

Human For A While

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Human For A While

by [fengirl88](#)

Summary

Written for this anonymous [prompt](#) on sherlockbbfic:

John/Selkie!Sherlock

John comes home from a trip to the seaside with a pale-eyed young man in tow. Sherlock is tall, brilliant, and strangely sad, and seems incapable of leaving John's side. One day John brings a seal skin to Harry's house and makes her promise to hide it, and that she will never, ever tell Sherlock where it is.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

Chapter 1

Part One: Harry

John was a total wreck when he came home from Afghanistan: shoulder useless, hand shaking, a limp his therapist said was psychosomatic, if you wanted to listen to that sort of bullshit. Staggering along on an Army pension, no way he could stay in London permanently on that sort of money, but would he take anything from Harry? Would he buggery. Except the phone, and she was pretty sure he'd only accepted that because of Clara. Always thought he had an eye for Clara, though he denied it. His gaydar really was nonexistent, poor sap.

“Keep in touch,” Harry had said, pressing the phone into his hand. He'd said he would, but she knew he wouldn't. When she'd tried to kiss him goodbye, he'd flinched away, then looked guilty because he'd hurt her. Fucking typical on both counts. She'd needed another drink after all that. Never could stand the smell of hospitals.

She knew he'd got some grotty bedsit, probably just sitting there staring at the walls and going quietly crazy. You just can't help some people. Knew he'd still got the gun, too, but she wouldn't let herself think about that. Other people have lives as well, you know.

When the letter came from their great-uncle's solicitors, it seemed like a godsend. Get John out of the way for a bit, make him feel he's doing something useful, he always liked that. She got on the phone right away.

“What do you want, Harry?”

“And hello to you too,” she said tartly. “Look, John, Hector's died and the solicitor wants us to go and sort out his stuff. I can't go, I'm all tied up at work. Do you think you could—”

“OK,” he'd said, not even letting her finish. Must be more desperate than she thought. “Where do I have to go?”

“They said you can fly to Aberdeen and then hire a car; I'll pay for that – no, look, don't argue, you can pay me out of the estate when it's settled, OK? It's about half an hour's drive from there, on the coast.”

“Just as well it's July,” John said.

She remembered that freezing Christmas in Fife with Hector just after their father died. It wasn't like John to refer to their childhood, however obliquely.

“Yes, just as well,” she'd said, and they'd talked practicalities, got the rest of the call over as quickly as possible.

She hadn't expected John to tell her how it went, certainly hadn't expected to *see* him so soon after he got back. She was in the middle of packing up Clara's books – why the fuck anyone

needed *that* many books she'd never know – when the doorbell rang. It looked like John through the glass, but there was someone else with him, tall thin figure with dark hair.

“Harry, this is Sherlock,” John said.

Fucking hell, she thought, knowing she was staring and she really shouldn't be. If she'd had a straight bone in her body she'd have been all over this man. A face almost too weird for beauty: hair as black as coal, ash-pale skin, knife-sharp cheekbones, strange light sea-coloured eyes, and that mouth – dear God, that *mouth*... Where the fuck had John picked this one up, and what on earth did he see in John?

Jumping to conclusions, Clara would have said, but you'd only got to look at the body language: the way this man stood just too close for casualness. The expression in his eyes when he looked at John, as if he wanted to melt into him...

Jesus, H, ask them in, why don't you, don't just stand here gawping and channelling Mills and Boon.

“Come in,” she said. “How was Collieston?”

John looked up at Sherlock, *blushed*, for fuck's sake, then looked away again and cleared his throat. “Fine,” he said, “good. It was all fine.”

Your luck's changing, mate, Harry thought.

She had no idea how much.

“Hector left us the *house*, Harry,” John said shakily. “It's a mess, but structurally sound. And the money – did you *know* he was that well off?”

“No,” Harry said. Good news for John, though; at least it would cushion things till he found a job, though presumably probate would take a while.

“I've found a flat to rent,” John said. “Mike Stamford knows someone who's just moving out, and Sherlock and I are going to share it.”

Too good to be true, Harry thought uneasily, but what was the point in saying that? John might look concussed, but he also looked happier than she'd seen him in years, and she wasn't going to rain on his parade.

They talked paperwork and house prices, Sherlock still gazing silently at John. Harry was almost starting to wonder if he *could* speak, but as the two of them were leaving he turned and said “You'll be wanting John's new address; it's 221b Baker Street.”

Deep voice, musical, with a sort of growl in it. Probably a smoker, Harry thought.

She didn't see much of them over the next few weeks, but whenever she did it was always the same: Sherlock apparently completely wrapped up in John, and John looking exhilarated but also uneasy. She remembered that look in the mirror from her own first gay relationship, no surprise there – but she didn't understand what was going on with Sherlock. Obviously crazy

about John, couldn't take his eyes off him; but with a sense of sadness coming from him, so powerful she could almost touch it. Harry wondered if he was ill and not saying – it'd be just like John's luck to fall for someone who was utterly gorgeous and devoted to him and then lose him to some awful disease.

No use worrying about that. Might never happen, and she'd got other things to think about. Selling the bloody marital home, for a start.

She was making lists for the removal men when John turned up. Alone, which was surprising – she hadn't seen him on his own since he came back from Scotland. Carrying a bundle of something wrapped up in an old green velvet curtain.

“I need you to hide this for me,” he said abruptly.

“Oh Christ, John, you do pick your moments. I'm trying to move house, if you hadn't noticed.”

“I know,” he said. “I thought that might help to – camouflage it.”

She stared at him and at the bundle. What the fuck was he up to now?

“Promise me you'll never tell anyone,” he said. “And especially not Sherlock.”

“Jesus, John, what *is* this?”

“It's his,” he said. “He mustn't find it. Promise me.”

She lifted a corner of the velvet, touched the smooth pelt that lay heavy in his arms.

Sealskin.

She stared at him.

“You have got to be fucking *joking*.”

But he wasn't, that was clear.

She'd heard the stories often enough from Hector. Used to know the Great Silkie ballad by heart. Never imagined for a moment any of the stories could be true.

“I love him,” John said desperately. “I can't let him go.”

“Oh God, John.”

She wanted to hug him, but he wouldn't want that, and the sight of that crazy bundle in his arms made her feel sick, thinking of what must surely follow.

What they both knew about the ballads and the stories, what everyone knows: the love between a selkie and a human always ends badly.

Chapter 2

Part Two: John

Even in July, Hector's house oozed damp and cold. The rooms had that unmistakable smell, too long unaired. Wardrobes bulged at the seams with musty clothes, piles of yellowing newspapers and unexpected grim stores of food tins and packets long past their sell-by date. (John remembered his mother twenty years ago, going through the Fife larder like a small blonde tornado as Hector protested: "They just make that date nonsense up so they can sell more. Put it back, Jean, it's perfectly fine." "It is *not* fine, Hector, it's *fermenting*.")

He scrubbed the kitchen floor and work surfaces with industrial quantities of disinfectant – at least he'd be able to walk across the room without *sticking* at every step, and throw together something to eat. The conservatory was freezing cold, but smelt less bad than the bedrooms, so he set up camp there, blessing the instinct that had made him pack his sleeping-bag. He wolfed down the doorstep sandwiches he'd made and sat staring out at the harbour, drinking his tea.

The coldest winter I ever spent was summer in Northeast Scotland, he thought, grinning wryly. He wriggled into the sleeping-bag still wearing everything but his boots, and wishing he'd brought a woolly hat. Wondered how long ago Hector had stopped even trying to look after himself. Still, when you're 96 you can do what you like, at least if you haven't got kids to interfere and put you in a home.

Was this what his life would be like, if he survived long enough?

Shut up and go to sleep, Watson, for fuck's sake.

For once, he didn't dream of Afghanistan, but of a storm at sea, a boat poised on the edge of a whirlpool, held in place by fraying ropes. Something from an old black-and-white film he'd once seen.

He woke at 4 a.m., sweating buckets and with a raging thirst. Drank some water and fell heavily asleep again, waking to find it was gone nine already.

Late morning, and he was still sitting on the clifftop behind the house, staring mindlessly at the puffins wheeling and skittering through the air. He knew he ought to go indoors, do some more cleaning, but the thought of those moth-eaten garments and slippery eiderdowns made him feel itchy all over.

For a moment he'd thought it was a man swimming down there, and then he realized it was a seal. Grey seal, from the size of it. The sight gave him an odd feeling inside, a lift of the heart, Hector would have called it. So beautiful, solitary and strong, this sleek dark creature raising its head now to stare at him.

It's not really staring at you, he told himself. Just an optical illusion. But it felt real, for a moment – and then the seal disappeared into the waves. John strained to catch another glimpse of it, but it was gone.

Better go back and face the house anyway.

The rest of the day was spent throwing things into binbags, till John was aching all over and covered in dust and cobwebs. The cranky boiler grudgingly produced enough water for a bath and a hairwash, and with clean clothes on he didn't feel so bad. He made himself dinner – pasta and tomato sauce, pretty basic but the hot food was comforting – and then settled down to read himself to sleep with one of Hector's books.

In retrospect, reading about how Slains Castle had inspired Bram Stoker to write *Dracula* probably wasn't such a good idea just before bed. He tried to scream but couldn't make a sound; he woke up shaking and whimpering. Put the light on, needing to see for himself that he wasn't really covered in blood. Felt his neck: no wound there. Just his mind playing tricks on him again. Fuck it.

He didn't know what made him decide to go down to the sea in the dark, lie down on the slipway with his head hanging over the side, for all the world as if he *wanted* to get washed away. He'd had enough, that was all. Nothing worked. Nothing was any good. He felt the tears run down his face, couldn't even be bothered to feel ashamed of it any more, lying here crying stupidly into the sea.

A strange sort of howling from further along the beach made him scramble to his feet and peer into the darkness. He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand, then rubbed them, not believing what he saw.

What kind of idiot would go skinny-dipping in the middle of the night off the coast of Scotland?

A bloody *gorgeous* one, apparently. He'd seen more than his fair share of naked male bodies – that went with the job – but never a man as beautiful as this.

Maybe it was just the moonlight; but the way the man's skin shone made John catch his breath, made him want to stretch out a hand and touch. He was close enough now, close enough to feel the heat coming from the other man's body, the warmth of his breath as he leaned closer still, their faces almost touching.

I'm dreaming, aren't I? I'm still fast asleep on that bloody sofa and any minute now he's going to turn into another sodding vampire –

The kiss was like falling through clear water with the sun in it, dizzy and plummeting. His hands clutched and scrabbled, tangling in dark curls as he pressed into the embrace. Must be a dream but the body in his arms was so warm, warm and dry, how was that possible? The man's lips and tongue teased and caressed, making him moan with longing.

But he didn't do this, he'd never –

“Shh,” the man said. “It's all right.”

Hands, sure and strong, stroking John's hair and his neck, running down his spine, holding him together and he needed something to hold him together because kissing this man was going to shatter him into a million tiny pieces and he'd be lost forever. He was drowning in it, gasping for breath, sinking into the depths, clinging on to this man like his only hope of rescue, his legs buckling under him, the strength of those hands holding him up as he shuddered and cried out, shaken to his bones.

The hands relaxed their grip and John pulled back from the kiss, feeling the chill of the night air as pleasure ebbed, leaving him sticky and ashamed.

“Sorry,” he muttered, hardly daring to open his eyes.

“Are you?” the man said. “I'm not. I don't think you should be either.”

The intimacy of that voice in his ear made his hair stand on end. Pressure of lips on his neck, a lingering kiss just light enough not to leave a mark. There'd be no trace in the morning to prove he hadn't dreamt the whole thing.

“You'll see me again, though,” the man said, as if he could hear John's thoughts. “Once it starts it can't be undone, and it's started now.”

“What – how –”

“The usual way, of course,” the man said. “Look it up, if you can't remember. Go back to bed.”

John stared at the pale figure walking away along the beach till he couldn't see it any more. Then he stumbled back to the house in a daze and collapsed on the sofa, tumbling into sleep as if sandbagged. He had no more dreams, or none that he remembered.

Chapter 3

Part Three: Sherlock

He'd seduced men before, of course; summer after summer, ever since he was old enough. Easy, when you know how, and it passed the time. He never saw them again, never wanted to. But this man was different.

Some relation of the dead man's, he'd thought, seeing the car pull up in front of the house. Not a son or a grandson, though. The old man didn't seem the type to breed.

As the land-dwellers said, *It takes one to know one*.

When he'd looked up from the water to see the man on the clifftop, watching him, the shock of recognition was so strong he'd had to turn away, plunge deep under the water. *This one's mine*. He was shaking with excitement, impatient to begin.

It had always been a game, before. He wasn't quite sure it would be this time.

That night, the man's sadness called to him so powerfully that he could hardly wait for the summons to finish, rushing from the water and shedding his skin before the last tear dropped into the sea. He couldn't resist a whoop of triumph. *I knew it!*

Skilful kisses and touches, polished moves in a familiar dance. The words were new, though; something more than the litany of curses and pleas wrung from his partners in the height of passion. He shouldn't have said what he did, shouldn't have spoken at all. But the thrill of feeling this man coming undone just from his kiss made him reckless.

Feeling desire *after* the act was new, too. The taste of the man's skin was still in his mouth, the scent of him still in his nostrils. It wasn't enough. He wanted skin against skin; wanted to lie with him all night, luxurious and slow, to tease and play till they were both spent and panting. He wanted to lick the sweat from every inch of him, to clean him with his tongue, swallow every drop of the precious fluid he'd seemed so ashamed of spilling. The memory of that choked cry made Sherlock clench inside with pleasure: he wanted to hear it again, and more, louder and unashamed this time. Wanted to possess this man completely, melt into him, wrap him close and tight around himself like a second skin.

He was careful, going back, and lucky; nobody saw him. He'd never felt the need to hide his conquests before, but he didn't want anyone to know about this one. Not yet, anyway. His mother would fret and his brother, pompous ass, would say *the rules were there for a reason*.

"Rules are boring," Sherlock muttered defiantly. Boring, and irrelevant.

All the stories were of human men and Selkie women, human women and Selkie men. And children, always children. That was when the trouble started. Everyone knew that. What he did, what he'd just done, wasn't in the rules at all, but he couldn't get them to see it. If she

knew where he'd been, his mother would ask him to promise he wouldn't go back. He didn't like saying no to her, but nothing in the world was going to keep him away from this man.

When he swam out the next morning the man was sitting on the clifftop again, staring into space. Sherlock wanted to go to him there and then but he couldn't: too risky to shed his skin in broad daylight, so close to other people. All he could do was gaze up at the man, showing off his strength and grace as he dived and surfaced: *see me, notice me, look how beautiful I am*. He knew he shouldn't, but the smile that lit up the man's tired face was worth it. He stayed as long as he dared, then dragged himself reluctantly away to wait for nightfall.

Past the longest day now, but it felt as if the darkness would never come.

"I thought I'd dreamt you," the man said, sounding half-dazed still.

The same stretch of sand, darker tonight because of the clouds across the moon.

"I told you you'd see me again," Sherlock said, trying to sound casual though his heart was hammering. "Should I leave a mark on you this time so you know I'm real?"

A sharp intake of breath. "*Christ*. I should *not* want that. I want that."

Sherlock wanted it too, wanted it so much it made him dizzy. *Put a mark on you, indelible, mine*. He moved closer, till they were almost touching but not quite, savouring the ache of anticipation now it was almost over.

"We can't do this here," the man said, glancing over his shoulder at the lights of the village. "It's not safe."

Last night he'd been too far gone to care. Sherlock wanted to make him feel like that again, reckless with desire.

"I like it here in the open," he said, reaching out to stroke the man's neck.

The pulse fluttered under his fingers.

"*Ohh*. Oh God," the man said shakily. "I don't even know your name."

Don't give him a name, you must never tell them your name –

"Sherlock."

"*Sherlock*. I – my name is John."

"John."

The name felt good in his mouth. Heavy. He said it again, tasting it. John made a soft desperate noise and kissed him.

Good, so good, the kiss, and different from when he kissed John, not sure how, it didn't matter, this, just this, no, he wanted more, he *wanted* –

John was pulling him towards the house, saying “So beautiful, Christ, you're so beautiful, please come with me, *please*.”

Stronger than he looked, and Sherlock liked that, liked it too much for his own good.

“I can't –”

The oldest taboo: *you don't cross the threshold*. He knew he mustn't, but John's grip felt so good it made him weak. He felt drugged, half-asleep, knowing he was walking into danger but he couldn't stop himself.

“Lie down with me, please, I want you to, I want you so *much*,” John said. “*Fuck*.”

Hands fumbling with buttons, shoelaces, fastenings – Sherlock silently cursed the stupidity of humans' coverings – and finally, *finally* the relief of naked skin beautiful and warm against his own. John's scent making him dizzy with pleasure – just pheromones, he told himself, but that didn't explain the feeling, so strong he felt he was shouting it aloud. *I've found my mate*.

He'd thought it would never happen to him. Thought he'd die unmated and he wouldn't care, it was better that way. Why would you stay with someone once you'd got what you wanted? But he couldn't imagine ever wanting John less fiercely than he wanted him right this minute. *Mine. Now. Always*.

The makeshift bed was cramped and narrow, but it didn't matter; he'd never felt anything as good as this.

John's sex, thicker than his own and fully hard, beautifully heavy in his hand as if it had been made for it. His own aching arousal matching John's, the slippery wetness of their pre-come slicking Sherlock's palm as he tightened his fist around them both. Moving the ring of his hand, slow, then faster, harder, *like that, yes, please, so good, too much, more*. John's hand closing around his, pressing his fingers tighter, squeezing, *now, right now*. John tensed and cried out, coming hard, making a glorious mess of their joined hands and his own stomach and chest. John's hand was still clasping his fist and Sherlock went on thrusting into it, till he couldn't hold out any longer against the pleasure of that tight hot slide, couldn't breathe, shaken and helpless, coming apart in John's grasp, his mind emptied of everything but John's name.

He was floating, suspended, heavy and weightless at the same time, so awash with pleasure he couldn't move. His blood felt thick and slow, and he could hardly open his eyes.

“Hello,” John said, sounding pleased and shy. “Are you awake again, then?”

John's hands stroking his back felt so good that for a moment he wanted nothing more than to abandon himself to the bliss of that touch. But the sounds of the birds outside and the colour of the sky made his stomach knot with panic. How long had he been asleep? He tried to sit up, and found he was dizzy.

“Careful,” John said. “You don't have to go, do you?”

I don't want to go. But he couldn't leave it any longer: it would be light soon, and the risk of someone finding his skin was too great.

“I must,” he said, pulling away from John's embrace.

Oh, but not touching John any more was *agony*, like having a strip of his flesh torn from him. The pain scared him. All the stories of captivity and suffering seemed to be pressing in on him till he couldn't breathe, everything screaming at him to get out of here, *now*.

“Will you – will I see you again?” John asked, sounding so lost and unsure that it made Sherlock's chest hurt.

Tell him no and walk away. Walk out of this trap and don't come back, if you value your life.

“Yes,” he said. “I promise you will.”

Chapter 4

Human For A While

Part Four: John

Finding the photograph changed everything.

He'd been trying to sort Hector's books into boxes – the ones he wanted to keep and the ones for the Oxfam shop. Tucked away behind a clutch of classic detective stories he'd decided to take for comfort reading was another volume of Scottish folktales, not one he'd seen before. Hector's name on the flyleaf and his notes in the margins looked firmer and clearer than John remembered. Written long ago, obviously.

The dust made him sneeze, and he banged the book shut to shake it off. A loose page dropped out of it and landed on the floor. *Fuck. Torn it.* As he bent to pick it up he realized it wasn't part of the book at all, but a separate black-and-white photograph. Slightly blurred, but it took his breath away.

What the hell was Hector doing with a picture of Sherlock?

Was it Sherlock, though? It was uncannily like him, but looking at it again, John wasn't quite sure. He peered closer at the pencilled figures in the corner: *xii.viii.46*.

There was writing on the back of the photograph, too. A quotation, but he didn't know where from:

“Summoned by tears, and held in woe.”

Underneath, so small and faint he could hardly read it, was another line of writing.

My lost love, now and forever.

John sat down heavily on the sofa and stared at the picture. *Hector* had written that about this man. In 1946. Jesus.

He couldn't imagine what it must have been like, being gay back then.

Never thought of Hector as having any kind of sex life. Well, you don't, do you, when you're a kid? Hector was already an old man, and it was easy to assume he'd never been interested in that sort of thing.

So strange to think of that part of Hector's life, hidden away all these years in a book of fairytales. He wondered what Hector would have thought if he'd known about him and Sherlock. But if Hector hadn't died he'd never have met Sherlock. The thought was like a physical pain, doubling him up.

A memory from more than twenty years ago came back to him, his A-level summer. Waiting for results and tormenting himself with worry – *what would he do if he didn't get into university, if he couldn't become a doctor* – and Hector comforting him:

“My mother always used to say *What's for ye will no go by ye*. If it's meant to happen, it'll happen somehow.”

He should have kept in touch more, he knew, but he'd been too caught up in his own life. And now Hector was dead and his death had brought John a gift he'd never imagined.

He turned the pages guiltily, trying not to think about it.

“The Goodman of Wastness”. One of Hector's favourites. He hadn't read that for years. There was a cross in the margin next to the selkie woman's parting words, when she'd found her skin again:

“Goodman of Wastness, farewell to ye!
I liked ye well, ye were good to me,
But I love better my man of the sea.”

In the gap between the stories, Hector had scrawled a few words and another date:

His fate was harder. iii.ix.46

John wondered what it meant. Must be something to do with the man in the picture. He'd probably never know – whatever that relationship was, it must have been a secret one. God knows what Harry would say if he told her about this. Or about him and Sherlock, come to that.

Night seemed a long time away. Too many hours to spend daydreaming and remembering and longing to be naked with Sherlock in his arms again.

John groaned and buried his face in the sofa cushions, giving up the battle with exhaustion.

Must show Sherlock that picture, he thought, as his eyelids began to droop.

“Where did you get that?” Sherlock's voice was harsh.

“It was in one of Hector's books,” John said. “I thought at first it was you, till I saw the date. Do you know who it is?”

“It's my grandfather.” Sherlock looked as if he might be about to be sick. “I never knew him. But I've seen – other images of him.”

“There's a quotation on the back, but I don't know what it means,” John said, showing him.

Sherlock gave a cry and dropped to his knees, burying his face in his hands.

“Sherlock. Sherlock, please, what is it?” John knelt beside him and put a tentative hand on his shoulder.

“Not here,” Sherlock moaned, “it wasn't here, I'd have *known*.”

“What wasn't?” John asked. His stomach was knotted with dread.

“There's – a *feeling* you get in the places where it's happened,” Sherlock said. “It gets into the walls.”

“What are you talking about?”

Sherlock raised his head and stared at John, as if he couldn't believe anyone could be so stupid.

“Captivity,” he spat. “Your kind imprisoning mine.”

That couldn't really mean what John thought it meant, could it? He wondered if he was going mad, or if Sherlock was. Maybe they both were.

Hector's voice echoed in John's head: *If a woman wanted to call a Selkie to her, she must cry seven tears into the sea.*

“Summoned by tears,” he said, wonderingly.

“*Finally*,” Sherlock said, his voice tight with rage.

“Are you saying Hector – did that to your grandfather?”

“He *called* him!” Sherlock burst out. “Called him and kept him. Trapped him.”

And lost him, John thought, *the way I'm going to lose you now.*

He remembered his despair that night on the slipway, lying there crying into the sea –

“I called *you*, didn't I?” he said, stricken. “That's what you meant about *the usual way*.”

Sherlock said, so quiet John could hardly hear him, “I wanted you to. The first time I saw you –”

“Wasn't that the first time?”

Sherlock's face flushed, and John had a sudden image of the seal in the water, that lithe strong dark body he'd watched diving and surfacing, showing off, day after day.

“Oh, this is *crazy*,” he said helplessly.

“It was the only way I could see you,” Sherlock said. “I couldn't come here in the light.”

“I wanted to see you too,” John said. “Every hour of every day.”

Sherlock groaned and hauled him close for a long desperate kiss, pressing against him as if he wanted to break through the wall of John's skin and disappear inside him. John tasted blood, his own or Sherlock's, he wasn't sure. He clung to Sherlock with all his strength, letting his weight pull both of them to the floor.

No finesse to it this time: they clutched and grabbed at each other, needy, frantic, trying to blot out what had happened. Sherlock was all bones, bruising and hard, slamming against him as John groaned and gasped for breath. He gripped tighter as Sherlock thrust, though his knee was hurting and his shoulder was screaming in protest.

Words kept forming in his mind: *the last time, it can't be the last time, I can't bear it, if I have to give you up I'll die...* He buried his face in Sherlock's neck, crying out and coming apart, shaken by the force of it.

Sherlock's movements grew more urgent, till he stilled, going taut all over, and came with a long wailing cry, clasping John so tight he thought his ribs would break. He kissed John's eyes, wet and stinging with salt and sweat, and held him as if he'd never let him go. Neither of them spoke for a long time.

John lay breathing Sherlock in, trying to lock the memory of his scent, his skin, away where he couldn't lose it, but knowing it was useless. It would fade from his mind, like the sound of Sherlock's voice, like the contours of his face, like the feel of Sherlock's body against his. It would come too soon, the time when he couldn't remember Sherlock any more, not properly. And then there'd be no point in anything any more.

"Don't you *dare* think like that," Sherlock said, in a growl that made John's hair stand on end.

How did he know?

"Oh come on, it's obvious," Sherlock said impatiently. "It's written all over you."

"If you know," John said, "then you know why."

"You don't understand, do you?" Sherlock said, sounding as if it was being forced out of him. "I can't be parted from you either."

John felt weak with relief, then caught off balance by a sudden wave of anger.

"So when were you going to tell me what you really are? Or weren't you?"

"You wouldn't have believed me, would you?" Sherlock said unsteadily. "You'd have thought I was mad, or making things up."

"Maybe," John said, knowing it was true.

"We'll find a way," Sherlock said. "We have to. Not here, but somewhere."

He pushed his hands into John's hair and drew him close again.

They were gentler this time, careful and tender, vividly aware of each other's fragility. Slow, deep kisses and prolonged caresses; an act of reassurance, an unspoken promise, till the hunger overtook them again, pushing them out of themselves.

What the word meant: *Ecstasy*. Standing outside the self. The hidden meaning inside the skin of all those myths, those stories of transformation.

But the skin of this story was also the truth, and the truth was a hard one. What everyone knew: what all the stories and ballads told you. The love between a selkie and a human never had a happy ending.

Had never had one yet.

Who were they, to think they could change the rules?

Chapter 5

Part Five: Sherlock

Too many watchers, so close to home: he'd always known he couldn't escape their surveillance forever. His luck had run out at last; the storm broke over his head.

His brother tried to *order* him not to go back there again, which was frankly absurd. As if Sherlock was going to do what *he* said.

When that didn't work, he claimed Sherlock had broken the rules in going to John in the first place. Said there was *no record of a summoning*.

“Then your records are wrong,” Sherlock snapped. Trust Mycroft to make a mess of things.

His mother was just as upset and angry as he'd feared: “This man's family nearly destroyed yours, Sherlock; don't you care about that at all?”

Always talking about *the history*. Why did everyone behave as if the only things that could happen were the ones that had happened before?

If Mycroft's records were anything to go by, history couldn't be trusted anyway. Probably all of it was equally distorted: centuries of carelessness, prejudice and assumptions.

And if the history was wrong, maybe the rules were too. Maybe there was a way to escape them. Or rewrite them.

There had to be a way. Not here, but somewhere.

When Sherlock impulsively said he'd go with him to London, John looked so happy it took his breath away, then kissed Sherlock as if he was trying to crush the life out of him.

After that it was too late to back out, even if he'd wanted to.

A long way from the sea, and the thought of that made Sherlock breathless in a different way, feeling imagined walls closing in on him. He tried to tell himself the distance would help; too close and he'd be constantly drawn back.

Maybe they'd be safe in the city. Plenty of places they could hide.

He knew his way around London by now; the city had been his refuge from the breeding-grounds in autumn and winter, year after year. Escaping the monotonous cycle of courtship and reproduction, the weight of expectation that dragged him down. His family's obsession with lineage and heredity, the duty of perpetuating your kind. He didn't want any part of it.

He liked the anonymity of crowds: wave after wave of people passing through the city and none of them his. There were watchers here, too, but the security cameras seemed blessedly impersonal.

The disguise he wore made it easy to slip away from these strangers, even from those who thought they knew him. Better than a cloak of invisibility: they saw a drug addict and never looked beyond the label. If he wasn't around, they just assumed he was out of his skull somewhere, or maybe trying to get clean.

The city's mysteries and riddles pleased him, suited him. He'd explored its hidden alleyways and secret places, tracing forgotten paths and boundaries long since blurred to near-invisibility. Buried streets and lost rivers, read about but seldom or never seen.

There were other mysteries there, too, if you knew where to look or how to invite them. Puzzles and games for a mind that rebelled at stagnation. Too easy to satisfy him for long, but he always hoped for something better, harder, a challenge to test him to the limits, an opponent worthy of him.

He'd played in that world alone, and always on his own terms. It felt strange, revisiting it now with someone by his side.

He wanted to be with John, more than anything in the world. Wanted the daylight hours as well as the dark, wanted people to look at him and envy him. *He's with me*. What he knew already was enough to make anyone proud to call this man their own: loyal and brave, a healer and a warrior. A man who had seen the world, but who looked at Sherlock as if he was the most amazing thing that had ever been since before the world was made. It was intoxicating, that look. He wanted to make it happen again and again, in bed and out of it. Wanted it to burn into him, till he was imprinted with John's gaze, an invisible legend stamped on his skin like the marks of John's mouth and his hands.

But John was working, and the hours passed too slowly when he was away. Sherlock had never lived like this in the city before, day after day without respite. Even this far south, the long summer days made him feel stretched out beyond bearing, longing to disappear beneath the waves.

The first time Sherlock bolted, he was gone forty-eight hours. John didn't need to tell him he'd counted every one of them; it was written all over him.

Seeing John like that, bleached with pain and exhaustion, hurt him in ways he couldn't explain. He'd never felt like that before. But then he'd never felt those other things before either. The intensity of passion that lifted him so far outside himself he was scared he'd never get back again. The longing that felt like a string tied tight around his heart and pulling, pulling right through his body and out of it, all the way to John's. As strong as the pull of being too long away from the sea, the one that forced him to run, not stopping to tell John where or why or even to say he was going.

“You can't do this to me,” John said. His fists were clenched by his side; Sherlock could feel the tamped-down violence coming off him in waves.

“I'm sorry,” he said, the word still unfamiliar in his mouth.

“Christ, Sherlock, I thought you were dead. Do you have any idea what that was like?”

A flash of it, yes, but his mind wouldn't hold the thought, too big, too overwhelming, making him feel he was falling apart.

“Promise me you won't disappear again,” John said fiercely.

He couldn't promise. He tried to explain, but it was no good. John didn't understand why he couldn't risk making a promise he knew he wouldn't be able to keep.

They took these things more lightly, Sherlock thought. Even if you ended up breaking a promise, they still expected you to make it. Like marriage. The promise itself was a necessary sign, and the failure to make it was an injury.

This quarrel was much worse than the one about the old man. It burnt till there was nothing left but ash, till Sherlock was almost ready to beg for forgiveness. He'd never begged for anything in his life, but he couldn't bear John's cold anger, his withdrawal into silence.

Get out of here, the voices urged him. Run while you still can.

He'd bolted again, a second time and a third, struggling to resist till he couldn't hold out any longer, desperate with longing and fear. And each time it was worse: the agony of being apart from John, even for a single night, and the bitterness and anger between them when he returned.

He couldn't talk about where he'd been, or why he had to go. The words stuck in his throat: *I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hurt you, I never mean to hurt you but I keep doing it and I'll always keep doing it and this is why they said it wouldn't work, I can't stay and I can't go and I'm being torn in two.*

The fourth time, scrabbling in disbelief and panic, he found the hiding-place empty.

John had been there before him. The skin was gone.

Chapter 6

Part Six: Lestrade

Lestrade had known Sherlock for years, on and off. The man was still a mystery to him, though. Brilliant, sure, with a knack of seeing connections nobody else could, pulling solutions out of the air as if by magic. But Lestrade was no closer to knowing what made him tick than he'd ever been.

John Watson's appearance in Sherlock's life had been a hell of a shock. Just turned up to a crime scene out of the blue, cool as you like. *He's with me*, Sherlock said, even more full of himself than usual, and Lestrade was gobsmacked. Never expected to see Sherlock involved with anyone.

Never expected this, either.

Bloody hospital chairs. Lestrade's arse was going numb. Not surprising – must have been sitting there for hours. He didn't know why he was still here.

Or why Sherlock wasn't.

John's lips were moving but Lestrade couldn't hear what he was saying. Probably wouldn't make sense anyway.

He wondered about that thing John's sister had said: *Maybe he doesn't want to wake up*.

Really ought to go home in a minute or he'd be fuck-all use tomorrow. Too many short nights this week, even before the explosion and the sleepless night that followed.

Still no idea whether that bastard was alive or dead. He tried to tell himself they'd catch him eventually, but he knew the odds didn't look good.

John started whimpering, a drawn-out, shaky sound that made Lestrade's gut knot with anger. Bloody Sherlock couldn't even be arsed to visit, when he must know it was his fault John had got hurt.

Sometimes I swear he's not human.

He'd said that to John once, after some more than usually spectacular emotional failure on Sherlock's part. Had to apologise, seeing the stricken look on John's face.

You love someone *that* much and he abandons you when you need him most. Fuck it.

Lestrade reached out to smooth John's hair back from his forehead. Probably shouldn't be doing that, but it seemed to quiet him, and the whimpering stopped.

“That's better,” Lestrade said. “Sounded like you were having a nightmare.”

Talk to him, try to maintain contact.

“The doc says you're going to be OK, so you'd better prove him right, hadn't you? Can't go against professional medical advice... Your hand feels hot, must be running a temperature again. Do I call the nurse or what?”

John's fingers tightened against Lestrade's and his eyelids fluttered.

“Come on, yeah, that's it, wake up. Wake up, Watson. *John*. Help me out here, I can't just keep talking to myself. First sign of madness.”

John was muttering again, louder than before. Lestrade caught snatches of words, *lost*, *Sherlock*, *no*. More puzzlingly, *Hector*.

“Who's Hector, John? Did he have something to do with the explosion?”

John's hand gripped tighter; he was trembling all over. Good sign or emergency? No idea. *Fuck*.

Better not chance it. Lestrade struggled out of the chair to push the call button for the nurse, but John opened his eyes and clung on to his hand, pulling him back down again.

“Lestrade.” His voice was hoarse.

Lestrade blinked and swallowed. Stupid lump in his throat. No witnesses, fortunately.

“About bloody time, too,” he said. “Gave us all a fright.”

John managed a weak grin. “Thirsty,” he said.

“OK,” Lestrade said, pouring water into the plastic tumbler. “Careful – don't overdo it.”

He knows that, you pillock, he's a doctor.

“Thanks,” John said.

His hands were still shaking. Lestrade held the tumbler to his lips, tilted it carefully. John swallowed and shuddered.

“More?”

John nodded and drank again, then lay back against the pillows.

“Your sister was here but she had to go,” Lestrade said.

He could have bitten his tongue out the next minute. Didn't take a genius to spot what was missing from that sentence.

“Sherlock?” John said, so quiet it was almost a whisper. His face was even paler than before, which took some doing.

“He's alive,” Lestrade said quickly. “Got off with a few cuts and bruises, thanks to you.”

“But he hasn't been here,” John said, after a pause.

No point trying to lie about it. “No. No, he hasn't.”

“How long?” John asked.

“Best part of twenty-four hours,” Lestrade said reluctantly.

John was silent for a long time. Hurting badly, Lestrade thought.

“I've lost him,” John said. “He's gone and it's all my fault.”

“Oh come *on*,” Lestrade said, exasperated. “How can it possibly be your fault, you daft bugger?”

“I took his skin,” John said.

“You what?”

“This is going to sound crazy,” John said.

“Try me,” Lestrade said.

“OK,” John said, “but you won't believe me.”

~~*

“Let me get this straight,” Lestrade said, holding his head. He thought it might be going to explode. “You're trying to tell me that Sherlock's actually a seal? When he's not, you know, solving crimes and all that?”

Hallucinating, poor sod. Or cracked. Had to be.

John took Lestrade's hand and put it to his forehead.

“Feel,” he said. “I'm not running a temperature. It's not septicaemia talking. Honestly.”

“Do you think maybe the blast—” Lestrade said tentatively.

“No,” John said, looking at him steadily. “I know what you're asking, but no. Ask Harry if you don't believe me.”

“Your sister?”

“Yeah. I left the skin with her.” John grimaced. “I thought it would – stop him from leaving. Didn't work.”

Lestrade ran through his mental list of useless bloody manuals and training courses. Nothing there about how to handle a domestic involving a mythical creature.

Which left the human angle, and dealing with that as best he could.

“Those other times,” he said carefully, “when Sherlock left, he always came back, didn't he?”

John nodded. “But that was before,” he said miserably.

“Look, I've *seen* you two together,” Lestrade said. “It's obvious he wants to be with you. But you can't, you can't *keep* someone against his will.”

“That's what Harry said. She said – I was *treating him like an animal in a zoo.*”

“Bit harsh,” Lestrade said, wincing. “But yeah, you can't do that.”

John looked washed-out, smaller somehow. Lestrade fought back an impulse to hug him, which really wouldn't be a good idea. Still wanted to, though.

“When he – when I met him,” John said, “I – oh God–”

A choked sound that was almost a sob. Lestrade put his hand gently on John's and left it there. John's ragged breathing gradually steadied.

“Sorry,” John said with an effort. “It's just – I was pretty desperate. Couldn't see the point in going on. And then he came, and – I can't go back to that, I just *can't.*”

None of the things Lestrade wanted to say seemed like a good idea, so he didn't say anything.

“But I have to, don't I?” John said bleakly.

“You have to give him the choice,” Lestrade said. He felt half-mad, not to mention a complete arse, but he said it anyway: “Give him back his skin.”

He watched the signs of struggle pass across John's face for what seemed like a very long time.

“OK,” John said at last. “Can't use my mobile in here. Let's get that sodding Patientline working so I can ring Harry.”

Chapter 7

Part Seven: Harry

She'd told the policeman she had to go, and it wasn't really a lie. She couldn't have stuck it out a moment longer.

Hospitals. History repeating itself with a vengeance. It seemed no time at all since she'd been sitting by John's bed telling him to keep in touch, watching his hands turning the mobile phone over and over. She'd give anything to be back there again, even though they were so estranged then. Just so long as John was alive and awake and going to get well again. Not lying unconscious, unreachable, his mind more wrecked than his body.

*You don't know that, H. Don't go **looking** for it.*

Christ, she needed a drink. She'd been sober for the last twenty-four hours, ever since the call came about John. She hadn't dared risk driving to the hospital, she knew she'd be way over the limit. But the shock had gone through her like a cold fire, burning up every last trace of alcohol from her brain. Nothing between her and the slow hours of crawling dread. Nothing to take the pain away.

John's body in the too-big pyjamas looked shrunken and frail. How *could* he pull through? Fucking doctors, talking a load of crap as usual. They had no idea what he was going through. Wouldn't believe her if she tried to tell them. Well, who would?

She hadn't believed it herself at first.

You have got to be fucking joking.

Some joke.

Her hands fumbled with the bottle, trembled, slipped. A crash of glass and the sharp smell of whisky.

The last straw: she sank to the floor and howled, rocking to and fro, sobbing. Cut her hand on a piece of broken glass, but that was right, that was better, she shouldn't be whole when John was broken. He liked to say they'd never got on, but it wasn't true, it *wasn't*. Once upon a time they'd done everything together. Till she grew up and started being different and he couldn't handle it. How fucking ironic was that, now?

She'd tried so hard to make him see sense about the skin. Another irony: that she should be the sensible one. No wonder he wouldn't take that from her. He'd always sided with Clara anyway, so he assumed what she said about Sherlock needing to be free was just projection. Or that she wanted the two of them to break up because she and Clara had.

“You can't keep him locked up like – like an animal in the zoo!”

She'd thought he might hit her at that. He looked sick as she flinched away from him, then angry.

“You don't understand,” he said. “How could you? What the hell would you know about love?”

He'd said he was sorry, afterwards. But he couldn't unsay the words that stuck like a barb under her skin. A blow would have been kinder, healed more quickly.

She fetched a dustpan and brush to sweep up the broken glass, wrapped it carefully in newspaper, tied and labelled the bundle.

Aren't you the responsible one all of a sudden?

Fuck off, whoever you are.

What now? Vodka, gin, something more exotic? For the first time she could remember, she didn't know what she wanted. None of it seemed right. Maybe she should go to the off-licence, get another bottle of whisky.

She was half-way out of the door when the phone rang.

“Harry. It's John. Harry, are you there? H?”

She was crying again, but a different sort of crying.

“Yes,” she said. “Yes, I'm here.”

~*~*~*

The door of 221b was open, thank goodness. Harry struggled up the stairs, clutching the heavy slippery weight of the skin in its green velvet wrapping. She leant against the door of the flat and it swung open.

“Sherlock?”

A noise from the sitting-room but no reply.

“Sherlock, is that you? It's Harry.”

But the tall man standing in front of the fireplace wasn't Sherlock.

“Who are you?” Harry asked.

Her arms were aching under the weight of the bundle but she didn't want to drop it. It felt oddly warm and alive. Well, she supposed it *was*, in a way. Carrying a part of Sherlock, but not. Better not think about that or she'd get weirded out.

"I'm Sherlock's brother," the man said. "You must be John's sister."

"Sherlock never mentioned he had a brother."

The man smiled. It wasn't a nice smile.

"Nevertheless," he said.

"Is Sherlock here?" Harry asked. "I've – John asked me to bring him this."

He's one too, of course he is. No need to be embarrassed, then, or to explain. She put the skin down in a heap on the sofa.

"So it was with you," Sherlock's brother said. "Stupid of Sherlock not to have thought of that. He turned *this* place upside down, of course."

"I'm sorry," she said. Why the fuck was she apologising for John? *Honestly.*

"I doubt *you* could have done much to prevent it," he said. The emphasis was lightly insulting; she didn't know if he meant it to be. "I'm afraid that Doctor Watson and my brother are both – creatures of impulse."

Harry got the feeling no-one had ever accused him of that.

"Where is Sherlock, do you know?" she said. "John's in hospital and he's only just come round."

"The explosion," he said.

His face darkened, and she had a sudden image of something coiled, violent, beneath the sleek surface. She wouldn't give much for the bomber's chances if Sherlock's brother ever caught up with him.

"I thought John wasn't going to come round at all," she burst out. "Because of what happened with Sherlock. Where *is* Sherlock?"

"Running away, as usual," he said. "Why change the habit of a lifetime?"

The contempt stung, even though he wasn't aiming at her. It was true of her too, wasn't it? She'd run away from Clara because she was scared she couldn't make it work. She wouldn't stay and fight for Clara, fight for the relationship.

"John made a mistake," she said. "But he loves Sherlock."

An impatient movement of his hands.

“Yes, yes. It's mutual. That much was clear from the records.”

“*Records?*”

“Sherlock broke the laws of our kind in revealing himself deliberately to your brother.”

She must have looked as baffled as she felt, because he sighed.

“We are enjoined to reveal ourselves when summoned, but not otherwise.”

“Oh right,” Harry said. This was getting crazier by the minute. “And how does that work, exactly?”

“By name, obviously, if the human knows one's name. Hence the taboo on *telling* it. Otherwise, by crying seven tears into the sea. Sherlock claimed your brother had used the second method. He was – shall we say – mistaken.”

He could say mistaken if he liked; Harry was still too busy thinking *What the fuck?*

“Sherlock has always been impatient,” the man said. “He didn't wait to count the tears. The summoning was incomplete, hence not legitimate.”

What difference did it make anyway? she wondered.

“A great difference,” he said, as if she'd spoken out loud. “One of the threads that bind him to his own world has been broken.”

“One of the threads,” Harry repeated, bewildered.

“One, yes,” he said irritably. “Two remain.”

“Oh,” she said. “*Oh*. Is that why you're here? To – warn him?”

“You might put it like that,” he said. “I have something for him. Perhaps you'd be so good as to give it to him when he returns.”

He took something from his pocket and handed it to her. It looked like a small mirror, but so dulled with age that she couldn't see her face in it. Heavier than it looked; she nearly dropped it.

“Don't you want to wait and see him?” she asked.

“He doesn't care to see me,” the man said. It sounded dismissive, but she recognized that underlying note of regret. “Better if you give it to him. He'll know what to do with it. And he knows where to find me if he wants to.”

Harry hadn't expected to feel sorry for the supercilious bastard. She tried not to show it; he wouldn't thank her for *that*.

He paused for a moment, cleared his throat and then said “Sherlock has a choice now, though he may not recognize it. It won't be easy. But then Sherlock never did want things to be easy.”

They're well matched in that too, Harry thought. John was stubborn as all get out. *Thrawn*, Hector would have said.

“You seem very sure he'll come back,” she said hesitantly.

He looked at her pityingly. “Oh, he'll come back. His heart is here now. Don't you feel that?”

She shook her head.

“I always forget how much your kind don't perceive,” he said wearily. “Good day to you.”

Harry slumped onto the sofa next to the sealskin in its bundle, holding the heavy mirror and listening to the sound of his footsteps going down the stairs.

Chapter 8

Part Eight: Sherlock

He'd been walking without rest for a day and a night and now it was getting light again. He didn't know where he was going. Not that it made any difference. No place offered him refuge; nothing gave him relief from the memories flooding his mind.

The sick dread of that moment when he'd found his skin gone. John not even denying he'd taken it, shouting at him *Don't you understand? I can't do this any more!*

His own bitter words, flung at John: *I should have known you'd betray me. Runs in the family.*

All humans were the same in the end, anyway: the stories were true. Take the skin from your back, drain the life from you till there was nothing left of what you'd once been.

The last thing he'd said to John, before the world went mad: *I never want to see you again.* In his mind the words had a shape, jagged edges pressing into his flesh from the inside.

Even after that, John had saved his life. Put himself in harm's way for Sherlock's sake, standing between Sherlock and the destruction he'd brought on them both through his stupidity and recklessness.

Mycroft would say *I told you so.* About all of it. That didn't matter now. All that mattered was his skin, gone. And John –

He'd felt the blast like a blow to the head, knocking him flat. Afterwards there'd been sirens and flashing lights and Lestrade saying “Get in the fucking ambulance, Sherlock, for Christ's sake.”

“*I can't.*”

Lestrade had thought he wanted to track down the madman and Sherlock had let him think it. When the truth was he couldn't face the sight of John lying in the ambulance *hurt and bloody maybe even dying.* His fault.

He couldn't go near the hospital, either. As long as he stayed away, as long as he didn't know, John might still be alive. Might be going to recover. The words Sherlock had never spoken might still be said, to blot out the ones he couldn't unsay.

His people would say he should be ashamed of himself for still wanting John. Still wanting to be with someone who'd done *that* to him.

It didn't make any difference. The pain of being without John, the pain of being without his skin overwhelmed him. He couldn't live without either, couldn't choose between them, and now he'd lost both.

He didn't know what drew him back to Baker Street again – it was pointless, he knew, he'd searched every inch of 221b and found nothing. But this was the last place they'd been happy, and some trace of that still clung to the walls, along with the anger and pain.

The hour before dawn, the last time they'd made love. Heartbeats slowing afterwards, limbs still tangled together, the touch of the morning breeze on heated flesh making them shiver and sigh. The way they couldn't stop kissing, fell asleep still pressed against each other...

His stomach lurched. Why was the front door open?

He stumbled up the stairs two at a time, heart pounding.

Harry Watson, sitting on the sofa. And next to her, a bundle wrapped in a green velvet curtain.

Sherlock gave a cry and dropped to his knees, pulling the skin close to him. He could feel the pain blur and soften at the edges, but the core of it was still there, heavy and hard in his chest.

“John said to tell you he was sorry,” Harry said.

The words sounded as if they should mean something, but they were coming from too far away. His throat was dry; he couldn't speak. He hugged the skin tight, waiting for the familiar warmth to comfort him, make everything all right.

Nothing. It wasn't working. He wanted to weep, but weeping wouldn't do any good.

“Your brother was here,” she said. “He brought you something.”

The sight of the mirror made his scalp crawl. His stomach knotted in anticipation: *John in the hospital, broken, dying. Or already dead –*

He leaned back against the sofa, letting the skin fall across his knees so he could hold the mirror in both hands. The dull metal was so cold to the touch that it almost burned. He raised it reluctantly to his lips and breathed on the surface till it clouded. Lowering his hands, he rested the mirror against the skin, feeling the heat of the contact flare as the mist cleared and the image spun outwards.

For a moment he thought it was himself and John standing together on the sands; then he realized it was his grandfather and Hector. Staring at each other as if nothing else existed, or ever could. Kissing and embracing, lying down together. His face flushed with shame, seeing something so private; he was grateful when the mirror clouded again, hiding the lovers' entwined bodies from view.

He pressed the mirror against the skin, and the mist parted. He saw his grandfather overpowered by force of numbers, struggling as he was dragged away, pulled back towards the sea. Saw Hector sink down hopeless on the shore, crying out to call him back as the mist swept in once more.

When the mist cleared for the third time, he saw his grandparents with their first-born, Sherlock's mother. His grandfather looked older now, no longer sleek and shining; he stared out towards the land with eyes that seemed empty and lost.

The mirror grew cold and dull again; the vision was over.

He turned his head and saw that Harry was in tears. He hadn't realized she could see the images too.

"They never had a chance, did they?" she said, wiping her face with the back of her hand.

"No," he said.

His head was too full; his eyes stung, as if the images were trying to force their way out again.

"He *wanted* to be with him. Wanted to stay," he said, feeling half-dazed.

"You wanted that too, didn't you?" she said.

"Yes," he said.

He set the mirror down carefully on the table, staring at it as if it could show him the future as well as the past. He knew it wouldn't, now.

"Your brother said—" Harry began, and stopped.

"What?"

"He said – you'd broken one of the threads but there were still two left. Something like that. I didn't know what he meant."

He didn't know either.

"What happens if you break them all?"

"I don't know," he said. "Death, I imagine."

She reached down to grasp his hand; the touch was unexpectedly warm and comforting.

He stood up and hauled her to her feet, pulling her into an awkward embrace. She hugged him, so hard he could scarcely breathe.

"I want to see John," he said, breaking away from the hug. "*Now*."

"*Yes*," she said.

Her face was so full of hope and joy, so like *John's*, that it hurt to look at her.

“I've got my car,” she said. “I haven't had a drink in – Christ, it's been twenty-seven hours. I'd really like to take you there. I'm OK to drive, I promise.”

He wanted to go alone, but he hadn't the heart to refuse.

“Thank you,” he said, “yes, that would be – good.”

He saw the question in her eyes as he bent to pick up his skin, but she didn't ask it.

Bracing herself, squaring her shoulders; soldier's daughter.

“Come on then,” she said, though her voice was shaking. “Let's get you to the hospital.”

Chapter 9

Part Nine: John

He was falling through water stained with blood, plumes of colour billowing around him like smoke. His lungs were screaming for air, squeezed tight, as he sank deeper and deeper till he thought he'd never see the sun again. Strange creatures swam around him, so strange they couldn't possibly be real.

A dark shape loomed up out of the depths and crashed against him, sending him cannoning into a wall that shouldn't be there. The impact jarred through his body and he gasped, water flooding his throat till he thought it would split. Everything went blue-white, dazzling, for a moment; then the lights went out.

His eyes hurt when he opened them, as if he'd been in the water too long. He saw a dark blur with a pale splash in it, gradually coming into focus.

Sherlock.

He must still be dreaming. A cruel dream; when he woke up he'd remember all over again that Sherlock was gone for good.

“John.”

Sherlock hadn't *spoken* in his dreams before.

He put out a hand and touched the purple shirt-sleeve. It felt real.

“Sherlock,” he said, still half-expecting to wake up.

Sherlock was staring at him; he couldn't read the expression in his eyes.

“How long have you been there?” John asked.

“An hour or so,” Sherlock said. “I'm not sure. Harry brought me.”

“*Harry* did?”

“She said she'd, um, leave me to it. Gone to get coffee, I think. She's been – very kind,”

He couldn't take it in; it was all too much. Then he saw the bundle, and he knew.

“She gave it to you.”

“Yes,” Sherlock said.

“I’m so *sorry*,” he said helplessly.

Sherlock’s hands tightened on the skin, but he didn’t speak.

“I know it was wrong,” John said. “I know I had no right.”

“No,” Sherlock said. He looked down at the bundle in his arms, as if he still couldn’t quite believe it was there.

“Oh God, Sherlock.” The shame of what he’d done bleached through him, taking his breath away.

“I thought you were dead,” Sherlock said abruptly.

So you know how that feels now. Too late to do any good.

“I should have come before,” Sherlock said. “I was afraid.”

“I’m glad you’re here.” *Glad* wasn’t the right word, but there didn’t seem to be one for what he was feeling. “I know it’s more—”

More than I deserve, he wanted to say, but he couldn’t get the words out.

Not going to cry in front of Sherlock. Too much crying already. That’s what started this whole thing off.

He couldn’t be sorry for that. Even though the pain of saying goodbye was much worse than he’d imagined.

“My fault you got hurt,” Sherlock muttered. He still wouldn’t look at John, and his knuckles were white.

They sat in silence for a while. He wanted to touch Sherlock, but he didn’t dare.

“I was dreaming about your world,” he said, remembering. “So much water, I couldn’t breathe.”

Was that how it had been for Sherlock? he wondered.

“I wanted to live in yours,” Sherlock said. “I thought I could.”

“I wrecked it, though, didn’t I? Trying to keep you against your will. Like you said, *runs in the family*.”

Sherlock flinched. “I was – wrong about that,” he said.

“Hardly,” John said bitterly.

When there’s nothing left to lose, you might as well face the truth. However much it hurts.

“What happened with Hector,” Sherlock said. “It wasn't what I thought.”

That didn't make sense; maybe he *was* hallucinating. He put his hand to his head; it felt hot, but no hotter than before.

Sherlock might have been wrong about the past. But that didn't change what had happened between them. What *he'd* done.

“Harry said I treated you like an animal at the zoo.” The words were burnt into him, ineradicable. His eyes swam.

Sherlock's hand touching his face felt cool and unexpectedly gentle. John clasped it and pressed his lips against the palm, a kiss for all the things he couldn't say. Sherlock made a sort of choking sound, and John let go, trying not to cry out at the loss of that touch. He cleared his throat.

“Thanks for coming,” he said. “I didn't think I'd get a chance to say goodbye.”

Sherlock was staring at him, as if he could see right through him. “Goodbye?”

“You've got your skin back,” John said. “You're free to go now.”

That was how it always worked, wasn't it? Regaining the skin, then returning to the sea. Leaving the human – lover, captor, thief – for good. No other possible endings; no exceptions to the rule.

“What if I don't want to go?” Sherlock said.

He hadn't thought anything could hurt worse than parting from Sherlock. His heart felt as if something was squeezing it, hard. The pain of it made him catch his breath.

“How could you possibly come back to me after – after what I did to you?”

“I don't know how,” Sherlock said. “But I'm here now, aren't I? I know it's not supposed to be that way. But it's what *I* want.”

The lights in the room flickered and buzzed; that shouldn't be happening, John thought, even if there was a storm coming. The air felt heavy and thick.

“My grandfather did what *they* wanted him to,” Sherlock said. “Gave in, went back to his own kind, continued his line. I don't think he was ever really alive again after that. He didn't have a chance, but I do.”

Whatever was squeezing John's heart gripped tighter. “What chance have we got? I can't live in your world and you can't live in mine. We both know it's not going to work.”

“I'd give anything to be with you,” Sherlock said. “Anything at all.”

His hands moved restlessly against the skin.

“Nobody's going to take it from you again,” John said. “I promise.”

Sherlock's eyes were wild and his face seemed paler than ever.

“I want you to have it,” he said suddenly.

“You – what?” He must be dreaming after all; this couldn't be happening.

“Please,” Sherlock said. “I want you to keep it for me.”

Taking your life in my hands, he thought dizzily. That wasn't how it was supposed to go.

“Christ, Sherlock, you can't be serious!”

“I can,” Sherlock said. “I mean it.” His voice was shaking but his hands were steady as he held out the skin.

“Why would you trust me with that?” John said, stunned.

Sherlock looked suddenly excited, impatient, as if he'd finally worked something out and couldn't wait for John to catch up. “Don't you *see*?” he said. “It has to be with my heart. And that's with you.”

He felt the weight of the skin in his arms, felt Sherlock's arms around him, Sherlock's kiss like a jolt going through his whole body. There was a sound like thunder and the world went lightning-white, then dark.

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He wasn't sure if he'd lost consciousness, or if the hospital lights really had gone out for a moment. And that strange smell, sharp with iodine and salt...

Seaweed. Olfactory hallucinations, now. But not just his; Sherlock was sniffing incredulously as well.

“What is it, Sherlock? What's happening?”

Sherlock put out his hand and touched the bundle lying in John's arms. “It feels different,” he said tentatively. “It – I don't think it's *alive* any more.”

“What does that mean?” John asked.

“I don't know,” Sherlock said.

They stared at each other, and at the skin.

Sherlock said slowly, “Mycroft told Harry I'd *broken one thread but two remained*. Maybe I – we – broke the other two.”

Just when you thought it couldn't get any weirder.

“Threads? What threads – how?”

“I'm not sure,” Sherlock said. “I'm not dead, am I?”

“Not unless we both are,” John said.

He didn't know why that was funny, but Sherlock was laughing, and then he was laughing too, laughing and crying all at once as Sherlock hugged and kissed him.

“It doesn't matter, does it?” Sherlock said, breathless and exultant. “None of it. Living or dying.” He kissed John again. “I'm with you now and they can't part us.”

“No,” he said. He was shaking, he found, teeth chattering.

“Are you all right?” Sherlock said. “*John*. Are you all *right*?”

“Bit cold,” he said. “I think it's probably shock.”

“Should I get the nurse?” Sherlock asked anxiously.

“In a minute,” John said. “I'm not letting go of you yet. Not now I've got you back.”

“Can I lie down with you?” Sherlock said.

The words and the look together made his heart almost too full.

“Mind the drip,” he said. *Once a doctor, always a doctor.*

“Obviously,” Sherlock said impatiently.

He laughed at that, relieved. “Still you, then.”

“Still me,” Sherlock said, stretching out carefully next to him. “Are you still cold?”

“Bit, yeah.”

“Here,” Sherlock said, pulling the sealskin up to cover them both. He put his arms around John and kissed him again.

The warmth and weight of the skin felt comforting, like the warmth and weight of Sherlock's body against his in the narrow hospital bed. He let the tension drain away, let sleep claim him, lying close and safe at last, wrapped in the sealskin and his lover's arms.

End Notes

Thanks to blooms84 and kalypso for their encouragement and suggestions. The title comes from Robert Wyatt's [Sea Song](#).

“The Goodman of Wastness” is a real folktale, but I haven't come across any legends that suggest it's possible for a selkie to become fully human. I'm very grateful to the OP for the wonderful prompt and to everyone for commenting. I hadn't written anything quite like this before and the encouragement is much appreciated.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!