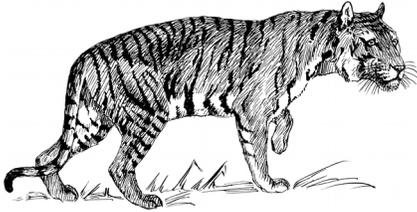


The Adventuress and the PREDATOR



by

B. L. Higgins

“The *Weres* of London”, Book 2

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: Rebel, Rebel.....	1
Chapter 2: The Test and the Testy.....	12
Chapter 3: Of Cabbages and Queens.....	28
Chapter 4: A Stab in the Dark.....	34
Chapter 5: A Rude Awakening.....	53
Chapter 6: Talk Around Town.....	61
Chapter 7: A Tail of Two Kitties.....	78
Chapter 8: Morgue to Come.....	96
Chapter 9: A Turn For the Weird.....	114
Chapter 10: Les Miserables.....	129
Chapter 11: Searching for the Truth.....	138
Chapter 12: An Awkward Interlude.....	154
Chapter 13: Blackmail Can Be Murder.....	164
Chapter 14: Accusations and Excuses.....	178
Chapter 15: A Princely Caper.....	189
Chapter 16: Denouement.....	201

Chapter 1: Rebel, Rebel

“I’ve changed my mind,” Sherlock pronounced, his voice suspiciously sonorous.

I sighed and wearily turned the page of my newspaper as I said, in a mild fit of peeve, “What is it *this* time, genius?”

Sherlock half-turned from where he had been standing, gazing out of the over-sized front windows of 221B Baker Street onto the street below. His overall look was pensive, his fingertips crazy-glued together into their usual steeple. He scowled momentarily at my derogatory use of the word “genius.”

“No need to be tart, John. I am doing this for your own good,” he declared, in a take-no-prisoners tone.

“Oh, great. For my own good, eh?” I grumped. “Why does that phrase always send cold chills down my spine?”

In truth, I had had quite enough of Sherlock’s moods this week. After the hunt, he had been lively, excited by our newfound partnership as *weres*, but this exuberance had slowly worn off as the days had passed, until Sherlock became taciturn, almost *surlly*, in his general demeanor. I couldn’t even hold a fit conversation with him without receiving a stern, reprimanding stare in

return, prompting me to abandon all attempts at civil discourse.

In short, my flatmate was, currently, in a right nasty snit and, somehow, I figured into it in some unflattering and highly-inconvenient (for him) way. The only good news was that, finally, he had decided that he would deign to include me in the loop.

“You will no longer accompany me on any of my cases,” he announced, sharply.

That’s it. End of statement. Finito. Bugger off.

That caught my attention. “Wait a minute,” I retorted, messily folding my paper and dropping it to the floor at my feet. I leaned forward in my chair by the fireplace and said, “Since *when?*” in a challenging manner.

Himself continued to gaze down at me, unwaveringly. “Since *now*. Since I have determined, through pure logic, that it is unsafe for you to participate in any more cases with me.”

His face was unyielding, yet his eyes defied me to answer.

I am not a man to back down easily in the face of deterrence. In the military, I had gone where

others had feared to go and paid for it with a bullet wound to the shoulder and assorted scars. *Never* have I backed down from a reasonable, winnable challenge. Yet, here, my dearest friend, business partner, and flatmate, has decided, *sans* discussion, based solely on his own input, that I would no longer work with him in the business in which we have been so successful in the past.

This wouldn't do. This wouldn't do, at *all*.

"*Unacceptable*," I declared, using his own words against him. I slapped the padded arm of my chair in emphasis.

One dark eyebrow rose in response. "You are being unreasonable, John."

"So be it, then," I replied, setting my jaw. "Won't be the first time."

There was a profound sigh and a rolling of eyes that heralded nothing good. "Why can't you just *trust* me on this, John? Why must you always be so *difficult* in these matters?"

"Difficult?" I shouted, jumping out of my chair and striding over to him. "*Difficult*? How am I being difficult if I disagree with your 'logical' decision to cut me out of our investigations? I mean, haven't I been an asset to you on *many* occasions?"

He peered down his long, thin nose at me condescendingly. I *really* hate it when he does that. “Because it is for your own good, John.” His manner was unusually brittle.

I favored him with a do-not-even-go-there look.

“Yeah, and my father told me it was for my own good when he beat me with a belt to ‘make a man out of me’. Didn’t believe *that*, either.”

Those cool, gray eyes warmed just a bit, and his expression softened, as he said, “I am not your father, John. When I say it is for you own good, it doesn’t mean that I get any pleasure out of it.”

I crossed my arms in defiance. Sherlock took note. “I. Don’t. *Care*,” I gritted out. “I will *not* be sidelined because of one of *your* whims.”

“It is *not* a whim!” Sherlock shouted back, his cold attitude breaking suddenly. “It is a very well-thought-out...”

“Logical decision, based on multiple layers of data that my puny mind is too helpless to understand,” I mocked him.

He straightened up in affront. "That is *not* what I was going to say," he said, obviously miffed. "Do *not* put words into my mouth, John!"

"Maybe not *those* words exactly, but that *was* the gist of it," I replied, snappishly. I knew I was just baiting him at this point, but I didn't care. I was *mad*. I turned on my heel and marched back to my seat, sat down aggressively, recovered my paper, and set it as a wall between us.

I could almost *feel* Sherlock's aggravation from across the room. I didn't care. I truly didn't. He could just rethink his "logical" decision and find a way to fit me back into the equation.

A few soft steps and I heard his chair cushion sigh as he sat down in it. After a few moments of silence, a deep voice interrupted my pseudo-reading. "My decision is final, John."

"Your decision bloody well *stinks*, Sherlock," I retorted before returning to my terminal silence.

A few more minutes passed, in which I could hear some shifting around in his chair, which was situated across from mine. Some crossing and uncrossing of those impossibly long legs, and a sigh, or two, were added for dramatic effect.

Good. Let him suffer. Arrogant git.

“I will make sure your practice flourishes, John, so you will be independent of our cases for income.” His voice was, once again, even and reasonable. “I will make sure you are busier than you have ever been before. That will make it easier for you to make your own, independent decisions in the future,” he intoned, his melodious baritone pleasant to the ear, but his words abhorrent to the brain.

I have never hated hearing *anything* said in that voice more than at that moment.

“And how, exactly, are you going to manage *that*, Einstein?” I asked, my teeth gritted so hard my jaw ached. The paper wall remained standing.

“I will pass the word to the werewolf of London that you are one of us and can be counted on to be discrete,” he explained. “They will come in droves. We have few enough physicians among our ranks; at least, the ones who will admit to being *were*. I can vouch for your talent and professionalism...”

“But not on my ability to work with and support you in dangerous cases, is *that* it?” I finally just lost it, crumpling up the paper and throwing it at him, unsuccessfully. It just fluttered and

landed on his well-shod feet. He impassively watched the pages land, but did nothing.

“I never said that...”

“*You* said you wouldn’t have worried so much about me if you had known that I was a full-on *were*, an elite,” I reminded him, angrily. “Now, suddenly, that isn’t *good* enough for you?”

“We are in danger, *all* of us!” Sherlock suddenly shouted back. “Anyone who is *were* is a target! Didn’t you not read about the murder in the paper three days ago?”

I blinked, casting my mind back to that day. *Something* had changed. Something had happened, and I had missed it.

Then it hit me.

“You threw out the paper early that day,” I accused him. “I *remember* now. You were upset and threw the paper out before I even got a chance to read it!”

“Yes, I did,” Sherlock agreed, testily. “I saw something there that I found so disturbing that I refused to let you see it.”

Still wrong-headedly trying to protect me. I stared at him, wordlessly, but my face said, “Go on.”

“There had been a murder,” he declared, flatly.

“Werefolk?”

Sherlock nodded. “Yes, but, *this* time, instead of being the victim of a hunt, the body was found inside a burned home. DNA had to be employed to identify her.” His eyes dropped. “It was one of our allies, a *were* who had chosen a ‘normal’ life. She was a professional who worked with Mycroft.” He blinked twice. If he were an average man, I would have thought he was pushing back tears, but this was Sherlock. He would *never* allow himself to be emotionally compromised, except under the most extreme circumstances.

Finally, he raised his eyes to meet mine. There was pain in them. “We are under attack, John. Before, it was just those on the periphery, the homeless, the ones who could disappear without penalty. Now...” His lips flat-lined.

“Then, tell me why are you pushing me into the background, just when you need me the most?” I asked, my anger slowly dissipating.

“Because you are *also* on the firing line,” he said, simply. “I...I can’t afford to lose you. You are too valuable to us.”

To *us*. The werefolk. Suddenly, I'm a community asset instead of a person. Great.

"Thanks loads," I snarked back. "Nice to know my resale value has risen now that I'm useful to the *were*."

Sherlock's face clouded. "That is *not* what I meant, John." His gray eyes went dark with anger. "You are *more* than an asset. You are...you are *were*. You are one of my *charges* now. I must keep you as safe as possible."

"Well, *maybe I don't want to be safe!*" I yelled as I bounded out of my chair. "Maybe I want to go adventuring with you, did you ever think of *that?*"

Himself blinked. Several times. *Reboot, reboot.*

When his expression finally returned from blank to animated again, he said, quietly, "You are my friend, John. My *only* friend. I can't allow anything to happen to you." His tone was even, yet there was more emotion there than I had ever heard before. I was, frankly, a bit shocked. I sat back down.

"What makes you think *anything* will happen to me, Sherlock?" I asked, reasonably.

"I could have lost you a week ago. I've been thinking about that."

“Obsessing, you mean.”

A hint of a smile. “Perhaps a bit.”

I huffed. “I’m a soldier, Sherlock.”

“You’re a *doctor*, John, who carried a gun. Big difference.”

“No. *No* difference,” I retorted. “I went through the same training the rest of the men did. I can kill as effectively as they can. I could defend myself and my men as well as any soldier on the field. Don’t downplay my abilities, Sherlock. They’ve saved your arse upon several occasions already.”

He blinked again.

As I watched him, I realized that, while he had probably expected some degree of resistance from me regarding his decision, he hadn’t expected outright rebellion. In his clear, organized, uncluttered mind, he should have been able to easily sway me to his line of thinking. I am much more emotional than he is, so he constantly underestimates the role of emotion in decision-making.

His eyes were steel when he locked them with mine again. “You,” he observed, “never truly

left the war behind you. My profession is just an extension of it for you. It gives you life.”

“Hah!” I laughed in derision. “This from the man who turns to drugs to keep from killing himself out of boredom!” I pointed at him dramatically. “What would *you* do if I wasn’t here to ‘entertain’ you between cases? *You* are my war, and *I* am your drug, aren’t I?”

“*That* is a shameful lie!” Sherlock rebutted angrily, leaning forward in his chair, hands white-knuckled around the ends of the arms. “I have *not* used drugs since you came to live here!”

“Not that I know of, but you *are* a skillful liar, when you want to be,” I snapped back. “Don’t tell me you don’t have a stash of them right here in the flat!”

“You should know. You’ve looked more than once,” Sherlock snarked, leaning back in his chair. He smiled humorlessly at the look on my face. “Oh, did you think I hadn’t noticed, John? I can tell every time you’ve conducted one of you little ‘searches’. You have no subtlety, do you realize that?”

We stared at each other, jaws tight, hands clenched, until I spoke again.

“So, I’m a danger addict, and you’re a drug addict. Is that what’s going on here? We both solve crimes to get our kicks?”

Sherlock was silent, but I could see I had hit a nerve. When he spoke again, all he said was, “*Former* addict.”

“Whatever. I *still* won’t let you cut me out of your cases. Just try it.” I plunked my arse down in my chair, picked up the scattered pages, and folded them up again.

Before I could start to read again, however, Sherlock said, his tone cold, “Don’t test me, John. You *will* lose.”

I snorted. “We’ll see.”