father was on duty, Sally remembers hearing inhuman shrieks from the basement. She’d close her eyes and whisper that mummy was just experimenting, no harm done. Mummy wouldn’t do anything bad to her, never...

But Sally has always been able to see strange colours (auras) around people. They’re like halos of different coloured lights. Most people have normal colours of blue and green all mixed together in varying degrees of morality.

Her mother’s steadily becomes black.

Once her mother asked Sally for her heart. Sally said she would give it to her mum, of course she would (because little children are naive, little children trust so much.)

Once her mother tried to kill her with a steak knife just to take out that heart.

And she did it all with adoration in her eyes.

Her father rushed in to stop it, authorities and police were called. Sally couldn’t sleep for weeks. She hates magic right then. Hates the witches for changing her mum, hates everything to do with
witch craft.

Magic is evil.

“I’m going to become a police officer just like my dad,” she decides right then. “I’m going to protect people from witches.”

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Now here she is, caught in spell, knife to her throat, staring with hatred at Moriarty. She should have seen it, the black in his aura, but he’d hidden it just as he’d hidden his so-called non-pulse. But she can see it now, the black and red teaming around his person.

It’s strange.

She used to hate Sherlock Holmes too. Hated him so much for studying the dark arts, despite her warnings (“Mum, mum, what are you doing...? Why are you holding the knife like that...? Mum...? MUM!”) Hated him for taking on that dark tinge, making her always suspect.

Well, she was right, wasn’t she? Sherlock Holmes is a witch. But...

He isn’t the one making five people commit suicide. He isn’t the one threatening Sally’s life right now. He isn’t the one who has chased her with demons.

She’s not sure what kind of witch Sherlock is anymore. She always thought they were the same. But she knows what the gloves mean. She can see Watson’s aura, more blue and green than any she’s ever seen before. If a man like that can trust Sherlock well...

Magic is evil.

Maybe it is and maybe it isn’t. But at the moment, Sally glares with hate at Moriarty, she hates this man. She hates what he represents, what he reminds her of.

(“Sally, dear, may I have your heart...?”)

With a flood of loathing, Sally bites her tongue, let’s the blood fill her mouth and she drives the knife from her throat to her shoulder instead and then yanks out the blade, spitting out the red.

Moriarty stares at her in what she smugly recognizes as surprise.

Sally picks up her gun and points it at him.

“You can’t control me.”

Then she shoots.
Part 7: His Heart

Chapter Notes

Note: Unedited

Thank you to everyone who waited for this. To angelblack3, prettyarbitrary, lunaerum, michi_thekiller for their word wars this month which spurred this update. To people who left comments and kudos and fanart. You kept me going. To my professor who inspired this update in the first place.

Bless you guys.

This chapter is probably terrible, but hey, you deserve to see this ending. I love you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“They’re drowning a witch in the river!” John hears when he and Harry are playing tag by the hill.

Mary nearly tumbles down in her haste to reach them. Her face is flushed from exhaustion and her pigtails have nearly unraveled entirely. There are tears in her eyes as she clings to Harry. His sister has always acted as a bodyguard for other little girls against bullies.

“Hey there, don’t cry,” Harry brushes back Mary’s bangs, “now breathe and tell me what’s happened, darling.”

Hiccupping, Mary sobs out, “They found a witch boy w-with glowing e-eyes. T-the other boys, they, they went and d-drowned him!”

Harry gapes, “But that’s silly. There aren’t any... you must be...”

But Mary can’t lie. It’s her gift. She always tells the truth. Her tongue swells up if she tries to lie. Everyone knows that.

In fact, Mary is shaking her head even now and pointing frantically towards the river that runs through their town. There, John can see a crowd of boys that are Harry’s age, all gathered near the water’s edge. There are splashes and shouts of ‘freak’ and ‘monster.’ He thinks he can hear a strangled cry.

John doesn’t think about it then.

He is running to the water before he realizes it, his sister’s frantic shouts far from his mind when he jumps into the blue.

-

We’ve met before. Do you remember?

- 

Air. Air, where is the air. John tries to breathe it in but he chokes. Except he can’t choke either
because choking just invites more of this black ooze to venture into his lungs, his eyes, his nose. The ooze (fog/orb/thing) tries to take possession of his veins and push out his blood and this is what drowning feels like. A whole other entity forcing itself inside your body when all you want is some precious, sacred, air—

He hears a violin. *Witch*, the strangled strings sneer at him, *witch, witch, witch, do you know what we do with a witch?* The screeches climb and climb up around John’s body, tying him up in their crescendos as John’s vision blots away in white dots and black canvas. The violin, the notes, the string, seem to raise him up higher and higher because John can feel the pressure steeping into his ears while the ooze chokes him and then…!

*We drown them, silly. We drown them all!*

Violin strings dig into his flesh and he’s pull him deeper, deeper…

He drowns.

*You’ve done this before.*

*There’s a little hand (was there a hand?) and everything is sort of blue, waves tossing and turning. He can’t see anything as he dives into the river. Water has a way of making you blind, washing away your vision in the same way it ruins all paintings but watercolours. Your hands move. So do your feet. But they’re blocked, as if you move through a vat of viscous tar except water isn’t nearly as thick.*

John kicks downwards, trying to spot anything unusual but the current keeps messing with his vision. The current makes all the shadows sway and wiggle, like creeping, crawling things. Like they’re alive. But John kicks past them, hoping that they won’t reach out and grab him.

He still can’t see the witch boy. His lungs beat against his chest, screaming tantrums for more air but John keeps his lips clamped shut. He has to find the witch boy, has to!

*But why?* his lungs scream in protest, *what will he do for you?*


But a live human body can only swim so low voluntarily. He doesn’t remember the stream being this deep yet his ears are squeezing air like bullets into his brain and his hands can’t push against the current anymore. He’s too small. He has too much air in his lungs. His body wants to float but John just wants to sink deeper.

*I have to find him. Please, god,* he thinks of the time Mum nearly drowned in the bathtub, overwhelmed by so many emotions from the neighbours fighting next door. The next day, the police had gathered around the neighbour’s house. All of them murdered by the father, who had committed suicide after. In the tub. *I have to find him, I have to find him—*

There! He sees a shadow, falling further away. Two eerie dots, shining grey-blue-green-*what* orbs becoming steadily blank as they begin to disappear in the deep blue.

“No!” John stupidly yells out, precious air escaping to the surface. He swallows the water and
kicks with the last of his strength, grabbing wildly at the two orbs until his hands touch some fabric and then John kicks up, and up, and up…!

He gasps at the surface, vaguely seeing Harry beat up the other boys while Mary watches in admiration. His fingers feel sweaty. Slippery. But he can’t let go yet. Wait, the witch boy… is he there? Is he safe?

John nearly knocks his forehead against the witch boy’s face in haste. By the time he’s done coughing, he’s caught by intense (and eerie) grey-blue-green-something eyes placed against dark curls and a pale face.

 “…You’re going to be cursed,” says the witch boy.

John almost lets go then.

- Maybe you should have.

- “NO!” John half splutters, half cries, as his head is wrenched up from the water-murky-black-ooze-thing that he was dragged into. He flounders at the surface, tries to find something steady he can lean on but the strings pull him back into the water-black-ooze-thing and John wrestles against it. Kicks upwards, like a fish trying to fly, but the strings rip him backwards. Down. Down.

The water-black-ooze-thing crawls into John’s ears and John panics. His arms are peeled apart as far as they could be and John only has time to see the eerie white sky (what the hell, what the hell, where is the fog) shining down at him with the same light as the orb over Dead London and a strange figure in dirtier and murkier white.

It’s thin as bones until it turns around towards him and John realizes that it is a figure made of bones. But not like a human. No. It has antlers like a stag or a horned devil and empty eyes painted with rusty red. All the bones are placed in mismatched places, tied together with red strings, as if a child decided to glue a skeleton back together after breaking it. The leg bones hang from the figures cheeks and the arm bones are the feet. It hunches over until it is nose to nose with John’s face and to John’s horror, it smiles and pushes him in into the water-black-ooze-thing.

“You’re not welcome here in my mind, Moriarty,” he thinks he hears the mismatched skeletal figure laugh. “Do enjoy your time in my River Lethe.”

- Did you know, outsider, that the Greek Underworld has five rivers running through it? All that water for the dead and the undead. For gods and goddess. For those that can’t even drink anymore and those that don’t need to. What’s the point? Ah, death is so boring!

- John nearly pushes the witch boy away but he realizes that his grip is slipping and he just snaps, “Fine then. Curse me. Just shut up and swim!”

The witch boy seems caught off guard. He looks as if no one’s ever yelled at him before but John knows that isn’t true. The witch boy was nearly drowned by the other boys in the town. Yelling was likely involved. Still, the witch boy only turns away and allows himself to be led by John to
the shore since he doesn’t seem to know how to swim.

John leads them away from where Harry, Mary and the other boys are. He doesn’t think any of them want to talk to a witch boy and he doesn’t want them to try to drown the witch boy again. No, he leads the witch boy and himself towards a bend in the stream, covered by tall spruce trees. The branches curl up above, providing shade, hiding darker things in the woods.

But John isn’t afraid. He has a witch boy with him.

They both crawl onto the shore, shivering and trying to squeeze water out of their clothes. Well, John is. The witch boy merely sits down cross-legged on the dirt, as soaking with as ever, staring at him. Those eyes fix John in place until John shivers and looks away.

“Um,” John says to the ground since Witch boy keeps staring. “Are you cold?”

Stupid question really. For all he knows, witch boys don’t get cold. But John can’t help but keep looking at the witch boy in his soaked clothes, looking more like a prince than a witch. His clothes seem posh. A silk dress shirt in white and long black slacks. He even has golden cufflinks and while one of his shoes is missing, the other one appears to be shiny leather. Only his eyes, like bits of shattered stained glass, cut apart the picture of a young pampered prince.

His eyes seem to see everything. The colours in his eyes… they don’t stay fixed. They move. Bits of cloudy paint trapped in glass.

The witch boy, surprisingly, only scowls. “I just told you that you’re going to be cursed and you ask me if I’m cold?!”

“Don’t need to be rude,” John blurts out before he can help himself. He nearly covers his mouth. What is he thinking? Insulting a witch of all things…!

Witch boy’s mouth drops. “I am not rude,” he says, sounding so much like another child that John can’t help but blurt out, “Yes, you are.”

The Witch boy’s eyes narrow and John suddenly feels like he’s just kicked a sleeping kraken and stared into its stomach.

“No,” the Witch boy says too quietly, “I’m not.”

John needs to back away. Now. But he’s never been good at walking away from anything because he says, “If you say so,” all gruff and disbelieving.

Witch boy stands up, “I am not! You are! For being…! Being abnormal! I really will curse you if you keep repeating what Mycroft and Mummy say all the time…!”

Fear flutters in John’s heart, twisting it tight. He’s almost too terrified to breathe but he just curls up his fists and glares.

“Then do it, if you’re so angry!”

Witch boy’s lips twist, teeth gleaming dangerously. “Fine. If you so insist.” His fingers twitch (except that’s not quite right, his fingers didn’t twitch—) and John is flown backwards (no) and he hits the ground. Something wraps around his throat (no, this didn’t happen) and John looks up to see the Witch boy smirking down at him (no, no, no, this did not happen—)

“Stop!” John thrashes against the chokehold, seeing the boy above him flicker between the image
of a Witch boy and that White figure from before (the fog, Dead London, Sherlock, the Orb). John raises his hands, they’re long again and then small. Long, then small. Adult, then child.

But the gloves are still there, Sherlock’s gloves, black as the fog during witching hour and John smashes his fist against the Witch-Boy-not-Witch-Boy-White-Figure’s side.

Something cracks. John feels himself being pulled up. His limbs, so stiff before, lined with red scars where the strings held him fast, burst up and—

- 

No, no, it’s easier to forget. Better. Safer. Go back, John Watson. Go back to your fog.

- 

John wakes in the black-ooze-like water once more, splashing and spluttering. He has to get out of here. Find Sherlock. He squints at the blinding white sky. So bright. If this is what the sky looked like before the fog, so white and bright, then he’s amazed humans could even walk straight let alone function as society!

Behind, John hears another splash and a chill runs down his spine. Skeletal toe bones rest against his shoulders and John nearly smashes them away to front-crawl to the nearest shoreline. But what shoreline? There’s none. Only a black expanse of terrible ocean (like space) that meets a bleak whiteness as eerie as the Orb over Dead London…

John wants to laugh. He’s such an idiot. He’s in the orb, isn’t he?

The white figure swims faster. Growling, maybe. Its toe-bones graze John’s ankle but John shakes it off and kicks harder, away. Don’t you fucking touch me, he thinks. Stay away, stay away…!

But he’s so busy looking behind that he doesn’t bother checking the way in front.

John smashes against hard hip bones and stares in horror at yet another skeletal figure. Its head fixed on the shoulder, abnormally huge. A lion’s skull perhaps, standing on a bipedal canine skeleton’s body. It creeks its head on the side, red string hanging from its teeth like drool, boney hands pushing John down into the black ooze-like water.

“No!” John reaches out, punching the other skeletal figure away. Sherlock’s black gloves are like leftover tattoos from the black ooze, staining the skeletal figure’s cheekbone. Cracking its face.

He hears other splashes. Other skeletal figures rising from all around him. Bringing up their crooked arms to bury him in the ooze.

And John doesn’t have a gun. Or if he did, he fears checking his pockets lest the ooze have a mind of its own and swallow John too. So he just raises his fists, whispers a silent apology to Harry, to the others trapped by Moriarty, to Sherlock. If he has to die here, he’ll die fighting—

But the skeletal figures don’t attack.

They stand still, heads craned towards him. The empty hollows of their eye sockets do not tell the tale of their thoughts.

John holds his breath, as if breathing will be what breaks the spell. But no, when he has to release his breath, they still don’t move. They are hushed white statues in a sea of black.
Slowly, John draws his hands back towards himself.

All at once, their heads turn in unison, following the movement of John’s hands and John freezes.

They freeze too.

Quietly, John swallows and moves his hands outwards. The skeletal heads on each side follow the hands closest to them.

“…the gloves…” they whisper, voices as shrill as lone cricket’s trill and yet low baritone all at once, “…you have the gloves…”

“Um,” John says wearily. “Yes.”

Suddenly they kneel, actually kneel, around him. Some even crawl closer, making John put up his fists again but there are too many, no…!

Skeletal hands fall on his shoulders gently and that’s all they do. Touch his shoulders, stare at the gloves. That makes John stare too.

He has the urge to back away from the kneeling skeletal things, the way they seem to crouch over him with caging hands on his shoulder. But he’s too busy glaring at the gloves, trying to will them to spill their secrets. That’s thrice now that the gloves have been mentioned. Moriarty called it protection. Soo Lin and Anthea had pointed them out to Sally. And now these skeletal figures in the Orb.

“…What the hell is going on here, Sherlock…?” John whispers to the gloves. “Did you know this would happen?”

No answer. Of course not. So fucking typical now.

“Look, since none of you are killing me at the moment, could you tell me how to find Sherlock? Tall bloke? Blindfolded?”

None of them seem to move but the grips on John’s shoulders tighten.

“You should leave,” they all say at once. “It’s not safe here. You’ll go mad.”

Arent we all mad here? John’s tempted to say but he doesn’t.

He still doesn't know what these things can do or what they are. Just because they aren't attacking now, doesn't mean they won't attack later. They did try to change his memories after all. Speaking of which, John doesn't recall ever meeting a Witch Boy before... not at that age...

Another manipulation, perhaps. If this is black ooze is like the River Lethe then maybe people really do go mad here. Mad from having their memories rewritten again and again...

Well, John thinks, at least Sherlock might be alright. The man has his memories wiped daily...

"You should leave," the skeletal things interrupt his thoughts once more. "It’s not safe here. You’ll go mad."

"Yes… um, yes, I heard you the first time. But I have to find Sherlock, if you'd just tell me if—"

"No. You should leave," they crowd closer, their skeletal fingers digging into John's skin. "It’s not safe here. You’ll go mad here."
"Hey, what are you--"

"No. You should leave. It’s not safe here. You’ll go mad," they lean in, hollowed eyes almost touching John's cheeks and John lashes out, pushes them away into the black ooze.

"Get off! I have to go!" he bulldozes past them, thankful for his short height for the first time in years as he ducks between their arm bones.

They seem to crack or break apart with John's touch, bits of tattered bones and string fluttering down to the black ooze's surface. The black ooze itself seems to tighten a hold on John... the liquid acting like fingers to slow John's movements but John finds that if he hits the ooze ahead of him with Sherlock's gloves then the ooze dissipates and becomes more like the thin water John knows better.

Find Sherlock. Find Sherlock. John ducks and dodges and weaves between the bones.

But are you sure? a traitorous part of him asks. This is what Moriarty wants. Sherlock.

Yes, John knows this. If he finds Sherlock than Moriarty might have won (that is, if Sherlock even is his goal, in the first place.) But what choice does John have? If he doesn't find Sherlock than he's trapped here forever. And everyone else imprisoned in the fog will spend the rest of eternity repeating the same day over and over... or being ripped apart by demons.... being Moriarty's playthings... How can John justify that kind of decision? How can John ever make a choice?

You're always running away, Harry used to yell at him when John would walk out in disgust after they argued about her drinking and his stupid risk-taking hobbies. Turn around and look at me and face this!

No. John never faced his problems at home. He never tried to coax Gordon Watson into caring again (because maybe Gordon Watson could have, even if he gave away his heart, but John didn't try hard enough) and he never spoke to Harry about how she felt or how John himself felt. How could he do that to her? To both of them? Instead, John sent himself to Medical school and the instant he could, he ran off to war.

Instead of talking to Harry when he was shot, he ran off to the most dangerous place, the outskirts of Dead London. He used to call her all sorts of things in his mind. A nag. A bitch. An annoyance. He even wished she'd disappear.

You're always running away.

(And now I'm dead, Harry's ghost whispers to him.)

He clenches his eyes shut.

I'm sorry, I'm sorry, tears fall into the black ooze.

The skeletal figures hunch over him with a violin's screech and John's beyond caring now. Harry is dead. John failed. And now Dead London is burning and Sherlock is gone. What more can he do? Drop by drop, his tears slip into the black ooze and the ooze itself seems to whisper.

"...Don't cry," the voices, all at once, from the skeletal figures and the black ooze swallowing his knees, seem to echo.

“What the fuck do you care? You’re going to kill me anyways, just fuck off!” John shouts. What a stupid time for tears. He hates this. Weakness. He wishes the water on his face would burn up and
evaporate into the white sky.

“Don’t cry,” they say again. "We will take you to him."

John can barely believe it, his heart stuck in his throat. He wonders if he's dead. If he'll start seeing Harry soon because nothing in the fog (or damn it, this orb) would do something for him freely. Mrs. Hudson wanted the curse broken. Sherlock wanted John to save him but John failed. These figures won't help him for free.

“What the hell do you want?” John hates how his voice almost trembles. He’s not doing this here, damn it. He’s spent, what, a week? Three days? Longer? In the fog and he’s not going to break down now.

But they just repeat, “Don’t cry, we will take you to him,” in unison, inching closer and closer. The ones that have a grip on his shoulder suddenly press down and John punches the nearest one. Except another skeletal figure grabs his fist. Bony fingers all grab him on the arms and the torso. Pushing him back into the black ooze.

“F-fuck, no, no, no!” John tries thrashing away but there are too many. Too many. The black ooze is at his chin again.

“Don’t cry,” they repeat. “We will take you to him. Don’t cry,” the black ooze is at his nose, John clenches his eyes shut. “We will take you to him."

Black ooze covers the top of John’s head. He feels like he’s sleeping in a pool of bones.

“N-no!” John falls over, the moment he can move.

He opens his eyes in shock to find that he can breathe. He whips his head around, taking in the unfamiliar scenery. The black ooze isn't there anymore, except at John’s feet. But now the black ooze is more like a glass floor with the ooze moving underneath. If John could jump up and stay suspended in the air, so he wouldn’t have to touch the black ooze again (even if it’s behind glass), then he would.

Slowly, John puts a leg up and frowns at the long hallways dressed in dark blue Victorian wallpaper, finished off with white paneling as smooth as the marble of ancient Greek statues. The blue wallpaper seems to be simply striped at first but John can see the etchings of monstrous wolves running up and down each stripe, wolves that remind him of Siraj. Well, Sherlock.

Speaking of wolves, every door looks as if it’s been ripped apart by some beast. Maybe not a wolf but definitely something angry. John can see the splintered wooden frames sticking out of the torn walls, giving him glimpses of each room if he chooses to look. But his view is blocked by the skeletal figures that are beside him.

Fuck. The skeletons. John tries backing away, but the one behind him just holds him in place by the shoulder.

Only three skeletal figures now, instead of dozens.

These skeletal figures seem to have fixed up where their bones are. The arm bones are back in place, as are the leg bones so that the skeletal figures have a humanoid shape but the animal skulls remain at the head. More red ribbons, skinny as veins, wrap around each bone in messy and indecipherable mazes. All three of the skeletal figures are hunched over John, as if to make a three
bared cage of messed-up bones.

“…I…” John says, when his tear tracks dry and the skeletal figures make no move to choke him again. “What is this place?” Where the hell are we? he doesn’t add. Are we still in the Orb?

The ceiling is snow-white, making John think that yes, they’re still in the Orb.

“Mind palace,” the three skeletons say, their voices overlapping and echoing down the hallway that seems to have no end. John can only see darkness at either end. Darkness and gaping holes where there should be doors.

It’s scary how comforting that’s become now (the darkness), compared to the white sky and ceiling. John suddenly has an urge to walk to the end of that hallway and see what the darkness holds.

But more importantly—

"Mind Palace?" John frowns. He's never heard that term before.

He wonders if it's a prison that traps minds within. From what Moriarty said about the Orb and people going mad if they jump in, John wouldn't be surprised if Mind Palace was just a euphemism for a pretty bird cage filled with hundreds of ripped-apart minds.

"Is it dangerous?" John decides to ask when the skeletal figures, predictably, do not answer his first question. He's not sure why he's not running away from them anymore. Harry always said John had shit instincts when it came to danger. But the skeletal figures aren't attacking him (yet) anymore and they seem to be drawn to the gloves. Maybe he can gain more information from them before he runs off to find Sherlock...

For a moment, he thinks they won't reply again but then he hears, "You have the gloves."

John furrows his brow. The more he hears about the gloves the less he likes this. "Right. So you've said. But about others who've fallen in? People like Sherlock? Are they alright?"

"You have the gloves," the skeletal figures repeat. John's ready to wring their necks but it would do no good.

"Right. Thanks. I think," John's still wary after they tried to kill (drown? manipulate?) him so he gets up to leave.

As soon as he moves, the skeletal figures move also, keeping a triangle formation around John, each step he makes being echoed by them. John pauses mid-step. They pause mid-step. John tries to move past them, they shuffle in front too. It's like having three extra shadows that have gained physical form. Shadows that John could do without.

"Look, can you leave? Thank you for taking me here, wherever this is, but I have to find Sherlock and I'd get more ground covered if I could actually see where I'm going!"

"You have the gloves," one says while another also remarks, "It is not safe," and the last one behind him echoes, "We must accompany you."

John feels the chill return to his spine. "How can I even trust you lot? You tried to change my memories! Who knows what you did to my head when you dunked me in the ooze and now you expect me to just let you follow me around while I try to find Sherlock?!"

They merely stare (or he thinks they do, with their hollowed out eyes.)
He's wasting too much time indulging these... these... skull things! He has to find Sherlock and if he's going to be stalked by skeletal monsters that could turn on him at any moment then so be it. He'll run and they'll just have to keep up.

He ignores the repetitive echoes of *You have the gloves and It is not safe* and *We must accompany you* as he rushes down the hallways, poking a head through each gaping hole sans door (with three skeletal heads poking through with him.)

The first few rooms seem to have nothing but the same décor. Same wallpaper. A crib. Maybe a baby somewhere but when John tries to see the inside of the crib, where he hears the slightest hint of a whimper, the skeletal figures pull him backwards, moving him to the next room.

More cribs. More baby noises. But each time he comes near, the skeletal figures pull him back.

The next few rooms don’t have a crib. There’s a large double bed instead with red silken sheets, messy dress shirts that are toddler sized and a rocking-chair that sways back and forth on its own. John feels like he’s stuck in a dollhouse, watching ghostly porcelain dolls that don’t exist.

But then he hears the voices.

“...can’t keep playing with jars of hearts on the floor, Sherlock!” he hears.

And that's when John's guts want to jump out his throat.

"Sherlock!"

John ducks underneath the skeletal figure's winding limbs. Brushes past their fumbling scratchy fingers.

He goes to the closest gaping hole, hears a tiny (more petulant) voice scoff, "Chairs are boring,” and almost trips in haste to reach it.

Another sound. A sigh, this time. A woman. Older. "Dear, the humans may perceive us monsters but that does not give you permission to act like a heathen. Sit down the sofa or I will take away your collection of lizard fingers."

John rushes through the gaping hole-sans-door just as a small child with eerie blue-grey-green-something eyes slams a jar of a (please-don't-be-human) heart on the carpet and storms off to sit with arms crossed on the carpet. John almost reaches out, to ask the child not to go, but he's still stuck on the exact copy of the witch-boy from his (fake?) memories standing in the same room and somehow not being able to see him.

The woman too, tall and elegant with the same dark curly hair and eerie eyes, doesn't seem to notice John either. Instead she walks past him, her arm passing through his body.

If this is a ghost's dollhouse then John maybe is the ghost here. But he's not sure what these two figures are. The witch boy and his mother, maybe.

Bony fingers brush against John's arm again and pull him back. "Come away," they whisper, as John tries desperately to listen to what the woman and the witch boy are saying to each other. "This place is not for you."

John feels like a puppet, being directed to and from stage. But he's so numb, so confused, he almost lets them. He watches the Witch boy pout deeper as the woman tries to stroke his hair. The Witch boy turns away, immature, but the small smile on his face gives him away...
"...Sherlock..." John's eyes widen.

The skeletal figures still.

"Oh my god, that's... that's Sherlock! There! Just like in my memory in the ooze!" John tries to tug his arms away, "Sherlock! Sherlock, it's me, John! You have to come with me!"

But little Sherlock doesn't move from the sofa. He says something to his mother who laughs quietly in reply. They make a happy picture, a clichéd moment from long ago. John tries not to remember the little happy moments he had with his own mother (he tries not to remember her nearly drowning in a bathtub, nearly dying from a car accident, found dead from the alcohol.)

*We all go mad here...* the rooms, the white ceiling, and the missing doors seem to whisper.

"Come away," the skeletal figures whisper. "Come away, come away..."

This time, John doesn't argue.

- 

"I..." John shakes a little. The skeletal figures only stand there. They don't move. "I don't know what's happening. This is... that was... that was Sherlock but he... he didn't recognize me."

Again, he doesn't add. Sherlock is a brilliant man who gets wiped clean again and again. Worst thing is that John's not sure who did this to him, Moriarty or Sherlock himself.

"Don't cry," one skeleton says while another echoes, "It is not safe here," and the last adds, "Mind Palace."

John bites back a laugh. "You already said that. Mind Palace. Is that a mind in there? Or a memory? Maybe that's why he couldn't see me... he's stuck reliving his past... god knows how this witchcraft shit works. That could have been me. All my memories shuffled into different rooms."

"No," the skeletal figures seem to insist. “You have the gloves."

"*Enough with the gloves!*” John wants to rip them off now but they’re Sherlock’s and the only protection John has against whatever this Orb does to people who come in here. “What if I didn’t have them? Would that be *me* in there too? Would Sherlock and I be trapped? Everyone keeps talking to me about gloves and games and chosen people but I don’t want to play this. I never asked to! I just… I just want…!"

Just want what?

But before John can continue, a painful crack hits one of the skeletal figures, shattering it apart into bits of white splinters and chalk that kisses the glass-covered black ooze.

"What the hell?" John moves, grabbing for his gun from his pocket while the other skeletal figures move in front of him, arms outstretched. They step on their fellow skeleton's dust and ashes.

A low chuckle echoes down the hallway from the other side. And for the first time since John entered the Orb, he hears it. Whispers. Not like the ones from the black ooze or John's own mind but the creeping, wispy (entrancing) whispers. The kind of whispers that curl up and stroke your ear, lingering longer than smoke. The fog's whispers.

But why did it take John so long to realize that he'd been filling up the silence with his own
whispers, with the black ooze's whispers and why are his shoulders relaxing at the sound of the fog's whispers, damn it, why—?

"Oh, boo hoo, you whine and whine so much, Johnny boy," a Dublin accent trills out.

He feels like ice has been shoved through his throat. "No."

"Aw, I'm disappointed. Didn't I make a good impression on you when I was outside?" Moriarty steps out from the darkness at the other end of the hallway. "Shame on my other self. I mean, I may be a witch, but I do have manners! Unlike the rest of you humans. No respect for the rules..."

"H-how are you... I thought you... Why are you here?! You... you sent me in here! I thought you couldn't...?" John chokes out while the skeletal figures scoot closer to him. If bones could wrap their angular forms around another human being as armour, John thinks that these skeletons would be doing just that.

Moriarty laughs again and when he does, the hallway lights (dimmed and blurred against the wallpaper like ghostly paintings) seem to shake too. "Now don't be silly. This is Sherlock's Mind Palace! Why would I send a filthy human into this divine mind when I could send myself first? Oh, no, John. I jumped in long before you did. I just left a bit of myself behind, just like Sherlock did, the first time."

John steps back. "W-What...?"

Moriarty grins, his lips seeming to stretch from edge to edge, "You saw the evidence, dummy! The rooms. Memories. The skeletons. Guards. Rather like stylish antibodies, really. Attacking intruders, outsiders to Sherlock's delicious mind. Very creative. He's been reading a lot of Mythology, always thought that was garbage myself but a man has to indulge in his guilty pleasures. I mean, I have my apples... I love a good apple..."

"I... n-no, it can’t...?" John suddenly wants to reach out and touch the wallpaper, wonder if Sherlock can feel it. How can this be Sherlock's mind? Sherlock was wandering around the fog every day while the orb was above Dead London and the Sherlock that John met (and re-met) is too brilliant to be without a mind.

John scowls and aims his gun. Moriarty is just playing games, stupid, stupid psychological games and John won't play.

But the skeletal figures block his aim, inching so close to John that his skin could be touching bone.

"Urgh, for Sherlock's chosen player, you are boring. Disgustingly normal," Moriarty's face twists for one brief moment, the shadows around him twisting up like long claws of spiked beasts, scratching at the walls. To John's shock, the shadows actually seem to create splintered scars against the dark blue wallpaper. Shadows decorating the walls with wooden mutilation.

The skeletal figures in front of John start to vibrate, not in the same way a human trembles from fear, but with barely-contained rage. The urge to throttle. John's hands reach out to touch the first skeletal figure by the shoulder bone when he stops himself. What is he doing?

"Oh? Are you angry," Moriarty talks casually with the skeletal things, ignoring John completely. "You always get so upset when I play with your things. Didn't Mummy and Big Brother teach you to share? Rather unbecoming of you, to pick up human manners, dear. I don't like it but very well, I'll indulge you and your pet."
John swallows. He feels his leg faltering without his cane and he hates the damn thing for shaking so much that his shoe feels like it will fall off.

"Don't you come any closer, I'll shoot," John warns when Moriarty seems to glide towards him and the skeletal figures tower even more as a bone cage, this time more welcome than the last.

"You and I both know that won't work. Now…," Moriarty waves a finger and the gun in John's hands slams down to the floor, shattering into pieces. John lets out a pained grunt as the shards hit his feet and the skeletal figures charge forward, their shaking limbs chattering away like teeth in a cold winter, ready to drown Moriarty maybe except—

"No!" John tries to pull the skeletal figures back.

Moriarty's eyes glow with that eerie grey-no-green-no-blue-no colour and the skeletal figures burst apart as easily as the first skeletal figure did, their pale bony fingers stretching out in quiet destruction towards John. John nearly falls to his knees, has the urge to gather up the white dust and heal heal heal even though they were only bones in the first place, so that would do no good--

Cold hands wrap around John's throat. Only touching. Not pushing in or trying to bruise him in anyway. Moriarty's fingers hold his neck as if John's a delicate glass doll but the cool dismissal in Moriarty's eyes betrays what Moriarty truly wants to do to him. No. Moriarty is playing. He just can't break the rules yet.

"Let me tell you a story," Moriarty purrs.

John spits in his face and Moriarty, surprisingly, just laughs and laughs…-

"Once upon a time," Moriarty sings out, strolling forward while the shadows trail behind, dragging John by the ear, "there were witches."

His voice echoes down the hall, into the dark.

"They could see everything, know anything, if they gave their hearts up to the Fog. A great bargain. All the power in the world for a human heart. Who wouldn't take it? After all, you can fake having a heart if you borrow a Demon's, but that's another story. Except knowing everything is so boring after a while, Johnny. Curse a few mortals here. Experiment with some curses there. Tedium. Humans are all the same. React the same. Boredom." Moriarty stops, his back to John.

The shadows around John flicker as wildly as black flames, absorbing what little light is in the hallway.

"Imagine that," Moriarty says quietly. "Imagine decades of utter tedium."

John doesn't shiver. His leg aches without his cane and his hand won't stop shaking without his gun. He remembers days of wanting to lie in bed forever, days of feeling nothing and just listening to the fog and memories of Bill and shots in Afghanistan.

"I imagine its hell," he doesn't mean to say.

Moriarty doesn't quite move but the shadows around John stop. They hover of John's neck and skin.

The lights start to flicker and the floor shakes again as Moriarty fucking laughs again (always
laughing), shoulders hunched in and a hand wiping his eye. "Ah yes, yes. Hell. You'd think it'd be exciting to go to Hell. All that fire. But screaming from the pain would get so tedious, don't you think? Yes... that's why, we witches play so many games. If we have to burn, might as well enjoy it."

Moriarty suddenly smiles then, at John, and John's leg and hand stop shaking because that manic gleam in his eyes reminds him so much of Sherlock that he's reminded that they're both witches and maybe they're both the same but no, no, Sherlock wouldn't hurt people. Sherlock's not like that. Why else would Sherlock help him find Harry? (To use you for the spell, to get you to free him.)

He hears scratching on the walls, looks up swiftly to Moriarty grinning so wide at him and dark trails (shadows) scratching at a ruined door, clawing (slashing) at the doorknob. 

"Ah, he keeps putting the doors back. And I worked so hard on the decor earlier too," Moriarty gestures with his head and the shadows suddenly rip apart the door, tear down shredded slivers of wallpaper and plaster and wood. "Here, Johnny boy, let’s watch the story. Watch Sherlock make the world burn."

"What—"

Moriarty puts a hand on John's back and pushes him through the hole.

He falls into familiar room of 221B’s sitting room and for a moment, painful heat beats against his eyes.

This isn't real, he reminds himself. This is a room. One of Sherlock’s memories. That doesn’t stop him from touching the armchair or wanting to cradle the skull.

A shadow slides around John’s hand and pulls him back. When he turns around, Moriarty has a finger on his lips and shakes that finger back and forth. “I wouldn’t, if I were you… the play’s about to start!"

“You—"

He hears shuffling by the window and John’s leg almost gives out when he sees Sherlock, his Sherlock (but not really), draped in a long blanket. His features are the same though he has less lines on his face and the blindfold is gone. John feels strange seeing Sherlock without that cloth, like he’s seeing Sherlock naked and exposed.

John nearly ducks his head down, out of respect perhaps, but Moriarty moves his finger to John’s chin and forces John to look.

Suddenly a woman comes in, the woman from the other memory. She looks older though, deep wrinkles under her eyes and high cheekbones but as elegant as ever save for the cutting frown drooped into her skin. “Sherlock,” she says.

“Mother.”

He doesn’t look at her, only wraps the blanket tighter around himself and stares out the window. The blanket is as black as the blindfold, like a cut piece of the Foggy sky.

Her lips thin and some of her dress rustles against the floor. “You must stop corresponding with this... this... Moriarty character, Sherlock. He’s the worst kind of witch—”

“Rather like me, don’t you think?”
“Nothing like you,” she snaps. “You haven’t started human experiments,” yet, she doesn’t say but even John can hear the implied meaning, “there’s still hope for you. Come with me. Join your brother in his business. Mycroft’s position is more suited to your talents, you’d make me proud—”

“Yes, because that’s what just what I’ve always wanted,” Sherlock scoffs. “To join you and perfect Mycroft in your pandering to mortals.”

“Sherlock—”

“Why don’t you check what’s underneath the table? No, wait, 221B will bring it. Go on, see for yourself, Mother,” he turns to her then, eyes gleaming, as 221B obediently shuffles the box forwards with the floorboards, each creaking bit of wood and carpet like a rumble of a sleeping giant.

Her eyes flash in turn. But she doesn’t move to open it. “I don’t have time for your games—”

“Everything is a game, Mother.”

“For the last time, human lives are not chess pieces—”

“Open the box, Mother,” Sherlock says again, standing up against the curtain. The fabric is as black as his blanket as if 221B is holding him within her teeth.

Her glare doesn’t change but John catches the slight tremor of her thumb as she opens the box. Her face pales and her lips charge into a thin line.

“…Tell me that you didn’t do this, Sherlock. Tell me that this is from the morgue, from that Hooper woman, or something you found on the street. Tell me that you didn’t do this!”

Sherlock doesn’t move. The ruffles around Mrs. Holmes’ dress flare up, like the hungry tongues of snakes disturbed from rest. Still, Sherlock doesn’t move.

“…I won’t lie, Mother.”

She shoves the box away and storms over to him, looking ready to hit him but the curtains flare up protectively. Even if she’s his mother, 221B won’t let her harm her tenant. Mrs. Holmes scowls at the curtains but hisses, “You’re no son of mine. Not after this. I won’t help you when the Fog takes its price.”

Sherlock shrugs. “I won’t need it.”

She storms away, door shutting behind her. Moriarty pushes John forward so John can peer in the box.

Inside, are a pair of smooth hands, neatly cut at the wrists and still wriggling against the cushions, like spiders trying to crawl out.

John lets out a small noise, ears numb to Moriarty’s amused smiles, eyes drawn to Sherlock who takes out his phone and texts (because Moriarty has to be dramatic and flick his hands for the shadows to spell out the words) your move now M. Show me something interesting. –SH

John’s leg give out, snapping over like a broken doll’s sharp limbs. His hand fumbles for something to catch his fall but there’s just the box and the crawling hands and John isn’t part of this memory so his own hand falls through and Sherlock is smiling at the text that he gets back…!
Well-played. But you won’t beat the next game. –M

Then make your games match your talk or London will never burn to the ground. –SH

“No,” John shakes his head. “This isn’t right. You’re changing something!”

Moriarty blows into John’s ear and shakes his head, “I’m offended, Johnny. I told you, I play by the rules. I might try to bend them a little from time to time but I can’t tamper with Sherlock’s memories. He’s more interesting with his mind intact, don’t you agree? It’s the sexiest part about him. No, no, no, you’re just frightened… frightened that he might not be the hero you’ve dreamed him up to be. After all, what do you know about Sherlock Holmes, anyways? You just met him. You’re just human. You could never understand him,” Moriarty grabs John’s collar, lifts him up, “know him.”

John feels like a sack of meat, hanging from the hook of Moriarty’s hand and Moriarty thrums with anticipation.

“Let’s see another memory, shall we?”

His shadows destroy another wall and Moriarty shoves John in.

- 

He sees Sherlock texting Moriarty. Eyes glittering in excitement over the texts and firing rapid messages back in return.

He sees Sherlock scoffing at humans and wondering what purpose the existence of so many slow creatures serves. He sees Sherlock cutting more limbs and throwing the leftovers away, creating blood circles and glowing with excitement when corpses appear stacked in the middle of Trafalgar Street in the shape of dead trees, muttering about M.

“There should be a murder every day, it’s like Christmas,” Sherlock whispers to 221B.

People mutter about Sherlock. Call him freak and monster and beast but Sherlock never seems to care. His eyes are always carefully blank but Lestrade gets into near accidents and Sally’s dad almost dies in a Tesco while Anderson’s skin turns deathly blue. They start to whisper that Sherlock’s a witch, all but Lestrade, who tries to keep the rumours at bay. Still, there’s doubt there and Sherlock turns away.

“Humans are so boring,” he says to 221B, hearing the house creak and croon in return.

John’s heart breaks a little and Moriarty pulls him to the next memory.

- 

Your games are becoming repetitive. Whatever happened to showing me ‘The Greatest Game this world will ever witness?’ –SH

Your stakes are repetitive. We can’t play a game for the world if you don’t bet your world, now can we? –M

John watches Sherlock’s fingers play against the phone’s screen, as nimble as a pianist’s.

Then I’ll bet the world. –SH

“Please no…!”
Moriarty pulls him into another memory.

People are dying of strange suicides and Sherlock is brimming with excitement and John doesn’t want to see this anymore, please, make it stop. But Moriarty’s shadows block John’s sides, force him to look straight ahead…

“Brilliant,” Sherlock whispers so loudly that John can’t escape his words, “how are you doing this, M? What curse are you using? How do I stop it before you win?”

He paces back and forth within, notes and newspaper articles strewn everywhere. John even sees a spellbook with blood circles drawn within, pictures of severed limbs and strange language written inside. If only this was real, John could reach out and shake Sherlock, find out what’s going on… get him away from M… but no, no, John can only watch…

Sherlock doesn’t even notice Mrs. Hudson hovering in the hallway, looking concerned and maybe even frightened. But this is Sherlock and maybe he does notice, John realizes, but he just can’t be bothered to deal with the same (tedious, human) reaction.

"Sherlock...?" she says quietly.

He keeps muttering to himself, to M, even though M isn't there.

"Sherlock..." she tries again.

The muttering grows louder until Mrs. Hudson scowls and gestures to the floor and suddenly all the books and newspaper articles are buried under floorboards or armchairs or bits of wallpaper as 221B’s pipes clunk in angry hisses for Sherlock to pay attention to her housekeeper.

"Give that back, do you have any idea how much time I have left to solve this riddle?!" Sherlock shouts up at the ceiling.

Dust rains on him and Mrs. Hudson snaps, "That's enough, Sherlock! You must stop this game, now! Your mother warned me that you might be dabbling in this Witching game nonsense—"

"Oh, my mother, hm?" Sherlock suddenly rounds on her, snarling in her face. "What did she pay you, Mrs. Hudson, to keep tabs on me? Is that where your new herbal soothers come from? Well you can tell her that I won't stop, even if she has a spy in my own home—"

"221B and I are concerned for you, we are certainly not spies…!"

"221B can't be Mother's spy, she’s my bonded demon, I'm borrowing her heart; of course she can't be the spy, but you—"

"For the Sun's sake, Sherlock, 221B told me about this M fellow and I don't like what you're betting this time! You must stop this game, now. There are poor souls out there, who have died for you two to have your fun, and—"

"What is the point,” Sherlock snarls, the ends of his scarf waving wildly like claws, “of caring whether some humans I've never met before die or not? Humans die every day, all over the world, by the thousands and we barely bat an eyelash. At least these deaths have use. Purpose,” he stretches his arms out so wide, that he knocks over a jar of preserved ears, the fluid staining 221B’s carpet.
More groans and hisses sound from above and Sherlock just kicks at the floorboards while Mrs. Hudson turns white.

"Shut up, shut up! I know what you’re both thinking. Stop thinking. You’re both too loud, annoying! I expected better from you 221B, you’re a demon and you, Mrs. Hudson, your husband was a murderer and you can talk to demons, what does that say about you? No, I don’t care who M has been murdering—"

Mrs. Hudson grips the edges of her dress. Something glitters in her pocket. “Sherlock—”

But he doesn’t hear her. “—M is crafting something unique, he’s going to show me the secrets of the Fog. We don’t have time to these, these trivial arguments…!”

The shelf falls apart and the windows burst open.

221B rumbles, more dust falling onto Sherlock’s hair while the dishes in the cupboards clank together. "221B’s right," Mrs. Hudson grabs Sherlock's phone, raising it up, "We can't have you listening to M anymore; you're not yourself, Sherlock—"

She moves to smash the phone but Sherlock’s eyes flash and 221B’s pipes screech out like a metal person come to life, writhing in agony from first pain. “No!” John screams, but Mrs. Hudson still falls. Mrs. Hudson drops the phone, her hands scrunched up against her ears as she rolls up and tries to soothe 221B. To whisper to the flat. Calm its pain and Sherlock grabs the phone just before it hits the ground.

“Did you think that would work?” he roars at them, his messy hair making him seem more like a beast than he ever did when he was Siraj. His roar makes 221B’s pipes and floor shriek’s shriller, makes Mrs. Hudson press closer to the floor. “I started this game and I’m going to finish it. Nothing will stop me, Mrs. Hudson, not even you or 221B.”

Mrs. Hudson shudders against the carpet, tears dripping down to 221B’s floors. “But people—”

“Let them burn, Mrs. Hudson. They have no importance to me.”

“No,” John wheezes, his legs failing him again. “No,” he tries to reach for Sherlock, tries to erase the blank anger and fury written into Sherlock’s stupid eyes. “This isn’t you… this isn’t real, you didn’t, you didn’t do this please—”

Moriarty laughs (damn him, damn witches like him, damn laughter, maKe iT sToP…!) and tries to pull John away once more but John rushes out, “Don’t you fucking touch me…!” and races out of the gaping hole in the wall, back into the hallway with its blue wallpaper and muted lights and long array of gaping holes and doors.

Well, only one door. The only door John’s seen intact. At the end of the hallway. Bolted shut. The rest of the doors are torn apart, even the ones slowly growing back. He didn’t think the hallway had any end but that’s not important. He needs to get out of here. He can’t… can’t walk into any of these rooms again. Any of these memories if they’re even memories at all—

“Oh this is real,” Moriarty leers from behind. “I’ve been in this mind for over three years while my other self patrols the Fog, this is very real. Looks like your Sherlock isn’t the hero you think he is, shame. But that’s too be expected. He’s better than you. He and I think the same.”

“Why…?” John heaves against the wall; everything is shaking and he can hardly stand, “Why are you showing me all of this? What’s the point?!"
"...Why?" Moriarty drawls, his face blank. For a moment, John wonders if spiders are creeping up his shoulders, waiting for the right time to bite. When Moriarty is quiet, John feels the urge to run.

The shadows reach out and push John down against the wall so that Moriarty is standing nose to nose with him. Not touching.

"Because you need to learn your place, Johnny boy. I saw you through my other self’s eyes. You think you can save everyone but you can't. Sherlock doesn't want to be saved. Sherlock doesn't need to be."

John's hand trembles but he fights to keep it still. (Watson, Watson, some dead soldiers call out, why didn't you stitch us up faster? Why? Harry's corpse smiles at him, you're always too late. Why didn't you get in time?)

"No," John bites out. But he's talking to Harry and Bill and Mum and Dad now, not Moriarty.

Yet Moriarty presses a fingers against John's neck, "Oh? Did you not see the evidence for yourself, pet? Sherlock hates humanity. He's using you to win the game. He doesn't care who dies in the process. He didn't care when he lured your sister here in the fog, he won't care when you die."

So useless, his dreams taunted him at times, useless and insignificant trash.

“You said that already,” John bites his tongue. “Thought you were above repetition.”

Moriarty’s eyes flash and John thinks this might be it, Moriarty will blast John away now. But Moriarty doesn’t cast any spells and John remembers the gloves and he doesn’t know what’s happening anymore, everything is repeating, over and over, there’s no damn point to any of this, what does it matter if Sherlock cares about John or not, he just wants to go home…!

But you don’t have a home, the fog, Moriarty maybe, whispers to him. You’re all alone. Sherlock doesn’t want you.

“I know that, damn it!” John pushes Moriarty away, his gloves cutting scars into the shadows and making Moriarty step away. “I know, he doesn’t care about me! You’ve made your point! But I… I…”

But why is that important? he stops, his trembling leg pauses. For once, John feels a strange wave of calm settle over him, one he hasn’t felt since he healed Mrs. Hudson with his gift. It feels alien, especially here in the orb, but at the same time, John embraces it.

Observe, Sherlock told him once. And John does.

“Why haven’t you killed me yet?”

Moriarty’s smile strikes him like a sudden flash of lightning in a mirror, but frozen, stuck between shards of glass and mirror, shooting ever back and forth.

“You keep talking about how boring I am. But you can’t kill me, can you?” John goes along with his words, holding onto observe, observe within his memory, desperate not to let Moriarty speak, “Not when I wear these gloves. And even if you could kill me, you need me to lure Sherlock out. Your other self said so. He sent me in here. Said my madness would bring Sherlock out but that didn’t work, either. Those skeletons, the things you called Sherlock’s immune system, they didn’t make me mad. What you’re doing though… this isn’t madness… you want me to… to what? Show me how terrible Sherlock can be?”
John feels cold suddenly. Little pricks of ice tickling his spine, edging at the ends of his gloves. He looks down and sees fog, the wispy dark fog that came in with Moriarty before. Within the shadows and huffs of cold that touches his hand, John sees the remnants of creeping smiles and clawing hands, voices, voices, no, focus!

"Haven't you heard, dear? All witches are terrible. The sooner you realize it, the better."

White fingertips (not fingertips, just breaths of fogs, voices, faces, there—) trail across John's wrists with sharp nails, the better to cut you with, my dear—

"Stop it! Stop repeating yourself! That's not what you do, this is all... theatrics, drama! You're playing a game with me, and I won't play. You want me to what? To lure Sherlock out? You'd have done that by torturing me but that's off the table with this gloves. So now you're showing me memories, not just any memories, but memories where Sherlock acts like a real witch to you," John rambles, wondering if this is why beings like Sherlock and Moriarty talk so much, to buy time. But no, Moriarty and Sherlock are on a different level entirely. Too brilliant. Too smart. They must talk to hear their own voices. John feels the dryness in his own throat. Like the fog is slipping in and scratching sand paper within, trying to bottle and close his lungs.

"I find it hard to believe that you're doing this out of boredom or you think I'm interesting," John goes on. "No, you want something from me."

Moriarty ghosts a hand over John's chin, the fog darkening all the lights in the hallway until only Moriarty's eyes are aglow, like the orb over dead London. But they're in the orb now. Sherlock's globe. Mind. WhereareyouSherlock—

"You..." Moriarty says quietly, "...are nothing. Just a way to pass the time until I beat Sherlock at his game—"

"Then why haven't you?" John snaps, because fuck this shit. Fuck this repetition and his mind is still screaming at him to observe, observe, buy more time (but for what? What's the fucking point of any of this, why should he listen anymore—) "If you've really been stuck here since the beginning of the game, while your other self or whatever runs around Dead London, then you've had... what... three years or so to beat him. And yet you haven't. You're at a standstill. Repeating. Always repeating. You're as stuck as the residents of Dead London. Living the same day in and out, never solving the—"

John's voice stops in his throat. Cold has carved its way in and this can't be the answer. So simple. Yet it makes sense. These men might be geniuses but they're so petty, so dramatic, so determined to win that they...

"That's it, isn't it?" John leans back against the wall. "You... you two were playing a game and one of you... one of you was close to winning and the price was too large so you... one of you made the game repeat over and over again until…"

All those people. All the days repeating. Pawns. Players. Chosen. Witching hour—

"Until one of you won again, the one who cast the repeating spell..."

He wants to throw up. But he can't remember the last time he ate and there's nothing to vomit up except his insides and what does he need those for now anyways?

Moriarty's hands fall away and when John looks up, he scrambles for a gun that isn't there because the fog is pouring out from where Moriarty's eyes used to be. Black fog, yet eerily luminescent
around the edges, bits of bottled lighting again crawling on the edges of mist and air.

"...He broke the rules..." Moriarty says. "I would have won."

John's hands shake. The gloves cling to his skin, so sticky and confining.

"I see..."

"But he had to be BORING. He had to play the coward. Stall. Buy time. And for what? For some pawns he'd throw away later? He knew the stakes. He bet his WORLD. And now, when I'm this close to breaking him, he clings to some OUTSIDER. And I can't even wring your neck, Johnny, oh, I don't make a habit of dirtying my hands with human blood, but for you, I'd make an exception. Your blood is probably nothing."

John edges away, using the wall as his guide because if he lets go, he'll fall. His legs will fail him, everything in him screams that he needs to get away. Gloves or no gloves.

"Y-you two bet the world, what did you expect...? That Sherlock wouldn't have a back-up plan?" John grasps for words. Keep distracting him. Keep talking. Get closer to the smooth door at the end of the hallway. "I mean, I'd hate it if I had to lose the world because of a stupid bet..."

"Stupid?" the fog pours out like a heavy rain of flies or ants buzzing out into the air from Moriarty's eyes, "Do you know how witches gain power, Johnny?"

John shivers as the black fog caresses his wrists, tugs at his gloves.

"...No."

"We play games. We bet our WORLDS. And then, we eat each other's Fog."

What? John nearly says.

He yanks his hands away from the black mist and nearly falls over as he stumbles towards the door.

"Sherlock bet his World, his Fog. He should have let me take it, then we'd be together... we'd burn the earth together, me and him..." Moriarty purrs, his voice like the chorus of buzzing flies, coming closer and closer, except John hears the sly tone in Moriarty's voice, sees the stark black veins contrasted with pale skin and thinks this man is brilliant.

He hates it, but that's what he thinks because John has never been good at avoiding what can kill him.

Brilliant. Like Sherlock.

Then—

"You... you're lonely, aren't you?"

The flies, the buzzing, the black fog and Moriarty stop.

No one breathes.

"...What did you say?" Moriarty's voice comes out, slowly, quietly. So suppressed that John knows he's being stupid. He should shut up. He should have listened to the voices. But John's never been good at ignoring things that weren't related to himself. (Isn't that how good people run away? By
"You're lonely," John repeats. No shaking. No trembling. This, John knows.

The black fog is still against Moriarty’s face, like black tear stains with a bitter smile.

“I don’t know what you wanted to show him. But this game… you goaded him because you thought that he was like you. Except he wasn’t. You say he broke the rules but… if witches don’t break the rules, then he’s more human than you think…”

“…Shut up.”

The words are as quiet as a moth's beating wings.

John nearly falls backwards again. Damn it, what am I doing? he thinks, What did I say that for—?

Black, black, black hits his face and John gasps, feels the buzzing enter this throat, try to claw it apart except it can't because there's some barrier maybe. The gloves. And John tries to spit the black, the fog, out, except how do you fight something as everywhere as the air?

He turns his back. He runs. Stumbles. To the door. He has to get to the door—

"I am not lonely," Moriarty's voice echoes and buzzes all the way down the hall and John doesn't want to look back, doesn't want to see what creature Moriarty has become. "You are, little Johnny boy. Abandoned by his dead parents. Unable to save his sister. No friends. All dead. Who will want you now?"

The fog won't get out of his throat. How can you be choking yet not choking? He wants to rip his face off but that won't help. Just get to the door, get to the door (but Moriarty will follow him in) gettothedoor—

"You'll never save him, Johnny!" Something swipes at John's feet and its only sheer dumb luck that has John only stumbling faster rather than falling. "He's a witch and he's going to burn with me!"

Black scratches at his ankles and John's stomach is nearly impaled by the sharp door knob.

"Open, come on," John's stupid fingers shake as they jitter with the knob. Fog crawls up around the knob too, shaking it as well. Mocking him.

Moriarty laughs, the buzzing is all around John's ears and still he doesn't dare turn around, doesn't dare look at what awaits him there.

"There it is. He doesn't want to see you either. Do you see? You're nothing to him. Just a pawn."

John's fingers dig so hard into the digits of the glove that John's surprised holes haven't worn through. His head nearly bangs against the pristine door. Why, why can't this door open? Is Sherlock really in there? Is this door untouched because Moriarty couldn't enter too?

Because John can't enter?

"Please..." he finds himself begging back in Afghanistan. "Please..."

Bill’s falling. The fog is coming. He can’t find his sewing needle and it’s the first time he hears the voices.

“No one’s coming. He could have come at any time to take you away from me, but he didn’t. He
doesn’t care. Give up, John Watson.”

His hands itch. John’s fingers tug at the gloves because he just wants it to end but—Sally, Soo-Lin, Anthea, Mrs. Hudson. Lestrade, Molly and…!

He laughs because the last thing he wants Moriarty to see is him crying. He’s so stupid but—

“I believe in Sherlock Holmes,” John says.

Moriarty’s face turns completely white, the black fog from his eyes flickers between red and grey and then…!

The door clicks open, cold yanks John backwards—

—And the door shuts before Moriarty can swipe him back.

He wakes up to the chill and cold of grey mist, everywhere. Smokey ice freezing every surface with time. Overhead, the sky, the ceiling, seems lit with little lights that fade in and out in an ocean of black. There seems no end to it and John can see nothing else but mist and black blankets of dotted lights.

“No,” John shoots up, shivers. His leg rattles in pain. He can’t do this again. Not more fog. No more. No more, please…

“You should have never have come here,” a low voice echoes as the grey fog darkens to black. The voice seems to slide around John’s heart, to squeeze it, because John knows that voice. But he’s heard it so many times in this orb, in Dead London, that he isn’t sure if he wants to turn around. A trick. Another memory or more amnesia. John’s limbs ache.

But his traitorous body turns to the sound anyways.

“…Sherlock…” John breathes, seeing the man there, sitting on an armchair of bones woven together. The black blindfold is a welcome presence, hiding Sherlock’s eyes and Sherlock’s hair, too, seems to blend with the darkening fog while his pale hands stand out, clasped together against Sherlock’s chin. Everything from his suit to his blindfold seems to feed into the fog, until the two seem interchangeable.

“…John.”

He’s never realized how attached one can feel to names, to sounds that shouldn’t mean anything. A laugh escapes him. Choked and bitter and elated all at once.

“It’s you. It’s really you. Look, I, I don’t know if you remember who I am right now, but we have to leave, Sherlock. The others, Moriarty, or the other Moriarty—fuck, I don’t know—he’s got them on these pills and they’ll die if we don’t—”

“No,” Sherlock says in that same detached, calm way. His voice seems to resonate with every molecule of fog. “We cannot leave.”

“But Sherlock…”!

John’s hand reaches out to touch him but the fog seems to slap him away, stinging his skin and Sherlock’s gloves.
“No.”

“No. Not trapped.”

“I am here of my own volition.”

“Yes, you jumped in. Moriarty said so—”

“The other me did. I’m the original, the one who sees everything. The other me dissolved as soon as he returned to my mind.”

“I… I don’t understand…” John shivers, watching the fog darken and lighten. He feels like he’s underwater, seeing how the light tries to reach the darkest parts of the water (it never will.)

Observe, observe, observe…

The way the fog feeds into Sherlock now, on this throne of bones. The way the other Sherlock (was he truly other? Is he gone?) could see fine despite being blindfolded. How this is Sherlock’s mind, the only light that made anything visible over Dead London. How there are two spells at work: Moriarty’s and Sherlock’s. How Moriarty said he’d bet the world and that witches gain power by betting worlds and eating each other’s Fog. But if the World is like a Fog then maybe…

“You… You’re the Fog.”

A faint glow behind Sherlock’s blindfold, two little lights each where his eyes should be, flashes while the fog scatters and twists around Sherlock’s neck and hair.

“Yes. I am.”

“I don’t understand… how can you be the fog…?”

Does this mean that all the Fogs around the world are witches? Is Sally justified in hating them? But there were other voices John heard too, he doesn’t understand—

“The Fog can be anything. I asked it to let me see everything and it took my eyes,” Sherlock says, detached again, “and I became a part of it. At least the part that covered Dead London before Witching Hour. Witching Hour’s Fog is Moriarty all over. The demons are his flair for the dramatic.”

What the hell is he supposed to say to that?

“Fine, fine,” John says, gesturing to the door, or where the door should have been because they’re running out of time and they can sort this out later. “You’re the fog. Moriarty’s the fog. You’re both witches. The fog is alive or something and technically not really you. Great. Just great. But we can leave now. Together. Just take my hand, Sherlock.”

“I cannot.”

John wants to pull his own hair out. “Why not? Another rule or something? Well, people are dying, Sherlock! We can’t just do nothing!”
“I am doing something,” he says, as detached as ever while the fog solidifies into black shards like glass about to rain on John’s head.

“Sitting here—”

“If I leave,” he continues, “then Moriarty will try to break my spell, he’ll make time go forward again and he’ll win. Is that what you want, John?”

The fog is the silence. John tightens his jaw.

"Is this the real you then?" he asks quietly. "The Sherlock that remembers? The one who forgot didn’t know what the hell was going on but at least he tried to help! Well, you know what? Fuck you."

The throne of bones rattles and Sherlock hisses, “I’m sure that’s what you’d expect from a witch, John Watson, but this is who I am—”

"I know you’re a witch! And I know there was a game. And you were about to lose so you made the days repeat to buy yourself time but, guess what, your actions have consequences. Hundreds of people are stuck in the fog. Lost. About to die now, because Moriarty's decided he's tired of this. You say that you can't do anything else but wait here. For what? I don't know. A way to beat the game maybe because you think you'll save everyone but that's just selfish. You're a witch. You can do other spells. Find another way. You can stop this spell any time because you're the one who cast this spell. And who knows, maybe Moriarty just cast some more, twisted your repeating spell into this… this whole… fucking fog mess and maybe you became part of the spell to stop him but none of that is working, Sherlock. None of it!"

Something rumbles, the fog darkening again to black shards around John and prowling wildly around Sherlock’s form.

“Well, then I must apologize, John, that I’m not the hero you think I am—”

“No, you’re not a hero,” John says quietly. “You’re just human like the rest of us.”

The throne of bones clatters, the skulls at each leg biting silent words with cold teeth. And there, in one of the skulls, John thinks he sees a crack, until the fog hides the throne once more and John sees only shadows and Sherlock.

“Human?” Sherlock sneers but John sees his fingers twitch.

“Yeah,” John steps closer. “Human. Human to want to stop time, to find a different way to win. It’s not… it’s not a bad thing.”

“It’s not a good thing, either.”

John laughs weakly. “I guess not. Who’d want to be human? But you… I think you were desperate. Moriarty was about to take your world and I don’t think you expected that he’d go after Mrs. Hudson, Lestrade or Molly too. That’s what happened, right? With the weird suicides? He was making people eat those pills and maybe the final part of the game involved those three… and you… you didn’t realize you cared until then.”

He waits for the fog to darken again, to fall. But that doesn’t happen. No, the fog seems to shy away from him, retreat towards Sherlock as Sherlock whispers, like a lost child, “How…” and John wishes he knew Sherlock before the Fog, wishes he could have been there before.
“Because no one’s that desperate to stop time unless they’ve run out of options, unless they’ve got other people, friends, they care about on the line. You care. You might not know what to do with it. But you do.”

“Yes, and I doomed them to over three years of tedium and trauma. Very caring of me.”

“I don’t think you meant any harm… Knowing you, you spouted off whatever spell came to mind, without thinking of the consequences. That doesn’t make it right. But you weren’t wrong either.”

“And yet still, we come back to this impasse. I cannot lift the spell lest time go forward and Moriarty win and if the spell continues, Moriarty will make them wish they were dead. Tell me, Saint John, what I should do.”

John flinches at that.

“Well,” his shoulders sag and his voice comes out weakly, “…you could let me help?”

The shadows and Sherlock don’t answer.

“I know I haven’t been much help. You’ve had to save me so many times… I can’t do anything… not even save Harry. But if you could just tell me what you need to beat Moriarty, I could—”

“There’s nothing you can do,” Sherlock says impassively. “Moriarty wanted me to find something before he killed everyone. Solve the serial suicides and find the impossible.” Sherlock laughs, his laughter scratching scars into the fog, “Couldn’t find it. Cannot find it. I never will.”

“What—”

“I cannot say,” Sherlock spits the words out, his mouth twisting in disgust at said words. “Rules.”

Even now, in Sherlock’s own mind, there are rules.

“Then we don’t need it! There must be something else you can do. Take the repeating spell off, take the fog away, and we can solve it together. Maybe there’s a different spell we can use. Anthea, Sally and Soo-Lin have weapons drenched in blood, weapons that might be able to kill a witch if we work together. You’re not alone, Sherlock,” John reaches out—

“No!” the fog slams John away, wrapping its smoky tendrils back around Sherlock’s chest, his arms, his legs, tying him to the throne of bones. “No, no, no, no, I don’t need you,” and John tries not to wince at the sting, “I don’t need anyone! Alone protects me. Alone is what I know!”

“Sherlock!” John stretches his hands and but he finds that he’s being pushed back, repelled, as if his hand is one pole of a magnet meeting another of its kind. Always repelling.

The gloves, John thinks. They must be part of Sherlock, repelling his fog, not letting John touch it.

Without thinking, John tears the gloves off with his teeth and plunges in, ignoring the stinging at his skin, the way the fog slaps at his face the way a sand storm might. He keeps his eyes and mouth closed, marching forward until his hands touch something solid. Something corporeal.

“Sherlock please,” John gasps, the fog tackling his mouth, cutting up his tongue and throat.

“Let go of me,” Sherlock hisses. “You’re getting cut, eaten—”

“I don’t care, Sherlock,” John coughs through the fog, “I won’t leave you—”
“Fool,” the fog, Sherlock, Moriarty, *everything* seems to hiss, “consorting with a witch…!”

“I killed my sister!” John roars, tears slipping down his face, “I ran away and I abandoned her and part of me hated her sometimes and I only cared about her when she could feed my adrenaline high, that’s how fucked up I am! I gamble with stupid things and I’m stubborn and stupid and prejudiced at times and if I had the same powers as you, who’s to say I wouldn’t have done the same thing?”

The roaring fog dies down, Sherlock cranes his head up at him with lips wide open, “John…”

“We’re all a little fucked up,” John shakes his head, putting his hands hesitantly on top of Sherlock’s throne. “But we… we could be fucked up together?”

For the first time, this Sherlock’s lips twitch upwards.

“I play the violin at odd hours. Keep the neighbours up by butchering Bach and playing off key.”

“Well, I hide a gun in my trousers and I almost shot the cashier at Tesco’s for saying hello.”

“I keep limbs in my apartment. I let people draw their own conclusions because I want them to leave me alone.”

“I stare at the barrel of my Browning when I have nightmares and then I get angry when Harry tells me she’s worried.”

“I’m rude and I’m told I enjoy murder too much to be healthy. I’ll drive you mad, John Watson.”

He huffs softly, leaning his forehead just an inch before Sherlock’s. “I hear voices ever since I was shot and I listened when they asked me to come here. I’m probably already mad.”

Sherlock’s shoulders shake, the fog rustling with him, until half-gleeful, half-maniacal laughs escape him and his hands reach out to cup John’s ears and press their foreheads skin-to-skin until they can feel the throbbing in each other’s heads.


John’s hand brushes up against Sherlock’s head, against the black cloth of the blindfold that feels like silk and spider’s webs and fog threaded together all at once.

“…May I?” he whispers.

Sherlock doesn’t move for a moment. But then he nods.

Silently, John’s fingers slip into the threads of Sherlock’s curls, into the knot that holds the black blindfold together. He coaxes the knot free and the silk fabric slips easily, brushing against the back of John’s hands until the blindfold falls neatly onto Sherlock’s lap, blending in with his dark suit.

Instead of bright grey-green-blue-violet-*something* eyes, John sees two gaping holes, as infinite as black holes, swirling on Sherlock’s face. Just like the holes on Moriarty’s face before. The fog feeds into the empty husks of Sherlock’s face, little creatures that have housed his body for their own.

John’s breath stops as his hands slowly reach up to the outlines of the holes on Sherlock’s face.
Sherlock’s lip twitches up. A ghost of a smirk.

“Ugly, isn’t it?”

“No,” John finds himself saying, as his thumb rubs over the edge of where Sherlock’s eyes had been. “Not at all.”

He leans in (slowly, quietly, so that Sherlock can push him away whenever he wishes) so that his breaths warm the empty holes in Sherlock’s face, so he can see the depths of Sherlock’s price. His lips press a kiss there, on the edges of both holes. Soft and quiet.

“It’s fine,” he says against not-eyes, “it’s all fine. I promise, if you want me to, I’ll stay.”

Even if it’s here in this orb, waiting for days to repeat until Sherlock finds his answer, John will stay.

He feels something wet against his lips, and before John can ask what it is, Sherlock pulls John close, so they are eye-level again and says, “I break the spell.”

The fog suddenly brightens, too white, too white and the throne of bones disintegrates. John thinks that he’ll fall but Sherlock has a firm grip and up above them, light is shining through, light too bright for John to describe. His eyes sting as he looks up but Sherlock pushes John to his chest, whispers at John that everything will be fine because John is brilliant and they’ll beat Moriarty together and—

They’re back on the room of St. Bart’s, listening to gun shots as Sally shoots Moriarty in the mouth. Repeatedly. Over and over, all in the same spot, while blood dribbles down her lips.

“You can stop shooting now, Sally,” Sherlock says promptly, sounding more like the Sherlock John is familiar with. Less detached. Less unsure. “We’ve broken the spell. Both of them.”

Sally, to her credit, doesn’t falter, but she looks like she’ll aim her gun at Sherlock too, in case he’s an illusion. A trap. After all, he has no eyes. No blindfold either. She keeps her aim fixed on Moriarty, keeps shooting until her clip is empty. When she opens her mouth, her teeth are red too and she spits it out.

“…What the hell…?” she frowns at Sherlock’s not-eyes until her gaze settles on John, “John, what’s happening?”

“I…”

The others seem to be able to move too. Anthea kicks Moran away while Soo Lin stares in shock at her hands, how they can flex again and Mrs. Hudson is supported by a weary Lestrade.

“No. You couldn’t. You made time go forward and you…?” Moriarty manages to say, despite his lips and cheekbones being mere sinew and clotted bits of crimson.

Sherlock’s teeth gleam as dangerously as when he’s a wolf. “You said I couldn’t find him. But I did. And he beat your game, Moriarty. Without knowing the rules.”

Moriarty shakes his head, a snarl ready on his lips. “No, no one like that exists. I am you, I would know!”

But everyone can move again. And to John’s awe and horror, the fog is mostly gone. There is pure light shining down, brightening all colours, all hues and buildings. He squints from all that light
reflecting from glass on other buildings, from Moriarty’s watch. The only fog left swirls around Moriarty and Sherlock (and John too, still leaning against Sherlock.)

“Your powers, your Fog is mine now,” Sherlock continues but this is when Moriarty laughs.

Everyone tenses. Anthea keeps her gun aimed at Moran, who only shrugs at them all with playful grin and Soo Lin keeps a knife aimed for Moriarty. Sally loads another clip into her gun.

“Oh Sherlock, darling. How naïve. Did you think I didn’t plan for this? Anyone could fill the role of your savior, given a few pushes here and there. Johnny boy is just the unlucky bloke who happened to be the one. Nothing special. Still. I never bet my Fog to you, now did I? I bet it to the one who beat the game. And lucky for you, Johnny boy, that’s you.”

“What—”

“John, run!” Sherlock tries to cover him with his arms but John sees the swirling fog suddenly gather and shoot straight for John’s eyes and suddenly John is writhing on the ground, clawing at his face because it hurts so much, why does it hurt. It’s being shot in Afghanistan, drowning, being eaten alive and watching his parents die, watching Harry die, all at once.

*Make it stop, make it stop.*

But it doesn’t stop. The fog digs into his eyes, his mouth, his nose and hands. It needs to become him. It wants him to become *it*.

“You bastard, what have you done!” a voice he once knew says.

“He’ll be eaten alive, you know, better say your last words, *Sherlock.*”

“No!”

Hands. Something. Must be hands, touch his face (is it his face?) and pulls him close.

“John, John, please, listen to me. Don’t listen to the fog. Don’t listen—”

*We’ve met before. Do you remember?*

“No,” he whispers back, “no, we haven’t met...”

“John,” Sherlock sounds more panicked now, “John, who are you talking to? Who’s talking? John —”

“...Who are...?”

*Shhhh, listen.*

And he sees it then, countless lives and parallel selves, living out such strange and different outcomes that are still very much the same. In one life, they are in Victorian England and there is a confrontation by a waterfall. In another, John is an Asian woman in New York trying to figure out her client. In yet another, they are both women in a cyberpunk future, chasing Moriarty through the wires. They have wings. Then they don’t. Sometimes John is married to another woman. Sometimes he’s not. Then he’s married to *Sherlock* or in some cases, Sherlock is with Moriarty while John either accepts this or rebels against the idea and there are just so many possibilities and regrets, so many, so many...

They are all him and yet they’re not, not *this* him anyways.
“...Yes...” John gasps, “yes, I remember...”

“No!” this Sherlock, his Sherlock is shouting, clawing at his arm, “Don’t listen to the voices, John. Don’t go to the other side. Stay with me, you promised...!”

There are whispers again. He knows them now. They spoke to him in his dreams; they spoke to him in the fog (along with Sherlock and Moriarty’s voices.) He knows them and yet he doesn’t. Voices of the witches that still wander the fog, of other Sherlock Holmes and John Watsons in other worlds. Voices from the other side, voices from what could have been and what will be. Voices from nowhere.

They tell him that it’s time to sleep now. He’s been walking around for days without eating, without properly resting. They want him to let go.

_You’ve done enough now, the voices say, just close your eyes._

“John, John, don’t you dare—”

Just a quick nap, what harm could come of it? He’s done his job. Sherlock is free. Things will sort themselves out. A nice nap does seem like a good idea... and he’s so very tired now. The voices croon in his ear, whisper soft nothings that are familiar and sweet, so much like the lullabies his mother used to sing to him and Harry during storms.

_Little child, be not afraid... (1)_

“...Mum...?” he mouths, barely a sound left, “...Harry...?”

_Shhh, they whisper, shhhhh._

He sleeps.

---

Once there were two witches who made a very dangerous bet.

“I will bet you the world if you can find someone who accepts you for who you are, completely, even your witch self.”

The other witch was close to denying the bet, despite his competitive nature. Who would bet their power, their intellect and _world_ on such an impossible thing?

But he remembered his Mummy (gone now) and brother and how they found a place among the humans. Besides, who said that the person to accept him had to be human? He had M. That was enough.

“I accept,” he said. “I bet my world.”

Such a foolish wish that could be interpreted in any way by the Fog.

After all, even witches are subject to the consequences of curses. Even witches have someone they love.

---

_Interlude: Molly_
She likes bones. They listen to her. All the dead bodies, the lingering spirits within. They listen and they talk back and they *emphasize*, unlike the living.

(She used to think Jim emphasized with her too, but no, Jim played her the whole time. Jim was M and M was Moriarty and Molly is nothing but a puppet on strings and she can only collect bones and limbs and try to numb the peace of wailing children who lost their lives too soon.)

Jim talks too much. She knows his real name, his real self, of course. But she likes to call him Jim because she like to fantasize that he can be killed like humans can. In Dead London, Jim keeps her in the morgue until she has to play her role. Jim taunts her about being unforgettable Molly, the one who Sherlock forgot until it was too late.

(She used to fancy Sherlock too, until he scoffed at her so many times, made her cry and feel so little that Molly took a step back and decided she’ll change. She will. She doesn’t need Sherlock’s approval, no, and then Jim batted his eyes at her and *stupidly*, she fell again—)

Molly doesn’t speak much anymore, except to the dead. But she watches. Listens. Moriarty talks a lot for a witch. About Sherlock. About the spells. *If Sherlock ever DOES find the one, then I’ll just have the Fog eat that trash and then Sherlock and I will be the only ones again*, Moriarty used to say.

Watching it now, watching clouds and mist and black and fog swarm into John Watson’s body makes Molly’s nails dig into her skin.

She’s so tired of listening to screams. The bones and limbs in Dead London are so loud. They can’t (well, they couldn’t until the spell broke) leave. All spirits twisted up and crying out for someone to listen, to come, to free them so they could rest in peace.

Jim is laughing while Sherlock shakes John’s body, presses their lips together in a futile effort at CPR. Nothing happens. John continues convulsing, the fog continues eating him. The woman with a blackberry is yelling into her device, yelling for medics to come. The Asian looking woman and Sally are shaking Moriarty, demanding him to stop this.

So many voices. So loud.

Molly picks up one of the fallen daggers and walks up to Jim and the two women, watches the two women fall silent at Molly’s approach.

Jim smiles at her and Molly tightens her grip, keeps the dagger in her pocket.

“Well, now, darling, are you here to beg for John too?”

She stabs him in the chest, watches as the dagger soaks up all that witch blood.

“Now, that won’t help,” Jim shrugs, his jaw nearly mended, “you can’t kill me unless—”

“Unless you drench a weapon in witch blood, I know,” Molly says.

She cuts off his head.

Jim talked too much.
(1) The line “Little child, be not afraid” is from the song ‘Lullaby for a Stormy Night’ by Vienna Teng. It’s the song that John’s mum sings and that John hears before he closes his eyes.

THEME MUSIC: Not sure why but this song by Lucia gave me feels during my favourite scene
He dreams of another life, other Sherlocks, other Johns. But mostly he dreams of nothing, because with nothing, there are no pressures at all.

We see a roof and bright light up above the center of the city (Dead London, they called it) while the rest of (New new new) London is in a faint (what’s the word) fog. There are people there and we whisper to them but they don’t hear or notice. They are busy crouching over a convulsing body that we have already taken. Do they not realize that this body will be obsolete soon? To be recycled into the earth?

The one-who-traded-his-eyes will not stop shaking the body, shouting at it. There is another body too, the-one-like-a-spider, missing his head. The-one-who-talks-to-bones stares at the headless body of the-one-like-a-spider with no expression on her face, the knife stubbornly in her hands. The one-who-221B-loves and the-one-who-guards sit numb on the ground, unsure if their shackles are broken. Then there is the one-who-sees-auras standing with the-one-who-dreams-worlds. They appear distressed, though the-one-who-dreams-worlds has tears in her eyes while the-one-who-sees-auras clenches her jaw and we are curious.

What could the one-who-sees-auras be thinking? We slip into the fog of her thoughts and listen:

In fairy tales, a kiss is supposed to wake the dead. But in reality, a kiss is just two lips touching. Maybe exchanging saliva with tongues meeting, maybe pushing air through. But what need do the dead have for air?

Sally watches Sherlock jam his lips over John’s, over and over. Trying to suck the fog out of him maybe, as if Fogs are more attracted to witches than humans. Sally remembers the scars that she and Soo Lin have gained, remembers watching Harry die, and clenches her fists.

“That’s enough, Sherlock,” she says, not to be cruel but because this CPR isn’t working and they should try something else. Interrogate Moran maybe since Moriarty’s blood has sprayed over Sally, Soo Lin and Hooper (who Sally respects a hell a lot more after the beheading-a-witch-thing, if anyone deserved a shot at him, Sally gives it to Hooper) so that bastard won’t be saying anything for a while.

Sherlock doesn’t respond to her. Just keeps muttering spells. Pressing lips together. Pushing down on John’s chest.

“This is wrong,” Soo Lin whispers beside her, looking back and forth as if the Fog will return at any moment, “this is so wrong, why can’t I see him…”
All Sally wants is to take Soo Lin’s hand and comfort her. That damned brother of hers is probably still dead, all of the dead players like Harry probably are. Not even a broken curse can fix that. But right now Sally has to keep a level head or Sherlock could magic the whole building down.

“Look, let’s just ask Moran how to stop the spell,” Sally tries again. She’s not being gentle with him, she’s not. But someone has to keep a cool head and who knows how long John has left?

When Sherlock stands, she almost expects him to snap ‘shut up, Sally’ like he used to before the Dead Zone, but he barely nods to her before he storms over to Moran, pins his hands around Moran’s thick neck and snarls, “Make it stop. Take Moriarty’s fog out of him!”

Moran, the sick bastard, just smiles down at him and shrugs. He doesn’t even acknowledge Anthea, who still has a gun pressed to his side and is typing away at her blackberry with her other hand (Sally used to think Anthea was one of those people who are obsessed with texting but she knows better. Anthea can’t be without a bit of technology beside her. Technology feeds into her, talks to her. Being in the dead zone, where electronics couldn’t work, was like missing a limb.)

“Now why would I? I’m just a demon. I don’t manipulate the Fog or make deals with it like you do. Wish it away, Sir Witch. You are a witch, aren’t you? Cast a spell. Fix it up,” Moran’s grin spreads wider and wider the more Sherlock’s fingers draw blood. “But you can’t. The fog likes the little soldier, you see? I like him too. He’s becoming ripe.”

The black holes in Sherlock’s face suddenly leech out black tendrils that cut across the air and slash up Moran’s face. Like a deep sea creature living in Sherlock’s non-existent-eyes. Sally nearly drops her gun and Soo Lin, frowning, steps in front of her while eying the black tendrils warily.

“Ah!” Moran grins out the blood, licks the excess drops that dribble from his lips. “Delicious.”

“Shut up,” the shadows from Sherlock’s eyes look ready to rip Moran apart, while Sherlock’s pale fingers dig deeper into flesh.

“Sherlock, you idiot,” Sally moves into to pull them apart but Lestrade reaches them first, an arm thrown between knife-sharp shadows. He cries out, red cutting across his arms and Sally shoots at Sherlock’s sleeve and Moran’s leg (to stop the bastard from trying to escape, she saw that attempt).

Anthea grabs Moran around the neck, to stop him from moving while Soo Lin rushes to help her. But Sherlock’s the one who looks like a demon, shadows writhing from his eye holes as he snarls at anyone who comes near. Lestrade can barely hold him back and Sally is ready to shoot at Sherlock’s legs to stop him from moving if that’s what it takes until they hear a rumble like thunder (real thunder??) coming down from above them.

Is it…? Can it be?

“Shit,” Sally stares at the helicopter lights gleaming down at them. She’s half tempted to shoot them down, daring them to be real.

”Mycroft,” Sherlock hisses like the devil itself has appeared. “No, no, no, no, you can’t be here. You can’t take me away from John, he’s still alive, I know it!”

He whips backwards, his shadows acting like serpents that push Sally and Lestrade back.

“What the hell, Sherlock!” Lestrade coughs. “Don’t bring down our rescue!”

Sally just wants to scream. Instead, she runs towards Sherlock, ducking and dodging shadows that whip her way, and slaps the wanker across the face.
The startled deer-in-headlights look she receives would be amusing if not for the black holes in his face or the way his aura suddenly seems to scream *John, John, John*, in a way that Sally’s never heard auras speak before. Freakier, Sally’s never felt much of an aura from Sherlock until now.

But she swallows that down. Drags him down by the scarf so they are nose to nose.

“Get. Your. Shit. Together, Holmes,” she growls. “If Watson’s alive, then do him a favour and get him on that helicopter because right now he needs a hospital or some magic voodoo doctor if you want to get him back. Now stop throwing a tantrum and take *fucking responsibility* for the shit you’ve caused. *Get us out of this hellhole.*”

He doesn’t move. Not at first.

But then—tendrils of shadows recede back into his torn eyeholes and Sally finds herself staring at a darkness that seems oddly… (vulnerable) empty.

“Yes…” Sherlock stumbles back, “yes, I should…” he turns towards the body. He murmurs a few words, but Sally can tell from the red wisps from his lips that they are a spell. Mum’s words were always like that, red wisps, greetings disguised as experimental spells. Sally always shivered in that house…

She closes her eyes, feels herself lifted up in the air towards the helicopter, along with the rest of their group. This is it. They’re out of the fog. But the helicopter is so damn loud, an earthquake pretending to be help, and John is probably dead and Sherlock could go maniacal with Fog magic at any moment and they’re floating in the sky with a demon towards a mechanical flying machine and it’s *so damn cold*…!

Someone floats next to her and grabs her hand. Soo Lin. Sally would know that hand anywhere.

“…It’s okay to cry,” Soo Lin whispers, “I’ll listen.”

She does.

And we… we feel… *No. We cannot feel. We cannot*. We slip out of the-one-who-sees-auras, we slip away from her thoughts and seek the outside—

The metal contraption flies away, as if it can run away from us. If we felt amusement like many organic beings do, we would laugh at human arrogance. We float after the metal contraption, inhabit it. How human it is to assume that because a thing is not visible, it must not be there.

We are always here in this world. Unseen and seen. Our children know this.

Moran watches us when we slip within the metal contraption. He smiles. The others within the metal contraption shiver and lean away from him in disgust but we find our child’s bloodlust comforting. Such a lovely sound compared to the monotony of organic life.

“Let me taste him, Mother, just a taste,” Moran (such little self-control our children have) begs. The poor thing, all in chains when he should be free to roam and feed.

“Who are you talking to?!” the-one-who-traded-his-eyes demands.

The-one-who-heals-and-stumbles is a part of us now, we tell Moran. But the-one-like-a-spider will be given to you, as per contract.
“Such a shame, I would have liked to try his heart,” Moran licks his lips. Perhaps the next addition will be given to him as well. Such a good child. “The little soldier looks good on you, mother.”

Yes, we say, as the-one-who-traded-his-eyes suddenly grabs Moran and starts screaming profanities at our child. His soul was (is) delicious.

The rest of this human drama becomes dull. We go to devour other worlds, other cities, except—

“Wait,” we feel a tug, something is pulling us back.

The-one-who-sees-worlds is looking at us. *Holding* us somehow. We need to leave, leave, now—

“John,” she whispers, “I see you.”

We—*he* (no, don’t leave us, don’t leave *me*)—stirs awake.

No. We won’t let you.

- 

John gasps, grasping for air and feeling like he’s been plastic wrapped into a snow globe of fog and sky.

“What the hell is happening?” he tries to breathe, or not-breathe. His lungs, they aren’t… they aren’t moving and he’s waiting for the burning need for oxygen but instead all he feels is this lack and the need to lay back, close his eyes, listen to the whisperings…

“John,” Soo Lin whispers urgently.

“What?” he blinks. Yes. Soo Lin. Wait, wasn’t Moriarty here before? Why is he in a helicopter? *Is* this a helicopter? Moran is tied up, Sherlock is yelling, security guards (where did they come from?) restrain him and…

“Stop that!” John tries to tell them.

They pry Sherlock off Moran, pinning him to one of the seats with handcuffs. Sherlock almost looks like Siraj with his snarls and darkness-bleeding eyes but still, he doesn’t answer John. No one but Soo Lin does.

And the Fog.

He feels it everywhere now. In the breaths of every person. In his non-existent veins. As a hush between molecules of air in the helicopter. It whispers to him more frantically now, tells him to come back, to sleep for longer, everything will be at peace and he will belong again…

“No,” Soo Lin’s gaze is direct. “Don’t go yet. It’s not your time.”

“What are you talking about?” John reaches out, but his hands go through the wall, through Mrs. Hudson’s face and he jumps (no, *floats, hovers*) backwards. “What is this? Where am I?” *Am I a ghost?*

He’d hoped that everything would just end for him. That he’d never have to *be* again. Or maybe see his family again (*guilt, guilt, guilt*, okay, maybe *not* see his family.) But he’s still *here*. Why is he still *here*; he should be dead, eaten, gone—

*Yes*, the Fog seems to gesture him closer, *come back to me, little soldier*. *Rest forever.*
“Stop listening to it!” Soo Lin tugs him down by the wrists. Wait, how? He’s a ghost. He can’t be touched. Can’t die properly, can’t live, can’t anything! He’s just… here. Always. No, no, no, no, no…

It hurts so much, doesn’t it? the Fog croons, so kind and lovely, the way Mum used to tell him stories. The way she’d kiss his forehead at night when she wasn’t haunted by other voices. We can make it better. Just come closer…

Soo Lin pulls him down until her forehead touches his. She looks directly at him, solemn and determined, before she starts to hum.

And everything just… fades away. Mutes to background noise. All he can hear is the soothing warmth of Soo Lin’s hum, threading through his being and tethering him to reality (just like her hand.) The Fog might as well be muffled through glass walls. Sherlock and Moran’s scuffles might as well be shadows playing at the corner of his eyes.

It’s like… it’s like he’s been falling into a void of howls and screams for decades but he never noticed how horrible it was until he met music. The type of music that’s soft and alone, unsure yet moving forward. A small voice that flutters into the cacophony of warring screams and offers him a hand out.

How…?

“…is she doing? Stop that incessant humming!”

“Oi, leave Soo Lin alone!”

How can he ever—

“…does that sometimes. Humming to the fog. Probably part of her gift. I would leave it alone, Sherlock.”

“Shut up. Shut up, shut up, shut up, all of you!”

Moran laughs.

—reach it?

“Don’t listen to them, Soo Lin,” Sally puts an arm around her but Soo Lin barely acknowledges her. Only keeps her eyes on John. Only keeps humming.

The Fog roars around them all, like a muted bass to Soo Lin’s song.


John wants to see, to drift off and be one of the grey clouds but Soo Lin hums an old lullaby and he stays close, hovers, ignores how the man with an umbrella hisses that Sherlock just survived creating a dead zone and should be grateful that the curse was even broken in the first place—
A stretcher passes him and Soo Lin as they walk down the hall. Soo Lin tugs him forward, keeping her eyes on him, tries to touch the body under white sheets when people in white coats (doctors, yes, that’s the word) shoo her into an office and John is so tired, so sleepy—

Soo Lin starts to murmur lyrics under her breath.

Mycroft (witch, the Fog whispers, don’t want them near you, little soldier.) That’s what the man with the umbrella is called. He’s Sherlock’s brother and he (sort of) runs the government. That’s all John can pick out in between the Fog cooing at him to go to sleep and Soo Lin singing about trapped sunlight in a bottle at the bottom of the ocean.

He talks about providing compensation to those trapped so long in the fog. He talks about setting up a rehabilitation program. Mostly, it’s just two witches and six (seven, insists Soo Lin, in the middle of her song) humans stuck in a room together. (And the Fog. Always the Fog.)

Sherlock still hasn’t moved from the sofa in the corner. He looks good. Alive. A new blindfold around his eyes. He won’t need John so John can just close his eyes and sleep, right? Just lay back and listen to—

Soo Lin stands up, mutters about going to the bathroom, and rushes out the door. As soon as the door shuts, she scream-sings a happy folk song in Cantonese.

Can’t keep singing forever, the Fog hisses, just like you couldn’t save your brother.

Soo Lin just sings louder.

People die every day. That’s what they do. Why hold on to this one soul? Let us have the little soldier and we won’t devour you either, one-who-sees-worlds, the Fog strokes her hair as a lover would.

Soo Lin starts singing a Rick Roll song from YouTube and John can’t help but laugh… she looks at him in hope but…

Couldn’t save his sister. That’s all he stayed alive for. His purpose is complete. Let him die. Let him join us. You can join us too, if you like.

Soo Lin starts making obscene gestures in the air, surprising several chefs in the kitchen. Anthea and Sally whisper to her, trying to give her Tylenol and John sways to the hummed rendition of old waltzes…

Just give up. He already has.

She runs towards the private wing blocked off to all other guests and collapses by the door. For twenty minutes, she’s out cold and John knows he’s supposed to stay (right?) but it’s so hard to keep his eyes open and the Fog feels so nice, so comforting, he can’t—

Soo Lin wakes up and starts scream-singing about blood.
Fog and hymns and fog and hymns and fog and fogfogfog—

“Sorry, it’s just. Um,” Sally blushes in the dark, “you have a lovely voice. But… it’s nighttime. Is there any way you can stop?”

John stirs a bit. When did they get here? In this lush bedroom? It looks like a hotel room. Same style of windows as earlier. Same grey skies… maybe if he reached out, he could float higher and just…

Soo Lin’s voice cracks a little.

“Oh, god, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked. You wouldn’t be doing this if you wanted to. It’s your gift, still. Is there anything I can do? Have you taken a break at all? Let me get some water—”

The melody wobbles a bit before Soo Lin shakes her head. In the glass reflection, John can see her eyes are bloodshot from staring at him all day (all week? How long—?)

Sally looks like she wants to gather Soo Lin in her arms and never let go.

She doesn’t though.

And so John hovers over, and he tries to reach out, he really does, but the Fog comes back, roaring in his ears that *Harry is waiting for him, doesn’t he owe it to her, to Bill, to join them all*—

Soo Lin’s eyes are so red in the morning.

“…ohn? John.”

What?

He blinks and realizes that he’s in another bedroom, set up the same as the one that Sally and Soo Lin share. Except there’s a body lying on the bed. *His* body. Hooked up to machines and IV drips and heart monitors and other devices that John’s never seen before.

Clutching onto his body’s hand is…

“Sherlock,” he whispers.

Soo Lin gives a wary smile. “I knew you’d stay stable if you could see him again. I’ve been trying to get in here all week. But Mycroft’s men wouldn’t let me. I’m the ‘creepy singing Asian’ apparently.”

For some reason, John feels guilty. But why? He was… was dead. Then he was on a helicopter. In a hotel room and now he’s… staring at his own body? And the Fog, it… it keeps whispering around him, coiling around and round and ro—

“Stop that,” Soo Lin snaps, tugging at his wrist again. Sherlock stirs, head down on John (no, *his body’s*) bedside, but doesn’t wake.

“But,” John moves (to the Fog, to Sherlock? He doesn’t know.)
“We don’t have much time! Just… just listen to me. This once. Then you can choose. Do what you want. Just listen!”

The rasp in her voice makes him stop. Stop and really look at her for the first time since… since…

Her eyes are so red and dull that John wants to ask if he can heal them. But Soo Lin just shakes her head, her cheeks hollow.

“…I have this gift. I can see souls stuck in the fog. Worlds, even. If they have the chance of being saved, being pulled, back, I can even touch them. And I… I’ve been trying so hard… to keep you tethered here… but you keep going back. Your body is right there and you don’t even care!”

John doesn’t know what to say. For once, everything is silent. Not even the Fog rustles.

Soo Lin frowns. “I don’t… I don’t know what your life was like before you entered the Dead Zone. I don’t know what hell you or Mr. Holmes have gone through… but John, I can’t keep tethering you here… N-not… not if it’s against your will.”

Of course it is, the Fog answers for him. Can’t you see his time is up? Let go. Give him to me.

Soo Lin flinches.

“Wait—”

“You need to choose, John,” she turns away. “You need to keep choosing. I’m sorry but… if you’re not still here in an hour, then I will let you go.”

She walks out of the room and John’s left staring at Sherlock Holmes holding onto his body, left hearing the Fog whispering that they’ll be together forever and won’t John be happy?

“I…” John looks at his wispy hands, how they come apart when he tries to touch the light switch. “I’m dead.”

Maybe not brain dead or heart dead, but for all intents and purposes… dead.

But you can be more. Become a part of us and you can know everything in all possibilities, all planes of time, all worlds. You can be everything and nothing. You will never feel grief or pain again. You will be part of us and we will be you. Never alone.

Yes. That’s right. Being part of the Fog was… was kind of wonderful. He felt important. Part of something bigger than himself, something that wanted him and he could rest all he wanted… float away…

“You made a promise, John Watson.”

He feels as drawn to this voice as he did to Soo Lin’s song.

Sherlock sits up, looking around in the room.

“…Are you still there?”

John doesn’t answer. The Fog roars everywhere and nowhere.

“Smart woman, Soo Lin. Probably can’t tell living humans about the souls she tries to tether here. One of her prices. Inconvenient really. But that’s why she brought you here and spoke directly to you, so I could hear.”
Reacting to the image, the text reads:

Sherlock starts to tap his foot impatiently. “Don’t leave!” though it sounds more like an order than a request, “Just… just stay. You promised you would stay so don’t let the Fog take you away from me, John Watson!”

“But…”

John, the Fog whispers, and when he turns around, he sees Harry. Whole. Smiling. The way she was before he left for Afghanistan. The way she was when Clara said yes to marrying her. Didn’t we promise to take care of each other? Through thick and thin? Why’d you let me die?

“H-Harry…”

Tears rise up, his torso starts to dissipate, to wisp up like smoke into the Fog’s embrace and—

“Please,” Sherlock whispers, and when John whirls around, he sees tears falling down his cheeks. “I need you.”

—he rips himself away. It hurts. It hurts so much, like he’s being dipped into acid, or pulled along the hot sand so the sun can burn the heart out of him, but he forces himself forward, falls onto his body and he…

He wakes.

Ten floors down, under blocks of reinforced steel and concrete, Moran starts to cackle in his jail cell.

At first, he just gasps like a man who’s been buried in sand and crawled out of the earth. Every machine in the room beeps in messy, overlapping sounds, as if to shout the end of the world. Then, hands, smooth wonderful hands, tear the wires off, sit John up and trace his cheeks.

“…John?”

He smiles sheepishly. “Sorry I took so long.”

“You… you wonderful, idiotic, shining light, if you do that again, I will end your existence!”

He can’t help but laugh. Cough-laugh. Both.

Jumping up quickly, Sherlock shoves a glass of water against John’s lips and starts lecturing John about the harmful effects of being fog-touched (constant exposure to whispers, susceptibility to possession, fainting spells, prone to hallucinations being several symptoms.) He calls John stupid for taking off his special gloves and forfeiting protection. He calls John amazing for coming back, through it all, and watching Sherlock flail around with his perfect long limbs and stupid hair makes John think, God, I missed this.

Sherlock freezes in mid rant, hands poised in the air. “You’re crying. Why are you crying. You just woke up. You should be happy. You’re free. We should send Soo Lin a card. Or flowers. Or a dozen flowers. Or an entire garden. Is that what people do? What do people do to say thank you for saving my future flatmate and partner, John? Please stop crying.”
He can’t. It’s gross. Snot all over his hands and collar now. Why did he think he could do this?

“Did you…” Sherlock hesitates, “do you regret coming back?”

“What?! No, of course not!” but the Fog won’t stop whispering in his ear, telling him that he’ll come back one day. He belongs to it. “It’s just… I can’t stop…!” Can’t stop the Fog from talking. Can’t stop crying. Sorry. Sorry. So so sorry.

Words just won’t come. The John who broke the curse seems like a stranger.

Sherlock sits back down and slowly brings puts his hand on top of John’s.

“I… I meant it, you know.”

John frowns. “Um…?”

“I need you. I don’t… think I will ever stop needing you. And if I have to tell you this every day, for you to stay, for the Fog to just… shut up. I will.”

And looking up at Sherlock, who sits so still (so vulnerable), John can’t help but want to punch every person who ever looked at Sherlock like a monster.

“Do you… do you know why I called your wolf Siraj?”

Sherlock looks annoyed at the interruption but curious. “No. Not particularly. I can’t deduce much from a simple name, though I suspect you might have had an old dog named Siraj or an army mate —”

“It means light,” John cuts in. “When you saved me from those creatures… your eyes were so bright and I believed in you. You’ve already saved me so many times, more than I can count. You don’t need to—”

“John?” Sherlock scowls, “Stop changing the subject, shut up, and accept the compliment. I need you.”

He tries to argue, he really does. But he remembers what he said to Sherlock in his mind palace. He feels the intensity that Sherlock’s shadowy-ink-eyes must be radiating under the blindfold. This is… He doesn’t what this is, exactly… but he doesn’t want it to stop.

“…Okay,” he whispers.

Sherlock presses a kiss against each of John’s knuckles.

Each one feels like more than a thank you.

Mrs. Hudson’s hands tremble when they touch the golden numbers on her lap.

John moves to hug her and she won’t stop shaking.

Sally nearly punches Sherlock when he tries to give Soo Lin a box of heart-shaped chocolates (and some diamond earrings… and real gold) as a thank you. Soo Lin only avoids the spat and steps next to John.
“Um,” John hands her a packet for honey-ginger tea, “I hear that’s good for sore throats. Sorry for the trouble.”

Soo Lin’s lips twitch up. “Next time someone ends up fog-touched, you sing.”

“Oh, god, no. I’m awful. I’d probably scare the fog away. On second thought, maybe I should try that,” he pauses when Soo Lin’s laugh comes out as a rasp. “I’m… I’m honestly sorry.”

Soo Lin puts up a hand. “It was not your fault, John. Besides… we all loved Harry. Some of us more than others,” she glances over at Anthea in the corner, “and she’d never have wanted you to die for her.”

John feels his throat grow tight. He tries to say thanks but it doesn’t seem enough. Soo Lin, bless her, seems to understand, and gives him a comforting touch on the shoulder.

“Talk to Anthea sometime, when you’re ready. She knew Harry best.”

“I… I’ll think about it.”

Honestly, talking to Mycroft’s top secret agent (he can’t stop imagining Anthea as a James Bond & Q hybrid now, toppling terrorist and witch organizations with a touch of her gift) makes him nervous enough. Knowing that her mission was to free Sherlock and she was stuck in the Dead Zone for nearly three years makes John want to salute her every minute for the rest of his life.

“…What are you doing to do now?”

“Dunno. Hope that my rent doesn’t go up now that Dead London isn’t Dead? Figure out my thing with Sherlock?”

Soo Lin gives him a knowing gaze and John huffs. “You?”

It’s her turn to look uncertain. “I had a good job at the museum before… looking after antiques. I used to paint too, so maybe I’ll open up a studio…” she looks at Sally wistfully.

“We could… we should all meet up again. For pints. Or something. You, me, Sally, Anthea.”

Soo Lin seems surprised at this question but John finds himself feeling genuine about it. They all went through hell together and John wouldn’t mind keeping in touch.

Slowly she smiles, “I’d like that.”

They part ways with a promise to email and inform Sally and Anthea about the plans. Sherlock returns to John’s side like he never left.

“So… what now?” John asks, ignoring how the Fog tells him this won’t last. He’s tired of seeing the same décor in every room within this private hotel. How many buildings does Mycroft own anyways?

Sherlock scowls. “Mycroft made me sign a public agreement to placate public opinion of witches —not that they know their government is being run by one, idiots—I have to solve cases for the state, use my magic for good (so arbitrary), etcetera, etcetera, I deleted most of it already. But I still retain access to the morgue and Lestrade will still give me cases as long as I don’t use magic again —”

“That’s reasonable… right?” John doesn’t know much about witch politics. It still boggles his
mind that there are more witches in existence than he thought. “But wait, is magic like… well, can
you even not use it? Is it like your gift? Will you get hurt if you don’t use it—”

“Don’t be silly, John,” Sherlock rolls his eyes, “my gift is obvious. I turn into a wolf every
midnight until dawn.”

John’s brain nearly stops.

“Wait. So that… that wasn’t really part of the curse? That was just your gift? Er… slightly
modified?”

“Yes. Problem?”

John just laughs. “No, no, not at all. I was just thinking that I was going miss seeing your Siraj
form. You better not get fleas.”

“I will eat all of your slippers.”

“The horror!”

Sherlock drags John across the yard. But before he forgets, he slips a new pair of black gloves on
John’s hands.

After all, every witch needs a way to protect themselves from becoming fog-touched. It’s only
natural that he gives another piece of himself to his John.

Mycroft sorts through the paperwork with a sigh. He’ll need to find a therapist to speak with the
three main pawns in that wretched curse-game Moriarty and his idiot brother played. Molly
Hooper will need several months to recuperate (though she insists she’s fit to work) and Mycroft
plans to flood Mrs. Hudson’s retirement fund with money. Lestrade will get any vacation he wants,
all the best care, and the highest raise Mycroft can blackmail officials into giving him.

Then there are work placements. Hundreds of people, those that Sherlock’s path crossed, all in
need of work again. Mycroft still doesn’t know why some were rejected by the curse. Likely
because Sherlock either hated them (see Anderson) or didn’t care for them (see Mrs. Turner.)
Moriarty, disgusting witch, was obsessed with seeing if Sherlock cared.

Better not to care. Doesn’t mean Sherlock cannot.

Still, to give his brother credit, he found someone who does. Someone who became Fog-touched
for him.

Mycroft shudders to think of the implications, of living each day with the Fog constantly
whispering weaknesses in your ear, asking you to join it. The knowledge, the power, one could
gain… at the price of losing all self. For witches, to gain even a tiny slither of the Fog’s power,
means giving up a physical heart. Contracting with a demon to fake having one.

John Watson could succumb any moment. And Mycroft fears what kind of Dead Zone his brother
would create to get John Watson back. Maybe one large enough to cover the whole world.

Best to get his top witches and scientists working on a cure. Benefit of gaining more knowledge
(and power) about the fog and keeping his brother’s human sane and in this plane.
Also need to give Anthea the greatest raise of her life. Maybe consider recruiting her, Sally Donovan and Soo Lin Yao into a special witch-hunting/healing division?

And the demon… there’s always a demon to deal with. Mycroft won’t be surprised if it’s escaped already, possessing another form. Demons do that.

It’ll be on the hunt for John Watson soon.

But Mycroft already has ten contingency plans in place.

Anything to keep London running.

- - -

We’ll be waiting for you, the Fog says, when John wonders if he should take off his gloves to sleep.

Sherlock pulls John away by the hand and the gloves stay on.

In those fleeting moments, he doesn’t hear any Fog.

- - -

And they lived.

(That’s a choice.)

End.

- - -

Interlude: Moran

He finds James Moriarty’s ashes in a street. Laughably easy to slip out of the prison. Most human souls are so *weak*, not like the delicious little soldier’s. Most humans fall apart as soon as Moran devours them and takes their body for himself.
Mother sings with pride, beautifully dissonant. *Take the ashes, breathe another child to life,* she says.

He knows what to do.

James Moriarty’s heart had been one of the tastiest morsels he’d feasted on when they had made a contract decades ago. Moran can still remember the pungent taste of pride and arrogance, of loneliness and *desire to hurt.* His ashes smell just as rich but Mother has promised him a better meal. A little soldier.

Moran brings the ashes close to his chest and steps into the shadows. He steps out onto another street, in what humans call ‘New London.’ Laughable when this London smells as fragile as the one swallowed by Mother.

*Ahhhh,* he can smell the ripe little soldier now, walking cautiously with the other witch. With one swipe, he’ll finally get to taste the soldier’s blood, tear that body apart so the soldier’s soul has *no choice* but to float in the in-between, to float towards Mother and then—

“hEllo bRoTHEr,” a familiar voice slices across his path, slices away Mother’s voice.

Moran looks up at a fragile, looking human. Female. Grey hair. Wrinkled skin. She’d fall apart if Moran snapped his fingers. He laughs. No harm in a snack before the main course...

But within a blink, the old human has him slammed against the wall, her gnarly wrist digging into his neck.

Moran spits at her, and *finally,* spots the golden numbers hanging around her neck.

“…2…21… B…” he snarls, “quite a vessel you’ve stolen for yourself… and to your *favourite* too —” he chokes at the tightening around his neck.

Her eyes glow. “nO. i aM bOth. AnD i wiLL noT LEt yOu tOUCh mY hUmanS!”

The night is filled with blood.

**Chapter End Notes**

Thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank YOU, to anyone who has ever left kudos or comments or bookmarked this piece. To anyone who followed from the beginning or just started now. To anyone who reblogged and shared this or talked about it or made fanart. I finished this because of your encouragement. You are all wonderful.

I left this ending up to interpretation. If you think Sherlock and John are romantic sexual, sure! If you think they’re in a romantic asexual relationship sure!

I leave this universe open to you to write fanfics about as long as you give credit. Any extras I write from now on in this universe, you can ignore in favour of your own canon. Have fun. And again, thank you. I couldn't have finished this story without you (especially angelblack3, who helped me so much. Thank you!)

**FANART:** You can see new Darkling fanart on tumblr under my ‘fanart’ tag [here](#) and [this piece](#) by the wonderful [kissing2cousins](#)
TRANSLATORS AND PODFICERS: If I have given you permission to translate my fic into another language (or do a podfic, etc.) please email me at autumn.festival14@gmail.com so I can add you to my list. Please let me know your username and what language you're going to translate to. Before, I could keep track of who I gave permission to but now with so many emails I just forget. Thank you for understanding!

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If you ever have any requests for extra scenes in this universe, please let me know in the comments below or on tumblr. Thank you again.


Please [drop by the archive and comment](http://wwwarchive.org) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!