

## **A spell against fear**

by mazaher

January 13th, 2012

::

*What the scene with John and the "hound" in the lab may read, if the Screenwriters' Guild required a mandatory Ethology 1.0.1. examination.*

*Another bit of The Hounds of Baskerville I wanted to try and fix. A slightly alternate writing from 59:54 to 1:06:53, because "Keep talking." -- "I can't, it'll hear me," makes no damn sense in this world or the next.*

*Capt. John H. Watson, formerly of the Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers, needs no such rewriting: he's pretty much amazing as he is, even in the actually filmed scene (go and read the post reblogged at <http://abundantlyqueer.tumblr.com/post/15625235637/benedictosaurus-okay-so-this-actually-fucking>).*

*See endnote for more info on one detail.*

*As for Sherlock, well... I think that what we see him performing at the end of the scene is a rather remarkable piece of applied psychology, as subtle as it is effective in view of restoring John's understandably shaken emotional balance. It is probably not an excuse. But I do see it as extenuating circumstances.*

::

ACCESS DENIED.

In the too-bright light, alarms blaring in his ears, John's eyes blow wide open in disbelief.

"Oh, come on!"

Suddenly, darkness. Silence.

In the narrow beam of the torch, afterimages still burned on his retinas, John searches for whoever it is that turned off the power as, half-blinded, squinting, he makes his way to the opposite entrance.

"Hello?"

His ears ring and buzz after the onslaught of the alarms. But now, a scurrying noise, a different pitch. What was it?

The large cages mounted on the whole length of one side are covered by light curtains. John draws back a couple, finding emptiness inside.

His tension eases fractionally.

There, more noises come from the other side of the lab, behind the desks. John points the torch.

Nothing.

In the third cage, a monkey. Its frightened screech makes John jump no less than his torch did the monkey.

The fourth cage has been forced open, the gate leveraged from the lower outer corner until it bent and the lock gave.

Now John is scared. He hastens to the card reader. This door will open, must open, and let him out of here.

But it doesn't.

"No, come on, come on!"

Nothing. He's stuck inside.

He draws out the phone and dials Sherlock.

By now he's panting.

"Now, don't be ridiculous," he mutters. "Pick up."

Sherlock doesn't.

"Oh, damn it!"

He's on his own.

"Right."

He turns back, again exploring the room and the faint shapes his almost-recovered sight makes out beside the beam of the torch, searching for another way out.

A tapping of nails on the floor.

Where?

Is there another door?

There, mid-way on the opposite loong side.

John trots over there, draws out his card for a third time.

A growl.

Footsteps.

A snarl.

John presses his hand to his mouth to muffle the gasp he can't suppress.

Automatically he slips into combat mode: shut up, keep breathing, and \*think\*!

*It's a closed room and I made quite a noise coming in and shuffling around, so no way I can actually hide, I can be easily tracked by hearing and smell. Not enough light from the glass panels in the doors to even just make out moving shapes. Better try and \*see\* something myself, than counting on the beam to confuse ...whatever the hell is in here, if it decides to attack. There.*

John turns the cap to widen the beam and sticks his torch upright inside a beaker on the nearest desk. The torchlight, reflected on the white ceiling, casts a faint light on the nearest half of the room. He looks and listens, slowly turning around in place.

No movement, no sound.

John draws a shaky breath, then another. He's seen enough in Afghanistan to know that if he wants to keep his breathing steady, frightened as he is, he needs to talk.

So he talks.

"Everybody's blabbing about a hound, so I'll go with the idea that you're some sort of dog and not a complete alien. They said the animals here can't use the lifts, so I guess you can't shoot me either. I've been under fire. This is a bit less bad, I just have to keep my distance. There's a byword the vet officers used to repeat... What was it? The three motivating Fs: food - fuck - fear."

A half-bark, half snarl from the dark end of the lab. John flinches. He can't remember ever having been so scared. But then, he was never completely alone like this in the midst of danger. He goes on talking, the tremor in his voice under thin, painful control.

"Let's see. Food. You're growling, so you're not hunting. Correct, mate, I'm not food. Let me tell you you wouldn't enjoy me, with that aftertaste of morphine and antibiotics. Fuck. I'm not competition for mating... at least I hope not, so let's say that's out of the picture too. Fear. I bet that's why you're growling-- just as I'm having trouble breathing. Fear... You're out of your cage, and there's a human in the lab. Out of the cage is where whatever unpleasant procedures humans do here are performed, isn't it? So, care to get safely back into yours? Let me leave you right of way. Like this."

John backs slowly toward the first empty cage in the row he inspected earlier, taking care to avoid crossing the open spaces in the room. He slips inside, bolts the lock into place and draws the curtain partially down, leaving just enough of a clear corner to keep watch on the room.

"See? I'm not staring at you. I'm not challenging you and I'm not afraid of you. Crap, who am I fooling? From what I've seen and heard, you can still smash this cage open and make me mincemeat... Let's put it this way, I'm not so afraid of you that I wouldn't fight back. But we're on the same boat really, you know that? Nobody's listening, mate. No friend here for either of

us. What about singing, then. *We'll beat the bailiffs out of fun, / We'll make the mayor and sheriffs run / We are the boys no man dares dun / If he regards a whole skin. / Our hearts so stout have got no fame...*

His phone rings.

Sherlock.

"It's here. It's - in - here - with - me," John whispers, making an effort to make the words clear.

"Where are you?"

"Get me out, Sherlock, you've got to get me out. The big lab, the first lab that we saw."

More growling. Whispering was a mistake.

"Fine, mate, you want to know what I'm up to, don't you? As I want to know where *\*you\** are..."

"John... John?"

"Now, Sherlock, please."

"All right, I'll find you. Keep talking."

"I am talking. And singing to the damn beast. Just be quick, Sherlock."

"Keep talking. What are you seeing?"

Half-hearted snarling.

"John?"

"Yes, I'm here."

"What can you see?"

"I don't know. I don't know, but I can hear it now. Did you hear that?"

"Stay calm. Stay calm. Can you see it?"

John suddenly finds he's near the end of his tether. For the benefit of the growling animal he can hear and not see, he must keep his tone conversational. The effort almost strangles him.

"I'm actually doing a damn good job of staying calm, Sherlock, thank you very much."

"Can you see it? Can you see it?" Sherlock insists.

"No, I can't..."

A shadow across the curtain in the half light. John can only make it out if he doesn't stare and gives quick glances out of the corner of his eye. He draws himself up and back against the wall inside the cage. He swallows.

"I can see it. I can see it. It's here."

An explosion of white light.

"Are you all right? John?"

"Jesus Christ, it was the hound!"

*\*Sherlock\** is there. Sherlock is reaching a hand to his shoulder, but John can't be touched right now, he must *\*move\** and not be touched and be free to go out of this damn place buried twenty feet under the earth and breathe again the blessed air of the moor. He jumps to his feet, out of the cage.

He moves toward the exit, not running because he's an officer, but as quick as he can walk, turning back to Sherlock as he goes, wondering why he's not following.

"Sherlock, it was here, I swear it, Sherlock, it must... it must..."

*Be still in here, Sherlock, you need to come out with me, right \*now\*.*

"Did... did you see it? You must have!"

"It's all right, it's OK now."

*Sherlock looks worried for all the wrong reasons. He looks actually worried about \*me\* and not about the fucking beast which must still be here.*

"No, it's NOT! It's NOT OK, I saw it, I was wrong."

"Hm, well, let's not jump to conclusions."

"What?"

"What did you see?"

"I told you, I saw the hound."

"Huge, red eyes?"

"Yes."

"Glowing?"

"Yeah."

"No."

"What?"

"I made up the bit about glowing. You saw what you expected to see because I told you. You have been drugged. We have all been drugged."

"Drugged?"

"Drugged. Can you walk?"

"Of course I can walk."

But he hasn't: these last 26 seconds, Sherlock has kept him there talking. Talking of reasonable, everyday things like doubts and conclusions and expectations and drugs, and the panic has actually abated. John's heart is still racing, but not at the frantic pace it was only a minute ago.

"Come on, then. It's time to lay this ghost."

::

*endnote: Garryowen (or Eóghan's Garden, in the town of Limerick) was a drinking song in Ireland for quite some time before the US 7th Cavalry pinched it as the official Regiment tune. In my country, it's self-mockingly sung or whistled as customary background score by those who unexpectedly find themselves in very, \*very\* tight corners. The lyrics here, however, are different and rather ...less presentable; originated in the Infantry, they have since leaked among the general public. It is actually those lyrics I had in mind while writing. It's not very likely --but by no means impossible-- that John may have heard and learned them during his service in Afghanistan.*