Sui Generis
by Francesca_Wayland

Summary

When Irene Adler contacts Mycroft Holmes with some shocking information and instructs him not to share it with Sherlock, he believes it to be a calculated power play against him. In some ways he's right, but the truth is more complicated, and personal.

This is an AU sequel to 'Neither A Soldier Nor A Gentleman' (http://archiveofourown.org/works/338793/chapters/548227) and so I suggest reading that first, but this work is also a study on the relationship of the Holmes brothers.

Notes

I have no idea where this idea came from, but it refused to be ignored, and so we'll see what happens with it. . .

Also I'm torn about whether or not Mycroft actually knew about Sherlock's rescue of Irene in Karachi, but for the sake of this story, he really was fooled.

Disclaimer: No money coming to me, just lots of love for Sherlock and its actors, writers, and creators coming from me!
Chapter Notes

Since a script side from 'A Study in Pink' showed that Anthea's real name is Andrea, she will be referred to as Andrea in this story.

Mycroft Holmes, British Government *de facto*, was listening to the chords of a Liszt concerto through the earpiece of his office telephone when his assistant Andrea barged through the heavy paneled door without knocking, a white envelope in hand and a complexion to match.

She stopped short at his desk and started to open her mouth, but he put up one forestalling finger, and to his expectation but satisfaction, it shut again immediately.

"Not now, please," he said in a patient but non-negotiating tone. "I'm on hold with Angela, and you know that she gets tetchy when-"

Her voice, more assertive and present than he had ever heard it before, cut directly through his dismissal: "Sir."

His eyebrows jumped involuntarily, more in surprise than displeasure, and he scanned his memory to determine whether she had ever interrupted him. She had not.

For a brief moment she looked pleased that she had earned his attention, and then holding firm eye contact she placed the single envelope in front of him. The instant he properly caught sight of it he slammed down the receiver, his eleven o'clock phone appointment with the chancellor forgotten at once, and her expression intensified.

In the upper right corner was affixed a reddish-orange and cream coloured stamp depicting a small aeroplane taking off over ostentatious post-modern buildings. *Flight From Karachi* it said, in commemoration of some famous but irrelevant air journey, and at once Mycroft's lips thinned and twisted with bitter understanding.

On the centre of the envelope feminine script addressed him by name and even by his euphemistic title, and though the upper left corner was left blank of the identity of the woman whose hand had done so, the stamp had already told him everything, as it had been meant to.

Irene Adler.

For a brief but difficult moment he struggled to reconcile the two parts of his mind. On one hand he clung to the thought *No, it's not possible*. He had been so thorough this time. He recalled the way he had personally put in legwork for the occasion, something he was loath to do in all but the most urgent of situations. Usually he enlisted his brother's services instead, though for obvious reasons Sherlock had not been trusted with this mission - despite his show of callous triumph over the woman when they had all last assembled.

And so Mycroft had traveled to Pakistan himself to interview everyone even peripherally involved, and not only had all the details of her death coincided with the varying testimonies, but all the statements had uniformly agreed with one another. He had left Asia satisfied that the Adler
catastrophe had been put to bed (pun most vehemently not intended), and that he could now focus on the burgeoning threat of James Moriarty.

In fact, he had been so sure of Ms Adler's death that he given both the Americans and the Germans his word that the security breach had been permanently contained, not to mention he had made assurances to his colleagues at MI5 and MI6. Confirming the kill had been a necessary step towards repairing relations with both countries after the AirBond debacle (and one the MI6 had rather insisted upon), and yet he would never have done so if he had not been absolutely certain—his professional standing was sacrosanct to him. Without his reputation for infallibility, the position he so greatly enjoyed was precarious.

Yet that was precisely the predicament he now faced, because he could not ignore the proof of his oversight that this envelope represented: Sherlock had reached Irene Adler first, and she was alive.

A spark of rage towards his brother for his ongoing folly over the Adler woman flared, but with practiced determination he suppressed it for the time-being, and rerouted his energy from the tawdriness of emotion and towards the purity of brainwork.

He stretched a hand towards the envelope, then stopped, took a breath, and reached into a drawer to pull out a pair of leather gloves. He looked up to Andrea's face; now her eyes were wide and avid with interest.

Carefully he slit open the envelope to reveal a single sheath of paper, a small bindle made of blue plastic, and a loose memory card.

Without inspecting the other items more closely, he shoved away from his desk and strode to the digital projector mounted above a handsome mid-Georgian mahogany secretaire. He reached up to insert the card into its corresponding slot, grabbed the remote, and jabbed the power button.

The image that filled the immense wall-mounted screen caused his assistant to gasp in shock in a rare show of reaction, and for Mycroft's part the remote control almost fell from suddenly nerveless fingers, though apart from a slight widening of his eyes and blanching of his complexion, his face remained cold and expressionless. Even while his mind felt icy and numb, his body seemed to go onto autopilot, and he hit the advancing button. Again and again variations of the first image flashed across the screen, slightly unfocused due to the level of magnification, and yet still unmistakable.

"The..." he somehow found his voice, despite the fact that he was shaken in a way he had never before experienced, "sachet will contain DNA evidence, I'm sure. Not hair, she's too clever for that. She knows we have people who could track her through her location's unique signature of air pollutant levels, embedded in the strands. Perhaps nail clippings..." He said, sounding distant.

"I'll send it to the lab right away, sir - alpha priority," his assistant said, her voice slightly breathless but her manner as competent as ever.

"Yes. Do. Although I expect it will be just as it appears..." He took one long, agonising breath. "The child is the picture of my brother when he was that age."

When Andrea left, the physical evidence in hand, Mycroft allowed himself to sink into his seat in a daze, and he recalled that there had been a slip of paper included as well. A note?

He lifted the envelope, and contemplated its exterior, this time with greater scrutiny.

The Karachi stamp had postmarks indicating that it had been sent one week before, but obviously
she wasn't still there and she was merely toying with him. She was underlining his failure to realise she had not been executed, and perhaps also making an implication about where the boy had been conceived. He quickly did the math and yes, it did appear that during the time she had allegedly died, she had actually been creating a new life instead—in a way other than simply taking on her new identity.

He studied the envelope itself. The paper was not expensive; it was flimsy and low-quality cardstock, and of non-standard dimensions. He inferred that it came from an upper mid-range hotel, perhaps a hotel Sherlock had arranged for them... But the thought ignited that anger again, and he deliberately turned back to his observations.

She must have taken some of the stationary with her, knowing that she would eventually taunt him with her escape (or alternatively it was sentiment, although that seemed rather implausible given the woman in question). But it was the pen that was far more telling. Palladium-silver alloy nib, perhaps a Sheaffer, and dye-based ink. That certainly seemed to imply that wherever she was now, she wasn't destitute.

He unfolded the single sheet of paper, and the masthead reading Hotel Mehran confirmed his earlier conclusion. Below that, centred on the page, she had written in small, embellished script just three words: "Don't tell him."

In that instant, Mycroft understood almost everything that had happened.

First: Sherlock had deceived him on a staggering, unprecedented scale. But of course that much had been obvious from the moment he'd laid his eyes upon the stamp on the envelope.

Second, and the far more salient matter: this envelope and the secret it carried constituted Irene Adler's revenge upon him.

He wasn't so arrogant as to believe that her motives for the conception itself were at all connected to her desire to taunt him or garner protection against him—he wasn't even certain whether it had been planned on her part or if she were taking advantage of an accident.

However, now that she had given birth to (biologically, at least) a Holmes, she was certainly exploiting the situation: her notification of the infant’s existence clearly was meant as retribution, and her revelation that she was alive after he had staked his reputation on her death certainly was, as well. Because now of course it wasn't just Sherlock from whom he had to withhold critical information—it was the MI-5, the MI-6, the Germans, the Americans, and several other powerful parties who had been delighted to learn of her demise.

She's terribly good, he thought, but unlike his brother it was in bitterness more than in admiration.

In one neat package, literally, she had targeted the only two things for which he cared: his career and his younger brother. Without the complication of the child, Mycroft might not have hesitated to respond ruthlessly this time, tracking her down until reality matched the story he had given his colleagues, and he was no longer an unwitting liar. One part of him was still tempted to do so, and place the infant under his stewardship—perhaps that would be better for the child anyway, more stable. Sherlock would never have to know of any of it; Mycroft could set up a house in some rural, hedge-rowed corner of England, and the boy's care could be managed by a litany of nurses and tutors, and then when the time came: boarding school. It was a childhood he would've rather envied, himself.

But almost as soon as he became convinced that he should take that course of action, he realised that in fact, such a scenario was unsustainable. It would be difficult enough to prevent Sherlock
from figuring out this secret as it was, with his nephew God knew where. But if Mycroft personally
oversaw his upbringing? Impossible.

Third, if experience with Ms Adler had taught him anything, it was that this wasn't merely hollow
revenge, but also a prologue to something greater—something that would directly benefit her
interests.

Yes, she had an agenda, but she would still enjoy the setting of the stage and intensifying of the
suspense before she made her next move. Though when that came, it was sure to be cold, concise,
brutal, and brilliant. She would slice all that previous pretension away as deftly as a surgeon.

But even though this revenge was simply the preface to what to come, it was a palpable hit,
because it created an agonising dilemma for him. On one hand he felt that he must confront
Sherlock about his clear role in (i.e. obvious engineering of) her rescue... To have him explain how
he had done it, how he had tricked Mycroft so successfully. And then demand to know what had
possessed him to make himself so vulnerable to such a person... To risk precisely this scenario.
How could he have been such a bloody fool?

But on the other hand he wanted to shield his younger brother from her, as he had not before,
protect Sherlock from being drawn into her renewed power play, but also protect his lifestyle, a life
that had been so hard-earned in its relative tranquility and productivity. Knowing he had sired a
child with that wretched Adler woman would undermine everything—especially if he had any type
of emotional attachment towards her, which was becoming ever more clearly evident.

And so he must adhere to Ms Adler's request and keep the dreadful burden of his knowledge to
himself. He could not push Sherlock into her path again, this time with most likely permanent
repercussions. For now, he would do as she asked, as terribly as that chafed.

She had secured for herself perhaps the only thing that would not only stay his hand against her,
but actually incline him to provide her protection or financial support of any kind. As troublesome
as his mother was, the child was his nephew and the unexpected continuation of what had been a
very long and historied English line, which he had been certain would end with he and his brother.
And the infant was an innocent, despite the fact that he would doubtful remain that way for long,
given his parentage, particularly on the maternal side.

He felt his fury towards his brother kindle again, and this time it was harder to control. He didn't
begrudge the fact that Sherlock had tricked him (he was actually subjectively impressed and proud
of his brother for accomplishing such a feat), but he could not abide how he had so degraded
himself with that woman. If Sherlock had been able to exhibit any semblance of self-control, he
wouldn't have created this situation, for which his older brother was now paying the price.

But of course, Mycroft reminded himself, breathing through his nostrils, I'm personally to blame
for all of this. He had pushed Sherlock right into Irene Adler's trap in the first place, and now he
must face the consequences.

Still, that wouldn't stop him from tracking down "the late Irene Adler." Perhaps she wouldn't be
between his crosshairs, but he needed all the data he could get, and though he was usually content
to sit passively and have others gather intelligence for him, this time the matter was altogether too
personal and potentially destructive—to himself and to his brother—to trust anyone but a Holmes.

And in this case, Sherlock would most certainly not be on hand.

For several weeks he and his assistant dedicated themselves to following every ghost of a thread
left by Sherlock.

He re-confronted everyone whom he had previously interviewed, this time informing them that he knew that they were lying to him, and menacing them with untold things in the same civil tone he might use to order a tea from his PA. Inevitably each person folded, and he began to piece together how Sherlock had tricked him. As aggravated, bordering on furious, as Mycroft was, he couldn't help but feel a measure of fraternal pride over the beauty and complexity of Sherlock's exfiltration, and begrudging respect for how his younger brother had so shrewdly covered his tracks. Sherlock had designed the entire rescue with one central objective: to use every vulnerability of Mycroft's against him in order to craft a lie exactly tailored to him. Mycroft was certain that no one in the world could even perceive that he had any weaknesses, let alone plan and carry out an entire ex-fil based on the exploitation of them.

Correction, he amended, ever striving for precision. Sherlock—and Irene Adler. Her discernment and exploitation of his vulnerabilities were, after all, the twin catalysts for his return to Pakistan.

They are indeed a pair, Mycroft mused darkly. However, where Sherlock's deceptive actions were an ex post reaction to her capture and means to what he obviously perceived as just ends, hers appeared to be ex ante and aggressive—a power play, and certainly soon to be even more. And that, he thought, was the singular difference between she and his brother.

And yet, despite the increasingly comprehensive picture he had of what had happened in Karachi and its immediate aftermath, no one knew where she had gone after they had parted ways, nor what her current alias might be. The trail went cold at a radius of 130 miles in any given direction of the city, land or sea, and the one man who could tell him everything, Sherlock, was the one man he wasn't willing to confront. Oh, caring was such dreadful a disadvantage—every conceivable element of this scenario proved that again and again.

On his fourth night in Pakistan, and the final evening before their return to London, Andrea knocked gently on the door of his guest room in the High Commisioner's house, where he was staying for the duration of their repeat investigation. He called for her to enter, and when she did she silently handed him a dossier of A4 sheets. He flipped it open expecting to find new intelligence on the location of the Adler woman, but instead he was confronted with the insignia of an internal laboratory to which he had full access. It stated that the DNA evidence Irene Adler provided (skin cells swabbed from inside the cheek, as it turned out) proved conclusively that the child whose images were stored on the USB stick was indeed the progeny of she and his brother. Despite his belief that he had already internalised and to a degree accepted this catastrophe, he had still gone faint when he'd read the official words.

From the time he had first received the letter, onward, he avoided getting in touch with his brother full stop, and though it did irritate him that Sherlock never initiated communication himself, Mycroft reminded himself that until he received Adler's next communication (which precedent told him was inevitable) it was best that he refrain from any contact. He prided himself on his iron self control, but Sherlock had always been Mycroft's weak point, as apparently Irene Adler was Sherlock's. And so Mycroft was gripped with the fear that he would unintentionally blurt out the news in a blend of concern and anger, unable to look at his brother and contain such explosive information. And so he waited.

It irked him that on top of everything else, he had no way of even contacting her, which distinctly put him in her control even further, and completely re-established the dynamic of power that had existed between them prior to Sherlock's little revelation the year previous. He could only learn of the next fragment of her plan when she chose to reveal it to him, and even then she would do so in such a way that would decidedly favour her and her agenda. And yet still his eyes jumped through
his mail each day looking for her elegant hand, an uncontrollable tic which filled him with loathing—towards himself, towards her, and even towards Sherlock at times.

It was a bitter reminder of how she had gained full control of both Holmes brothers once again.
From the moment he had seen the image of the infant on his projection screen, at once so familiar and so shocking, Mycroft had resolved to track down Irene Adler—and to do so without taking the risk of interrogating his brother. He was confident that between himself and his agents he could uncover the truth without involving Sherlock at all, and initially, shortly into his arrival in Karachi, it seemed as if this would be possible. However, after an additional month passed and there was no further communication from Irene, nor had he discovered any leads as to her whereabouts, his determination not to try to use his brother as a resource began to waver.

He and his team had pursued every viable lead and some decidedly nonviable leads beyond that, but in only a few short weeks after his return, he had found himself in the unprecedented position of having no further recourse. All of her former contacts in London convincingly believed she was dead, Karachi was a dry well, and her financials had obviously been raided by someone, and yet the actual transactions were inscrutable to even their top forensic accountants. He supposed he shouldn't have been surprised that so many were unequal to the task of deciphering a mystery created by Sherlock Holmes, and though a certain fraternal pride in his brother still lingered, his frustration was definitely starting to override it.

More than anything, Mycroft loathed his lack of agency in the situation, as it completely subverted the natural order of his life. He enjoyed never being answerable to anyone but himself and ERII, and the longer Ms Adler dragged on this silent waiting game, the more difficult it became to play the passive role, and he started to become fixated on at least discovering her location. He was aware that it was probably a mere token, but in his desperation the thought of speaking with Sherlock became increasingly more enticing. He was the one link that joined everything together.

Just when Mycroft felt his resolve ebbing away entirely, his aide came to him in the closest approximation to excitement he had seen since the day she had brought in that hateful package. She stood across from him at his desk, and though her voice sounded even and detached, a certain confidence in her movements betrayed her excitement.

"I may have found her," she informed him, and he felt a flicker of hope for the first time since they had returned to Britain.

Andrea explained to him that she'd heard tales and rumours circulating amongst certain members of the diplomatic corps based at the Embassy in Washington, the UN in New York, and various consulates along the Eastern Seaboard. They whispered of a woman who could dominate anyone, male or female, whether it was with whips—or wits.

When his aide had started asking around under the guise of wanting to book a session (as herself—she was clever enough to realise that the more egregious and risky her own indiscretion appeared, the higher the rewards she'd reap), the breathless, avid responses she'd gathered had set the kindling of her suspicions ablaze.
One high-ranking female official at the UK Mission to the UN had called the dominatrix in question "a hurricane of intellectual sexuality" and another man shared anecdotes about how she could make even most hardcore BDSM scene somehow romantic and timelessly glamorous. Someone else had observed that she seemed to be able to transform herself into any character that the client would most desire. "She," he had said, "seemed to know exactly what I liked." But most damning was the fact that her appearance seemed to coincide precisely with when Irene Adler had disappeared.

"And then an hour ago I was finally trusted with her information, including her website and its password," she concluded in a slightly breathless voice. "Which is where I saw this." She laid a glossy piece of A4 on Mycroft's desk, her cheeks flushing faintly in satisfaction.

"She's adopted an American accent judging by some of the video on her page, but it's her, isn't it? I've just sent it to the lab to run it through facial recognition, but I wanted to brief you immediately as well... She goes by the professional name 'Stormy Leather' now."

As Andrea had laid out her increasingly persuasive evidence, the often-experienced but still gratifying feeling of victory within grasp swelled in him—so sweet after weeks of frustration—and it was was with uncharacteristic eagerness that he leaned forward to examine the photograph.

He was first struck by its resemblance in style and content to those he had procured from The Woman's website nearly two years prior. A slender, fair, and dark-haired woman with highly-defined cheekbones lay across a swath of rich crimson velvet in a state of effortless elegance, engaging the viewer with a challenging yet seductive expression. The anticipation blossomed into the thrill of triumph, and a burst of adrenaline flooded his system...

But then as soon as it had come it dissipated again, and was replaced by crushing disappointment.

"No," he said, his voice reassuringly bland, and not at all reflective of the frustration he felt. "I can see the resemblance, but no. It's not her, merely her western hemisphere equivalent. I imagine that wherever powerful men and woman with various Freudian complexes congregate, women of her profession will flourish."

**Though perhaps not quite of Irene Adler's calibre,** he added silently. He rather suspected this woman wouldn't have proven nearly the emotional and intellectual foil to his brother as Ms Adler had. But then again, who could?

"Cancel the lab request."

He pushed the photograph away from himself with the tip of one finger, then, ignoring the look of hastily suppressed disappointment on his PA's face (she wasn't nearly as skilled as he—yet), he leaned back and steepled his fingers under his chin, surveying his options once again.

Unfortunately, it was painfully obvious that this changed nothing at all, and that Irene Adler was still as firmly in control of the situation as ever, and once again he allowed his thoughts to turn to his brother.

**Perhaps I should speak with him,** he considered, while all too aware of how rash and dangerous an impulse that was. Doing so could be Mycroft's key to everything—or his very real destruction if Ms Adler found out and it incited her wrath.

But despite the acknowledged risk, he was so accustomed to being able to utilise Sherlock that it was frustrating (to put it mildly) to be deprived of his talent. Besides, Mycroft was an accomplished interrogator, and as long as he asked precisely the right questions in precisely the
right way, Sherlock would never have to know anything beyond the fact that Mycroft had discovered that she was alive because of Sherlock. Even if Sherlock refused to answer him outright (which was highly possible; he never liked to make anything easy for his elder brother, nor would he readily give up details on such a successfully orchestrated and executed mission), his reactions alone would be ripe for analysis.

And yet ironically, Mycroft would have no reason to speak with Sherlock about her at all, if he weren't attempting to locate her as a direct result of her contact with him, and the power-play she had instigated. He'd still be as blissfully ignorant of her survival as Sherlock was of the shocking consequence of his affair with her.

It was that thought that gave him real pause. Irene's implied threats aside, was Mycroft willing to risk setting Sherlock on a path of discovery that would ultimately turn his entire life upside-down? Yes, hewas excellent at obfuscation but his brother was almost equally good at detection, and Sherlock finally seemed content after a very rocky period of adjustment in the aftermath of returning 'from the dead.' But his good reputation had been resurrected and the architect behind it all had committed suicide. And though he didn't suspect that Sherlock's relationship with John Watson was anything more than platonic, it was obvious that the man was very good for his brother—and it had taken a tense period of time for them to finally reach their former levels of trust and ease with one another, as well. Did Mycroft now dare to jeopardise his brother's happiness after so much adversity?

Alone in his office, he allowed himself the indulgence of a deep grimace and sigh at his dilemma. The situation was a wretched ourobouros of professional, familial, and compulsory obligation, and she had undoubtedly enclosed him within its confines with the utmost deliberation and glee.

He turned, as was his practice since boyhood when confronted with anything messy or emotional, to the solace of thought and reason. Thought and reason were constant, comprehensible, and uncapricious, and the only valid means by which to organise a mind muddled by things such as sentiment.

And so with a sigh of both relief and gratification, he withdrew to his mind, and devised a comprehensive cost/benefits assessment within a matter of seconds.

**Current status:** Irene had contacted him to inform him that not only was she alive, but that she had conceived a child with Sherlock. Sherlock himself was only aware of his first role but not his second, and both Irene and Mycroft wished to maintain that status for the time-being.

**Objective:** To locate Irene Adler so as to attempt in-person negotiations, without the unnecessary dramatics of cryptic messages or power plays. Protection and significant financial support were anticipated concessions and would be granted without dispute for the sake of the child, but he needed to know if her agenda contained any additional elements, and be prepared to negotiate unforeseen terms.

**Benefit:** It was probable that his brother, Sherlock Holmes, knew where Ms Adler was settled and what alias was used, or at least had some awareness of a possible location.

**Cost:** Consulting with him in any way but the most oblique and strategic manner possible would alert Sherlock's suspicions.

**Benefit:** Sherlock would attempt to contact her or even perhaps go to her, which could lead Mycroft (or at least his agents) to her.
**Cost:** Sherlock could (more probable: would) discover the existence of his son in the process of finding Ms Adler. In retaliation for his noncompliance with her request, she could then inform his colleagues in The United States and Germany that she was alive, and moreover, and that the younger Holmes brother had carried out the entire mission from the initial rescue to her patriation in [wherever she was] under falsified documents. (Additionally, it would wreak havoc on Sherlock's life as well, which was a very potent disincentive as well).

**Final Assessment of risk:** His American and German counterparts would believe—and understandably so—that he had been involved in Ms Adler's exfiltration, and that he had wilfully conspired to deceive them. All trust, so essential in his delicate position, would be lost, and he would be utterly finished—cast off in disgrace.

He blanched at the thought, and actually felt physically ill. He had seen how badly Sherlock coped with boredom, and fortunately for himself he'd never suffered that plight due to the ongoing and rigorous demands of his occupation. But if he were deprived of that position, if had nothing to constantly fuel the roaring freight train of his mind, he suspected his reactions would be far worse than a few bullet holes in a wall. Suicide would likely not be out of the realm of possibility, he understood with cold but lucid dread.

There were worse things than being (temporarily) bested by the woman who had nearly brought England to its knees, he realised, and with that sobering perspective, he accepted the findings of his assessment, and managed to suppress the urge to reach out to his brother.

And so it wasn't the keen disappointment of a false lead or the indignity of being relegated to a passive role that finally broke Mycroft's resolve.

Ultimately, it was politics.

There was never such thing as a lull in his professional life—the very nature of his work meant that there was a ceaseless demand for his attention: the near discovery of corruption in a distant election he was helping to fix, the disappearance of a governor's child in a politically unstable country which could incite a civil war, or even the acrimonious romantic break-up of a team of talented British scientists who had been at the forefront of zero-point energy technology research, which threatened the entire project (a further blow against 'caring,' as if he'd needed any additional evidence...). These were all within his purview, and just a sampling of matters that had arisen in the past week alone.

However, as demanding as his usual duties could be, they had in no way detracted focus from The Adler Conundrum, as he had taken to calling it. Far from it, since he had been able to adjust his schedule and go to Asia to investigate the circumstances of Ms Adler's survival, when he had first received the package. He had become so deft and masterful at his role that he could literally resolve a labour strike or minor economic collapse over breakfast, and under normal circumstances there would have been no problem in adding one more layer of ongoing complexity to his workload.

And yet unfortunately, current developments were far exceeding the status quo's level of demand... The minor headaches that had cropped up in the past week were trivia compared with one issue that had been steadily escalating over the past year, and had rapidly come to a head in the past month: The upcoming changes to the United Kingdom's status in the European Union.

Although he wasn't as outwardly arrogant as Sherlock, neither did he bother with false modesty. He was the most brilliant man in Britain, and certainly one of the greatest strategists in the world. And yet very occasionally a paradigm would shift despite his best efforts, and the growing sentiment in
Britain that it should renegotiate its role in the European Union was a force Mycroft found he could neither moderate nor ignore.

In an effort to avoid a crisis, he held meetings on a daily basis that often stretched from pre-dawn to midnight and beyond, whether with the Prime Minister, ranking members of the QC, the head of the Bank of England, the president and director-general of CBI, or his counterparts in the founding member states of the EU. Even the Americans were hammering at his door: they were vigorously opposed to any change because the UK currently represented their interests in the EU due to the two countries' 'special relationship,' and a change in status threatened that. The matter so monopolised his work—and therefore his life—that for the first time since his early twenties, he had been forced to delegate all other tasks aside from those deemed most critical.

And so, with the rising tensions between the EU, The US, and various factions within the UK, Ms Adler could not have chosen a more pernicious time to drop her bombshell on Mycroft. Having to manage such high-stakes personal and professional issues simultaneously left him feeling stretched and overwhelmed in a manner which was entirely unprecedented, and during one rare moment not spent considering charters, historical treaties, the single currency, or veto powers, it occurred to him that her timing must have been deliberate.

After all, someone as clever and politically attuned as she had been would be aware that tensions regarding the UK's role within the EU had been escalating for years, and were coming to a critical point around this time. She'd also know full well that he would be integrally involved in the matter, and therefore he would be preoccupied and unable to respond to her in his usual decisive and ruthless manner.

Then one night after a particularly tense standoff between himself and his colleagues from The Netherlands and Germany, it occurred to him that in fact Ms Adler's cunning went even further.

During the meeting, the German had furiously accused Mycroft of blackmail when Mycroft had reminded him that Britain could veto changes to the single currency treaty if it were unable to get the reforms it sought, and as Mycroft lay in the single bed in his office's anteroom, he considered the concepts of blackmail, leverage, and power dynamics. This in turn led him to comprehend the full extent to which Ms Adler had out-maneuvered him.

Obviously she could count on him not to react to her gauntlet as rigorously as he would under normal circumstances. But she was also shrewd enough to realise that because Mycroft was already coping with one very serious and potentially volatile situation, he would be rather inclined to meet her demands so as to avoid the additional risk and uncertainty of another one.

But even more critically, she would know that now, more than ever, he was vulnerable to scandal, and would go to any measure to avoid even the faintest whiff of one. Obviously he was already invested in avoiding scandal due to self-preservation, but in the current situation the stakes were exponentially higher. In every way that mattered, he was the lynchpin in the negotiations between all the various stakeholders, and if he were to fall into disgrace the very delicate process would collapse, resulting in devastating consequences for Britain, its 'special relationship' with the United States, and the world economy.

As she might commend him for saying, she had him well and properly trussed.

One week later, following another day and night spent in ferocious debate with leaders from Brussels, The Hague, Berlin, and Washington, Mycroft sat alone in his office during a rare moment of solitude, holding a tumbler of 25-year-old single-malt Talisker whiskey in one hand and searching through his desk for some very deserved, full-tar cigarettes with the other. While rooting about in his top drawer, the back of his hand brushed against the edge of a file, lifting up the corner
slightly to reveal a glossy photograph below. Frowning, he pulled out the picture and gazed at the red herring that had been the American dominatrix.

He stared at it for several long moments, and in his mind it began to symbolise all his powerlessness and passivity in his handling of the Adler woman and her unknown agenda. It was only an image, but under the dominatrix's challenging gaze he felt the implied dynamics keenly—as well as a measure of self-loathing. After all, following that false lead, he had essentially accepted a passive role and allowed her continue setting the pace and terms.

Then suddenly, and very clearly, he thought, No. No, this will not do.

And perhaps because he was sleep-deprived, slightly intoxicated, and regrettably emotionally invested and therefore slightly irrational, he realised that the very factors that had prevented him from seeking out Irene Adler were in fact the precise reasons why he should locate and speak with her as soon as possible.

He straightened, and shoved the photograph haphazardly back in the drawer, his mind becoming clearer at the prospect of a potentially crucial new development. Still, he wouldn't implement a new strategy under these dissatisfactory mental conditions; his idea would have to pass through the same cost/benefits analysis framework he had used before.

He closed his eyes lightly, and despite his exhaustion and slight inebriation, the concepts and words flowed into place with satisfying clicks.

**Cost**: He was dealing with great volatility and uncertainty in respect to the UK's future role in the EU

**Benefit**: As such, he felt is was essential to seize control where he could, to the degree he could, specifically in terms of his management of the Adler Conundrum.

**Cost**: The stakes of his current project were so high that he could not risk unexpected scandal.

**Benefit**: If he located her it was possible that he could convince her to make her terms more transparent, so that he could devise a strategy accordingly. He would accommodate her as much as he possibly could (and perhaps even then some), just to get this over with and not have her sword at the back of his neck at all times.

He noted the unpleasant irony of that metaphor, but continued his assessment.

**Cost**: She could threaten him with exposure.

**Benefit**: He, in turn, would point out that this would result in her protection and financial support vanishing. After all, if forced to give up his role he would hardly be in a position to grant her such favours. As long as she wasn't like the scorpion in the fable about the scorpion and the frog, she would act in the way that most benefitted her and the child.

He stomach dropped at the last word, as it did every time he remembered that this was all due to the fact that Sherlock had fathered a son with Irene Adler. He tended to lose sight of that critical fact between the demands of his work and the extremely trying dynamic he had with the infant's mother, and the reminder only made him more resolute. The time had come to take greater control of the situation and utilise the one, best resource he had.

More energised than he had felt in weeks, he downed the last dram of the spirit and pulled on his jacket in one swift movement, then fished his phone from his pocket and sent off a text to his aide
as he strode from his office.

-Have the car round front ASAP.-

Despite the lateness of the hour, her response pinged on his phone almost immediately, just as he had expected that it would.

-Certainly, sir. Where to?- 

On the lift down he typed back his reply, a look of grim determination on his face.

-221B Baker Street. I'm going to pay my brother a visit.-

Chapter End Notes

QC: Queen's Counsel.

CBI: Confederation of British Industry: Incorporated by Royal Charter, the CBI is the foremost lobbying organisation for UK business on national and international issues. It works with the UK government, international legislators and policymakers to help UK businesses compete effectively.

A few things:

1. "Stormy Leather" is a real person. Be aware that a search is potentially NSFW.

2. The POV will switch between Mycroft, Sherlock, and eventually Irene.

3. The next chapter is already written and will be posted tomorrow after some final editing.

Thanks so much for reading!
Confrontations

When Mycroft entered Flat B, he was marginally more sober and composed, but still committed to his course. He had checked and rechecked his findings in the car, and was confident that they justified this action, risky though it was.

He found Sherlock sprawled out in his imitation Le Corbusier chair by the fireplace, a thick folio of what looked like old tube and sewer plans open across his lap, and a cold mug of tea by his foot.

"What are you doing here?" his brother asked without looking up, his tone a touch recalcitrant as usual. "You usually ring if you can help it—save yourself the ordeal of a trip."

He ignored Sherlock's dig, and lifted his chin. "Not if I have something particularly pressing to discuss with you."

"True," Sherlock conceded, sounding bored. "What is it?" He finally looked up and graced Mycroft with his eye contact, mocking though it was. "Has a corgi gone missing again? I'd check the main larder, it's —"

"No," Mycroft cut in, and then tried to force a smile onto his face, though he knew it looked more like a grimace. His brother could be so infuriating, so quickly. "I'm here to talk about something more personal."

Sherlock stared at him for a moment as if sizing him up, then drawled, "Oh God, must we?"

He pointedly turned his attention back to the folio, and Mycroft felt a stab of real anger.

"Yes, Sherlock. I'm afraid we must," he said, his tone sharper. He paused for a moment, then, watching his brother very carefully, stated: "Irene Adler is alive."

"Mm, John said," Sherlock replied, in the atonal voice of completely disinterest. Apparently he hadn't yet sensed danger in Mycroft's tone. "Ages ago. Your point?"

Mycroft shook his head, his eyes narrowing. His brother's studied nonchalance told him everything he needed to know about how this was going to go—not that he had at all expected for it to be easy.

"Let's not play games," he said, dropping even the pretence of a smile. "We're both well aware that the story about witness protection in America was just that—a story."

His brother sighed down at the underground grids across his lap, making an act of sounding annoyed at Mycroft's continuation of the topic, but Mycroft knew that if Sherlock genuinely had no stakes in the matter he'd have asked about her actual fate out of simple curiosity. And he should have known that; this was sloppy and suggested to Mycroft that Sherlock had still not ridden himself of his contemptible weakness for the woman.

"I repeat," Sherlock said, "your point in mentioning this is...?"

"I think you know."

Sherlock looked over at Mycroft as if he were a disgusting lab specimen, except that Mycroft knew for a fact that even putrefying flesh was accorded with more respect by his brother.
After a moment Sherlock looked away, concluding, "You're being tiresome, you can see yourself out now."

"I'm also well aware of how she survived," Mycroft added, holding his ground.

Sherlock paused for a fraction of a second; too infinitesimal for most people to even notice, but to Mycroft it betrayed that Sherlock was starting to realise the seriousness of the matter, and was firming up his defenses.

"What does it matter how she managed it?" he dismissed, still trying to seem cavalier. "It's not any sort of revelation that she's exceedingly cunning."

"No, Sherlock," Mycroft raised his voice. "I mean that I know you rescued her in Pakistan and arranged for her to have an alternative identity." He paused, then continued, "I know everything.

And then even more than you can fathom, on top of that.

When he looked up his brother was staring at him again, but if Sherlock's face had betrayed any chagrin at Mycroft's statement, Mycroft had missed it. It was now shrewd and assessing once more.

"So?" he finally asked, defiant.

He wasn't denying it or playing ignorant, which was a promising start, Mycroft supposed, but he was also far too self-assured and confident for Mycroft's liking.

Better throw him off then, he thought.

"Did you have an affair with her?" he demanded with the tenacity of a prosecutor, hoping to unnerve Sherlock both with the question itself, and his abrupt increase in intensity. Since Mycroft knew the answer, it was mostly a device to give him the edge.

It seemed to work. Sherlock blinked in surprise at such a frank question, but soon his eyes narrowed dangerously and a faint flush came into his cheeks. Mycroft thought he could detect outrage, indignation, and something akin to embarrassment, and though he felt distaste for it, he was fascinated as well. It was an expression he had never before seen on Sherlock's face. Outrage, yes, indignation, frequently, but never this brand of embarrassment, and it was quite a turn from the arrogance he had displayed only moments before.

"I was under the impression that you thought sex alarmed me," Sherlock said, his brows knitting together in anger.

"Where the Adler woman is concerned, I have no idea of what you are capable," Mycroft retorted in an arch tone. "Anything, it seems."

"Correction, you have no idea of what you're saying," Sherlock hissed. "Good-bye."

He raised the heavy open book in front of his face to emphasise the dismissal.

"Oh, but I do," Mycroft contradicted, his voice an icy purr. Still, he chose his next words prudently, careful not to reveal too much. "Despite your best efforts, I've learned all about your little adventure in Karachi. Fun for you, I bet. You always did want to be a pirate..."

He looked up from twirling his umbrella handle between his fingers to see that the folio had dropped back onto his brother's lap, and that he had gone very rigid; his eyes burned into Mycroft's and his face was as set and hard as carved alabaster.
Mycroft started to turn as if he were going to leave, then paused and added with a pained expression, "I ask you though, Sherlock. Her. It's ever so clichéd."

He meant his words, but they were also calculated. Whether arrogant or outraged, Sherlock was obviously still invested in what had happened in Karachi almost two years before, beyond simply wanting to ensure that his achievement was not compromised. Mycroft's impression had been accurate: incomprehensible as it was, his brother was still experiencing lingering sentiment for Ms Adler. And though it probably increased Sherlock's desire to protect her and her new identity, it also made him significantly more vulnerable...

If Mycroft spoke disparagingly of her as he just had, it would catch Sherlock where he was most susceptible, which might cause him react irrationally, lash out, and give away more than he might otherwise. In Mycroft's work he frequently encountered men and women covering for significant others during questioning, and the particular strategy of vilifying that loved one often yielded results. People would rush to heatedly correct him, and wind up revealing too much.

Still, a part of Mycroft utterly hated this, hated manipulating his brother's sole weakness for his own gain and approaching him like all those other ordinary men and women. And all the while he knew the full truth and weight of the situation, whilst keeping his brother - the infant's own father - in the dark. He knew that it was ultimately for the best, at least for now, but it still made him feel rather wretched and it certainly intensified his resentment towards Ms Adler.

"I didn't—" Sherlock continued to refute, his tone defensive, and as heated as his face.

Ah, so he was still going to disavow it all, rather than rush to her defense, Mycroft thought. Though it didn't help Mycroft's cause, he was still somewhat relieved that Sherlock wasn't so readily falling for the trap. He was still reassuringly less malleable than all those other people, weakened by sentiment though he was. Perhaps it was because part of Sherlock actually agreed with Mycroft about it being an ill-advised cliché, in spite of his apparent helplessness to do anything about it.

"Please, your denials insult the intelligence of us both," Mycroft interrupted evenly, although he was aware of how close he was veering towards dangerous territory now. He needed to antagonise his brother just enough, yes (something he wasn't finding difficult at the moment), but he also wanted to avoid drawing any attention to his informant. He loathed to consider how much the already unstable situation would escalate should Sherlock discover that Irene Adler had been the one to reveal everything to Mycroft.

"Believe me, there's little I'd rather imagine less than you and her..." He shuddered delicately, and it wasn't entirely in theatrical effect. "But the fact is, you're practically broadcasting it. I confess
myself disappointed that I didn't notice it before."

Sherlock remained stock-still, his mouth set into a firm line. The light coming in at an angle from the windows cut a hard slant against his face so that his cheekbones stood out even more prominently, and Mycroft knew that Sherlock might present a rather intimidating figure to others, but all he saw was his little brother in a pouty strop—the kind that had him chucking bits of his dinner at Mycroft when they were children. There were much more critical concerns at hand than his fractured pride and overly-prolonged sentiment.

"I now see it was a mistake on my part, not to discuss the Karachi incident with you directly," he went on, ignoring the thunderous expression on Sherlock's face. "I felt it sufficient to speak with John Watson about the matter, but I overestimated your loyalty to your flatmate over Irene Adler, I suppose."

"It had nothing to do with—" Sherlock started in fury, then seemed to catch himself, and clamped his mouth shut.

Mycroft raised one eyebrow, but then continued. "As I was about to say, I took his lack of knowledge as confirmation that you weren't involved. But even after all your meticulous scheming and secrecy, your body language would have given you away in an instant. That would've been ironically fitting in this particular instance though, wouldn't it have? Presumably the one time you decided to indulge in the physical, and it would've ended up betraying all your finest brainwork. But no, luckily for you I was trying to spare you the knowledge of her death, trying to be a good brother. As always."

This seemed to be the last straw for Sherlock.

"Get – out," he snarled with barely-suppressed fury.

Mycroft fixed his brother with a probing stare, still ignoring his orders to leave. He was far from done.

"'Over and done with,'" he quoted softly instead, now returning to Sherlock's unintentional but informative moment of candor. "So I take it that means you're not in communication?"

Based on Ms Adler's note he had judged as much, but Sherlock's reaction to Mycroft's intentional provocation confirmed it. And now Sherlock was staring directly ahead, but Mycroft could see some sort of foreign emotion burning in his eyes.

"Do you at least know her current location?" he pressed.

His brother only responded by tightening his lips further, but his unhappy, resentful look was sufficient for Mycroft. It appeared that he did not.

Mycroft swallowed down his frustration—moments before he had thought they might finally be getting close to some sort of revealing tantrum, but if Sherlock's genuinely didn't know anything relevant, it didn't matter how proficient Mycroft's interrogation skills were. He had agonised for weeks over whether to take this risk, and now Sherlock appeared to know even less than Mycroft.

It was entirely possible that although Ms Adler had accepted Sherlock's help and slept with him over a year and a half ago, she no longer returned any sentiment, and was 'done' with 'Junior' once more. But that would be a foolish thread to pull; if he wanted Sherlock to be any use at all, he needed to prevent him from feeling any self-pity or bitterness, which were both paralytics.

"Very well," he said, turning to the one tangible piece of intelligence he could discuss with
Sherlock, "but I do know that you obtained for her a new name, so you are aware of her alias. What was it?"

He watched his brother expectantly, but Sherlock maintained a stony, insolent silence, his eyes boring holes into the wall behind Mycroft's shoulder.

"I see," Mycroft said softly, feeling genuine dismay at Sherlock's lack of cooperation even though he had expected it. "My own brother, willfully harbouring a traitor."

Sherlock leaned forward, letting the folio slide off his lap and thud onto the floor. "Piss off," he hissed, his eyes flinty.

Mycroft tsked ironically and raised a brow. "Language, little brother."

But he knew that Sherlock rarely swore even this mildly; Mycroft was obviously hitting a nerve, and it was more than simply a reaction to Mycroft trying to get something out of him that he didn't want to share. Sherlock was growing more anxious for Ms Adler's future safety and security, and if Mycroft played the situation exactly right, he might be able to compel Sherlock to search for her himself.

In terms of risk he was in for a penny, in for a pound at this point, and tracking Sherlock to her location seemed the last viable solution, unless he wanted to revert to total passivity, which he no longer considered an option.

Sherlock gritted his teeth, and finally deigned to make eye contact with his brother again, although it was hard and begrudging. "She'll have long since changed it," he said, "so there's no point in my telling you."

"Don't act obtuse," Mycroft spoke over him. "We could track that alias and it could lead to what the other is." Though he now recognised that Sherlock wouldn't give up her new identity, he might as well further emphasise the threat to Ms Adler.

"Ah!" Sherlock perked up sarcastically, and Mycroft's eyes narrowed. "Well by that logic, your knowledge of the name 'Irene Adler' should be sufficient to lead you to her current alias, no help from me required. Which is convenient for you, since none is being - or will be - offered. So off you go, have at it." He made what Mycroft considered an excessively obnoxious shooing gesture, although Mycroft could see the sprinting pulse in his carotid artery.

"Yes Sherlock, I will have at it, and I will find her. You can't fool Big Brother forever," Mycroft said in a silky but dangerous tone, and he knew Sherlock understood the double, and equally true, meanings.

Still he didn't make a move towards the door, and the brothers settled into a tense standoff. Under Mycroft's relentless scrutiny, Sherlock began to struggle even more to maintain his composure: his fingers dug into the soft leather of the chair's arms, his face began to flush, and his mouth set into an even tighter line of resentment.

As much as it pained him to see his brother so affected, it also meant his victory. There was no doubt in his mind: Sherlock would be on a flight or train before dawn.

Just as he decided to take his leave, his loathsome work done, he heard John, Sherlock's erstwhile flatmate, enter the drawing room, and Sherlock reacted with obvious relief, straightening slightly out of his aggressive lean forward. Perhaps he thought Mycroft wouldn't be willing to discuss the Irene Adler matter in front of John, and therefore he was off the hook. Little did he realise that he
had only just placed himself on that hook.

"We were sleeping, but I heard some sort of commotion down here. Everything all right?"

"Yes," Sherlock said, then all but growled, "my brother was just leaving. Say goodbye, John." Still, his aggressive eye contact with Mycroft never wavered.

John assessed the pair of them with his characteristic blend of bemusement and curiosity, but said nothing.

For a fraction of a second Mycroft was tempted to spin towards John, announce something along the lines of, "I'm sorry to inform you that apparently Sherlock saved Irene Adler's life, and all evidence indicates that he fell in love with her in the process. He then lied to both of us by omission about his involvement. What do you think of that?" and then quit the flat and leave Sherlock to deal with all the fallout.

Sherlock's suddenly anxious face made it all the more tempting.

But no, that was a childish impulse, and he wanted Sherlock to spend his energy on seeking out Irene Adler, not fencing questions from his angry friend about his deception. Besides, it was obvious that making Sherlock confront the reality of his ongoing sentiment for Ms Adler was punishment enough for someone like his brother.

"Erm," John said from the doorway, "I'm going to go make some chamomile tea, then, since I'm up..."

Though Mycroft knew, and knew Sherlock knew, that John was using this as an excuse to keep an eye on them, neither brother acknowledged him; they were still locked in a battle of wills.

Finally, after enough time had passed that Mycroft felt his point was made and his trap laid, he did as he was bidden, but slowly and with great dignity.

"Good-bye, Sherlock," he said to his brother, who only looked away and pursed his lips more tightly in response. "John," Mycroft added, in his most civilised tone. "Give my best to Mary."

"'Night," John answered from the kitchen with a nod, though his eyes were glued on Sherlock, and his face was filled with concern.

Mycroft gave one more perfunctory smile and headed for the flat door, knowing that by the time the front door shut behind him, Sherlock would already be making his preparations.

As his car sped northwest on Park Road towards St John's Wood, Mycroft had to admit that despite the innumerable tense confrontations he'd experienced with his younger brother over the years, this one had left him feeling particularly shaken.

More than anything he was torn, which was a sensation he had rarely felt before this whole matter had developed, and which he loathed. On one hand he hadn't been prepared for how much Sherlock still cared for Irene Adler; it clearly went beyond wanting to protect a successful mission and involved deep sentiment for the woman, which was quite troubling.

But on the other hand, the strength of Sherlock's feelings gave Mycroft an advantage, the first one he'd enjoyed since this wretched business began. Mycroft felt confident that he had been able to leverage those feelings into Sherlock now assuming the role of Ms Adler's seeker. He could simply assign his people to trail his brother, which would spare Mycroft all the fuss and exertion of the
task himself, and allow him to focus in where his country desperately needed him: the UK/EU referendum.

Still, he wasn't without significant unease about the motions he had set into place. As his own brother had stated himself, love was exceptionally dangerous, and it was a weapon Ms Adler had wielded against Sherlock in the past with devastating results.

...And that had been before she was also the mother of his child.

Moreover, and speaking of the child, as good at confounding Sherlock as Ms Adler had proven, it would be quite a challenge to erase all evidence of an infant, if Mycroft's memories of Sherlock's babyhood served. Not to mention there would be certain physical changes Sherlock could potentially observe, especially since he would be able to directly compare... Mycroft grimaced with distaste again.

And hanging over his head like the blade of a guillotine was the potential that Ms Adler would expose him in retribution for that discovery, when she had explicitly told Mycroft that Sherlock wasn't to know.

Because although she would be quite adversely affected by his fall as well, he still wasn't entirely certain that she wasn't the scorpion of the old story after all...
The instant he heard the front door latch shut, Sherlock leapt from his chair and strode to the window. Pushing aside the curtain, he watched Mycroft slide into his car and then waited for it to turn out of sight onto Melcombe Street, before he spun on the spot and made a beeline for his laptop.

"What was that all about?" John called from the kitchen over the sound of the kettle starting to boil.

"Just Mycroft being Mycroft," Sherlock said in an offhand tone, although his heart was racing and he could even detect a very slight tremor in his voice. "You know how is when he tries to coerce me into doing something for him."

"Mmmm, and I know how you are when you can't be arsed," John retorted, but without any actual rancor. "Put the two together and raised voices are inevitable. Got it."

But now that Sherlock had temporarily appeased John with a reply he was barely listening, and as he jabbed at the power button and waited for the computer to boot up, his mind churned with dozens of ideas on how to proceed, and the nascent formulations of a plan. Yet just below his rational and coherent thought process, and vying for dominance, surged pure and primal adrenaline.

He hadn't heard the name Irene Adler spoken aloud since prior to his fall and exile, when John had parroted to him the lie about her going to America, and hearing it again now, particularly so unexpectedly, had incited a potent and all too familiar reaction in him.

Mycroft had been correct about Sherlock broadcasting the truth of his sentiments though physiological indicators: to his horror he had felt his face heat and his heart accelerate into a pounding arrhythmia in response to hearing the name by which he had originally known The Woman, and he hadn't been able to modify his expression into even the semblance of a poker face, let alone regain his composure.

He had been taken aback by the force of his reaction, and what it revealed about the ongoing nature of his feelings towards The Woman—feelings that somehow persisted despite his resolve to... not delete what had happened between them, but at least to view that time with academic detachment ...To distill what he had learned and use that knowledge when applicable, whilst suppressing the associated emotions that served no function. And though he had already known that he hadn't really achieved that objective, neither had he been prepared for quite the strength of feeling that had pulsed through him the instant Mycroft had spoken that name.

As if that experience hadn't been dismaying enough, it had occurred in the immediate presence of his elder brother, thereby forcing Sherlock to reveal a rather personal and humiliating weakness to Mycroft. This inadvertent disclosure was more than just mortifying—it also put him at a dangerous disadvantage. It wouldn't be a question of if but only of when and how Mycroft would leverage
Sherlock's weakness against him in some way, and Sherlock had only himself to blame.

His mouth pulled into a reflexive scowl and he jerked his head, as if he could physically jostle his thoughts back into approved order.

It took an uncomfortable moment of effort, and then a slew of thoughts burst forth in a disjointed tumble as if they had been welling up behind a dam while he'd considered the more distasteful aspects of his situation. Nonetheless, he was able to identify the most critical issue. Though he would eventually like to know precisely how Mycroft had learned of his little trip to Pakistan it was a low priority at present. Far more significant was the fact that Mycroft still wasn't privy to Irene Adler's location. For the timebeing, Sherlock's efforts (and therefore The Woman) were uncompromised.

Sherlock could tell that when his brother had asked him if he knew her current whereabouts, Mycroft had interpreted his expression as an admission that he didn't have such information. And though it had partly been a deliberate obfuscation on his part, it was true that he wasn't entirely certain. All he had was the postcard.

Besides Sherlock's continuing sentiment for The Woman, another correct conclusion that Mycroft had drawn was that when Sherlock had rescued the former Ms Adler in, and then exfiltrated her from Karachi, he had furnished her with a new identity. But Sherlock hadn't stopped there. Even with an alternate identity, if there were no supplemental framework to legitimise and protect it she would remain almost as vulnerable as she had prior to her capture. Because he was unwilling to see his hard work in Karachi be for naught (and, admittedly, for other more nebulous and personal reasons), he had also provided her with a small apartment and a bank account consisting of funds that he had managed to transfer from her Zurich account through complex and somewhat criminal means. However he had subsequently learned that she'd never taken residence in the flat, and shortly thereafter he'd discovered that the Chase account he'd opened had been drained as well.

For a while he had tried his hand at locating her remotely - as a purely cerebral exercise, he had assured himself although he knew full well that it was more - but all signs indicated that she had indeed changed her identity yet again. And unlike the Karachi episode, it had appeared that on this occasion she had not wanted to be found by him, because he'd had as little success then as Mycroft was apparently having now.

Not that he had had much of an opportunity to do the search justice, not really. Not so very long after he had returned from Asia, everything even slightly peripheral in his life fell by the wayside as his singular focus on Jim Moriarty and Moriarty's 'Final Problem' consumed all. And then he himself had been consumed.

By the time he had realised how The Final Problem was to manifest, and therefore what a great resource The Woman would have proven in the demanding months that lay in store for him, time was far too short to do anything but plan for survival.

Then, once he was ostensibly dead and absolutely disgraced he hadn't the time, resources, nor luxury of looking for her, as invaluable an asset as she might have been in the long-term. He couldn't afford to think in units of time any longer in duration than several days, and any energy he spent seeking individuals had to be devoted to locating the underbosses and caporegimes of Moriarty's still-viable network.

Conversely, neither could he risk disseminating any clues about his own whereabouts so that she might find him when she heard of his 'suicide,' in case those clues were seen and understood by the very people he was trying to track under the cover of his death. Anyway, he had had no expectations that she would choose to contact him, after she had severed any and all ties that had
connected them after they had parted ways in Oman. Still, that awareness didn't prevent him from hoping for precisely that, and not solely due to the fact that her knowledge of Moriarty and her skill at manipulation and deceit would aid in the work.

Because although he had initially been confident that he would not just cope but 

*thrive* under the challenging conditions of absolute solitude and relentless mental and physical exertion, after only several weeks he'd begun to feel its weight, and the cost of his lot. At the beginning, he had been completely consumed with the operation, fueled by the challenge posed by the enormity of his task as well as not a small bit of fury and need for recompense. However, Sherlock had soon learned that no matter how extreme a situation might seem at the outset, one may eventually acclimatise, and as he did so his fury had begun to shift into something much worse: deep loneliness and an increased apathy towards his mission.

He had missed the flat and being able to play his violin, as well as inexplicable, small things such as his tartan dressing gown, or the terrible PG Tips tea John would make, or the feel of his Kimex beaker in his hand. And he had fiercely yearned for London, less as a physical place on a map than as the embodiment of an idyll—one with limitations and infinite possibility, horror and wonder, challenge and reward... His personal Arcadia, and a representation of all that was deprived to him. But mostly, to his shock and unease, he'd found that once he was forced by circumstance into isolation, he missed *people*. Besides The Woman, he had particularly craved being able to speak with John whenever he needed to talk out a theory or problem, and as with Irene it was more than just the practical he had missed... On a number of occasions a random word or fragment of strangers' conversation had triggered the memory of something John Watson had once said, and comments that Sherlock had previously taken for granted came to become tokens of comfort to which he clung. And though they reminded him of all that he had sacrificed and left behind, they were also powerful incentives to continue.

Steadily Sherlock's original objective of destroying Moriarty's network evolved into the *means* by which he would get what he really wanted. He had stopped plotting out intricate strategies (bordering on revenge fantasies, he had to admit) on how he was going to destroy the criminal legacy Moriarty had left behind, and had begun to view the task as a mere—though potentially deadly—obligation. He'd understood his duty, and he would perform it proficiently, without reservation, and to its conclusion, but only because it would finally end his banishment.

But until then his exile would go on, and he hadn't been certain of how long the sentence would last. He had often thought that a span of years not only seemed possible, but likely. And sometimes at his darkest moments - after a devastating setback, or when he hadn't spoken to a single person for days, or when something had particularly reminded him of home - he felt convinced that he would never finish the work, and that he would have to remain forever an outcast. That it was impossible for one man, no matter how driven, resourceful, and clever, to take on such a layered, entrenched, and international network.

Those had been times he had mostly keenly, almost desperately yearned for Irene Adler. Unlike his friends and other allies, she wouldn't have been endangered by their contact, at least not in and of itself, and he could easily picture her adapting to the trials of such a dangerous and transitory existence. 'Death' had condemned them both to be refugees from their old lives and former selves, but it also could have protected them, and connected them...

Granted, he'd had no doubt that she would've proven an immense asset to the work itself, but in those moments it was clear that he was longing for something else, something he had never really experienced before: personal consolation through another person. *Comfort, closeness, intimacy.* Not only sex, although he hadn't been able to deny that that was certainly part of it. He could recall
the few times they'd had intercourse in the finest detail possible for being so preoccupied, and the idea of sharing such intense physical closeness after so many long months of solitude was incredibly alluring. But it was more than that. If it had been about only physical closeness and release, he could have engaged the services of a prostitute or 'pulled' someone in a club, and those ideas were so alien and unappealing to him that he would accept the crushing loneliness rather than indulge in either of those options.

No, it had been her he'd wanted: her body, admittedly yes, but moreso her mind and the affirming, challenging, and exhilarating dynamic between them. To his annoyance he'd had some difficulty readjusting to a strictly nonsensual life when he had returned to Karachi, and the extremity of his exile only magnified and intensified what he had already been feeling. At points it felt almost unbearable. To cope, he had begun to invent entire conversations with her, about everything from the repulsive condition of a hostel's sheets to the vulnerabilities of the underboss he was stalking at that time (smoking habit; Sherlock could confront the man alone as he stepped out for a smoke into the secluded alley behind the unlicensed casino he operated). But his running commentaries were a poor replacement, and they only served to accentuate his solitude. He had never been able to quite capture her voice—his impersonation lacked the vitality and flirtatious defiance of the real Irene Adler.

They never did reunite in death. He had remained the lone predator, facing interminable months of ever-increasing danger and difficulty in eradicating Moriarty's syndicate one shot-caller at a time. Sometimes he would tip off the local or state police as to the person's location if he or she were a fugitive; in the absence of any sort of outstanding warrant he would find evidence that would lead to a direct arrest. Occasionally, when opportunity allowed for it and he felt particularly repulsed by a mark, he would just turn the person over to a rival criminal faction and let the chips fall where they may.

That violence-by-proxy had been the extent of his own brutality, since he had never been compelled to use deadly force. His advanced planning was careful, informed, and detailed, and so in the critical moments of confrontation, he had never encountered any variables that he had not at first anticipated—variables which might have necessitated the use of his weapon. Nonetheless, his first step in each country he'd entered had been to obtain a firearm, and he had mentally prepared himself for the eventuality of having to take a life to such a degree that he had almost longed for a reason pull the trigger, just to end the unbearable psychological suspense of what it would be like.

But as the long months, extreme loneliness, and often squalid lifestyle continued to wear on Sherlock, he came to believe with irrational fervour that if he were to ever take a life, the bullet would be reserved for the most important target on his list: Jim Moriarty's second-in-command and chief confidante, Colonel Sebastian Moran.

The name hadn't been familiar to him prior to the undertaking of his mission, but the more Sherlock had learned about him, the more Colonel Moran had grown to represent everything that Sherlock sought to destroy. The man wasn't Moriarty himself, but as Jim's first lieutenant he was the next best thing.

Besides, he had done plenty on his own to rekindle Sherlock's desire for revenge. According to Sherlock's intel, he was the man who had physically strapped Semtex around John at the pool, and he had been at least one of the riflemen who had threatened the two of them on that same night. Sherlock had also suspected that Moran had been one of the snipers sent to kill John, Mrs. Hudson, and Lestrade if Sherlock failed to jump from St. Bart's, and was very likely the one whose sights had been trained on John. Moriarty had seemed to appreciate that type of symmetry and elegance.

However Moran had proven exceptionally difficult to trace, and none of the underbosses Sherlock
had apprehended seemed privileged with any information on his location. Even when Sherlock had promised (lied) that he would release the person in exchange for information on Moran's whereabouts, Sherlock had gleaned nothing of use to track him down—he had only been given additional reasons why the man needed to be eliminated.

Unfortunately, while each removal of an underboss had brought Sherlock a step closer to his ultimate goal, and had provided him with an opportunity ask additional questions about Moran, it had also made it ever more blatant to the remaining leadership that someone was methodically dismantling Moriarty's web, which had made his task increasingly more difficult.

Still, scant or ambiguous as the evidence in his possession had been, it was sufficient enough for him, and after nine months and four weeks, his determination had resulted in the neutralisation of all of Moriarty's remaining commanders, barring two: Moran, and a chav named Neil "Bozzy" Bosworth whose prodigious counterfeiting skills had elevated him through the ranks of Moriarty's organisation. And though Sherlock had found reliable evidence regarding the location of Bosworth, he still hadn't discovered even the hint of a lead regarding Moran, and had been all too aware of the fact that unless Bosworth knew anything Sherlock faced a vacuum of data, which could mean an indefinite exile.

In facing such adversity he again found solace in thinking about The Woman, and he had come to the conclusion that if he did reach an impasse in his work, he would invest his energy and brainpower into locating her instead. Perhaps she would know something about Moran and his potential location... or perhaps not. Either way, it would be something tangible on which he could focus—something which offered the potential of a more promising future than an interminable life of solitude in search of a single fugitive whom he had never met.

However, three days shy of the ten-month anniversary of his 'suicide', Sherlock's mission had come to an abrupt and unanticipated end, ruling out any need for contingency plans.

His pursuit of Bosworth had returned him to England, where he had been able to ambush the young man at his aunt's council flat in Hartcliffe, Bristol. Bosworth, perhaps because he was English and therefore was more familiar with how Sherlock looked due to his media coverage the previous year, had appeared gobsmacked when he had realised that Sherlock had been behind the annihilation of the crime syndicate, since the entire network had believed him dead as a result of Jim's manipulations. It had been intensely gratifying to Sherlock to know that the deception of his suicide had remained intact—but not as gratifying as Bosworth's keen nod when Sherlock asked him if he were willing to trade any information about the whereabouts of Colonel Sebastian Moran for his freedom.

However, he hadn't been prepared for Bosworth's next words: "Is 'at the geezer you've been after this whole time? I hate to break it to you only Moran's dead."

According to Bosworth, Moriarty's most trusted associate had been killed in a bare-knuckles brawl over dogfight winnings in the Black Country only several days prior. And though it had been quite anticlimactic, and Sherlock had been disappointed that he had not been directly responsible for the final ruin of Moriarty's legacy, he had taken dark pleasure in the barbarous nature of the man's death. Besides, it had meant that he could finally return home, which - after turning Bosworth over to the Avon and Somerset Constabulary, and then taking several days to investigate Moran's death until he was satisfied that it was legitimate - he did.

And though home was almost all that he had wanted for almost the entire duration of his 'death' (home—and The Woman), he had found the transition exceptionally hard. Difficult as his unstable and perilous life abroad had been, he had become somewhat accustomed to its rhythm and
demands, and it was challenging to reenter into his old life. He knew consciously that there had once been such a thing as normalcy for him (well, his own unique brand of normalcy), but he hadn't been able to recall what that had entailed, let alone put it into practice.

He had almost welcomed the tension wrought by his contentious reunion with John; it had given him a valid reason to feel wrong-footed and vaguely bereaved when he should have felt relieved that his great hiatus was finally over. But frankly he had felt very little relief, even after he, John, and the new development of John's fiancée Mary reached an understanding.

Over time Sherlock had come to realise that the shift was primarily internal. Being home again, amongst his tailored suits and insects enclosed in glass and books and collection of chemicals, forced him to acknowledge that he wasn't the same man he had been when he had last stood between the walls of his flat. A shift that began even before he'd left for Karachi had continued its progression, and he could barely recognise himself. And so, even though he was technically Sherlock Holmes of 221B Baker Street, NW1 once again, that was of little consolation in the face of his burgeoning identity crisis. Throughout that time, particularly during his sleepless nights, his mind had still turned to The Woman, the ghost of his yearning lingering despite his return to a life that he felt could never realistically accommodate her.

In the immediate aftermath of his return he'd wondered if she would get in touch with him since she once again knew how to contact him. However, as weeks passed and there was still no communication from the late Irene Adler, he had become increasingly more disillusioned, and it had felt as if he were slowly resurfacing to consciousness from a dream. He had started to realise that the reunion he had imagined between himself and The Woman had been an infantile fantasy, and that while it was perhaps permissible during the hardship of his time away (somewhat; grudgingly), it was an entirely inappropriate diversion while he was attempting to rebuild his life and reputation. And rebuild he must.

In fact, as he did finally begin to reacclimatise to his former life, the breadth and depth of the need he had felt during his 'death' had eventually come to seriously unnerve him, and as much as he had yearned for her during that time, he was correspondingly even more grateful that they had never reunited. He would have approached her as a diminished and desperate man, a shadow of his former self, and the results would have been pathetic and degrading to the extreme. Moreover, in his state he would have been incredibly vulnerable to her, and as much as he admired her, and as proficient a team as they had made in Karachi, he still didn't entirely trust her. Or perhaps it was that he didn't trust himself with her...

Either way, he had resolved that he would not look for her again, and should he ever somehow see her, he would have to ensure that he was in a position of not only not needing her, but preferably not even wanting her. Any position weaker than that would cede too much power to her (and to sentiment), and threaten to push him into the abyss of emotion once again. At best the fallout would be like the aftermath of their interlude in Karachi; at worst, like the majority of his hiatus. And perhaps worse even than that, he thought, as horrifying as the idea was.

And then just over one month after his resurrection, as if she could sense her hold over him diminishing slightly, he had received a postcard from America.

It was John who had brought it to his attention, which was fortunate (or perhaps just the reverse) because otherwise it might have sat languishing for ages, only to eventually be swept into the recycle bin during one of Mrs. Hudson's occasional purges.

But instead John had seen and been charmed by it, remarking that it looked to be a kid from the handwriting and spelling, and then reading it aloud.
Dear Mr Sharlock Holmes, I was always a believor in you and I was very sad when it seemed you were dead for 11 months, But now that you're back I admire you evenmore.

Yours,
Terri Womera.

At first Sherlock had taken little interest except to correct an error, interjecting in a bored voice, "It wasn't eleven months, it was ten. Not such a fan then, clearly." But then when John had read the name, his mind had jolted to attention, stimulated by something he couldn't immediately place. Almost simultaneous to this reaction, his body had been flooded with adrenaline, as if his limbic system had known why he was reacting in such a way before his brain could interpret it. That primal response should have been the tell...

Still, he'd feigned indifference—until John had left the room, at which point he almost tripped over his own feet to snatch the postcard off the table and stare at the signature.

Terri Womera. Of course. It was almost a homophone to her former professional name, plus the last letters were her former initials, and in some markets 'Womera' was promoted as the female alternative to Viagra, so there was a reference to sex...

Once he had established with some confidence that it was The Woman who had sent it to him, he had voraciously skimmed the rest of the coded message, and had deciphered its meaning in less than three seconds.

First she had written his name with an 'A' instead of an 'E,' which was followed by putting an 'O' where there should have been an 'E' in 'believer.' Then the number eleven. Why eleven? It seemed rather arbitrary, but he knew that neither that nor any of the other apparent errors were anything but deliberate. In the next clause there was a capitalised letter after a comma, and 'evenmore' formed one word. Two Es in a row, two Es missing from their proper places twice before, he had thought. So just replace the first E with an A and the second E with an O. Avonmore. Eleven B Avonmore. Simple, but clever.

He had then turned to his preferred search engine, and had discovered that the only 11B Avonmore anything - Avenue, Boulevard, Lane, Road, Street, etcetera - in the world was in Edison, New Jersey, despite the fact that the postcard both depicted and was sent from Baltimore (he had been surprised but wryly amused that she'd opted to reference that debacle). After all the energy he had invested in trying to locate her, the address was less than thirty miles from the apartment he'd originally let.

In an instant, it was as if he had discarded all that he had resolved in the past several weeks pertaining to The Woman, and had become reconsumed by the yearning he had felt for her in all those months of grueling solitude: he had logged into his British Airways account and had selected a flight for that evening. He almost certainly would have gone through with it—had John not walked back into the room and startled him out of his almost trance-like state only moments before he processed the order. Instead, he had snapped the lid of his laptop closed without taking the time to shut it down, jumped up from his chair, and gone straight for his coat. After shoving his arms into it and then wrapping his scarf around his throat, he had fled the flat without so much as a word to John, and had taken a long and mind-clearing, though difficult, walk to the river and back. By the time he had returned, he had managed to harden his will against her once more.

And though the pangs of sentiment had returned almost like Swiss clockwork during times of boredom or adversity (though he likened them more to acid reflux), they were never quite as acute as they had been during his ten months abroad, the weeks immediately thereafter, or the moments directly after he'd examined her postcard. She was like an addiction from which he was slowly
weaning himself—but would never escape entirely. Fortunately he knew how to manage just such a thing: work, and more work, and due to the eventual restoration of his reputation, demand for his skill had returned to almost its previous capacity.

He had kept the postcard, though. He had propped it up on a bookcase next to the fireplace, where it was frequently within his view. Sherlock could tell that John projected his own emotional makeup onto it; still under the impression that it was from young fan his face had softened when he had first seen it, and he obviously took it as evidence that Sherlock was capable of some feeling afterall, perhaps as a result of his extended exile.

The irony was that John was actually spot-on about the emotions evoked by the postcard, but Sherlock's reasons for actually keeping it could not have been more contrary to what his flatmate believed. Sherlock had held onto the card precisely as a reminder of and a caution against those feelings, using it as a sort of *ad hoc* chip, similar in function to those he had received during his recovery. And despite (or perhaps due to) the fact that the postcard was far more provocative than an imitation poker chip since it revealed her address, it had served as an effective coping mechanism. He had never returned to his online BA cart and completed the booking.

However, tonight he would.

Sherlock glanced up at the postcard with narrowed eyes, and felt his face flush even warmer, reflective of both the shame and defiance he felt.

Yes he was crossing a line he had drawn for himself in the sand, and while it was undeniable that he was experiencing a significant relapse of sentiment that he could only moderate but never delete, it was not that impulse that compelled him to act, but his rational concern for her ongoing welfare. He was responsible for warning her that his brother had discovered Sherlock's actions and therefore her survival, and that obligation had nothing to do with sentimentality or the strange, vulnerable need he felt for her—at least not directly.

And although there was some question of whether the address in the postcard was still valid, it was still a lead of sorts (it was certainly more data than Mycroft possessed, he wagered), and Sherlock intended to pursue it to its conclusion.

Chapter End Notes

"I can't write without a reader. It's precisely like a kiss—you can't do it alone."
—— John Cheever (Thanks to my lovely readers, especially for your patience between updates! Xx)
Departures and Arrivals

Casting one surreptitious glance over his shoulder to confirm that John was still occupied with tea preparations, Sherlock opened his web browser, signed into a virtual private network encryption program, and allocated himself an American ISP address, specifically from the state of Virginia. While the story he was going to concoct was purely meant for John, whom he doubted would know or understand the meaning of the ISP address, perhaps it could also buy Sherlock a critical hour or two with Mycroft. It wouldn't deter his brother for long, but it might provide him with enough time to get to the airport, at least, when his (inevitably) flagged passport would tip his brother off.

John reentered the room just as Sherlock was putting the finishing touches on the message he was submitting to 'The Blog of John Watson,' and he hit Enter with a flourish before turning to John with an expression of jubilant and slightly manic anticipation.

He was self-aware enough to know that it was one he might wear in seriousness when first learning of an intriguing new case, although it certainly wasn't much of a stretch now. There was a distinct possibility that he would be seeing The Woman within twenty-four hours, and the notion made him feel a conflicted blend of giddiness and wariness—the latter to do both with her intentions, and how he would react when in close proximity to her once again.

He also couldn’t help but note that at the surface this looked like Karachi all over again: he was seeking her out with only the scant clues that she had intentionally left him, uncertain of her agenda or her regard for him, all whilst deceiving and evading his brother in order to complete his objective without any interference. The critical difference was that this time he went to her as both an investigator and - as foreign and false as it was to articulate the concept in respect to him - a former lover. It shouldn't matter, he didn't want it to matter, and yet it did; it made things even more complex and delicate.

With slight effort he focused on John again and took in a subtle, steadying breath through his nose. As his flatmate set down an unsolicited cup of tea next to him he opened his mouth to speak, but John cut in first.

"So why can't you help your brother this time?" he asked, sounding shrewd despite his obvious tiredness. "You've got no cases on."

It was true that he wasn't working on an active investigation at the moment, and he briefly wondered if he would be reacting this strongly if he were preoccupied with an especially engrossing case. Would he have been willing to abandon a compelling mystery just to carry the message to The Woman that her 'liberty in death' had been compromised? Even when it was clear that she was in no immediate danger due to the measures she had since taken—measures that were so effective that even Sherlock, who had personally established her most recent alias and bank account, had been unable to find her without overt directions? He understood almost the moment he had even formulated the question that he would, even if the hypothetical case were a 9.5. He grudgingly acknowledged that in terms of intellectual allure, The Woman would always rate a perfect ten.

"Oh but I do," he contradicted with a forced quirk of a smile.

John stared at him for a moment, then smirked faintly. "Convenient, that. So basically no matter how empty your schedule is, something will somehow crop up the instant Mycroft asks for your help. So what is it this time? Little green men? Irrefutable proof of the Loch Ness Monster? Or
something else equally made up?"

Sherlock huffed out a small laugh, but it was more from John's incidental prescience than his
sardonic words. "Mm, yes, I'd say any one of those would rate higher than helping my brother. And
so does this. It's on your blog, I'd have thought you'd have seen it."

"In case you didn't notice, it's a bit late."

Sherlock raised his eyebrows and shook his head slightly in the equivalent of a shrug, and John
sighed.

"No, I didn't see it, obviously. A good one, is it?"

Sherlock's artificial quirk of a smile turned into an equally insincere grin. "Well you've achieved
something that every halfwit celebrity strives to accomplish, congratulations!"

"Hm?" John yawned, then blinked and seemed to force himself into greater alertness. "Wait, what
are you saying - halfwit...?"

"You've cracked America! I'm due for the next plane out to Dulles."

Sherlock watched as John blinked again, still struggling from his punctuated sleep. "Erm... my
passport is set to expire soon but I think if we wrap things up quickly I should make it under the
wire. And I know Mary will understand."

"What?" Sherlock cocked his head, narrowing his eyes and momentarily wrong-footed by the
image of John accompanying him on this...briefing mission, he supposed it could be called. "Oh.
No, I'm going alone."

"No, it's fine," he insisted, oblivious and misunderstanding. "You know how she is. And I think I
have two weeks or so left on the passport; that should be enough time, knowing you. If I had three
days left it would probably still be—"

"The statuses of your passport and your domestic arrangement are irrelevant," Sherlock interrupted,
now exasperated with John's dedication when he was usually flattered and gratified by it. "I'm
going alone."

John's reaction was instantaneous, and predictable.

"You don't need my help on this one?" Trying to sound indifferent, though the crease above his
tuberacle and the heaviness of his brow gave him away. *Hurt, disappointed.*

Sherlock managed to control his impulse to scowl as he felt himself responding with sympathy,
disgusted he should react in such a way when clearly circumstances dictated that he take this trip

"I'm afraid not," he said, steeling himself against John's unhappiness, and he was gratified to hear
that his voice sounded blunt and unyielding. "It's sensitive and requires the utmost discretion."

"Oh, right then," John nodded, still attempting to feign nonchalance, although now slight anger at
the implication put colour in his cheeks. "Strictly 'need-to-know,' then?"

"I'd say so, yes," Sherlock lied, then added, "You can read the message yourself and see."

He had utilised every shred of his scant knowledge of the American political system to pose in the
Comments section as an aide to a congresswoman whom 'he' believed corrupt and involved in the disappearances of some key donors in the opposing party; he had concocted it on the spot as a reference of sorts to his brother and The Woman, and he had been rather pleased with the invented scenario, until he heard John's next words.

"Strictly 'need-to-know' and yet they posted it on my blog for all to see?" John retorted, his tone now acerbic, and Sherlock mentally flinched at his unforgiveable lapse in thinking.

Stupid. He always seemed to commit some sort of tactical error when The Woman was involved, but it was crucial that he didn't repeat his carelessness—not when from here on out the potential consequences were significantly more grave than a hacked-off flatmate.

"Obviously they assume no one else in America has ever heard of your blog," Sherlock said, shrugging one shoulder as if to say "Americans," though he knew it was weak, and John's narrowed eyes confirmed it. "They insisted that only I come," he added.

Drawn brows joined narrowed eyes. "And since when do you pay any attention to client requests?"

Sherlock looked at John, uneasy over the growing measure of suspicion in his voice, but said nothing, and John leaned in, apparently trying another tact, to Sherlock's distinct relief.

"Should I renew the passport, you know, just in case?" he asked in a conspiring tone.

"Yes," Sherlock responded at once, "But not because you're coming to America with me." He paused, then said for final emphasis, "Because you aren't."

"All right, all right." John's expression dropped and for a moment he eyed the tea next to Sherlock, as if he wanted to snatch it back. Relatively speaking, Sherlock welcomed the anger he had deliberately goaded—it was far preferable to that knowing suspicion that had seemed to flare a moment before, as well as the hurt he had initially glimpsed.

"Are you going to shunt me off to help Mycroft again, then?" John asked, looking sullen.

Sherlock couldn't help an actual crooked smile this time, though there was still little warmth in it. "Not this time, I think."

John's face was thunderous. "I'll just leave you to it then, shall I?"

"Yes, thank you," Sherlock replied. He knew John would perceive his tone as dismissive, and to be frank it now was, without being contrived. Sherlock had very little time to reach Heathrow before the only direct flight of the day to Ministro Pistarini Airport departed shortly after dawn, and so every minute was critical.

He picked up the tea and turned back to his laptop, and ignoring John's pointed huff and then his heavy, retreating footsteps, he signed onto his own account on ... He would have liked to use his preferred alias to fly directly to Newark in the interest of time, but he knew it was impossible. If he did so Mycroft would be able to discover with absurd ease the identity that he had protected so fiercely for almost a decade. All he would have to do was locate Sherlock's image on airport CCTV footage (which he would surely be monitoring, after that meeting), and compare it with the passport information of the person who had checked in at the time indicated by the stamp on the video feed.

If he did that, he might as well simply hand over The Woman's postcard, because doing so would lead Mycroft to her location just as surely as the code in the message did, and provide about the
same level of (minimal) challenge to his brother.

Neither of those were options.

He switched to an England-based ISP in his VPN program so that his next actions were protected and yet distinct from the signature left by the entry on John's blog, and then searched for Flight 245. Granted, Mycroft would discover Sherlock's intentions the instant he processed through Passport Control at Heathrow, but Sherlock wanted to avoid any potential advance notice, which would enable Mycroft to assign an agent to Sherlock's plane—not that there wasn't a risk of that even without much advanced notice, and he would have to prepare for that eventuality.

Sherlock selected Flight 245, and then skimmed its real-time seat assignment plan, his eyes narrowing. There were over fifteen seats remaining, which meant that he could risk deferring the purchase of his ticket until he arrived at the airport—even better. He had enough Sterling on hand to pay for the ticket in cash and further delay alerting Mycroft as to his destination. Because while it was possible that Mycroft didn't actually monitor his internet usage, he most certainly did have his hands all over Sherlock's financials, and Sherlock expected that Mycroft had even set up some sort of notification system to alert him when Sherlock made large-scale purchases—a flight to Buenos Aires, Argentina, for example...

Argentina was one of the few countries in which his brother didn't have influence or internal access. Oh, Mycroft had been trying to negotiate some sort of relationship for ages, but Sherlock suspected that until the Falklands were back in Argentinean control, his brother was wasting his efforts—not that the country had been particularly friendly towards any British outsiders since Peron, so perhaps it would be futile even then. The thought made him grin, but it was still a hard twist of his lips.

And unlike North Korea, Iran, or other countries in which Mycroft hadn't managed to insinuate his prodigious nose Sherlock had relatively easy access to Argentina: just one direct flight to Buenos Aires from Heathrow. Out of his brother's jurisdiction he could switch to his alias's passport and purchase tickets on his alias's credit cards to Newark, without fear of Mycroft tracking him through airport CCTV. The indirect journey would be tedious and cost him over eighteen hours, but protecting his cover - and consequently, Irene's - made it worth the time and effort.

Once he had determined his short-term course of action, he pushed away from the table in the drawing room and strode to his bedroom, where he opened his closet, pulled out his ancient Tusting holdall, swiveling and unfastening it with a flick of his wrist so that it landed open on his bed, and then swept several suits from his closet, halved them over his arm, and dumped them inside. Shirts, underwear, and socks followed, topped by one additional pair of shoes, his travel toiletries kit, his international mobile adapter, and a case holding his passport and credit cards, shortly followed by the same documents bearing the surname Sigerson, and his work kit (lock picking tools, luminol swabs, a magnifying glass, forceps, bindles, spare gloves, antiseptic spray, plasters...). Throughout this rote but efficient packing, he wore a fixed, stony expression, and refused to think beyond the immediate implementation of his plan. He had no idea how he would conduct himself once he met The Woman face-to-face again - how he even thought he should conduct himself - but he supposed he had over a full day of air travel to contemplate that, though even that notion set his heart racing.

At the last minute, just as his hand closed around the handle of their flat's door, the manner in which he and John had parted pushed into his mind, and his brow furrowed. He had intentionally angered his flatmate so as to distract him from what seemed like burgeoning suspicion, but now something in him hesitated leaving on such tense terms.
More damnable sentiment, he thought darkly, but still he dropped his case to the floor, doubled back, and climbed the stairs two at a time to knock on John's bedroom door. He waited for longer than he cared to spare and still received no answer, which was due either to John's (valid) anger at being left behind, or because he had gone back to sleep. Regardless, Sherlock called a goodbye through the door then turned, only to pause again, his face twisting in a sudden grimace of uncertainty.

It was quite unviable but a small, slightly panicking part of him regretted that he couldn't dispense with the entire charade and just confide in his friend, despite how it might alter John's original opinion of Sherlock: that he was a man of steadfast logic, impervious to the demands and whims of emotion or sex. And it mattered to Sherlock that John maintained that opinion of him—partly due to his own vanity, he had to concede, but mainly because he wouldn't want John to get the impression that his general disposition was superficial or pretence, because it wasn't. He wasn't concealing a sensitive or amorous heart beneath a superficially stony, stoic exterior as if he were a character out of some awful regency-era novel, for God's sake. It was entirely accurate—with just one exception. A very singular exception.

And though he had been struggling with that anomaly for two years, time made it no less confusing or disconcerting, and he understood that if he weren't so constrained by his schedule it was possible that his present anxiety might have caused him to finally break his silence and overcome the absolute privacy in which he had shrouded the whole affair. It wasn't as if he were adverse to farming out to specialists when his personal knowledge or expertise were lacking, as they certainly were here.

And yet...

As much as Sherlock would value some insight, he also recognised that it was possible - rather, probable - that John was unequipped to help him with this. The woman and his relationship with her consisted of a negative space in his mind, in that he was unable to list or describe positive attributes of their relationship (what it was, its value to him, who they were to each other beyond 'The Woman,' in her case). But by grasping what it was not, he could arrive at a proximate, though very rudimentary, understanding. And it was not some casual dalliance that had expanded from an initial physical attraction, which differentiated it from all of John's relationship experiences at the very outset.

Not only that. As much as he respected and cared for his friend, he felt that whomever he and Irene Adler were to each other, they mutually occupied a plane above the vast majority of other people, populating their own self-enclosed circle in the Venn diagram of humanity. No, perhaps this was not John's area either, perhaps only Irene could lay claim to such territory because if this unclassifiable state were anyone's domain, it would be hers.

A honk from the taxi waiting on the dark street below broke him from his thoughts, and silently he retreated from the door, and turned back towards the stairs.

He barely registered the cab ride to Heathrow, let alone noticed the rising sun, which at first outlined the trees on either side of the M4 in a thin latticework of neon, and then tinted the predawn landscape a pale unsaturated gold. He was present only in the literal, physical sense. His jaw was set and his eyes were fixed but unseeing; his mind had turned inward, focused on the demands and logistics of his upcoming journey. But he wasn't considering what would happen upon his arrival, not yet... not beyond simply ensuring that she was safe, and warning her of Mycroft's new intelligence.

Later, obscured by an electronic devices charging tower in the waiting area of Gate 52, his body
was taut as an E string as he observed the latecomers boarding across the way—people who might have had to hustle to make the flight after his brother had received an alert that Sherlock Holmes had gone through Passport Control at Terminal 5. So far it was only a pair of OAPs, a Bangladeshi boy in his late teens wearing a kurta, and a harried-looking mother with her three young children. Still he assessed each of them thoroughly, knowing that to dismiss anyone would be excessively stupid.

He also ignored the ever more urgent calls over the Tannoy for Sherlock Holmes to "please proceed directly to Gate 53, your flight is prepared to depart" until he was certain that the sealing of the gate was imminent and he would be the last one through, at which point he finally approached and slipped through with a sheepish, apologetic smile to the attendant. He had booked a seat in the final row of the aeroplane, and as he moved through the aisles he carefully studied the passengers. He saw no familiar faces, nor any expressions that betrayed deceit with the exception of two adulterers going on holiday with each other, seated in separate rows). The fact that he didn't recognise anyone meant nothing though, and he committed each of the faces to memory so as to be on guard for overlap on his next flight. With so many direct connections from London to New York, it would be more than a little suspicious if he shared his next flight with anyone from this one.

The hours on the plane crept by with unbearable slowness, and somewhere roughly over the Canary Islands he realised that in an unpleasant reversal from the taxi ride he was becoming overly aware of his body, as if the closer he drew to The Woman the more attuned he was to his physicality. He dismissed the absurd thought with an audible snort, drawing a questioning look from the elderly man beside him, but he couldn't deny that he felt distinctly awkward and restless. The space between his seat and the seat in the row ahead of him was far too cramped to accommodate his legs, but that was always the case during airtravel (with the exception of his brother's Cessna, in which case his discomfort was of an altogether different type), and he had always been able to transcend the physical and turn his focus inward before. Now he felt uncomfortable in his own skin even more than the claustrophobic conditions warranted.

As if taking a cue from his body his mind suddenly seized on the question of whether it was plausible they would be intimate again, and though his eyes narrowed in self-rebuke he found himself contemplating the idea with a sort of masochistic curiosity. He would like to assert that he'd remain focused on the matter of her safety, but that had also been his ostensible objective when he had traveled to Pakistan, and, well...

Aside from what precedent suggested, he also had the suspicion that his will was like fatigued metal: once bent into shape it was that much easier to bend and refashion again, yielding along the same lines, and becoming ever weaker and less resistant each time. When that relatively unsensual metaphor began to morph into another, undeniably base thought, he actually growled in aggravation under his breath, and the man to his right gave Sherlock another look of alarm and budged away from him. Sherlock took little notice; he was too preoccupied with the task of disciplining his mind and distilling his thoughts until only ideas about strategy remained.

After what felt like a ceaseless span of time later his transfer in Buenos Aires appeared to go as smoothly as he could have hoped. No one from his flight followed him through the connecting flights corridor, nor rejoined him in the Passport Control when he drew out the crimson and gold passport of Norway. Neither did anyone from his portion of the queue appear to follow him to his next gate, although as with Heathrow he carefully assessed each passenger and made sure to be the last one to board.

At Newark, a Dr M. Sigerson passed through Homeland Security without incident, and as he strode out of the airport and into the late afternoon sunshine, he felt the fatigue of long-distance plane
travel drop away, to be replaced by keen anticipation. Feeling invigorated, he channeled his energies into assessing his surroundings. He determined that the carpark was too removed for someone trailing him to access a car while still keeping tabs on him, the pick-up kerb was also located at a tactically disadvantageous distance, and only one person from his flight had entered the taxi stand with him. When Sherlock saw her cab peel off at a different exit behind his own cab, he allowed himself to slightly relax his level of alertness, though he still felt strangely charged.

His taxi arrived at 11 Avonmore Avenue as the sun was preparing to set for the third and final time of his interminably long day, and initially he couldn't believe that they had come to the correct location. They had come to a stop in front of an utterly mundane and nondescript mock Tudor apartment building set behind a correspondingly drab and unimpressive lawn, and it was almost impossible to reconcile this boring building on its boring street in its boring city with the woman (The Woman) he had last seen on the deck of a ship in the Arabian Sea. If disguise were a self-portrait he didn't know what this bland place was supposed to say about her, because he could see nothing of the woman he knew here. In fact, it was depressing to even think of her living here; she must have found the sheer ordinariness of it oppressive just as he would have done. What had compelled her to relocate here, he wondered, when he had let a perfectly adequate flat for her in midtown Manhattan—one which appeared in its pictures to share at least some architectural elements with her former home on Eaton Square in a city that, while no London, seemed at least more tolerable than this remote hamlet.

He abruptly realised that it was possible he might be able to ask her himself, and the thought sent his pulse into an immediate gallop. He simultaneously felt the long hours and immense distance of his journey behind him, and the tantalising proximity of his objective before of him, and he quickly paid the cabbie, hoisted his bag across his shoulders, and headed up the walk at a barely-controlled clip.

In the building's lobby he found that the lift was broken and being serviced by repairmen, but he didn't even break stride as he swiveled on one foot to change direction and make his way towards the stairs. He noted with one glance that contrary to his own building's arrangement, these flats were placed in descending order, and he took the steps two at a time towards the top.

One storey below The Woman's flat he slowed, and then came to a full stop on the landing in front of Apartment C. His breathing was elevated and coming out in low and harsh gasps, and he recognised that it was due to more than the several flights of stairs he had climbed; he was much fitter than that. No, it was mostly a result of the adrenaline coursing through his system, and it didn't take a genius to know why that might be occurring.

He never had let himself consider how he might conduct himself when he first saw her again; after his near lapse into base thought he had managed to stay focused on the tangibles elements of his plan, that (1) he would find her at this address, and (2) he would report to her the relevant information. That was the purpose of this journey, he had resolved; anything else was incidental and even potentially detractive.

But the actual moment of reunion had come, and he cursed what he now viewed as procrastination on the planes. He'd had nothing but time - hours and hours - to plot an actual strategy that would help him meet this unusual and potentially fraught situation with at least some measure of real confidence. It galled him that even now, after all he had experienced, Mycroft's mocking accusation that sex alarmed him should be the slightest bit accurate. But it was too late to devise even an ad hoc plan now; he was far too distracted by the idea that she might be several metres above him, or could even happen upon him in the staircase at any moment. He would have to wing it.
Slowly he climbed the final flight, doing his best to tamp down the damnable nerves, the exclusive rights of which belonged to the late Irene Adler. He was unsuccessful, and by the time he stood in front of the dull oak veneer door with its imitation brass 'B,' his pulse was thundering through his body.

He contemplated the doorbell. It seemed like such a mundane act, pressing a buzzer, after all they both had done to bring him to this moment, and yet he felt close to balking. It was only the knowledge that despite his best efforts he might have actually lead Mycroft to her and ironically compromised her safety that pushed him see this through. That, and perhaps that unquantifiable, chimerical desire that currently simmered just below the surface of his rational mind...

He made another attempt to school his expression into one of neutrality, then reached up and pushed the button, which echoed through the set of rooms on just the other side of the door. He listened closely, and touched his fingertips to the doorframe to feel for vibrations of movement, but everything seemed absolutely still. He remained in that position for a full minute, monitoring breaths that wanted to escalate into gasps again, and trying to listen through the roaring of blood like a tidal wave in his ears. Then, letting out an unsteady exhale that was at least partly one of (cowardly) relief, he withdrew the lock-picking kit from his keepall and bent to his work. Several moments passed, and then the tumblers all fell into place, and with an almost painful lurch of his heart he gently turned the handle and pushed.

The flat was empty.

It wasn't simply vacant of its occupant, it was entirely empty: of furniture, carpets, appliances, or anything else at all. If it was even The Woman who had lived here (though despite its mundanity he was certain that she had; there was a very faint scent that seemed to strike a chord of familiarity and longing within him), she was gone now.

For a moment he simply stared, his face still as stone as his eyes darted around the empty flat, and then intense disappointment surged through him. He did something typically out of character for himself and cursed, and he would have slammed his bag to the ground if he were still carrying it.

All the meticulous planning on an impossibly narrow timetable, the pointless and stupid guilt over deceiving John, the care and vigilance to avoid his brother's potential agents so as to maintain the integrity of her cover, the foreign and absurd anxiety over seeing her again, and the equally foreign and absurd spark of... had it been anticipation? pleasure? at that same notion—it was all for naught. He swore again, even more forcefully, but rather than being cathartic, it only made him feel worse. Without furniture or carpeting to muffle his voice, it echoed all around him, literally amplifying the flat's barrenness.

He had been ever moving towards this minute, forgoing all sleep and food, and forced to confront the distasteful topic of his ongoing sentiments, only to be abruptly and absolutely thwarted. And according to the scratches on the floor that someone had been made when moving out the furniture, he had barely missed her - the freshly gouged wood showed no sign of any oxidation. If he hadn't been forced to route through Argentina, he might have made it in time.

No, that's not quite right, he amended a moment later, his lips pursing. It was that he had waited too long to find her, and he felt a bitter pang of regret over his stubbornness, even though he knew that in the aftermath of his time abroad it had been justifiable—maybe even necessary for the sake of his mental wellbeing and the reconstruction of his life as a Consulting Detective. Only now it was clear that he had merely traded sacrifices, not avoided one entirely.

For a long time he stood in the deserted, immaculate apartment, and because he no longer had anything else to pursue - no leads or clues - he simply tried to understand the life she had lived
here, deducing how her furniture had been arranged based on the scuffmarks on the hardwood floors, and the traces of picture frame outlines on the walls. But aside from figuring that she used the second, smaller bedroom as an office judging by the marks of a large and heavy rectangular piece of furniture that was likely a desk (although he didn't see any marks of a corresponding chair—a wheeled swivel model, perhaps? An area rug?), he learned nothing of any real or applicable value. Hell, even that had no real or applicable value.

Just like her person, examining her former home gave him no insight into her, nor made him feel any closer to her. In fact it did the opposite, and he felt suddenly lonely in this foreign place, to a degree he hadn't experienced since he had been 'dead' himself.

Sherlock felt himself mentally and emotionally recoil from that memory in the face of this unpleasant surprise, and he attempted to refocus his mental efforts on the essential facts of the situation he had discovered.

She must have learned, somehow, that Mycroft knew that she was alive, and was taking corresponding precaution to maintain her cover. He didn't believe it was a coincidence that she had quit her flat directly after Mycroft had discovered she'd survived Karachi. The question was, how had she found out? Who, besides himself, would be concerned with her safety, and tip her off? He had thought that she'd been forsaken by all her strategic contacts when she'd lost the leverage of her phone, and yet the empty flat suggested that there was more going on than he understood. He was obviously lacking in critical data.

It also suggested to him that even after losing at least the majority of the wealth and presumably all the power she previously wielded, she was fully capable of managing her own deep cover and ongoing safety. And though that concept filled him with a blend of intrigue, pride, and even traces of long-suppressed lust, the predominant emotion he felt was alarm.

Once again he faced the prospect of never seeing her again.

Standing in her abandoned flat, he knew that such an outcome could be avoided not through any action of his own, but only if she decided to bring him back into her confidence. But why should she ever reach out to him again, when he had so pointedly ignored her previous overture? It certainly wouldn't be for help, that much was clear.

*I waited too long*, he repeated to himself, and whereas he had been overwhelmed with rage and frustration only moments before, he now felt numb and nauseated.

He should be satisfied with this outcome, he acknowledged, since it directly resolved his ostensible reason for even making the exhausting, complicated journey. If he were operating purely rationally, he would be.

The problem, of course, was that warning her about Mycroft had only been the justification that a part of him had been waiting for—the part of him that had never deleted the tickets to Newark from his BA account after he had received her postcard. The part of him that hadn't wanted to wait—the part he had worked so hard to suppress and deny. Yet now that their separation was being imposed upon him, rather than being a choice he made of his own volition, he found the concept unbearable.

3,470 miles away and an hour later a black telephone rang, and Mycroft Holmes picked it up and lifted it to his ear, knowing it would be the agent who had been tracking Sherlock in the US since being tipped off by another agent at the Ministro Pistarini Airport.
After Mycroft had received the alert that Sherlock's passport had been scanned at Heathrow security, he had discovered his brother's name on the manifest of the next direct flight to Buenos Aires, and had been certain that it was a feint and misdirection. Sherlock would have surely realised that Mycroft would anticipate a route through Argentina and have agents there ready to be activated. After all, it was the only country where the younger Holmes would be able to switch to whatever alias he preferred without fear of being tracked by the elder through CCTV, which was also readily accessible, and directly serviced by his preferred airline. *Obvious.*

And yet when a UK agent had confirmed that Sherlock had indeed boarded that flight, Mycroft had shaken his head in disappointment, even if it also meant that he was closer than he had ever come to locating his target. His brother had become too overconfident after Karachi, apparently, or was too narrowly focused on the prospect of seeing Irene Adler, and careless in his haste and preoccupied state. Otherwise he would have known that precisely because Mycroft didn't have direct access to the government, he would compensate by placing in Argentina a full complement of highly-skilled intelligence assets, who would be ready to track him through the airport the moment he landed there.

Not that any of that mattered, now.

"Sir. She's not here," his U.S.-embedded agent informed him, in a tone uninflected and matter-of-fact. "I traced him to a block of flats in Edison, New Jersey, but—"

"Thank you," Mycroft interrupted, noting with further displeasure how Sherlock had allowed himself to be traced to such an extent, "but I've been made fully aware of Ms Adler's present location."

The agent paused, as if nonplussed by this deviation from the expected agenda, then seemed to remember herself. "Yes, sir. Very good."

"Well, that's debatable," he replied with arch smoothness, "But yes, as it happens... she's standing directly in front of me."

He hung up and turned back towards the woman with the faint but pointed smile, but his eyes didn't linger on her for long. They were pulled inexorably to the ten-month-old infant in her arms, and its dark blue, unnervingly focused gaze.

He remembered that precise gaze well, and the regret over how his relationship with Sherlock had deteriorated and hardened over the years hit him with surprising force. Yet out of that pain, he sensed the love and concern he had always reserved for Sherlock alone duplicate and expand to include this strange child, who had Sherlock's colouring and facial shape, and *gaze.* For the first time in his adulthood and the second time in his life he didn't coldly reject a fledgling attachment. In fact, for a moment he even felt awed that he might be feeling the way *normal* people did, rather than responding with contempt to such a notion as was his default. Mycroft understood with a visceral conviction he had previously lacked that despite the boy's maternity, he was indisputably a Holmes as well, and he would receive every entitlement that name afforded. As the acting patriarch of the family, Mycroft would ensure it.

As patriarch it was also his continued responsibility to look after his younger brother's welfare, which meant maintaining this uneasy alliance of silence with Irene Adler, for now. Perhaps eventually there would be a judicious time to break the news of his paternity, but at present Sherlock was still fragile from his self-imposed exile, and was *clearly* still subject to lapses in judgment due to unguided sentiment. He didn't know what (likely devious) reasons the woman facing him had for withholding the truth of the child, but for Mycroft the decision was borne of nothing but love and concern for his younger brother.
The Lady Cometh

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The child looked away, apparently bored with Mycroft and his unmoving, pensive expression, and the broken gaze seemed to free Mycroft from a spell. He blinked, and hardened his gaze to look back up at Ms Adler, but of course she'd noticed what had passed over his face and she appeared both smug and amused. She looked as if she had seen everything she had expected, and it was infuriating.

Now he had no difficulty frowning, and he lifted his chin slightly. "I should inform you that my employees will be going through the Border Agency's recorded video of your arrival. I'll have your alias and its entire history by the time you walk out that door."

To his frustration her expression didn't even flicker. "Oh, do you routinely have your people waste their time on useless tasks?" she asked with a cavalier, quizzical tone.

He stared at her, running her statement against various possible scenarios, but was forced to answer with a curt "I don't understand."

"The identity your brother provided served its purpose, but I won't be needing it anymore," she explained, and Mycroft tried not to react to the reference of Sherlock's subversion. "Obviously Irene Adler can't come back - yet," she continued, "but the alias I'll be using will be a new one."

"Which I expect you think I will create for you," he replied, one piece clicking into place.

"I expect it will the best protection I could hope for. Not forged, merely fraudulent."

"Yes, protection," Mycroft murmured, leaning back in his chair. "I anticipated this."

"Mm, well done you," she said, but her tone was dismissive. "Oh, and speaking of your employees... Your assistant is a pretty young thing, but she doesn't play submissive very well, does she?"

His mind whirring, he immediately shot back, "That hasn't been my experience. Not overtly enthusiastic perhaps, but always compliant."

"Lucky you, then," she purred. "But when my colleague heard that someone was asking quite a lot of questions and looked into it, she certainly saw through her in an instant—women like us can always tell when someone's heart is truly in it. There's a look in the eye that cannot be faked: relief and liberation." She paused and cocked her head, appraising him, and then raised an ironic brow. "You might have that look, if you ever gave yourself the chance."

Before he could make some sort of retort or indignant protest, she had already moved on to her next point.

"I decided to cut through all your futile efforts to track me down and come to you. I'm sure you had loads of strategy and contingency plans, but I thought I'd save you the strain."

"So," Mycroft said, ignoring her remark and getting back on topic. "That American woman - she tipped you off, then. You two know each other."
The baby babbled something nonsensical and the Adler woman bounced him slightly, then smiled at Mycroft with apparent relish. "Yes, she's a former protégée. How do you think she gained access to all those high-profile people almost overnight? I gave her my client list when I disappeared, free of charge except for the understanding that she would have an open-ended, non-pecuniary obligation to me. It's worth millions, and I don't just mean in blackmail."

"Of course," Mycroft murmured under his breath, and she gave a brief nod.

"To a girl with her potential and talent it's practically priceless, and when my clients lost access to me she was just the ticket to soothe their pain—or cause it, to be more accurate," she smirked, her eyes sparkling. "I say this about very few people but I trust her, mostly because of the debt she owes me, and so she keeps an eye and ear out for any sign that my cover is blown in the UK; since all her new clients knew me once, and have direct access to intelligence on matters such as that, she's the ideal lookout."

"And yet now you've voluntarily blown your own cover to me, and I am still waiting for your explanation as to why," Mycroft pointed out, and when he found himself wanting to lean a bit forward, he settled back into his chair instead, giving off the appearance of nonchalance. "Why risk exposure when not even my lot could find you?"

To Mycroft's surprise she looked down at the boy, and her carefully confident expression faltered at last. Still, when she spoke again, it was with the same lofty tone.

"Because it's not you or your people who worry me, and unfortunately I don't have such a good lookout with the faction that does. As useful as Sherlock's forged identity was for me it was compromised, and even though I was careful, so was the one after that. I'm not equipped to rebuild a life yet again, Mr Holmes, at least not one that will be able to protect a child as well. I haven't lost everything, but I also don't have the resources I used to. Except for you."

Mycroft didn't bother to ask who was after her because the actual details of her story were irrelevant, if they were even true. Mycroft would protect his nephew, and his protection would be absolute. Nonetheless it was a bit strange that the Karachi story had managed to convince him even after he was so through, but it had not fooled someone else. And even more curious was the fact that she was actually admitting a shortcoming to him, especially when she had known for nineteen months that she held the trump card: Nero.

"You've had the boy as leverage this whole time, why even worry about anyone in the UK finding out?" he pressed. "Obviously I wouldn't let any actual physical harm come to you as the mother of my nephew. "Imprisonment is tempting; exile, perhaps, he thought, but no, not actual harm now."

"And that's why I'm here now," she replied. "But contrary to what you might believe, I would rather avoid using my son in such a way. I'd have preferred that you never know about him at all, but now I haven't much choice. His safety is paramount and as I said, you're my best resource in ensuring his protection."

For a moment her expression hardened in a chilling resolve, like she was determined in more ways than securing protection for the child. It was a look of tenacity as though she were still intending to do something proactive, even though all her previous plans had come to fruition and now all she had to do was accept the protection she claimed she needed. But beyond that Mycroft couldn't discern anything, let alone what new scheme she might put into action, and then after another moment he was left wondering if he had ever seen anything at all.

He tented his fingers under his chin and leaned back in his chair to survey the woman in front of him, and steadily avoided looking at the infant, although he seemed to draw Mycroft's eyes like a
gravitation pull, particularly when he let out an exclamatory noise and waved his arms as if getting impatient with all the adults' talk.

It was all a bit surreal; this conversation with Ms Adler about organising protection was certainly familiar, but now she was arranging it for her child—the one she had conceived with *Sherlock*.

He pursed his lips, not willing to go down that path again, and refocused on the woman in front of him.

"A new identity and protection. That's all you want," he summarised with some scepticism, and she tilted her head slightly, one corner of her mouth turning up.

"You seem surprised, Mr Holmes. Have I confounded expectations?"

"That, Ms Adler, remains to be seen."

As legitimate as the woman's claims appeared to be, it was still possible - perhaps even probable - that there was more at play than was immediately obvious. They would have been able to arrange protection and funds from afar, and yet she elected to return to London herself.

Perhaps she wanted Mycroft to see the child in person, so that his subsequent sentimental attachment would ensure that their deal was honoured. But while that might be part of it, he was still certain that there was more to her reappearance than that. The in-house DNA analysis that confirmed Sherlock's paternity had been enough for him to uphold any offer of protection, since his reasons for valuing family actually had very little to do with sentiment (with one, perhaps soon to be two, exceptions).

And speaking of that exception, he worried that whatever she still had up her sleeve had to do with his younger brother. For a moment he entertained the idea of offering her the protection she sought under the condition that she not have any contact with Sherlock, but after another moment's consideration he dismissed the idea. If he set such rigid conditions it would do nothing but push her to do the opposite of what he wanted. This was a very delicate situation, and he couldn't just dictate orders as was his usual wont. Maintaining any semblance of control would take real diplomacy.

Yet before he could broach the subject of his brother, and hopefully learn why she wished to keep the boy a secret from him, she rose abruptly, hoisting the child up to her shoulder in a way that he would have never guessed could look so natural of Irene Adler.

"Very well, Mr Holmes. I need to go, but I'll be leaving my son here for an hour or so. You're the only one I can trust who knows I'm here, and I have an important errand to run."

Mycroft stared at her aghast for a moment before spluttering, "You must be mad if you think I'm going to allow that. You will both stay here, under my supervision, until we negotiate the precise terms of your return."

"No, Mr Holmes, we won't," she replied in a blithe but firm voice. "At least I won't, but enjoy my son's company. I think you'll find he's quite charming for an infant, and resembles his father more than just a little. Maybe you'll find you can actually control this one... though I doubt it."

He suppressed his urge to scowl at her dig. "And what leads you to believe that you can trust me? I could arrange it so that you never see your son again and it would be as easy for me as ordering lunch. What's to stop me from taking him into my custody and arresting you?"

"I daresay nothing. But you won't." She sighed and turned back towards him, though he could tell that threatening the custody of her son had had some effect. Even though her expression was still
neutral, her eyes were now cold flints. "You should know by now that you can't bluff me. Your position and your family, those are the things that matter to you. Work for selfish rather than dutiful patriotic reasons though, of course, and not any marital-based family. Oh you've considered it, I'm sure, but I'm equally confident that you dismissed it. No woman could melt those icecaps—nor any man. No, it's more about the Holmes family itself, its history, its honour... Now my son is a member of that family, and by extension, so am I."

She continued to look into his eyes for a beat, then a triumphant, vicious smile bloomed slowly and deliberately on her face, and Mycroft felt the scowl he had been suppressing turn down his own lips. He wanted to snap, "Illegitimate member of the family," but he knew, and worse she would know he knew, that that was irrelevant. Worse, it would only come off as petty and a bit desperate, and tip the balance even further in her direction.

"But in case you needed further encouragement," she said, now brisk and business-like, "I have people with proof of your brother's role in my rescue, and of the fact that you've known I'm alive and have kept it a secret. I ring my contact at a predetermined interval and give a code word that confirms my safety, which prevents them from releasing that information."

"If it's only a matter of one word, you realise that we have methods—" He saw her expression and stopped at once, briefly rolling his eyes at himself. "Of course. You are consistent, aren't you? There are two words. One confirms safety and the other is the word that would trigger the release of the information."

"Good, Mr Holmes, you're learning," she said in mock approval. "Yes, your exposure would only be a phonecall or missed communication away."

Mycroft found himself once again astounded by her sheer cleverness and audacity, and if he were very honest with himself, he could admit that he saw what attracted his brother to this woman—to a very finite point, however. Beyond that, he would vehemently rather not consider.

"But that was just a precaution," she clarified. "Naturally I didn't get to where I was by not covering my bases. I know it won't come to that, because first and foremost you wouldn't do anything to adversely affect your only nephew, and most likely the first and only heir to your family's legacy. Not only can I trust that you won't arrest me, but I can also be confident that you'll provide extensive protection for me—us."

She pinned him with another lengthy look and he found himself rendered speechless, a trick literally no one else ever accomplished, save perhaps Sherlock during his evermore self-destructive years, at some new low he had reached.

Becoming speechless as a result of being out-strategised was a new and wholly unpleasant experience.

She seemed pleased with this - As well she should be, he thought with distinct reproach - and she made her way towards him with the infant.

No one in his life ever violated the decorum of not thrusting things into his arms unsolicited, and so he almost dropped the boy in shock when she pressed him to Mycroft. It was the first time he had held any child since Sherlock had been just a bit older than this age (he thankfully wasn't a politician and didn't need to win popularity by kissing babies), but somehow his muscle memory remained intact, and he quickly recovered the fumble.

"Goodbye Nero, my darling," she murmured against the baby's ashy brown curls, and then with a kiss on his head she turned towards the door.
"Take my mobile number before you go," Mycroft said as she reached the threshold, in his icy *I'm not asking, I'm telling* voice that usually struck fear in the hearts of those at whom it was directed. Of course it had no effect on the former Irene Adler; she simply smiled her sharp-edged, dominatrix smile. "No need Mr Holmes, I've known it for years."

He grit his teeth at this and said, "I might have changed it."

"But you haven't," she replied with absolute certainty, and then with a last enigmatic smirk at him, and a lingering and impenetrable look at the infant, she turned and left Mycroft's office.

The child swiveled around at the waist and gave one plaintive cry of protest, stretching an arm to point at where his mother had disappeared, but when she didn't reappear after a moment, he seemed to accept her absence, and turned back in Mycroft's arms to look at him with that same steady, contemplative gaze again.

Allowing himself to return that gaze and study the infant now that Ms Adler was gone, he again noticed the strong resemblance Nero shared with Sherlock. If he had held onto any irrational doubt (hope) about the veracity of the memory stick photos and the legitimacy of his lab's DNA findings, they were eradicated by the child now before him.

He had told his assistant that he was the picture of Sherlock at this age, but that wasn't entirely true. Mycroft supposed that the child was objectively more attractive. It seemed that the maternal genes had had a positive affect in terms of appearance. How would they translate in terms of temperament, however? he wondered. If proponents of 'nature' in the 'Nature vs. Nurture' debate were correct, anyone who took part in his upbringing was in for a hellish ride. Of course, the way in which he would be nurtured certainly had the potential to be disastrous as well, if Irene Adler were to retain primary custody. He couldn't imagine that she had the capacity to be the warmest, most stable of mothers.

He gave a mental shake of his head and focused on the child again.

*Nero,* she had said. So that was the boy's name. She'd not mentioned it in her sole correspondence to him, and he had been too preoccupied with more serious details of the situation to concern himself with the child's forename. In real terms, only the paternal name into which he'd been born mattered—it would facilitate the protection that might save his life.

But Nero was certainly an interesting choice, Mycroft mused, and in some ways it seemed appropriate. The most well-known Nero had been a contentious figure who was the last of his powerful ruling dynasty (he had been adopted by his uncle and groomed to be his heir and successor, in fact), and his mother had been famously beautiful yet ruthlessly ambitious, and had herself also returned to the capital after a long political exile. And of course there was that absurd yet enduring legend about him being a keen fiddler, a trait the emperor shared with a certain man in both his and Ms Adler's acquaintance...

At the very least, Mycroft thought with a trace of wry amusement, she had continued the tradition of giving the Holmes males names that the mainstream might consider bizarre and archaic—unique names for inarguably unique boys.

He looked down at the infant, who was now bracing his arms against Mycroft's chest and leaning as far back as he could whilst maintaining his balance. Perhaps he did so because he didn't feel comfortable relaxing in a stranger's arms, but Mycroft got the impression that it was more to do with the fact that Nero wanted to get a better view of him. Dear God, the child was already displaying signs of his father's trademark scan, and the effect was unnerving, especially
considering it couldn't have been learned behaviour.

In general, the entire encounter left Mycroft feeling uncharacteristically disconcerted.

After spending almost ten minutes obsessively inspecting the flat down to its finest details, the manic and agitated energy that had possessed Sherlock seemed to run its course. He looked up from where he had been studying faint scratch marks on the base moulding of her office doorway feeling dazed and disjointed, as if he were swimming back to consciousness out of a particularly bad drug-induced high.

But now that he had snapped back to full awareness his lip curled hard, and without any last glances at his surroundings he straightened to his full height, strode to the front door, picked up the keepall in one jerky movement, and walked out.

She wasn't in Edison, he couldn't discern where she was, all evidence pointed to the fact that her relocation was voluntary and not a result of coercion, and that was the end of it. The fact that he felt persistent attraction and concern for the woman was bad and disruptive enough; he would not expend energy on regret or self-recrimination. If anything, he had dodged a bullet in not reuniting with her. His initial (and mortifying, in retrospect) reaction had told him all he needed to know about how he still felt, not that it was really any surprise. He had suppressed his sentiment to some degree when it had become evident that they would never sustain any type of relationship or enjoy an ongoing understanding, yes, but he wasn't such a fool as to believe he had overcome it. Avoidance was the best option at this point. That it was the only option available to him was actually an advantage, since he obviously wouldn't accept it if there were other options on the table. The fact that he had flown through three hemispheres - whilst attempting to elude his brother and with only a coded postcard to go on - proved that quite conclusively.

He caught a taxi back to Newark where he took the Acela down to Washington, and then caught another taxi to Reagan National Airport. There he used his own credit card and passport to travel directly back to Heathrow. He no longer needed to cloak his whereabouts so as to protect her location, and at least this way he would put some distance between his first known point of travel and her last known point. Plus it was consistent with his cover, flimsy though it was.

Not that it mattered much at this point. Mycroft certainly knew that Sherlock hadn't gone to look into a case about a potentially corrupt politician, and John, well... he believed that John had recovered most, if not all, of his trust in Sherlock once more. Even if Sherlock had left him feeling vaguely suspicious when they had parted back in London, it wasn't as if he would ever pry into Sherlock's credit card records. Still, Sherlock hated to operate in any manner less than thorough, and felt the need to bring all the loose ends together in one cohesive cover story.

He was vaguely aware that he was exerting control where he could but he didn't care, and he didn't examine the thought further.

Twelve hours after he had left The Woman's flat he reentered his own, which felt claustrophobic and unappealing to him. It was as if he were returning to his flat after having failed or come up short, and it was distinctly unpleasant. It was true that he hadn't achieved his objective, and yet she was apparently safe so why should that matter? He then came to the realisation that he had no concept of what would have been a satisfactory conclusion to all of this. Would it have been sufficient to merely inform her of the danger? Or to inform her and then assist with the transition into a new life again? Something... more?

At that final thought he sensed himself veering back into dangerous territory. He managed to push the thought away, but he couldn't ignore how the deep-seated boredom and frustration that had
been simmering during the extent of his journey was beginning to come to a boil. The ennui almost felt physical, and when Sherlock entered his flat not even the sight of his friend could soothe the feeling.

In fact, seeing John had just the reverse effect. A small part of his mind pointed out that his wasn't the familiar face he was craving to see, but again he suppressed it, just he suppressed the thought about 'something more,' as well as countless other thoughts of a similar nature that had been firing against his defenses for the past twelve hours.

Unaware of Sherlock's mood and the likelihood of him lashing out, John rose from a chair at the table to greet him with a welcoming grin on his face. It seemed that in the time that Sherlock had been away John had forgiven Sherlock for ditching him, but this bit of good will did nothing to improve Sherlock's agitated and tightly-wound temperament.

"Hey, you're back! Did everything in Amer—"

"The answers are yes and no," he interrupted coldly, taking a sort of perverse delight in the detached manner with which he spoke—one with a distinct lack of any of the softer emotions.

"...Yes and no?" John repeated, his brow furrowing, and the smile faltering.

"Yes, everything in Washington went fine," he lied blithely, without expending even the slightest bit of mental effort. "It was obvious at the outset what was going on—"

"I haven't seen anything in the papers so I take it the politician wasn't guilty?" John asked, still trying to engage Sherlock, to give him the benefit of the doubt. A detached part of him appreciated it, but the part that wanted to provoke John into a row would not be so readily calmed.

"—And no," he continued sharply as he took off his coat and tossed it over the back of his chair, "you may not write about it in your blog."

"I wasn't planning on—" John paused and shifted his weight, appearing to process Sherlock's words for a moment, then furrowed his brows and sat down again, perched on the arm of his chair. "You know Sherlock, if I didn't know you so well pretty much every tenth word from your mouth would piss me off."

"Which would make me wonder why the other nine were having no affect," he shot back. "It's a good job you do, then."

John shook his head in bemusement then crossed his arms.

"What's gotten into you lately? It's like..." He seemed to cast about for a certain memory, and then he gave a minute nod. "It's like the time around that case we had in Devon, with Baskerville, all over again. I thought going abroad would help but obviously it hasn't. You're irritated, you've come over all twitchy—well, more so than usual—"

Sherlock felt his temper increase. To be reminded of how he had been then, now of all times...

Just prior to the Baskerville case Sherlock had found himself a bit agitated—and that was putting it mildly, he conceded. At that point enough time had passed since he had last seen Irene that the afterglow had dissipated to leave behind it restlessness and frustration, the latter of which was compounded by the fact that he didn't want to feel that way (to miss her, to want her), and yet he felt powerless to prevent it. Nor had enough time passed so that he had yet gained any distance or detachment.
And so he had been stuck in a hateful in-between state wherein he spent most moments outside of work thinking about Irene whilst also castigating himself for it—feeling both grateful that he didn't know where she was, and hating that fact. And though his state of emotional upheaval had somewhat bled into the course of his investigation, he had been grateful that something so fascinating and all-consuming had come along at that point, or else he wasn't sure what he might have resorted to doing. And actually, confronting his unwanted emotions through the scope of that case and weathering them, overcoming them, had helped him with his more personal matter as well. Yet it was undeniable that it had been quite hairy in Flat B for a while, for everyone concerned.

"And as I recall telling you then, nothing is wrong with me," Sherlock lied, but his terse voice offered no room for debate.

Still, a part of him was aware he believed that if he declared it assertively enough, it might become the truth. Hadin't he once heard the phrase, "I think therefore I am"? He wasn't sure if it had been said by someone who was considered a thinker of note or if he had just overheard it on some advert or the like, but he agreed with all the various implications of that statement. His mind was incomparably powerful and the primary engine of his being. If he managed to convince himself of the words he now spoke, they would become his reality.

"I'm perfectly fine."

John shook his head with a humourless and slightly incredulous grin on his face. "Yeah, that might work on people who've never shared a flat with you, but you weren't then, and you aren't now. I do know you, like you said. And mercurial as you can be a lot of the time, I can still tell when something is bother—"

"Ooh, 'mercurial,' top marks," Sherlock cut in. As far as deflections went, it was a bit obvious, but Sherlock wasn't exactly aiming for precision at that moment.

John stared at him, his jaw subtly working.

"Fine, project your - whatever, angst, or something - on me," he finally said, "You're not exactly helping to build your own case here, Sherlock."

Sherlock made a derisive sound and sneered, "I don't need to build any case because I – am – fine."

Again John looked at him for a long moment, then shook his head and let out a long, controlled breath.

"Yes, okay, message received. I'll quit prying. But I know and you know that I'm right." He got a shrewd look on his face that Sherlock didn't much care for and continued, "Ever since Mycroft asked you to help him."

For a fraction of a second Sherlock felt pure panic at those words, before he remembered that he had told John that Mycroft was trying to get him to help with a case.

His eyes had narrowed but fortunately John hadn't noticed; he was headed towards the door, and then added from over his shoulder, "...And this time you won't be manipulating me into telling you where the cigarettes are."

"I don't need any cigarettes, I've quit."

"Fine. Good," he heard John say through what sounded like clenched teeth.
"Yes, I am," Sherlock retorted in a raised voice, having to have the last word. "Now you're grasping it!"

*Exeunt John Watson* he thought sarcastically, as John predictably grabbed his coat and pounded down the steps.

When he heard the downstairs door shut so soon after he himself had entered through it he smirked with the thought, *I believe we've set a new record.* The row had actually made him feel better, as if the tight sensation in his chest had been caused by the dangerously mounting pressure in a boiler, and the argument had been a way for it to release steam and equalise.

But as time passed and the intense need to pick an argument faded, the savagely good feeling started becoming distinctly *not* good. He recognised that just as he had when he'd returned to London after his faked death, he was exploiting John's patience and goodwill by using him as an outlet for his frustration over The Woman. His friend had accused Sherlock of projecting his angst on him, and he had been more correct than he could know.

Damn it, now he did want a cigarette.

Twenty minutes after John had somehow managed not to slam the door behind him, Sherlock pulled out his phone with a sigh and began to text him the peace offering of, *Joy King Lau takeaway? I'm ordering,* when he heard the key turn in the lock downstairs. He could faintly hear Mrs Hudson rustling about in her kitchen, so it appeared as though his friend had returned.

At first the sounds of the rustling heavier-grade denim and the heavy tread of boots on the floorboards seemed to confirm that it was John. But it became apparent almost at once that the steps coming up the stairs weren't quite right, and as the heavier trudges transitioned into lighter, quicker ones he stiffened in his seat and his pulse jumped, the phone slipping out of his hands to fall onto the cushion of his chair, and the unfinished text forgotten. For a moment his face betrayed his shock, but with effort he managed to temper it into impassivity again once the footsteps reached the door that stood ajar.

"Irene," he said, and he was reassured that his voice sounded outwardly steady and unfazed. "Or should I call you Erin? Oh wait, *no,*" he said in a sarcastically recalling tone, "that name has exceeded its usefulness, hasn't it?"

He finally turned his head to look at her, and his heart stuttered for a moment in spite of the shabby, oversized men's clothing she wore and the greying hoodie drawn tightly around her face. It had never been about physical attraction, after all—at least not in and of itself.

At his question her serious, searching gaze transformed in an instant to her more familiar and enticng expression of witty and teasing engagement. *It was Erin,* she said in the low, honeyed voice that still managed to incite half a dozen physiological responses in him, *for the ten hours I was on the aeroplane and in the airports at either end courtesy of your counterfeit passport. But recently it's been Renée. Renée Wolfe. Although I daresay it won't be that for much longer either.* She paused, then added with a slightly mischievous raised eyebrow, *Hello, Sherlock.*

His lips tightened, as if firming against the more sentimental responses he might make if he weren't hyper careful, and he opted for a detached albeit strained, *How did you get in?*

He glanced towards the keys she held at her side and saw something familiar: the worn plate-metal symbol of a caduceus dangling from the key-ring.

"Ah, so John got pick-pocketed I see," he said quietly, though now he could sense a subtle tremor
in his voice—his pounding heartbeat. Now that he was actually looking at her for the first time in almost twenty months he was even less able to control his physical reactions.

"Yes, which also gives us the advantage of not being easily interrupted," she said, though with less of the suggestiveness than he might have expected.

Sherlock gazed at her steadily, his face expressionless, though a storm of thoughts and emotions continued to churn beneath the stoic exterior. Desires warred with wariness—the id versus the super-ego.

She pushed the hood away from her face and pulled out her mane of hair so that it cascaded around her shoulders, making an incongruous image between the neck up and the shoulders down. An image that was - from the neck up at least - far too evocative of how she had looked when he'd last spent time with her for comfort.

He stood abruptly and went to the window, where he picked up his violin and bow then brought the instrument to his shoulder, though he didn't make a move to touch horsehair to string. The heft of the wood in his hands and the familiar shape were both grounding and comforting, as was the knowledge that if he needed to drown out anything she said for the sake of his dignity or self-preservation, he could commence playing in an instant. But in the meantime he stared intently at the street, and trained his eyes on the postman making his way down the pavement with his large red and fluorescent yellow trolley. His eyes passed over him, seeking to catalogue every detail he could find (cyclist, gay but in still the closet, either born in Romania or has nonintegrated Romanian parents), but as a distraction it was pathetic. None of those things mattered when they were just random and out-of-context observations which served no purpose. And they certainly couldn't compete with the woman who had been one of the most singular distractions of his life. Her presence to his right burned a hole into his focus, and so after just a moment he found himself turning his eyes away from the worker below to watch her from the corner of his eyes instead.

He could tell that she recognised his hold on the violin as the delaying and defense tactic it was, but she didn't say anything and instead leaned against the door frame, looking at him with an intent and appraising expression on her face. For once she was letting him acclimatise to her presence, and though on some level he appreciated the gesture, appreciated being given time to consider a coping tactic, he thought with a helpless sort of chagrin that it would be of little use. He had known Irene Adler for several years now and he had never been able to become inured or impassive to her, either in the short term or the long. And even after having neither seen nor spoken to her for some time, it continued to be obvious to Sherlock that she held the same indefinable and dangerous hold over him.

Chapter End Notes

"I think therefore I am," is a translation from a quote by Descartes and I figured Sherlock would appreciate it.

Sadly I can't take credit for the exchange about John taking offense at every tenth word Sherlock speaks. The original quote comes from Charles Marowitz's play Sherlock's Last Case and goes as follows:

Watson: "Holmes, if I didn’t know you better, I’d take offence at every tenth word you uttered."
Holmes: "Which would make me fiercely scrutinize why the other nine were having no effect."

HA.
Sherlock and Irene made eye contact again and this time it felt weightier and more drawn-out, and he found himself prompted into action in order to break it. Somewhat stiffly he gestured towards the chairs by the hearth, and she raised an eyebrow at his show of formal manners but then accepted the invitation to sit, alighting gracefully in John's chair and making the picture of refined elegance despite her horribly tatty clothes. But those were incidentals, he knew; he could still clearly see the woman beneath (in both the physical and metaphorical senses of the word).

There had been times since he had been back 'from the dead,' so to speak, when he had wondered if he had imagined, or at least greatly exaggerated, the intensity of the intimacy they had shared in the several days they had spent together following her rescue in Pakistan—first in a hotel, and then on the cargo ship that had been their escape from southwest Asia.

He had become particularly suspicious of his memories in light of how desperately he had clung to them during that year... away. His memories were almost always of perfect integrity and accuracy, but in such cases he was recalling facts and observations, not ephemera such as emotions. Moreover, the thought of her and the time they had shared had been such a vital consolation and diversion for him, that he frequently wondered if he had invented much of what he recalled about those few days as a coping mechanism. He had been desperately lonely; his thoughts on the subject could not be reliably trusted.

He had also reasoned during those times that even if he accurately recalled what they had shared, he had no reason to think that it was something that was at all replicable. Even at the time he had grasped that it was in all likelihood a one-off—that the type of long-term, complementary, and companionable partnership he enjoyed with John could never be reproduced (with a sexual component added, of course) with her. As meaningful as it had seemed, the factors that had lead to that unprecedented physical and emotional intimacy had been unique and singularly volatile. Mortal danger, secrecy and subterfuge—those were enough to excite him in any case.

And yet now that they were in the same room again, in his all too familiar and inherently dull flat, and he was once again faced with the woman herself rather than simply the memory of her, the pull was undeniable and seemed to confirm and validate everything he remembered. There was an intangible link between them that generated excitement all on its own; it was not dependent on any external factors, as he might have previously come to wonder. And if he were correctly interpreting the way her eyes seemed to warm and linger over him during this moment of reunion, it was mutual.

That made this meeting all the more dangerous, and he needed to be on his guard. It wasn't that he automatically distrusted her, not anymore—he needed to maintain vigilance over his own emotions and control.

He straightened his spine and took a small, discreet breath through his nostrils.

"My brother is looking for you," he told her tersely, his face angled away from her. "But then, you knew that."

She said nothing, but he didn't need her to confirm it.
He suddenly turned on her, but didn't move from his position at the window. "It's excessively foolish of you to come back to London. Not even I'm good enough to hide you here, directly under his nose."

"Even if I'm in disguise?" she said a bit too lightly for his liking, as if she weren't taking his warning seriously.

"The best disguise on earth only goes so far," he ground out, "And certainly not far enough for that."

Again she didn't reply, and he felt his eyes flick towards said disguise against his volition. But once there they lingered and then he couldn't look away. He took in every detail of her that he could, and still thirsted for more. It really had been far too long since he had last seen her. Still, it wasn't long enough to blur his memory of her (he wasn't certain that there would be any length of time long enough for that), and there was something about her now that struck him as slightly unfamiliar.

"You're different," he finally said, and before she had the chance to make a retort about her uniqueness (particularly to him) he clarified, "Different from how you were when I last saw you."

He was frustrated to hear that now he sounded slightly out of breath, and attempted to focus on the puzzle of her physical appearance rather than her appearance in his flat.

She cocked her head, her eyebrows knitting together in avid attention, and he tightened his lips and cast his eyes again over her fingernails, her hair, her face: anything else not obscured by her disheveled and oversized kit. Her nails were short and unpolished as opposed to when he had first met her, but in neither case was that observation helpful. Long nails painted in red varnish suited a dominatrix, but she was no longer The Woman (at least not professionally; in his mind she ever would be, he knew). Whoever she was now, the lack thereof didn't do anything but rule out that particular, known fact.

Her face had softened very slightly but it had always looked less severe without makeup, and countless things could have attributed to that, including the bit of healthy weight she had regained since he had last seen her, when she had been verging on gauntness.

And yet he was certainly as riveted and fascinated by her as ever, and that was invigorating. He had missed that. He was used to feeling that siren song of promised intrigue towards an unsolved crime, but feeling that same phenomenon towards an individual person was almost exclusive to her—and indeed was unique to her since Moriarty's demise.

"I don't suppose it's the clothes?" she suggested with an unreadable glint in her eye after a minute of silence had passed. It looked teasing, but Sherlock could tell that it wasn't, not quite. "Denim trousers, trainers, long-sleeved vest, a bulky hoodie..."

"I'm hardly thrown by your disguise as a man, Irene," he scoffed.

She raised her eyebrows in wry humour. "Well John certainly didn't notice me."

Sherlock shot her a withering look and she acknowledged it with a small, glib smile.

"Actually, I meant that you're rather used to seeing me in quite a bit less..."

He didn't allow that image to sink in, and immediately replied, "That's not it."

She looked at him steadily, the expression on her face not giving anything away, as he scrutinised her for another long moment, his brow creased in uncertain curiosity. He could only tell that she was somehow different from his memory of her, but he refused to admit that he was still stymied.
With a short pause and then an exhalation he changed the subject.

"I don't suppose you'll tell me where you've been in the past several days? You obviously left New Jersey two days ago, judging by the lack of oxidation in the scratches on your wood floors."

Her face didn't betray any sign of shock at the revelation that he had been inside her flat, and he realised in amazement that she had somehow already known that. But he refused to give her the satisfaction of acknowledging that she was a step ahead of him, even if it was perhaps a bit obvious.

"Oh, I make it a rule to never simply tell," she answered him. "I show, if anything at all. But since you claim on your website to observe 'everything', perhaps you can tell me where I've been. You can make up for the fact that you can't tell how I've supposedly changed."

You rarely show either, even when you're ostensibly baring all, he thought as he regarded her, though he didn't speak it aloud. There had been that brief time in—but as soon as he thought it, he shoved it away again.

He took several steps towards her that looked confident enough, although he didn't draw closer than about a metre, and that was only so that he could get a closer and more detailed look at her. He stopped just behind his Le Corbusier, the back of the chair acting as a symbol of the metaphorical wall that stood between them.

He scanned her body again, then focused his gaze on her left wrist. Protruding from the edge of her sleeve was faint residue from a plaster she had just removed. Under normal circumstances he would grab the person's wrist and turn it to better see the pattern, but he was reticent to initiate physical contact with her. From where he stood it looked to have dimensions different than those of an Elastoplast or any other type of adhesive bandage available in the UK. Then again, he had already known that she had come from abroad recently, and unfortunately he wasn't familiar enough with plasters from other countries to say whether that one had been purchased in America, or in another possible destination that she had visited between her departure from Edison, and her arrival in London.

His eyes narrowed; it was just like before. He could not discern anything besides evidence which told that which he already knew—or nothing at all. There was nothing new or revealing.

Correction, he thought with a twitch of his lips. There was, he just couldn't quantify or label it. It was something intangible to him, and he hated the very principle of that.

He was gratified that though he couldn't read her body, at least he could use the clothing she had selected as sort of secondary documents that shed partial light on her. It wasn't cheating since the clothes people selected spoke volumes in and of themselves, but it was still maddeningly inadequate.

But given they were all he had to go on...

He took a deep breath, then began to recite in a droning narration:

"Your clothes are second-hand, obviously, and though their clues don't give me direct information about you, they certainly indicate a lot. They didn't come from Oxfam, the quality is too worn for their standards—deliberately chosen by you for that fact, of course. You wanted to look as if you'd been sleeping rough, after all. But you did get them from a charity shop on the high street of a working class borough. Same goes for your trainers... Particularly telling are the traces of very faint but distinctive multicoloured powder along the edges of the soles... And if I'm not mistaken, which
When he finished he was surprised to see her regarding him without any obvious guile, and for a split second he almost thought he could read deep and genuine emotion in her face. But before he could interpret what it was he was seeing, her expression shifted into one of aloof amusement.

"I see you haven't lost your touch," she said. "Still the great detective, just minus the funny hat." She cast her eyes around the flat, as if looking for it.

Her words struck him for some reason, and an instant later he understood that it was because banter like this was of the type they had exchanged when they had first met. That is to say before Karachi, and everything that had happened there. He wondered if she were picking up his own cues and behaving accordingly, or if there was another reason that she was acting this way, rather than how she had come to act with him when...

He paused for a moment, then blinked and reiterated, "Your case. I do hope that if you've left it in the hall Mrs. Hudson doesn't break her other hip falling over it."

She laughed lightly then said, "There is no case, I haven't just come from Heathrow. But well-done on the Underground and Hounslow bit, that's all true. Only I wasn't on my way here, I was headed somewhere else entirely. Unfortunately for you that leaves the entire city, since the Picadilly line is the only—"

"The only underground line into central London from that airport," Sherlock finished for her in a grumble, and her smile widened.

"And I take it Hounslow isn't precisely what you were after when you asked where I've been."

"What's different?" he murmured, frustrated. "At first I thought you were dressed this way because you were in disguise to avoid suspicion. Part of my homeless network, obviously."

"Yes, Dr Watson mentioned it on his blog," she said, and she gave a small smile at the mention of it.

"Clever. My neighbours are accustomed to seeing them around here so you'd avoid notice."
"And homeless youth are overlooked or even invisible wherever they go, making it almost the perfect disguise," she pointed out, crossing her legs demurely at the ankle.

He supposed that if he subscribed to her theory about disguises he could comment that like his network of contacts she was without stability, a legitimate identity, or a home, but it seemed almost too obvious to even mention. Besides, he was more interested in a realisation that had just struck him, that *what* she was wearing was of little relevance compared to how many layers she had on.

He began to pace the space between his armchair and the window, but didn't try to stop himself. It felt good to work off the tight, restless feeling crackling in his chest.

"True, but your clothing isn't just a disguise for the benefit of some little old curtain-twitcher across the road, is it?"

She just smiled expectantly, although there were still lines of tension around her eyes and corners of her mouth.

"I was right about you sending a message with your clothing, but—"

"But wrong about how, and to what end?" she suggested, leaning forward on her elbows a bit more. Again there was some sort of current of unidentifiable emotion just below her mask of detached enjoyment, but he couldn't begin to fathom what it might mean. He didn't think it was as simple as her sentiment for him. He remembered her looks conveying that all too well, and this was different.

"As I said, it *was* to do with the clothes. Only I was distracted by the fact it was menswear and didn't consider how many items - quite obscuring items at that - you had on."

"I tried to steer you in the right course, suggesting that it was a contrast to how I previously appeared in much less..." she said, and though her tone was light, her body language had tensed up even further.

"Yes, well consider me caught up now," he replied quickly, and he felt his expression warming in approval in spite of the palpable tension in the room. He couldn't help but admire her. "It's an elegant inverse to our original meeting - then you wore none; now, too much - but you have precisely the same objective: to deliberately obfuscate my powers of observation. There's something about your body you don't want me to see. You know that now that I'm -" he felt his cheeks warm but he pushed on without pause, "-familiar with you, even the slightest change - a minimal fluctuation in weight, a cut, a bruise, newly toned muscle groups, type of moisturiser, state of personal grooming - will tell me everything I need to know."

But the solution to that would be to tell her to take at least some of her clothes off, and while he was normally unconcerned with modesty, especially when it stood in the way of reaching an answer, in this one case it was not really tenable. There were too many implications that her nudity held now, that it didn't represent when he had first met her. Now there were too many associated memories, which made such an idea too risky, even if it were ostensibly part of an effort to accrue data. Instead - to use a phrase Irene Adler would applaud - his hands were tied, and she was clever enough to realise that. Her secrets would remain safe until such time as she decided to divulge them.

*Or*, he wondered with a suddenly dry mouth, had she set up this exact scenario so as to bait him into telling her to take off her clothing, in the hope that those shared memories would play their part and turn his quest for data into something quite different? She did know him quite well and she was certainly more than adept at seduction. She would know that she couldn't approach him in
any obviously prurient way...

He swallowed and then floundered, and found himself having absolutely nothing to say.

She watched him from her seat by the hearth for a moment, then cocked her head and said in a conversational voice, "I suppose you're wondering why I'm here."

He paused in his step, but his heart picked up the pace in double-time.

"Well I have to admit that I'm a bit surprised by your recklessness," he said after a moment. "And I can't imagine what you could possibly think worth jeopardising everything we accomplished last year after Karachi."

At those words she gave him an inscrutable and startlingly intense look, but to his great frustration she said nothing, and in another instant it had been replaced by a studiously casual, capricious expression.

"So let's say I am curious as to what that might be," he continued in a guarded tone, unwilling to ask the words "Why are you here?" directly.

Since she had hammered him with the same exact question when he had come to her rescue in Karachi, the words held weight and implication. Those challenging words, which she had leveled at him with the tenacity of a crown prosecutor, had lead directly to his undoing. And that one initial loss of control - sparked by adrenaline, frustration, and lust, yes, but the manifestation of something much more substantial - had set off a series of events in which he had been emotionally compromised by her—either directly in the days that followed, or indirectly, in the subsequent years. He could not afford to go down that path again, in no small part because he wasn't certain if he could take the loss of her again. With a woman like Irene, such a loss was inescapable.

An inevitable - and inevitably contentious - break would also cause the loss of an ideal. At present she was practically flawless in his mind, and he valued that. Knowing that there was someone as extraordinary as him in the world made him feel less alone, even while they were apart. Yet if they became involved here in London he would eventually learn all of her mysteries and methods. That was typical in any relationship, and unavoidable if Sherlock were involved in one (and hell, even the thought of that was preposterous). In such an arrangement she could very possibly become ordinary to him, and he would resent that fall to the mundane, and resent her. With John it didn't matter how well Sherlock became acquainted with him because he already knew that John was a somewhat normal, although wonderful in his own way, sort of bloke, and so maintaining any sense of inscrutability or wonder was irrelevant to their relationship. But with Irene, that was everything...

And vice-versa. She felt sentiment for him, too—still, he was quite certain. But he had always held himself aloof from everyone else, partly to maintain his own aura of infallibility, which was also of great value to him. He had lowered his defences once, and as much as he was willing to, and that had been indescribably rewarding. But he sensed that he had pursued that side of him to its fullest extent: they had hit the apogee of a bell curve, and increasing the variable of time whilst maintaining the same level of intimacy would only result in the curve's decline. And then everything would fall apart. He would lose the respect of someone who desperately mattered to him, and he could become disillusioned with her as well.

As much as a part of him did crave that intimacy and validation, might even need it in a way he could've never imagined before they'd reunited in Karachi, he simply couldn't risk what they already shared just for the slimmest and most unlikely chance that it could be replicated once again.
It was unfortunate—the acute ache in his chest that represented the part of him that had been desperate for the past twenty months to see Irene certainly attested to that. But since he had eliminated all the other choices as being practically unfeasible, it was the only option.

"Let's say that yes, I do have urgent business in London, and while I was here I couldn't resist seeing an old friend," she finally answered, and it was infuriatingly vague and inadequate.

"Is that what you consider me, an 'old friend'"? he asked sharply, frustrated with her continued evasiveness, and also strangely stung and a touch annoyed. That term couldn't begin to describe the complex dynamic of their relationship, and while what they had shared was almost impossible to define, it was quite clear that 'old friend' did not suffice.

She just looked away, then her expression changed into one of faint mischief and she asked deflectively, "Could I pass as one of your famous homeless network? The cafe proprietor was certainly casting me dark looks. Apparently he doesn't recall his stares of an altogether different nature the last time I was here."

Sherlock frowned. That Mr Chatterjee was a complete cruiser. Still, her apparent carelessness angered him. They had nearly lost their lives in Pakistan, and now it seemed that she was repaying his efforts (and hers) with absolute recklessness. Something seemed amiss here, and it was unsettling, but after a brief frown, he reverted his attention to her comment.

"You won't be so lucky not to be recognised next time—and it won't be someone like Mr Chatterjee who doesn't matter," Sherlock growled. "So unless you're here for a particularly compelling reason, as I said, it's excessively stupid to reappear in London, let alone at my flat, competent disguise or no."

"Would you characterise me that way, Sherlock? Excessively stupid?"

His eyes passed over her again, and he conceded, "No... There was that whole business with your phone's password," he added on in a sardonic tone, but then he paused and when he resumed speaking his tone changed, and became more thoughtful. "But I... can't exactly fault you for succumbing to sentiment, when I myself..."

"Yes," she said when he started to falter, saving him from completing the thought, and he gave a brief nod, and felt momentarily grateful.

"So you do have a compelling reason," he interpreted, but she only looked at him steadfastly, and he flushed with agitation and perhaps not a small dose of concern. "This isn't a game, Irene," he said sharply. "I went to quite some trouble to ensure that your new identity was untraceable to my brother, but if you're just going to—"

"Sherlock," she interrupted, her tone firm but her expression strangely compassionate. "Your brother is the person with whom I have business. He's the one I went to go see first. We've been in contact for several months now."

Having had resolved the dilemma of how to proceed in his interaction with Irene in what he had thought was an admirably calm and rational manner, Sherlock was not prepared for the onslaught of emotion that her revelation brought on. He felt suddenly white hot with fury, his pulse hammering hard in his temples and swelling into a dull roar in his ears. He turned his back firmly against her, and for several moments his jaw worked as he struggled to gain control against what would be a telling outburst.

"Done with Junior once again, are you?" he finally managed through clenched teeth, his voice
sounding strangled.

In her reflection in the window he noticed her flinch slightly at those words, but he couldn't begin to understand that reaction, and he found himself not particularly caring; his anger consumed everything.

The silence stretched out for what felt like several minutes, but could have been only several seconds, before he heard her let out a small breath.

"You're right, Sherlock," she said, and now her voice was filled with some grave emotion which was as unclear to him as her flinch had been. "This isn't a game." After a beat she added softly, "Not at all."

Something that felt like rage still seethed inside him at her revelation that she and his brother had been in communication without informing him of it (or was it jealousy? he thought, and a detached part of himself laughed in scorn).

"Oh please," he retorted in a low voice that still betrayed his barely-contained fury. "It's _always_ a game with you, Irene."

"Not last time," she said softly. "And not now."

The entire situation had suddenly spiraled out of control, but there was certainly a strong precedent for that. The question was, when had he _ever_ been able to maintain personal control with her? He always attempted it of course, but still ended up three steps behind and trying to play catch-up. For a man who was constantly ten steps ahead it was highly disconcerting. Sometimes it was disconcerting in an incredibly attractive way, but at present it was simply upsetting and overwhelming.

_His brother had been in communication with her, neither of them had informed him, and yet it wasn't a game?_

"Prove it, then," he said angrily, stopping in place and cutting a hand through the air towards her. "Tell me why you're here. Tell me now, with no pretense, or go. I have neither the time nor the inclination to personally experience a plotline straight out of _EastEnders._"

She looked up sharply at that, and he disclaimed on the next breath but in the same tone, "John watches it."

"Why I'm here," she repeated softly, and he was both gratified and frustrated to see her looking somewhat wary herself.

"I'm waiting," he said, his voice hard even while something traitorous within him reacted sympathetically to her expression.

She looked up and sat a bit straighter, then asked, "I want to know how you are."

He shot her an incredulous look, then scoffed. "Really, _that's_ it," he drawled in a voice heavy with skepticism. "You're here to check in on me."

"Yes," she said simply.

He tightened his lips into a thin white line as he stared at her in incredulous reproach. Still, perhaps if he played by her impenetrable rules and humoured her it would lead to actual answers. '_Not a game,'_ he thought resentfully.
"I have my work," he answered tersely. "And I have a good assistant." *Friend*, his mind corrected, but he wasn't about to indicate any signs of attachment or vulnerability to Irene at the moment.

"So you're happy," she interpreted, although her voice held none of its usual assertive confidence.

His lip curled at that word. Happiness was never a driving motivation for him, and using such a word to describe his levels of satisfaction was trite and lacked nuance. Avoiding boredom, engaging his mind were his life's driving goals. If he met those needs, he supposed he was more or less satisfied, but he would never use such a frivolous word as 'happy'.

...Although he couldn't necessarily say he was entirely satisfied, regardless of his friendship with John and the relatively adequate levels of work. But the reasons for that were best left unexamined. He had already determined the future course of his and Irene's interaction, and further examining his emotions would only threaten to undermine his resolve.

"Well sometimes John forces me to Cif out the fridge after my specimens rot," he sneered. "Or people ask me inane questions," he added with heavy insinuation. "That does tend to put a damper on things."

But his face suddenly lifted in an expression of breaking clarity, and he whirled back towards the woman sitting behind him, his eyes now focusing on her with laser precision.

"But you don't ask inane questions," he stated, finally coming around the chair and sitting opposite her. "Every word from your mouth is chosen with care, often in order to further a particular agenda." He leaned forward, his eyes sharp and probing. "So why are you asking me this? You know I know you better than to think you'd just engage me in small talk. You're trying to figure something out. But what?"

Irene didn't answer.

His lip curled further, showing his teeth, and an idea suddenly occurred to him, although it was a rather cynical one.

"Are you wondering if I've been pining after you?" he asked sarcastically as if the idea were absurd —was not in fact entirely accurate, "Had trouble adjusting to life without The Woman?"

"Well John did tell me you'd been writing sad music the first time we parted ways, when you thought I was dead," she shot back, but sarcastically. And a bit defensively herself, perhaps, Sherlock thought in a very rare moment of insight when it came to Irene.

But he had been seized by his theory, and he ploughed ahead with it. Jumping up from the chair again he resumed his pacing "—Thinking that if I still have feelings for you I can go to bat for you against Big Brother? Commute your exile?"

She looked at him levelly for a moment, then said, "I assure you, I need no help in that regard. I can handle Mycroft Holmes all on my own. Dare I say more effectively than even you can."

Sherlock pursed his lips, not liking the potential implication of her words.

*But that's utterly absurd*, he thought, willfully dismissing the sudden and unbidden suspicion. Mycroft would never be interested in her in that way, and it was beyond ludicrous to even entertain the thought.

...But then again, the same could have been said for Sherlock, before Irene had changed all of that. And just what was she concealing about her physical self? Evidence that she'd been intimate with
someone else? Would she hide something like that from him, whilst simultaneously referencing the fact that she was doing so? When he had first met her he would have answered in the affirmative, but now he didn't quite think so, although it certainly seemed from his automatic reaction that the idea bothered him a great deal.

"'Still' have feelings?" she asked, as if as in tune with his thoughts as ever.

His face involuntarily contorted into a grimace. "Yes. Well," he said in a soft but somewhat resentful voice, "I thought that was established. But that was twenty months ago, nearly two years. Must we rehash the whole business?"

She gave him a piercing, searching look that seemed to correlate with all the other strange body language she had been broadcasting, and which further struck alarm bells within him. But he deliberately dismissed the automatic question they raised, as he did with those that arose from her quietly-spoken next statement:

"You're right. Twenty months is a long time—time enough to change everything."

Chapter End Notes

"Every parting gives a foretaste of death, every reunion a hint of the resurrection."

- German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer

Thanks for reading and I welcome and value any questions or comments :)
"In conclusion," Sherlock announced without allowing himself to be diverted by her baiting comment, "You've managed to convince Mycroft to permit you back in the country and now you have 'business' with him. Business you won't discuss with me, apparently."

She met his eyes, but her expression was unsmiling and subtly emoted some sort of stress or anxiety. He wondered if he had been privy to that expression more times than any other person whom she’d known, but he quickly veered away from that line of thinking.

"Well you clearly have some sort of leverage," he reasoned as if stating the obvious, and her entire face tightened. "Ah, finally a cue I can read, he thought with both gratification and exasperation. "And the only thing my brother would care about that you have to offer is intelligence. Couldn't stop misbehaving, could you?"

"Never." She flashed a full closed-lip smile, but her voice sounded tight.

He quite consciously ignored how very attractive that smile made her look—and how attractive it was that she had never stopped misbehaving.

"And you ask me how I'm doing, as if gauging me for some reason."

"Sound observations," she said, though the following caveat of but... was evident in her tone.

He nearly lost his calm then, and gripped the back of his chair, squeezing the careworn leather tightly in his hands. "I told you to tell me why you were here, or else go," he said through nearly gritted teeth, then turned sharply at the waist to gesture towards the door with his head.

She drew in a quiet but deep and seemingly steadying breath (was that right? That didn't seem right), then looked him in the eye and stated, "I had to see you."

Part of him wanted to demand why, but he felt that that would be relinquishing too much restraint, so instead he stated, deadpan, "Clearly. Yet you gave me no say in the matter, no chance to turn you away." Still, his hands dug into the chair.

She fixed him with a level look, and once more it felt like she could see directly to his mind, and read it just as he had read her clothing. She said in a matter-of-fact albeit slightly chiding tone, "Sherlock, you've already admitted to me that you traveled to America and went to my flat. That doesn't sound like the act of a man who wanted to avoid me."

He had no retort for that, but he noticed the rigor-like state of his hands and he put them in his pockets.

"Although..." Her expression shifted and was once more unfathomable. "I'm also aware that you've had the means by which to contact me for ten months, and yet you've chosen not to do so."

"Yes. It was better that way," he replied, curt, and the fact was, despite how difficult the decision had been at the outset, it had been better that way. It was one of the few times that he had been able to exhibit some self-control with her, and it had unquestionably been the correct decision. Who knew where his friendship with John or his practice would be, had he diverted critical focus during that time to her?

"At first I wondered if it had been lost or intercepted," she stated, "but then I saw a picture of you
in your flat, here, taken during an interview by the Guardian that I'm guessing John finally managed to coerce you into doing. And there was my postcard just behind your left shoulder, propped up on your bookshelf. I understood then that you had made the conscious decision not to reopen any lines of communication."

"That's correct," he said in a detached, cold voice. Was he repaying her revelation that she had been in communication with Mycroft with his own callousness? He suspected yes, and though that made him feel petty, he proceeded anyway. His words may have come from his lingering anger, but they served another purpose as well—to further firm up the wall between them. "And the only reason I made the trip this time is because somehow everything I'd achieved in Karachi was put into jeopardy. It wasn't personal, you should know that that's in the past."

Her eyebrows momentarily drew together as if stung by his comment, but she lifted her chin and said, "I recall a similar narrative last time, Sherlock. Something about you not wanting for a mind such as mine to go to waste, you wanted the challenge, the rush... But after we cut through all your self-sabotaging justifications we uncovered other reasons too, didn't we?"

Sherlock looked away from her, his traitorous heart hammering in a way he was certain she could hear.

"I believe self-sabotage is what I would be doing if I went down that road with you again. Whatever other reason you have for coming here, whatever you want from me, I can't give you. I never really could. Yes, we spent time together twenty months ago. And it was—as I said then, I won't forget it. And I haven't. Nor do I regret it. But it wasn't...real. It was the result of a confluence of unique and volatile set of circumstances, one which can never be repeated."

"Is that what you believe?" she asked, slowly straightening until she was sitting up at her full height, her face flushing and eyes hard.

"'Believe'? No. It's what I know." He spoke in a tone of finality, even while he was aware the he was in fact lying outright.

His next words were slightly more truthful, although still counteractive to what part of him wanted. "I've had a long time to consider those days, and - even if there were...genuine sentiments... it could never be sustainable. I can't entangle myself in those type of connections. You pride yourself on knowing what drives a man, so surely you see what drives me now."

"Yes. I do," Irene said, and let that statement stand for a moment so that it was Sherlock's turn to flush.

"But you'll notice that you're arguing against something I never actually proposed," she said, shaking her head slightly. All the trace of playfulness was gone from her voice, replaced with something that sounded like censure. "The ego has been left unscathed by your encounter with Moriarty, I see."

He bristled at once, her implication that he hadn't emotionally grown deeply cutting him. It was so ironic when he considered how he had longed for the very woman standing before him, and would have humiliated himself in a number of untold ways to have had the chance just to speak with her just after his 'encounter' with Moriarty, and yet he knew he must not contradict her. She should think that he had resumed thinking of himself as the impervious man-god he had when they'd first met. It would make all of this much easier if she didn't think he was susceptible to anything relating to sentiment.

But then again perhaps it was moot, because he realised that as a matter of fact she hadn't asked
him if, were she to remain in London, they would see one another.

"I..." he trailed off with a deep frown. Putting aside the weakness of his own emotional turmoils, if she wasn't here to enlist his assistance with his brother, nor to try and recreate what had once passed between them, why was she here? He wracked his mind trying to imagine her motives, but found himself drawing a blank.

"I still fail to see why you needed to see me," he said, again managing to sidestep the loaded question of 'why are you here?'

Irene stared at him in deep concentration, her blue eyes sparking with razor-sharp intensity, and Sherlock didn't think he had ever been appraised so critically, especially by anyone outside his family. Yet this was distinctly different from suffering under Mycroft's analytical eye when he'd been a younger man. If Mycroft had seen something he disliked he would tell off his brother and make threats he wouldn't uphold. But if Irene saw something that she disliked, what would the consequences be then? Or if she saw something she liked for that matter?

And it was unsettling for reasons other than the unknown potential outcomes. The stare itself felt invasive and uncomfortable—he felt as if he were being assessed in some essential way, or weighed and judged. He much preferred to be on the side collecting the data, not offering it.

"I needed to speak to you. I wanted to tell you that I—" She looked away from him for a moment, then reforged eye contact, and continued without pause but with a subtle swerve in her tone, like an audiotaape of a concerto jumping a single note, "am back in London. I don't know for how long. And that your brother does know, but I'm not in danger. What happened in Karachi wasn't for naught."

He looked back into her eyes, knowing with complete certainty that she had just almost informed him of something, something important—the real reason she was here and the reason for her disguise, in fact—and then she had decided against it. He had failed her assessment, and he had been deemed untrustworthy or unfit somehow. That realisation gave him a winded, aching sensation in his chest and behind his eyes, and he understood that in this case the sting had much more to do with the fact that she was withholding something from him than it did with him not having the full information. He was broken from this thought when she took another one of those quiet breaths.

"And I wanted to..." His heart began to feel as if it were hurling itself up against his ribs as he watched her, transfixed by her eye contact. Would she say after all? But her eyes shifted from his as she continued, "...thank you again, in person. For saving my life. Everything has completely changed as a result of that, but—and I have to thank you for that as well."

For a moment he didn't really process the content of her words except to note that she hadn't still shared anything of any significance with him. She had decided not to entrust him, and though he still felt that raw agitation, he cognitively understood that it was the preferable outcome. Though he hadn't the faintest idea what it could be that she had kept to herself, he nonetheless had the suspicion that whatever it was would have posed a considerable threat to his defenses, which were weak enough, and growing ever weaker the longer she sat in his living room.

He noticed that she was regarding him again, although now it was in an expectant manner, and he blinked and replayed her words in his head.

"Everything has completely changed and I have you to thank..." He assumed that she was referring to the way he had set her up with forged documentation to provide her with an alternate identity, and he replied stiffly, "I'm pleased the passport worked."
"You saved mine as well," he pointed out quietly a moment later, referring to the time in Karachi when her skills at reading and manipulating people, and then getting them to bend to her will, had saved them from a fatal situation. He had meant for it to imply that she didn't owe him anything (not that her thanks had been what she'd intended to say, of course), but it came out earnest and sincere.

She smiled softly though it didn't reach her eyes, and without another word she stood.

She walked towards Sherlock and even while he felt all his systems freeze up, he still managed to have just enough presence of mind to take the opportunity to discretely inhale the air around her. He was first hit by the odour of the clothes—simultaneously musty and smelling strongly of cheap detergent, and then he detected a pleasant and sophisticated scent of expensive soap (French and triple milled, he thought), as well as a mild, faintly sweet aroma that he at first mistook as one of the notes of the soap fragrance. But no, it was distinct, and unfamiliar to him. Before he could attempt to analyse what it could be, she was drawing even closer, and he stiffened his back in one movement that almost looked, and certainly felt, like a flinch.

She paused for a moment at this, but then leaned in and kissed him once on the cheek, so lightly he barely felt it—just a whisper of touch, really. When she moved back, a powerful urge to grasp her arm and pull her back for a more proper and thorough kiss took hold of him. He managed to remain still, but his hands tightened into balls in his pockets.

Then she carefully tucked her hair back into the hood of her jumper and turned back towards the stairs. She dropped John's keys into the bowl by the door where he always kept them. Had she recalled that from her visit so long ago?

She must have, he thought, feeling deeply pleased by that minute gesture for some reason, despite himself.

In fact, the anger he had originally felt towards her at her abrupt appearance and her revelation that she had been in communication with his brother had faded, and once that fleeting, pleased sensation did as well, he was left with only a hollow, numb and somewhat shell-shocked feeling in their wakes. An impulsive part of him longed to call her back, but the rational part of him that knew how much of a capacity she had to wreck him, just when he had gotten reasonably back on track, stopped him. Moreover, this wasn't a brief interlude in a foreign country; this was his actual life, and he had no room in such a life - both in terms of his time or space in his brain - for personal diversion or sexual indulgence.

So rather than call after her he just watched from the first storey window as she stepped out of the front door, further tightening the hoodie around her face as she turned south towards Baker Street Station. It wasn't long before she almost faded out of sight, her grey jumper blurred by the enveloping mist that had started in the past hour, and then she was swallowed up by the throng of rush-hour pedestrians, and lost from view.

Without quite realising what he was doing, he lifted one hand from his pocket and briefly touched his fingertips to the chilled windowpane. He wondered if he would see her again, and felt both relieved and agitated that the kiss had felt like one that said goodbye.

But the fury over the communication between she and Mycroft had by no means disappeared. Instead it had refocused singularly on Mycroft, and a moment after he had lost sight of her entirely he spun away from the window, strode around his chair to dig his phone from between its cushion and armrest, and started composing an irate text to his brother.
Mycroft was tidying up his desk at the Diogenes Club and preparing to leave for the evening, when his phone vibrated in his pocket. He pulled it out, and immediately his heart plunged into his stomach when he read the text he had received.

_Irene Adler has just paid me a visit, says she's been in contact with you for several months. Explain this._

His fingers trembling slightly (That damn woman!) he replied evasively, _Ms Adler has always chosen the course that best serves her. You would be wise to remember that._

He had barely hit send when his phone vibrated again, and he shut the door of his office, sighed sharply, then hit the answer symbol and lifted the phone to his ear.

"Sherlock—"

But his brother bulldozed over any attempt Mycroft could make to take control of the situation before Sherlock had the chance to really build up a head of steam.

"You came to my flat," he said, low and livid, "you told me that you knew she was alive and that you were looking for her. But you failed to mention a pertinent detail or two! Was she the one who told you about Karachi?" Now it amplified almost to a shout. "Answer me, Mycroft. Did she tell you, or did you attempt to use me to track her down after you learned that she was alive through another source?"

Mycroft wanted to lie to his brother, to disavow all knowledge, but the woman was forcing his hand. Cursing the name Irene Adler and every subsequent alias she'd ever held, he admitted tightly, "She revealed to me that she was still alive." He heard Sherlock take in a sharp breath on the other end, then continued, "I put the rest together myself—once I knew that she had survived, everything else was obvious. The circumstances of her escape, your involvement..."

He paused, then with one more bitter curse mentally flung towards the former Ms Adler, he said, "She risked exposure because she wanted to come back to London, under my protection, and she thought I might agree to her proposal due to certain, shall we say, incentives she brought to my attention. He added in an unmistakably resentful tone, “And she was correct, of course.”

There was a deadly silence, punctuated only by the sound of his brother's now rapid breathing as he processed what Mycroft knew would be feelings of betrayal. Not that Sherlock would ever confess that to him.

But if he asked directly what she had offered that could possibly ensure Mycroft's protection, what would he say? He knew that Sherlock would initially assume it was information, but he would demand details, and Mycroft didn't want to contradict any story that Ms Adler might have fed him.

_Lies begetting lies_, he thought. Professionally that was all well and good, it was for the safety and security of the country. But he preferred to leave gross deception out of his relationship with Sherlock if he could help it. Unfortunately in this scenario he could not—Irene Adler had ensured that.

Just what the hell was that woman playing at by seeing Sherlock? he thought again, outraged at her apparent capriciousness. And good lord, where was Nero? She had told Mycroft that he was the only one he could trust, and yet the child hadn't been in his care since she had retrieved him about ten hours previous, having returned from the aggravatingly mysterious errand she refused to
discuss (but which his CCTV technicians were currently mapping for him, which would hopefully yield some answers).

Nor had Irene brought him with her, obviously. He doubted that Sherlock would be phoning him now if he had just learned that he was a father. Although even without the baby, he was surprised at how it appeared that Sherlock hadn't noticed anything. She was dangerous and out of control, but she was still good. Not that that had ever been in question...

"But Sherlock, I didn't lie to you." About that, he silently added. "I didn't know where she was, but judging from her correspondence I knew that I needed to locate her. You were my best chance at that."

"Have you seen her yet?" he asked in the slightly shaky voice his brother recognised as one which warned that Sherlock was precariously close to losing control.

"Yes. After you'd left for America. She appeared in my office yesterday, quite unexpectedly."

"How long?" Sherlock ground out.

"Sherlock—"

"How long have you known?"

"That is not your concern," Mycroft said, coming to a solution that would prevent further lies—a total information blackout. And that actually should be the proper protocol here, he realised.

"Our arrangement is between the two of us alone. Why would I tell you?" he asked, his own voice now steadily climbing and intensifying. "I'm sure I don't need to point out what happened the last time you became entangled with her. Years of work and highly-sensitive international coordination were wasted because you had to show off—you fell for her plan with pathetic ease, and your actions nearly lead to an international incident! You have no idea the lengths I had to go to smooth things over. And even though you were fully aware of how much you'd compromised everything, you still went ahead with your little rescue, threatening to undermine all the reparative progress I had made. You knowingly and willfully made me a liar, even after you saw firsthand that she never really cared about you."

Suddenly a memory of one thing she had said to him the previous day flashed in his mind and an idea, albeit a rather loathsome one, occurred to him. Still, it was the means to a necessary end.

"Alright, if you must know - and perhaps it's best that you do - that is what she threatened me with," he snarled contemptuously. "Exposure. Exposure of your indiscretions. Now, once again, I am the one who has to go to distasteful measures to clean up after you—to make deals with the likes of her."

He paused for a moment to take a calming breath, and he finished in a tone of ice-cold menace, "I hope that this is it now, Sherlock. I'm growing rather tired of cleaning up the messes you create over that damnable woman. It's time for you to grow up, and cease this humiliating behaviour of yours."

It had been quite a while since Mycroft had so forcefully upbraided Sherlock, and it was distinctly unpleasant, even while he knew it was necessary. Once upon a time reprimanding his brother had been a fairly regular occurrence, when Mycroft had been in his late twenties and through to his early thirties, and during those incidents he had often resented Sherlock for putting him in such a position—for making him take on the role of father, since their own father seemed unequipped to
handle his younger son. Back then the topics of the reprimands had been Sherlock's drug usage and the related matter that he would disappear for weeks at a time with no communication with anyone in the family. More recently, it had been confined to a topic he'd never have thought would be a concern for his brother: women. Or to be more precise, one woman—the woman.

Well. It appeared that Sherlock Holmes wasn't the only Holmes brother in whom Irene Adler could incite strong emotion, but in his case it was confined to anger.

For a moment there was silence. Then Sherlock spoke, and his voice sounded completely different. It was monotone and seemed devoid of any emotion, although Mycroft knew that in reality Sherlock was feeling just the opposite.

"Blackmail," he said. "That's how she was able to ensure your protection... she leveraged my rescue of her against you, in order to coerce you into agreeing to her demands."

Although it was partially true it was certainly misleading, but at this point Mycroft was beginning to care much less about such things. His anger was getting the best of him. And it would be far, far better this way. Let his brother see Ms Adler for who she really was. Perhaps his eyes would finally be cleared, and his childish and chaos-inducing sentiment put aside. Before the situation was potentially worsened in spectacular fashion by his discovery of Nero.

"Of course blackmail, Sherlock," he said with contempt. "Hark whom we're discussing. Ms Adler threatened to inform my counterparts in America, Germany, and Canada that I knew all about your plan and in effect sanctioned it by not taking any action to stop you, or against you once you accomplished it. She told me she had a source who had access to evidence, and with one phone call or missed communication from Ms Adler, that information would be released to the interested parties."

"But, you didn't know," Sherlock said, sounding uncharacteristically credulous.

"Irrelevant," Mycroft snapped, his sharp tone implying that his brother was being disgracefully naïve.

More silence met this, and though Mycroft sensed that he was getting his wish regarding his brother and his feelings for Ms Adler, Mycroft still pitied him. It couldn't be easy to be so helpless, held so captive by such hateful emotions, particularly for a mind normally so rational and ordered as Sherlock's.

"I'm sure you'll understand why I had to be discreet, particularly given your past behaviour," Mycroft went on in a softer, more sympathetic voice. "But I certainly haven't any idea what she's playing at in contacting you, other than to simply toy with you, or to privately gloat at what she's accomplished. It is not to be borne, and I will have words with her, I assure you."

Mycroft heard a swallow, a low exhale, and then the muted sound of a dead connection. Sherlock had hung up.
Renée, née Wolfe and Wolfe once more, at least for the time being, pulled the front door shut behind her, her heart hammering in her chest and her hands feeling clammy. She could feel his penetrating gaze from the upstairs window in the way the fine hairs at the back of her neck prickled, but she didn't allow herself to give in to the temptation to look back up at him and prolong this interaction even further. Instead, she straightened to her full height, tightened the knot of the hood with subtly trembling fingers, and made her way towards the Underground station as a fine but drenching drizzle began to fall.

As people swarmed in behind her, filling the narrow space on the pavement left by her path, and she knew he would have lost sight of her amongst tourists, commuters, students, and the general crush of humanity, she suddenly had to fight off a tight, choked feeling in her throat that meant she was on the verge of tears. She would not lose her prized composure due to Sherlock—not yet again, and certainly not in public. It wouldn't matter what the pedestrians streaming on either side of her might think of the tearful homeless youth, even if they even did spare a glance towards her, because she herself would know the reason for her loss of control. No - she impelled others to break down, it wasn't something she indulged in herself.

Then again, she thought as she took the stairs down into the Baker Street station, Sherlock had always been a dangerous exception in terms of what he was capable of making her do and feel. He sometimes dominated her thoughts and influenced her emotions to such a degree that she almost felt professional envy and admiration. And he had made her fall for him, which had been something she never could have anticipated or believed prior to their memorable first meeting.

When she and Sherlock had last parted, she had watched his figure recede down the gangplank with some sense of loss, yet such feelings were mostly mitigated by her confidence that they would see each other again—and sooner rather than later. The time they had spent together had not been of an entirely unexpected nature because after all, she had always known that if he showed up to save her, it was a confirmation of his sentiments, and a return of the same type of interest she felt herself. And even while she'd sensed that Sherlock felt uncertain about any future relationship between them, she'd known that what they had shared was merely the prologue to something else. Something elemental in both of them had shifted and changed, but strictly with respect to the other, and so she had been certain that they would be compelled to seek out each another again.

Granted, in the wake of their separation she had been left feeling slightly unhappy and restless, but she certainly hadn't shed any tears, not then. Instead, once she had successfully infiltrated America as Mrs Erin Sigerson, aided by effortlessly slipping back into her childhood accent, she had focused her concentration on recreating her life.

The first step had been to making it her own as opposed to one that had been established for her. Of course, she was grateful for Sherlock's efforts since without them she would have had few building blocks with which to construct one for herself, but she needed to re-establish her life on her own terms. She had drained the bank account he had established and leveraged most of the remaining funds towards creating her own identity.

It wasn't as if she were a stranger to the process. Irene Adler, the name by which she was most notorious and which she felt best represented her true self, had been one almost completely of her own invention. She had taken her surname from The Stella Adler Studio, a New York school of
acting that had been an obsession for her as a young girl in New Jersey. With a child's fervency, she had believed it was where she was meant to be, and it to her represented everything sophisticated, cosmopolitan, and worthy of aspiration. In the sixth grade she'd snuck onto a commuter train to attend open auditions for a youth program, and when she was accepted she begged her parents to allow her to attend. For the first time, she had glimpsed a place that wasn't flat or foreign to her, with people who weren't so dull and malleable. Her paternal grandmother had even offered to pay the tuition, and yet her mother and father had refused, each for his or her own separate but characteristic reasons. And unfortunately her parents were absolutely immune to Irene's arts of persuasion; they simply hadn't invested enough in her to even notice.

Irena Wolfe had been the only family member with whom Irene had ever felt any sort of rapport or affinity. In fact she had had adored her, and assuming a variation of her first name had been both a salute and a recognition of their kindred spirits. The surname Adler had also been chosen as a nod to her paternal heritage; her grandmother had been a Polish Jew whose original surname had been Wolfowicz.

But she had no desire to be connected to her past in any way other than the name and connections she shared with her grandmother, and so Edison, New Jersey hadn't been her first destination. It had been a last resort.

Originally she had flown west to the other edge of the continent and established residency in San Francisco, and on the outset it had suited her needs quite well. In many ways it had been just as charming and charmingly debauched as she'd expected, although compared with London and New York, it had felt quite small and provincial. Yet she found the city's size advantageous, because rather than feeling exposed, she had felt deliciously in-command. Nowhere else could she imagine so much wealth and influence concentrated in such a small area, with such a relative few people to get to know and subsequently control.

In fact, in less than two months she'd begun to insinuate herself into certain circles - computer tech, biotech, politics, and the arts - and she had felt the thrill of power and influence at her fingertips again. The city might have been small, but the bank accounts of its elite were colossal, and many of the tech industry's young Turks had far more disposable income and hunger for unconventional life experiences than self-discipline. It would be easy, effortless in fact, for her to regain a life that was only a shade humbler than the one she'd enjoyed in London.

More astonishing was the fact that despite the city's rich and storied history of sex workers, there was a decided dearth of legitimate competition. There were other dominatrices, to be sure, but after visiting several of the most well-regarded establishments under the guise that she was a potential client, she saw that none of them possessed her talent. She could've taken one look at someone such as herself and instantly seen that she could never be submissive, as she'd claimed. Irene had felt reinvigorated by the beckoning potential before her, and she had realised that even though Sherlock had told her that there could be 'no more Irene Adler,' she would never, could never, really change. For her, understanding this had been the final step in fully returning to life.

In present day, Irene touched her Oyster card to the reader while she passed through the stiles without breaking her stride, and for the first time the faintest flicker of a smile touched the corner of her mouth. That was one thing Sherlock had gotten wrong—she had been on and off the Underground all the time when she'd lived in London, when she wasn't being 'The Woman.' There was a bit of pop cultural apocrypha which stated that Marilyn Monroe once told a reporter that she was only recognised in public when she became 'her,' and it was a persona she could adopt or discard in an instant. Irene identified completely. She had always been deft at assuming whatever personality best suited her agenda, and yet with Sherlock the changes she experienced were much more organic and permanent.
The days that she and Sherlock had spent together had been life-altering for him, she knew, but they had represented just as much of a paradigm shift for her. At the outset he had fought and struggled against accepting his sentiment, as if admitting his feelings would cost him some essential part of himself, and she had recognised in him all that she herself had experienced. The only difference was that she had been several months ahead of him in the curve, and by the time they reunited in Karachi, she could empathise with him and partially guide him.

Partially only, of course. She had a will of steel and the finer arts of persuasion to supplement and reinforce it, but Sherlock was too stoic, too stubborn, too shrewd, and his defences too formidable to be forced into anything. She could mount an attempt using reason and adrenaline-fueled sex as a Trojan Horse of sorts, but he himself needed to realise that he was capable of passion, lust, and intimacy. Which he certainly had—then.

She knew that he had loved her, and that he probably still did. Perhaps too much, if that were possible. She understood that the intensity of that sentiment, and of needing another person, still terrified him, and that that fear had been exacerbated by how much of himself he’d already had to sacrifice to protect those he loved. It was only natural that he would be terrified of what the next cost might be.

And she hated to admit it, but his fears were valid. The cost of opening his life to her would be steep, it would come with the news that he was a father, which would change everything for him, in ways Irene knew would likely resent and want to resist. She had desperately wanted to tell him, and at several points in his flat she almost had, but at the same time she needed to protect both him and Nero.

And perhaps she too was terrified of what she might lose by telling him...

She made her way to the first downward escalator, and her mind turned back to the dilemma she faced. How might she act in the best interests of both? she contemplated. Was it even possible? Of course if she were forced to choose she would always pursue the course of action that she felt most benefitted their son, but Irene Adler was not a woman who was amenable to compromise—even now.

She had not wanted it to be like this, had never imagined that things between her and Sherlock could deteriorate to such a degree. It made her furious to know that for once, and for perhaps one of the most important matters in her life, she had been unable to prevent events from developing as they had. She had experienced an utter lack of control, which offended her at the most basic core of her being. At the thought angry, frustrated tears sprang into her eyes again, and she blinked them away with willful determination.

And now the most recent antagonist of her relationship with Sherlock was Sherlock himself. Granted, he was someone whom she’d never been able to control well, and yet with him it had almost always been a delectable challenge. Now his carefully-constructed coldness and act of indifference towards her was as infuriating and frustrating as everything else that had spiraled out-of-hand. If she had been holding a riding crop or flogger, she would have been very hard-pressed not to express her displeasure with him in an overtly physical manner—but no, it wasn’t like that between them, that wasn’t their kink. It seemed that theirs was something that could cut much deeper, and leave much more substantial scars.

As the protective glass barriers and the train doors simultaneously whooshed open, the crowds jostled and angled into any spare openings they could find in the Jubilee car, but Irene barely processed it. She was too engrossed in her thoughts, and she couldn’t help but consider the moment in which she’d understood everything had changed, and that their very brief but very intense affair
had had even more lasting and concrete consequences than she could've imagined.

In her mind she was back in San Francisco again. It was there, when she had been sitting at Baker Beach staring out at the Pacific with a copy of the America's Cup Gala guest list (a goldmine for identifying power-players in the city) lying unfolded but forgotten beside her, that it occurred to her that her period was very late. And in that single moment she had known with perfect and blazing clarity that she had fallen pregnant.

She would never forget the saline scent of the sea air, the chunky grains of sand beneath her feet and between her toes, or the calls of the seagulls that wheeled through the air during that fraction of a second when she had transitioned from unawareness to absolute conviction. Though she had known countless flashes of insight in her life, nothing could compare with the bone-deep certainty that had struck her like a thunderbolt when she'd understood that she had conceived.

In the moments just before she had been watching the golden Mediterranean-like light cast sparks off the crests of waves so that they looked edged with molten metal, and she had been filled with rare serenity. She'd known why that was—gazing at the expanse of blue with its endless horizon had reminded her of the time she and Sherlock had shared on the freightliner that had delivered her from one fugitive state to another, but one with almost endless possibility. It had been the only time in her life that she had experienced true intimacy and connection with someone, and was perhaps the first time in many years that she had even spent time with someone without agenda or expectation. Even the recollection could fill her with a sense of calm and a foreign feeling of happiness, albeit happiness that was tinged with a feeling of longing.

It was while remembering some of the more intimate ways they had spent their time that she had come to the realisation of her missed period, and in an instant the serene feeling was gone. She'd gasped sharply and her hands dug into the armrests of the beach chair, as her heart began to pound and adrenaline coursed through her veins.

It can't be, she had told herself. It isn't possible, I have an IUD. And yet, she knew - she knew - that it was.

And then, incredibly, the sensation of peace returned. In retrospect she had thought that perhaps her body had numbed her by placing her in a state of shock, because while she experienced significant emotional duress in the weeks that followed, in that moment she had simply accepted the development in stride.

On the way back to her Russian Hill studio (a fortune, but she was used to outrageous rent after so many years in London, and besides it was worth every penny for the hardwood floors, crown moulding, and views alone) she stopped in a chemist and purchased a pregnancy test that claimed it worked on the first day of a missed period.

An hour later she stood on her narrow balcony that looked out onto the bay, with a white plastic stick that displayed a plus sign dangling from her hand. She cast her mind back to the previous month, when she had been at another railing, looking out over another bay, but with Sherlock standing next to her. And as she relived those days, both blissful and bittersweet, she thought that she might even be able to narrow it down to the time that they had conceived the child. She didn't know it as instinctively as she had understood that she was pregnant, but she still suspected...

It had happened, she thought, during the last day that they had spent together, and it hadn't even been a full day. He had made arrangements to leave when their ship docked in Oman, so that he could return to London after spending the least time abroad as possible.

She had quirked an ironic smile to herself when she realised that the conception had probably
occurred not long after he had panicked that they hadn't been using any type of prophylactic. She had assured him that she'd had an IUD inserted, since she didn't want children just as much as she imagined he didn't. She had also reminded him that she had expected that he would come to find her, and since that in and of itself would be a confirmation of his sentiment for her, it was likely they would consummate their relationship. However, since she wouldn't have any way to anticipate the time and place of their reunion, she had been prepared. He had seemed oddly affected by her faith that he would come, and impressed with the advanced degree of her planning. Approximately twenty minutes later ...after he had conveyed his appreciation in a more physical manner... he shared what he had done in preparation of seeing her.

They had seemed to find a deeper understanding with one another then. It was clear that neither had arrived at that point impulsively; they had both made conscientious decisions to further pursue whatever it was that they felt for one another.

It was as close as they had come to an exchange of declarations, and they were as correspondingly unconventional as their relationship. And no matter how strained or nonexistent her relationship with Sherlock became in the future, it could not retroactively degrade what they had shared in that sunny purser's cabin, or what they had made between them...

Chapter End Notes

Please take note, the next chapter will be rated M. Thanks so much for reading!
Mid-morning sunshine spilled through the portholes in their small but very comfortable suite in soft bars of light, and it grew less watery-grey and more brightly golden as she listened to him explain to her all the advanced planning and consideration that he had put into her rescue in Karachi.

"You've thought of everything," she murmured in amazement after he finally concluded, and she felt deep affection warm within her at the sight of the corners of his eyes and mouth crinkling from his obvious pleasure at her words.

The expression was almost unbearably endearing, and her heart started pounding painfully in her chest, not out of the desire she had felt earlier, but out of the most potent brand of sentiment, one which had become pervasive in the past twelve hours.

She felt her throat constrict, and with slight effort due to her years of both natural and cultivated emotional detachment, she lifted her chin and met his eyes.

"You invested an unprecedented amount of effort and brainpower, and I'm sure expense, not to mentioned you risked your life..." she said, and she knew that he would be able to hear everything else she meant in those words, in her eyes and her tone of voice. *You did this for me - not for a case, or the satisfaction of a puzzle, or out of boredom - but for personal reasons. For sentiment. For me.*

Plenty of men and not a few woman would do anything for *Irene Adler*, and though much of that persona was a genuine component of her personality and certainly contributed to why Sherlock was so attracted to her, he hadn't done it for Ms Adler the professional, he had done it for Irene. It was a subtle but very critical difference.

She would never state those things aloud, but his face took on the same almost severe expression that she thought might be on hers, and she knew that not only had he understood her unspoken message, but he was affirming it.

"I've already told you, I don't do things halfway," he said in a slightly self-important tone, but she heard it for what it was, one of pride and gratification, and smiled.

His answering smile was gentle and held no trace of self-consciousness, and this time his expression struck her much differently and once again her desire for him rolled over her in wave of heat as if someone had just opened a door to a furnace. It mingled with that impossibly deep care she felt for him to form a heady blend of physical and emotional arousal. Her breath started to pick up.

"Mm, yes, I've noticed that..." she replied. Her voice was husky, and just as abruptly as his smile had affected her, her voice caused his pupils to engulf his irises, although she only got a brief glimpse before they were both leaning towards each other.
His long and elegant fingers went straight to the back of the extravagant bra he had just given her and he strained his neck forward to press his mouth the part of her throat he seemed to like best. He unhooked the clasp with expert - and she thought somewhat cocky, given the small but teeth-baring grin she felt against the skin of her neck - ease. Then after one final caress of lips against her throat he leaned back against the pillow to hurriedly pull the scalloped lace straps down her arms, which she lifted to help him.

He threw it off into some corner of the room with a deceptively calm expression and then wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her flush against him, but when their skin connected his pretense of being in control wavered, and to her satisfaction she saw his teeth bite into his lower lip.

His forearms uncrossed and his hands pushed down her lower back, then slid under the fabric of the matching briefs she still wore to take hold of her hips in a firm grasp.

She raised an eyebrow and his nostrils flared slightly as he pressed his hands down while rotating his hips upwards, now meeting her challenge with silent but steely resolve.

As she felt the evidence of his rapidly growing arousal press into her, she couldn't help but once again marvel at the purely physical lust she felt mixed in with her respect for and fascination with him. It was elemental and primal, and her need for him scared her at times with its intensity. Feeling such a way - with anyone, let alone a man - was unprecedented, and it had been profoundly confusing at first, even when her attraction to him had been based solely on their intellectual connection and the narcissism of seeing a reflection of herself in him. But her attraction had developed a physical component as well, and there was no denying that he could turn her on physically just as much as he could mentally.

Now his eyes burned with intensity and were drilling into hers as if she were the most fascinating and alluring puzzle he had ever encountered, and if he searched the depth of her eyes, he would discover the key to understanding her, or his feelings—or possibly an explanation to them. All his powers of observation and the blazing focus of his mind were channeled onto her, and she found it dizzyingly erotic.

Returning his penetrating stare, she ground down with her own countermotion, and his expression shifted. His intensity remained, but now the look in his eyes was dark and predatory, and wholly prurient.

She had seen countless shades of desire pass over his face in the past several days: wonder, possessiveness, lust, provocative teasing, tenderness and a half-dozen variants in between, but this was the one she liked best. It was reconfirmation that Mr Holmes was every bit as sensitive and responsive to her as she was to him, and that she wasn't the only one who was losing her composed, cerebral self to carnality.

The familiar staccato of excitement drummed in her chest, and she let herself revel in the uncomplicated but powerful feeling of raw lust. There were only two things on earth that could cause her heart to pound this deliciously: misbehaving and Sherlock Holmes. And in this scenario, she got to have both of her favourite things at once.

She saw that he wasn't so lost in a haze of arousal that he failed to interpret her expression because his eyes narrowed, and with a distinct lack of gentleness he yanked her towards him as he leaned in.

When he found her mouth he raised one hand to cup the back of her head, while his other arm encircled her waist even more tightly, anchoring her to him. For a moment their lips pressed
together with almost bruising force, but then she turned her face and changed the tone of the kiss into one that was far more sensual.

The fingers at her waist dug into her skin and he made a breathy, passionate noise and rolled them over to pin her beneath him.

He hovered over her for a moment, his eyes wide and focused on her face, before he lowered his head and pressed a kiss to her suprasternal notch. He dipped the tip of his tongue into the hollow there, then raised his eyes back up to her again.

She could feel the care he broadcasted when he looked at her as if it was another caress against her skin. It was like minute points of buzzing electricity racing along the path of his gaze, and in its wake gooseflesh rose on her skin and her nipples tingled and tightened.

As he held her gaze he dragged the hand that had been tangled in her hair at the nape of her neck down her throat, over her shoulder, across her collarbone, and around the curve of her left breast. Once he reached her chest, he grazed his fingertips over her skin with deft but maddening slowness, and she realised with astonishment and a flush of excitement that he was teasing her.

He leaned back down again to press his mouth under her jaw, as his fingers traced closer and closer to the centre of her breast, without seeming to make any progress at all.

She heard herself make a small sigh of frustration from the back her throat, and she arched into his touch, but he stilled his hand and pulled away slightly.

A hint of humour appeared on his face, a small teasing expression breaking through the intensity.

"Mm, no," he drawled, one side of his mouth pulling up as he looked down at her. "I think this is rather good for you, actually. Someone shouldn't always get what she wants."

"Do I?" she retorted with a provocative smile and an inviting tone.

Instead of responding with passion, his face shuttered for a brief moment, and she knew that he was recalling the one moment when she had not attained what she'd wanted, and his role in her failure. But as quickly as it had shown, it disappeared and was replaced by an intent, smirking look.

"You tell me," he said huskily, and lightened his touch even more so that she felt like the deprivation of contact would drive her mad.

"Do you?" she breathed, attempting to distract him so that she could press her chest up into his touch.

For a long moment he was silent and she thought he was going to ignore the question, before he answered, "More than I could've anticipated, it seems."

At that he dropped his chin and his mouth went directly to where she most wanted it. A low, pleased moan left her lips, and his hand squeezed her waist in acknowledgement and response.

He continued to focus on her with his lips, tongue, and teeth, and the taut, electric feeling intensified. It was as if a network of filaments connecting her breasts, belly, and between her legs began to light up and give off sparks.

His dark eyelashes brushing the tops of his cheeks, he briefly nuzzled against her sternum before switching to her left breast, and his hand stroked over her hip and down the outside of her thigh to grasp under her knee and hitch it up to his waist. He shifted forward to position himself between
her legs then pushed his pelvis hard against her, and through her underwear she could feel every inch of him. He was radiating unbelievable heat, and she thought that that was one difference between penetrative sex with him and the kind she'd had with women. The heat of him when they were skin to skin in the most complete and intimate way possible was unlike anything she had ever experienced before.

The sounds of the wind and waves breaking against the side of the ship faded into white noise, and all Irene could hear was the rustling of the mattress and the harsh breathing coming from both of them. The obscene sounds and the feel of him pressing against her obliterated the very last of her self-control, and she became ravenous for him.

She saw everything she was feeling reflected in Sherlock's tense features. Then with an almost inaudible growl, he rocked back onto his heels, slid his fingers under the elastic band of her lace and silk knickers, and tugged them down her legs and over her feet. With a flick of his wrist he threw them aside, then turned back to her with a searing look of resolve in his eyes. Of the same mind, she pulled him towards her and pinned him between her knees.

His look of single-minded intent wavered, and he leaned in and kissed her deeply, as if to refortify himself in their connection. But as soon as their lips broke apart, she rested one hand on his back to pull him closer, and reached between their bodies to take hold of him with the other.

She listened to his breath catch and then return in short, sharp pants, and she savoured a feeling of self-satisfaction for just a moment before she pressed her fingers into the skin on his lower back. He took the hint and with a piercing look into her eyes, he slowly sunk into her.

It was only their fourth time and Sherlock still wasn't entirely confident at the beginning, even though he probably thought that he concealed that from her. He should've known better than that by now but it didn't matter, because she found both his uncertainty and his compensating bravura endearing, especially since he lost all traces of self-consciousness as soon his baser instincts took over. Then his demeanor was altogether different.

She'd had certain expectations of him despite his inexperience, given his highly observant nature and masterful understanding of causes and effects. And she'd thought that if he should err towards selfishness, she was well-equipped to correct that behaviour so that she also got what she needed.

But he had been even better than she'd assumed. His initial period of slight insecurity grew shorter each time, and she suspected it might be totally gone by the time they parted ways that evening—as long as they spent the day the way she intended. Also, he was much less selfish than she had anticipated, and he was flying through the learning curve much faster than she could've hoped. Already he seemed to be picking up on the various things that either of them found especially arousing, which reminded her...

She stretched her neck to press her lips up against his ear. "You feel so good," she told him on a purring exhale, and she felt his entire frame stiffen and saw the pulse at his throat spike.

It was certainly true, but she had an ulterior motive for making the comment. Something Sherlock had done the previous night told her that he might very much like a bit of well-placed vulgarity, and she was never wrong about determining what people liked. On an impulse he had whispered low and throatily in her ear that he wanted her, and telling her had clearly excited him. That he should find that so arousing made sense: he loved the sound of his own voice, loved narrating, and most of all loved showing off, and she thought that if she encouraged this, they might both benefit. 'Both', because her motives weren't altogether altruistic; even the idea of his deep, desire-roughened voice dictating what he was doing to her or what he wanted to do to her filled her with the dark thrill of anticipation.
But on this occasion he would be the one to react to her words; he made a faint but emphatic sound and pressed into her harder, rocking her against the headboard.

For the moment she let him have full control, utterly engrossed in all the physical indicators of an aroused and sexually engaged Sherlock Holmes. She took in the rapid pulse in his carotid, the small sounds of exertion coming from the back of his throat, and the way he seemed totally lost in sensation. At the last observation she was distinctly reminded of how he had looked when he had been lost in thought before her in front of the fireplace of his London flat all those months ago, and a blaze of gratification curled low in her belly at the memory. She had wanted him then, and now - to be indelicate - she had him. And of course he would commit as fully to this as he did everything else he undertook; after all, he 'didn't do things halfway'.

After he managed to acclimatise a bit, he seemed to notice her watching him and his face took on a darkly speculative expression.

She reached up and touched the crease at the edge of his mouth with a fingertip, and his eyes darkened further.

"I was just picturing another..." he started, sounding hoarse. He cleared his throat. "A different..." He trailed off and his gaze searched hers, gauging her reaction whilst desire rolled off of him in waves. She felt exultant; first the talk (they would work their way up to the 'dirty' part) and now he was being proactive with actual suggestions.

She felt her lips bend into a leering smile. "Oh, I wouldn't dream of coming between Sherlock Holmes and an experiment," she said, and he looked into her eye for a beat longer, then smirked.

He answered in his much more familiar assertive voice, though it was tinged with a new coarseness, "Useful to know, as I have a number in mind..."

Even though he was lifting himself off of her and moving off to her side, she felt a rush of hot, heady arousal at his words. Suddenly she was struck with a vision of what it might be like to experience something relatively sustained with Sherlock. They were already so compatible in every way, and he was dismissive of societal norms or preconceived ideas, obviously unafraid to attempt new things, direct and pragmatic about what he wanted, and delightfully inventive about how he achieved those things. This could be just the beginning, she thought, and at the prospect another shot of adrenaline coursed through her body. The glimpse of the physical relationship they could have together was dazzling in its potential.

Meanwhile, panting heavily against the back of her neck so that small puffs of air made the sweat-slicked skin below her hairline tingle, Sherlock pressed up behind her, then wrapped his arm under her leg just above her knee and pulled it up and back towards his hips. Irene saw what he meant to do and leaned forward slightly to brace against the mattress, as he took himself in hand and shifted his weight so that he could position himself between her legs. Then with a low shaky sigh that she found both endearing and incredibly arousing, he rested his forehead on the back of her shoulder and pushed upwards, connecting them again after two shallow strokes.

At the first full thrust in this new position he gave a rough whimper, grasped the thigh he cradled more tightly in his arm, and pushed his lips hard against the top of her spine. By the third thrust he had opened his mouth and was sucking hard enough that she knew it would leave a bruise (again—she had spotted several from the previous night when she'd been in the shower), but she found that she didn't mind the adolescent behaviour in the least. In this way Sherlock was somewhat of an adolescent, but moreover the marks were physical proof that Sherlock Holmes had unraveled, and she had been the cause.
They hadn't yet attempted this position, and it took several moments to find the right rhythm, but when they did, she immediately knew it from the way her back arched and nerve endings all throughout her body seemed to resonate in harmonic accord. As one, the two of them moved in a flowing, rolling motion, with one of Sherlock's arms wrapped around her leg and another spanning across her belly, pinioning her tightly against him. Her hips were flush with his, and her spine was pressed to his abdomen, while the backs of her thighs covered the front of his, and their legs tangled. Time stopped, thoughts stopped, and all that mattered was the perfect synergy between their bodies.

Several minutes after they mastered this new position, he pushed his hand down her belly and pressed it against the juncture between her legs. There he began to stroke her in time with the pistoning of his hips, and she felt a moan leave her lips as she pushed back against him. She felt liberated and sensuous in a way that she used to witness and evoke on a daily basis with her clients, but that she rarely permitted of herself.

Unlike Sherlock she didn't lack in sexual experience, but very much like Sherlock, she found her most of her thrills elsewhere, and distinctly north of her genitals. When she did get involved with someone, it was almost exclusively for some manipulative purpose or, more rarely, her own physical gratification. It wasn't so much that she'd been careful not to prevent an emotional component from ever developing, so much as she had just never been disposed to any of her lovers that way. She had certainly never before been tempted to relinquish her upper-hand or control to the degree she had with Sherlock in the past two days, and was on the brink of doing again. But she had also never trusted anyone else in the ways she trusted Sherlock Holmes, and she had never wanted anyone else in the uncomplicated and agenda-free way that she wanted him. She and Sherlock were complicated, yes, but she had come to understand that her feelings for him were anything but.

With Sherlock, not only was sentiment a key component to their developing sex life, but it was the entire, precipitating reason she was in bed with him at all. And so in many ways including the most significant, this was just as new and unprecedented for her as it was for him.

With that thought in mind she tossed her head back, and although it was a strain, she managed to catch a glimpse of his face over her shoulder. He looked up as well, and their gazes snapped together.

If he could only see himself he wouldn't recognise his expression, she was sure. It must be the same with her she realised, as she met his intense, worshipful look.

Something profound clicked into place then. It was more than just the feeling of connection and simpatico with Sherlock that she'd felt building between them since they had met, it was one of total oneness. It reminded her of the bright red plastic View-Master she'd had as a child, which displayed stereoscopic images off of an inserted disk. When not in full focus one could see the two overlapping images, separate but distinct mirrors of the other, but when they slid fully into place and merged, they became much more than the sum of their parts; they were three-dimensional and vivid. She was experiencing that same brilliance and clarity now.

It didn't even occur to her to admonish herself for such fanciful thinking, the feelings of intimacy and belonging were so all-encompassing and genuine.

A chill of mingled euphoria, exhilaration, and fear raced through her body, causing her to shudder, and Sherlock clearly felt it though he seemed to misinterpreted it as something physical. He bit his lip, hoisted her leg up further, and tilted his hips, achieving an even deeper angle that made her drop her face back into the bed and moan into the duvet. After a moment she reached behind her
and grabbed his arm, pulling herself back up and twisting her neck to regain eye contact.

The open, soft look was gone, replaced by an unapologetically hungry and demanding expression that sent a dose of arousal and expectation downward.

As much as she wanted to, she couldn't maintain the slightly awkward position, but when she faced forward again and closed her eyes, she still saw his dark look imprinted on the backs of her lids. With that last image in mind, she let herself focus more on the sensations, and she lost herself to everything but the anchoring feeling of their physical connections until pleasure buzzed just under the skin of her entire body.

Ever the astute pupil, Sherlock muttered something into her ear that was not so shocking that it shook her out of her haze of mounting bliss and desperation, and yet just indecent enough. He followed up with quicker movements of his hand and the slightest additional pressure, and suddenly she was leaning back into him, overwhelmed by the blossoming, intensifying flares of pleasure that had almost taken her by surprise. They radiated from her centre all the way out to the tips of her limbs and the top of her head, so that for several mindless, timeless moments she was not so much a body as she was a woman-shaped constellation of bright, dazzling fireworks that detonated in rapid chain reaction.

Several moments later, she swam back to awareness to find him pressing his face onto the top of her shoulder, his rocking motions slower and shallower as she shuddered through her climax. After catching her breath a bit she took the opportunity to pull away, and before Sherlock had a chance to protest, she pivoted on her knees, pressed his shoulders back into the bed, and straddled him. As soon as she reseated herself he let out a low groan at the change of angle, and his hands clamped down hard on either side of her waist.

With ever-increasing alertness, fascination, and even new stirrings of lust, Irene watched as Sherlock now began to unravel beneath her. The flush had spread from the tops of his cheekbones across his entire face and chest, perspiration beaded up around his hairline and temples, and his jaw was hard-set with tension. Except for his look of determination, there was no trace of the aloof and cerebral genius, and as charismatic and enthralling as she found him that way, she also thrilled in witnessing his undoing. Part of it had to do with the innate rush she got from witnessing anyone shake apart because of her, and he had seemed a particularly imperturbable and unattainable challenge, but that was the very least of it. She didn't want to overanalyse the 'why' in the moment, but her instincts told her that it had to do with the fact that as vulnerable as she was making herself with him, and as much as she trusted him with that vulnerability, he was just as willing to do the same with her. And for both of them that was anomalous and significant.

He didn't shy away from her close stare now, and in fact it seemed to spur him on even more. He reached up to wrap his fingers around the back of her neck and curl his thumb under her chin, holding her face in place as he returned her look through narrowed eyes, and she held his wrist in her hand.

After another several moments it seemed that it was becoming too much; he squeezed his eyes shut and his lips pulled away from his teeth as his head tipped back onto the mattress, exposing the straining arc of tendons in his long, pale neck. She was tempted to give him a dose of his own medicine and barrage the area with love bites, but she knew that how unwise it would be to give into that particular urge, even taking into account his proclivity for scarves. She'd have to wait for a more prudent time to get her way in that respect, but she was more than confident that that day would come, and she could be patient. In the present, she settled for weaving her fingers through thick locks of his hair and pulling, and she smiled in gratification at the resulting grunt.
His hand dropped from her throat to blindly grope for her hip, and when he found it he clutched onto it, and with both hands he pulled her down against him even harder. With his eyes still tightly shut he gasped on an inhale and moaned on an exhale, and repeated the motion again, and then again, faster each time, until he abruptly froze mid-thrust.

With an avid stare she watched all the minute changes in his face and body as he climaxed, every muscle tensing beneath her and his fingertips digging into the tops of her thighs. It was empowering, but now that she had finished herself what she mostly felt was deep tenderness.

As he let out a torrent of breath he had been holding and then started taking in fresh gulps, she leaned forward and rested her wrists on his clavicle to stroke his cheeks. In what looked like a post-coital daze he encircled her wrists with his fingers, and they stayed that way for the length of several dozen heartbeats.

When she rolled onto her back and looked up at Sherlock, he opened his eyes and returned her gaze through heavy lids. His cheeks were flushed and his eyes glassy, and clumps of his hair were either standing on end in wild disarray, or else plastered against his forehead and temples. A single rivulet of sweat was running down his face in the hollow between his cheekbone and his jawline, and if she weren't feeling so spent she would've been tempted to lick it off.

But despite his wanton, thoroughly debased look, there was a sense of quiet satisfaction and peace emanating from him, reaffirming to her that everything she had felt, was feeling, was real and reciprocated.

Several moments passed in which their breathing slowed and deepened and their febrile skin cooled, and an almost reverential atmosphere developed between and around them. Irene didn't feel the need to make a remark to leaven the situation, or steer it in a particular direction. She was naked in every sense of the word and yet she couldn't remember the last time she had felt so at ease and content in her own skin—not even during the times she had worn her nudity as 'battle armour'. She didn't want or need any armour at all, now.

As far back as she could remember, she had been able to read others - what they expected, what they wanted - and moderate her demeanor and behaviour in reaction to what she saw. She suspected that it initially began when she sensed she wasn't quite like her peers and had used it as a defense mechanism. Unlike Sherlock, she hadn't retreated inward as a result of her otherness and tried to ignore teasing with occasional episodes of lashing out. In characteristic fashion, she had taken control of the unfavourable situation and had modified her own behaviour to secure the results that she wanted: being liked and included.

Or perhaps she had developed this almost pathological need because nothing she seemed to accomplish as a child had ever fazed or impressed her parents, and so she had been ever desperate to understand them and discover something that could make them seem to give a damn about her.

But regardless of the original cause, it quickly developed into something more. At around 11, she learned that the dual skills of understanding what made her classmates tick and being able to manipulate their perceptions of her could secure a lot more than just being liked. She could get things and she could get compliance: like a set of high-end ballpoint pens a fellow student had brought home from a trip from Germany, or the last chocolate milk at lunch, or the sworn secrecy of a classmate who had caught Irene staring into her locker mirror, intently watching several fellow 7th graders get undressed in the changing room after Girls' P.E. in its reflection.

She'd only become bolder and more adept, and when her mother divorced her father and moved them to her mother's native Wiltshire the following year, Irene had found that her talent for reading and manipulating people transcended national borders and cultures. Almost to her disappointment,
the English were just as susceptible to her as her American peers had been.

She wasn't a sociopath, she knew that. After she had been separated from her grandmother, she had been desperate to find someone else who could understand her, who could look beyond her pretense and call her out, or challenge her by not so readily giving her what she wanted, once she had seemed to give them what they wanted. She wanted someone to see her.

But people were shallow and fickle, and no one ever had—until Sherlock.

That was probably why she had become so attracted to him, she mused, not for the first time. It was more than his brilliance and his appealing brand of egotism, as attractive as she found those traits—it was because she had somehow sensed that she might finally be recognised, and known, and understood.

"Nine," he said, his low and throaty voice breaking through her thoughts.

She blinked and tore her gaze away from the trickle of perspiration to look into his eyes. It was clearly not a reference to her pulse, but she couldn't decipher his non sequitur.

"Times you said my name—or partially said it," he explained, and there was a distinctly self-satisfied look in his eyes, although it wasn't all arrogance. She detected some pleased awe and slight disbelief beneath the tone of smugness.

Her lips curled into a smile as she lifted her hand to trace the path of another bead of sweat between his pectoral muscles. "And how many times did you say my name—"

"Not sure, I was a bit distracted you know." He caught her wrist and pinned it against her chest, causing her heart to skip a beat despite how satisfied she already felt.

"Yet you can give me a very precise count of how many times I said yours," she retorted, watching how the strong pulse in his throat was as well before flicking her gaze up to his.

"Yes." Now as he looked down into her face his eyes were smouldering again, filled with the same intense and unchecked emotion that she had felt moments before.

"I can see I need to do a more thorough job of distracting you next time," she murmured, only mostly teasing.

She didn't think he was going to say anything more, but then he said in a rumbling but steady voice, "When you said my name, it... I took notice." She could tell that he was trying to appear matter of fact, but the grave tenderness in his eyes spoke to the depth of sentiment he was experiencing.

As she looked at him she was struck by how remarkable it was that he permitted himself to feel and express these things, given the final dénouement between them in London. They might have both sensed the potential for something unique and unnamed between them when they had first become acquainted, but any nascent attraction could have very well been destroyed by everything that had come to pass on that god-awful night.

Still, she had come to believe that although he had been deeply hurt and caught unawares by her perceived treachery, his essential sentiments towards her had not and would not change. She had been sure that after his feelings of betrayal subsided, he would begin working to ensure her safety, and she had been right.

It was only now, taking in his soft, unselfconscious expression, that she realised how remarkable
that really was. It struck her how powerful his feelings for her must actually be, if he - Sherlock Holmes - were willing to set aside his bruised ego and fractured pride, and not only risk his life to save hers, but make himself emotionally vulnerable to her yet again.

She recalled when, with barely-contained pain and grim satisfaction, he had looked her in the eye and punched in each of the four letters of her pass-code into her cameraphone, thereby conscientiously bringing about her downfall. In the immediate aftermath of that night, she had been devastated in equal measures by the fall itself, and the way she had permitted sentiment to lead to her it. She had been horrified that Sherlock had found and exploited the same weakness she had found and exploited in him, and even in her initial despair she had recognised that they were probably experiencing the exact same brand of self-loathing and recrimination.

Yet her sentiment for Sherlock in and of itself hadn't been her undoing, she had realised in the countless hours of reflection she had spent on that night. Sherlock wouldn't have been so eager to see all her meticulously-planned schemes fail, and be the one to cause it, had she had not made him into such a fool in her pursuit of them.

But her actions - making him feel special and making him feel, making him want to impress and protect her and making him want her, and then showing him that it had all been a calculated act to get what she wanted from him and that he had allowed himself to be manipulated - could not have been more emotionally damaging or humiliating to Sherlock if they had been designed for that purpose. Then, of course, her taunts about her connections with Jim Moriarty had obviously added insult to injury. And worst, this supreme humiliation had taken place directly in front of his cold, detached elder brother who was the true 'Ice Man' that Sherlock never would or could be.

As she lay pressed against him now, her head rising and falling with his breathing, she thought of what she might have been doing at that precise moment, if she had kept her former alpha-numeric code rather than changed it to the first part of Sherlock's name. She knew precisely where she would be, since she had planned several years of her post-professional life with as much care and precision as she'd applied to her intricate exit strategy. But as she thought of the cosseted and secure but ultimately uninteresting existence she would've lived, it didn't hold the attraction to her that it once had. There was no place for Sherlock Holmes in that existence, and if she'd wanted excitement she would've had to generate it all on her own. She was certainly capable of it, but it wasn't nearly as fun.

*Perhaps that's why he was so willing to forgive her past betrayal and risk the perils of sentiment again,* she thought. For a variety of reasons, both emotional and intellectual, she made life more interesting and satisfying for him as well. To a man like Sherlock, 'interesting' was imperative, and she knew that anyone who caught and held his attention was rare and valued.

Or perhaps, like her, he just couldn't help it.

As if he could discern her thoughts, Sherlock let out a quiet sigh and curled towards her, resting his head in the hollow between the side of her face and her shoulder and stretching his arm across her chest to cup a hand over her left breast. Now the connection felt warm and grounding rather than arousing, and a faint smile touched her lips.

She lifted her arm to rest her hand on top of his wrist and thought, bluntly and without any affect *it's quite possible that I'm in love with you.*
Irene blinked, and felt a faint and bittersweet smile on her lips at recalling that day. It had been somewhat surreal at the time, and her memories had taken on an even more abstruse, ethereal quality since. She had often wondered if their time on the ship could have been as extraordinary as she perceived it, or if she had embellished upon the experience until it stood out like a bold exclamation point in the timeline of her life, since it was the closest thing to intimacy she had ever known.

But on Baker Street, back in Sherlock's flat, she'd felt that same inexorable pull between them, although it was now manifesting as stilted awkwardness rather than mutual understanding and openness. It was the same coin, but this time fortune had flipped it the other way. And as much as she had 'managed' Mycroft Holmes thus far, the metaphor of a coin toss was yet another reminder at how detestably out of control she really was in this situation. She had a plan, yes, and the strategies to carry it out, but she had learned the hard way that even the best-laid plans could be put asunder—especially if the younger Holmes were involved.

The train was slowing to a stop, and when she glanced up at the name of the station she saw that it was Green Park, her transfer point. She wove through the other passengers to exit and her bittersweet smile lightened to a genuine one as she thought about seeing Nero. She loathed being apart from him, and it would be a palpable relief to hold him in her arms again.

She had never before cared so much about any one thing—not herself, nor Sherlock, nor her ambitions, nor even her beloved late grandmother. And though she had marvelled at it, she had never second-guessed the pure, fierce, and absolute devotion she had felt for the infant the moment he had been placed in her arms. Even the depth of feeling she'd felt for Sherlock that had initially so shocked her paled in comparison for her love for their child. It did make a neat sort of sense, she thought. After all, Nero was a perfect composite and extension of the two things for which she'd previously cared most: herself and Sherlock. It followed that her sentiments would be the sum of what she felt for herself and Nero's father.

Moreover the baby was a mystery unto himself, and though adjusting to being a mother had been very difficult at first in spite of that love, she now delighted in discovering a bit more of his personality every day. With Nero she was never bored, and even the mundane daily rituals that had previously represented the epitome of why she'd never wanted children - breastfeeding, changing nappies, constant laundry - had come to ground her in a life that was otherwise precarious. She would have never expected to find satisfaction in ever-repeating duties that in no way served her own interests, and nowhere had the shift within her been more evident than in the way she didn't resent rising in the middle of the night to feed or comfort the baby.

She had always fiercely prized her sleep and Kate had understood that she was never to wake or disturb Irene unless the circumstances were dire. Nero penetrated through all of that—through all of her natural self-absorption and self-priority, and aloof detachment. For the most part he was a happy, outgoing, and alert baby, with the rare exception of when he was somehow confounded in his efforts of getting something he wanted. Then he could throw strops that rivaled his father's, and when pouting, their lower lips jutted out in precisely the same, endearing, way...

But Nero's usual ebullient and inquisitive personality was more than enough compensation for his fussier moments, although she also hadn't been nearly as put off by a crying infant as she might
have expected. The unprecedented tenderness Sherlock had first managed to elicit from her was amplified exponentially with their son, and the power of her love for him was staggering at times. She would do anything for him, anything at all; she would die for him, and she wouldn't hesitate to kill for him.

Irene caught the equally crowded Piccadilly Line train and leaned up against a side partition, surrounded once more by a press of bodies but retreating within her mind so that it was as if she were alone. Closing her eyes, she remembered the time that had followed her discovery that those improbable days together had resulted in something equally unlikely and exceptional: Nero's conception.

In the hours after she had discovered that she was pregnant, Irene had realised with some shock that she actively missed Sherlock. It had been far sharper and more intense than the vague longing she had previously experienced, and unlike that feeling she had been unable to suppress or ignore it.

She had been so occupied with the logistics of recreating the basics of a life, and then elaborating upon those basics, that she had not permitted herself any distractions. Besides, missing someone was passive and unproductive and held traces of the pathetic; if she wanted to see him she could arrange it. And she hadn't, she had focused instead on the higher priority of her safety. She knew that he would agree that establishing her security was far more important than scheduling a rendezvous somewhere.

But by the evening of that first day she had less allowed herself feel the pang of separation and distance as much as she had just submitted to the overwhelming tide of emotions, and it had been every bit as unpleasant and pathetic as she'd always suspected it would be. In retrospect, that moment was the very initial loss of control that would set the precedent for the remainder of her pregnancy and early motherhood.

That first day, she had attributed her sentimentality to the fluctuation of new hormones, but she hadn't been able to deny that regardless of the cause, the feelings were real. She had even found herself briefly wondering if he actively missed her, before dismissing that thought with a derisive sound. Regardless, she had wanted to have him read the truth about what had happened in her eyes, in the curve of her lips, in the way she couldn't help briefly brushing her fingertips against her belly, despite the fact that the embryo had been no more than a microscopic collection of cells then, and her belly had still been so flat from the weeks of near-starvation during her captivity that her hipbones had jutted out like the twin sides of a wishbone.

She had also experienced another feeling that she normally derided and dismissed when she contemplated it at all: loneliness. Although she knew that it had always lurked below the surface of her daily life like a phantom, she also took pride out of being unique, to the degree that it was a primary component of her self-identity and self-confidence. She had never been tempted to compromise in order to have the companionship and understanding others seemed to find so easily. In fact, she had striven in the opposite direction; she had sought to make herself so singular and imposing that no one could ever hope to be worthy enough.

Of course, there had been those who had tried for some type of intimacy with Irene. There were the clients who worshiped The Woman, of course, but they had never stood a chance (though it was certainly enjoyable, and lucrative for her, to permit them to try). There were others, however, whom she had met under nonprofessional circumstances, who'd managed to earn a consistent place in her life. She knew that these women—and the occasional man—understood they would never be her equal or receive any concessions from her, and so they had tried to carve a place for themselves in a way they knew she valued: they had tried to be useful.
Beautiful, clever, and intuitive Kate had proven herself the most useful, and so she had become closer to Irene than anyone else had before. In the months before she'd met Sherlock, Irene had even come to wonder whether she felt anything more towards the woman, other than the satisfaction she derived from their successful working relationship. In the several years that Kate had worked as Irene's valet of sorts, they had certainly developed close familiarity, and perhaps even a type of intimacy, and she had taken Kate farther into her confidences than any other.

But then she had encountered Sherlock, and the blaze of recognition and understanding she had felt with him had burned away the lukewarm feelings she had experienced with Kate. For the first time she had experienced the possibility of true affinity and had glimpsed an alternative to that ever-repressed loneliness. It made whatever she had felt for Kate seem pallid and somewhat forced, though she still held the other woman in fond esteem.

The due diligence she had done in preparation for her initial meeting with Sherlock had piqued her curiosity and intrigue over the man, but it wasn't until he'd solved the AirBond code in less than eight seconds that it had fully struck her: she was not as singular, nor as alone, as she'd always believed. She had pulled away to stare at him in amazement over his mental prowess, but there was much more in her expression than simple admiration. There was wonder at seeing herself reflected in someone else for the first time, and shock as she identified what it was that she felt for him in that moment: deep attraction, respect, and somehow, even desire.

Standing on her balcony in San Francisco, she had longed to share such a pivotal moment with the only other person she had ever met who was like her—the one who had made this with her, and the only person who really mattered. Instead she was alone again, a sole figure silhouetted against a bright Californian sky that was thousands of miles away from the night sky that blanketed London at that moment.

Ironically, the very reason she wanted to reunite with him so immediately was the precise reason she must not. Her safety was secondary now—the safety of their child must be everything. The powerful men and women she had manipulated and exploited for her own ends would remain neutralised only as long as they believed she was actually dead, and to make a move was to risk undue exposure.

That first evening, that she would keep the child despite the insecurity and danger of her life had not been in doubt. At that initial point she hadn't recognised it as a selfish act on her part, although she certainly had come to view it that way in the following weeks. Then, filled with a desperate angst and uncertainty unlike anything she had ever experienced before, she had waged a fierce and ongoing debate about whether or not she should terminate the pregnancy without ever telling Sherlock what had happened.

On one given day she would vow to have the child despite the danger—despite never having believed she would have children, and certainly not wanting to change that. Then as soon as the following day she would wake up knowing that she had been delusional and dangerously self-indulgent to even entertain the notion that she could properly care for an infant. She was a fugitive who hadn't used her own birth name since adolescence.

On that initial night, however, the idea of ending the pregnancy hadn't even occurred to her. She was too filled with wonder and an unfamiliar sense of nostalgic longing to consider it, as well as the single burning question that continued to cycle through her mind like an incantation: but how?

Her mind may not have been as scientifically knowledgeable as Sherlock's, but it was almost as rational. And even if the conception might have seemed like a miracle, she knew there had to be a logical explanation, besides the simple possibility that she was in the 0.6% of women that
experienced a technical malfunction of an IUD that resulted in pregnancy. That seemed as if it were a swing to far in the opposite direction of a miracle, and was too banal. Anyway, the 0.6% figure was based on an entire year of use. She and Sherlock had only spent three days together.

For a full week she contemplated how to get in touch with Sherlock, and she finally decided to go to an internet café in disguise and email him her burner mobile's number through a masked ISP address. She planned for the subject line to simply say "In Venture," which would mean nothing to anyone who might be keeping tabs on Sherlock's inbox, but which would tell him immediately that the email was from Irene. The Independent Venture had been the name of the cargo ship that had borne them from the Port of Karachi, and the likely site of their child's conception.

It still wasn't as safe or particularly clever as she'd have preferred, but she had limited options, and she felt that Sherlock deserved to know what had happened as soon as possible. She was a bit concerned with how he might react to the news, especially after their entire conversation about birth control, but in real and practical terms it didn't matter much whether he accepted it or not. She was the sole architect of her new life, and she alone would determine its design.

But despite her irritating apprehension over his reaction, Irene had been determined to share the news with him. It was too significant, too unexpected, and too much of a paradigm change to keep to herself. The only other soul who had known about Irene's pregnancy at that point had been the proficient, but overworked and impersonal San Francisco General Hospital obstetrician whom she visited once in her first trimester. But that woman hadn't counted, and she certainly hadn't been Sherlock. She could have never seen Irene as any different from the hundreds of other mothers whose care she oversaw, or found the fact that Irene had conceived a child with one Mr Sherlock Holmes compelling in any way. The fact that the doctor had known the straight facts but could've never understood the context or implications had made Irene feel even more isolated than when she alone had known about the pregnancy, and the visit had steeled her resolve to reach out to Sherlock.

But just as she had settled on an internet café located in the tacky area of Fisherman's Wharf, which was solely frequented by tourists and therefore provided a degree of anonymity, everything had changed.

On a blustery mid-March morning she was listening to National Public Radio, the closest approximation to the BBC she'd found in America, when a news presenter announced, "British media is already proclaiming it the crime of the century, as three separate highly-secure facilities were breached earlier this morning: The Tower of London, The Bank of England, and Pentonville Prison. Katty Kay has more on the developing story."

At the words 'British' and 'crime of the century' Irene had frozen and looked up from the list of high-end condominium grand opening tours she had been compiling. She'd been filled with sudden ice-cold dread and foreboding, and her heart had started to pound against her ribs. She had warned Sherlock that Jim had further and much worse plans in store for him, and capturing Sherlock's attention by perpetrating something that earned the moniker 'crime of the century' would certainly be the style in which Jim might commence his final, deadly game.

The NPR presenter turned coverage over to a correspondent for the BBC World Service, and the longer Irene listened, the more leaden and chilled she felt.

"Some are already calling it the crime of the century. Today England has seen an unprecedented break in security, as three of the nation's most guarded sites have been breached, all within minutes of one another.

Scotland Yard was notified of a potential robbery of the Crown Jewels at the Waterloo Barracks in
the Tower of London at shortly after 11:13 this morning, and at 11:15 and 11:18 respectively, the vault of the Bank of London in The City was unlocked remotely, and the security system at HMP Pentonville failed.

One man was arrested onsite at the Tower of London, and a representative of Scotland Yard has stated that he is compliant. It is believed that he was responsible for all three break-ins, although it remains unclear how he carried out three separate breaches, two of which appear to have been performed remotely.

A Tower of London guard is in hospital at St. Thomas in London and is listed as being in fair and stable condition, but there have been no other injuries associated with the break-ins. Nonetheless, there are fears that this is not the end of compromised security and therefore safety, but the beginning.

A special session has been called at parliament to attempt to answer questions about how someone might have broken past the defenses of all three facilities, and what measures are being taken to prevent this from happening again. The Home Secretary had this to say:"

The clipped and professional voice of the home secretary came on the air, but Irene could discern a harried tone beneath her confidence.

'Look, the important thing to understand is that the perpetrator is in custody. He has confessed to the break-ins, and he has informed us that he was working alone. Based on the evidence collected by the police so far, we have no reason to believe otherwise. Scotland Yard have not determined motive, but they believe that he poses no further threat. In the meantime, we are doing everything we can to understand today's events.'

Questions remain as to whether one man could be capable of this, or whether he and his arrest are only serving as diversion for future attacks. Here's the shadow Home Secretary:

The opposition minister's voice was strident as she demanded, "We're just supposed to take the word of this man that he was acting alone? These are the best-guarded spots in our country, and they were compromised within minutes of one another. And why, just to show off? Or are we supposed to believe that he was acting as some well-intentioned citizen who was pointing out flaws in our security? I have a hard time believing that, and so do my constituents. I was in Tavistock Square on 7/7, and I won't just accept the word of a criminal that this isn't a prelude to a more serious attack. I want to know: what is the government doing to make sure we remain safe?"

The Scotland Yard is actively pursuing answers in their ongoing criminal inquiry, and there are unconfirmed reports that they have brought on additional, external consultation.

'External consultation.' That would be Sherlock, of course. Even without hearing either his or Jim Moriarty's names stated overtly, Irene's every fear had been confirmed in the short bulletin. 'Showing off'? Of course. 'A prelude to more'? Without a doubt. Just not in the way the ministers had thought.

With clammy hands she had opened her laptop to read all that she could on the emerging coverage, and every addition word filled her with greater alarm. Jim had finally thrown down the gauntlet.

Her initial knee-jerk reaction had been to grab her mobile and ring Sherlock at once, consequences and personal security be damned. During his and Jim's previous entanglement she had been at the centre, and she'd wanted Sherlock to assure her in his own words that he was more in control of the situation this time. Her thumb had gone to press the button to connect the call, but just before she could've gone through with it, she had quickly jabbed 'cancel' instead, and had thrown her phone
back onto the tabletop, staring at it and beginning to breathe hard as if she had just done something strenuous. In a sense, she had.

Even though she had been desperate to speak to him, she had also known that she needed to put aside her personal sentiments before they did more harm. After all, there was a reason he had been so distracted and malleable last time, and that reason was her. Until the final minute of the eleventh hour, he had fallen in line precisely as she had intended him to, and Jim had been the direct beneficiary of that. In fact, Jim Moriarty had been the only person in the entire situation to gain everything he'd wanted, and lose nothing.

Even if the dynamics between she and Sherlock had evolved, the fact that she could act as a diversion might not have. She hadn't wanted to take even the slightest bit of Sherlock's focus from Jim and his deadly contest of wits; Sherlock had needed absolute focus and clarity to pull through alive. Irene knew him well enough to also recognise that he would be mindful of all of that, and would most likely not even appreciate her involvement. She hadn't taken this personally, rather the opposite—it was a testament to the power she held over him and the significance of who she was to him.

And if her mere contact might have provided distraction, informing him that she was pregnant was most certainly off the table. She'd imagined that nothing could be more potentially catastrophic to his concentration than that particular bomb.

It had been the first time she had ever acted in the best interests of someone else when those interests directly countermanded what she wanted herself, but she had understood that it was essential.

From a distance she had watched it all unfold - the 'not guilty' verdict six weeks later, the intensely violating Sun article that cited a source called 'Rich Brook,' the superintendent of the Met's bloviated disavowals of Sherlock - with a sort of helpless, escalating fury. Though she had tried to think of how she might be able to aid Sherlock even indirectly, her lack of position or leverage meant that she had no useful contacts. What had been even more frustrating was the fact that any information she had on Jim was not to be trusted. She'd had no real way of knowing how much of what he had shared with her was genuine, and how much was strategically fabricated. He was a malevolent genius who was masterful at foreseeing and anticipating countless variables and eventualities, and she could easily imagine him planting fictitious information with her, even back then. A bid to help Sherlock that actually did the reverse and undermined him was just the sort of twisted scenario Jim would delight in engineering.

But then, despite her distance, despite her underlying faith that Sherlock could defeat Moriarty despite the prodigious challenge he posed, he had not.

Her initial reaction to the news that Sherlock had committed suicide had been absolute certainty that it was a feint of some sort, and that he would emerge shortly thereafter, fierce, vindicated, and victorious. In the week that had followed his alleged death Irene had developed the daily ritual of purchasing all the British papers carried by her local international newsagent. She would then return home and comb through both the papers and the online crime blogs of villages throughout the UK, seeking signs of Sherlock's signature brilliance. She'd never found even a close approximation, and eight days after the fall, she had come across images in The Sun, under the blaring headline Final Farewell to the Fraud!

Those photographs had done more to convince Irene that Jim had won than any frothing exposé or photographs of the St Bart's site in the immediate aftermath of Sherlock's jump could do.

She knew what people liked, but she knew the inverse, too. She possessed a native intuition that
had been particularly honed by her craft to recognise what might break people, and she was certain she had never seen someone as broken as John Watson had been in the pictures of Sherlock Holmes's small, sparse funeral. They had been grainy, taken by a paparazzo from a distance, but the deep grief etched on John's face had been unmistakable. He had looked haggard and brittle, and she couldn't be sure, but it had appeared as though he was favouring his left side.

Irene knew that Sherlock hadn't told John about her being alive, let alone about what had passed between them, but in all other regards, he seemed uncharacteristically open with the other man. John was just as much of an exception for Sherlock as Irene was—but Sherlock's helpmeet and complement rather than his reflection. And as a person of such importance in Sherlock's life, Irene hadn't believed that Sherlock could keep John in the dark about the most critical confrontation he had ever faced. It simply hadn't tracked with what she knew of Sherlock, and what she knew of his and John's friendship. And so, if John believed with such obvious and devastated certainty that Sherlock was dead, then that meant...

She had stared at the photographs and John's small pointillated face for some unknown amount of time, distantly sensing the blood drain from her face and a sharp, aching pressure welling up inside her chest. Then with a single, disjointed cry she had dropped the paper as if it had scalded her, and had stumbled backwards out of her chair to stand in the middle of her studio, staring but not seeing. Her breathing had hitched, and then sped up.

She'd pressed the heels of her palms against her mouth, hard, but the breaths had pushed past her fingers, getting faster and shallower, until she'd started to hyperventilate. Then her exhales had shifted into hoarse, dry cries. She couldn't remember the last time she'd cried like this, and she cried like someone who had forgotten how—short, erratic bursts that sounded alien and confusing to her. A rational part of her mind, a part that seemed distant and detached and had been almost as disturbed by her loss of control as it was by the real possibility of Sherlock's death, had berated her to pull herself together, that this was hardly concrete proof, that this changed nothing.

But hadn't they both learned that sentiment was never rational? Something had heavily and irreversibly clicked with her, some sort of horrified acceptance and surrender, and she could no longer convince herself that he had survived.

In the grip of her grief, she had flashed back to the way her flesh had crawled whenever she'd had to look into Jim Moriarty's black vacuum eyes, or had had to endure hearing about his pathological fixation on Sherlock's destruction. During those times she had told herself that she could ignore that particularly distasteful aspect of coordinating with Jim since his obsession wasn't actually directly relevant to her business, but it had still filled her with an unfamiliar and unrelenting dread.

She had feigned admiration for Moriarty during her ill-fated meeting with the Holmes brothers, but that had been bravura, as well as some overcompensation for how she had actually felt for the younger of the two men. In fact, she had felt scorn and contempt for Jim, but also very real fear. Contrary to what she had said, he was not her type of man at all. She was intuitive but she created plans based on meticulous organisation and cost-benefit analyses, and he was far more spontaneous and talented than she, but also far more volatile and capricious. Also, whereas she experienced sentiment as an (initially) unwanted effect of her interaction with Sherlock, he was driven by it. Except that in his case the sentiment was a fixation fuelled by obsession and hate in equal measures. She was audacious and clever, but he was a fanatical genius. Apparently he was fanatical enough and genius enough to take on and vanquish the great Sherlock Holmes.

She had never experienced such a crippling, paralysing sensation as she had felt in the aftermath of her acceptance of Sherlock's death, and even more than when Sherlock had destroyed her security and every carefully-laid plan, she had understood the heavy cost of sentiment. But she did not like
to think about that day, nor the days that had followed.

She'd been numbed by the loss in a way she could not have anticipated, and then when she had been able to emerge from that haze of pain she'd been met by keen, palpable regret for the second time in her life. The first time had been when she'd been captured by the terrorist group Lashkar e Taiba and summarily sentenced to death by decapitation, but at that point she hadn't been certain whether she regretted setting her password to S-H-E-R, or if she regretted agreeing to Moriarty's initial terms of consultation, and manipulating Sherlock in the first place. Now she couldn't help but bitterly condemn herself for not sharing with Sherlock what she did know about Jim, so that he could parse through the data and decide for himself what was true or false.

In retrospect she had also desperately regretted not telling him about her pregnancy, despite her good intention. Would knowing that he had conceived a child with her have altered his mindset as he'd moved towards his and Jim's final confrontation? Might it have made him less reckless, less prone to taking serious risks in his effort to defeat Moriarty? She would never know.

Yet she had been confident of one thing: if Sherlock was dead then it had been murder, not suicide. He had been outmanoeuvred somehow, but he certainly hadn't killed himself; that was only Jim's final masterstroke in a long-term design of defamation and disgrace. Sherlock was (had been, she'd reminded herself) far too proud and stubborn, and more importantly had held far too high an estimation of himself, to ever take his own life. As long as his intellectual brilliance - the single, essential trait that truly defined him - remained intact, it wouldn't matter to him how discredited or derided he was. No, the 'suicide' element had had Moriarty's brand of wicked genius all over it.

The day she had seen the photographs of Sherlock's funeral had been the day she had finally resolved to see her pregnancy to term. Not even the moment she had decided to email Sherlock had made up her mind fully, she had realised in retrospect. But after she saw the images of a shell-shocked and bereft John Watson standing beyond Sherlock's polished black granite headstone, she never again questioned it.

Two fortnights after Sherlock's apparent death, just as she was emerging from the deepest fog of her pain, she'd begun to notice various strange occurrences, and she had been rattled to realise that they might have been ongoing and she hadn't been aware enough to notice them. She had found the door to her postbox left slightly ajar on several occasions, although when she had inspected her post she hadn't detected any signs of tampering, nor had it seemed that anything had gone missing. On another occasion she'd caught a busboy furtively pocketing an empty bottle of San Pellegrino after she had finished it at a nearby café, but when she'd confronted him about it he'd said that he was separating it for recycling. Whilst the story had seemed somewhat plausible, her suspicions and sense of self-preservation had been alerted in a way she hadn't felt since just prior to her capture in Karachi. And she never ignored or dismissed her instincts.

Two months after Sherlock's death, the small incidents escalated dramatically with two harrowing events, the second of which had confirmed to her that the occurrences were not at all random but in fact targeted attempts against her. They had been perpetrated for reasons unknown and by assailants unknown—although she'd had her suspicions.

If the incidents had happened in the first weeks after she had discovered she had been pregnant, she would have almost certainly terminated the pregnancy. But since she had resolved to have the baby, it only steeled her already formidable determination to not only survive, but thrive. For herself alone it was a valid objective, but for her child, for *Sherlock's* child, it was an imperative.

Three months before she had wondered how she could've fallen pregnant, but after her ordeals she had been left with a much more alarming 'how' to consider. How could anyone know she was
alive? She'd wagered that Sherlock's body hadn't shown any signs of torture—that would've made the cause of death as suicide rather unpersuasive. Even if they had managed to find a way to hurt him without leaving tell-tale marks (the thought had made her sick), she had felt sure that he would never confess their secret. She knew he cared for her, even loved her, and he had risked his life saving hers. No, he wouldn't have given her up.

But even if the mysterious assailants had somehow learned that she was alive, how would they have known where in the world, literally, to locate her? Not even Sherlock had been privy to that information prior to his death. Had she been overly careless in San Francisco, and risked too much exposure in her enthusiasm at finding a lifestyle that held almost as much potential as the one she had left behind? She'd racked her mind looking for signs of negligence or flickers of suspicion in anyone she had met, but she had drawn a blank.

Barring personal error on her part that had alerted some of her former enemies that she was alive, there was only one man capable of locating her, she had thought. Jim Moriarty.

Since Sherlock's death, even the name was enough to unnerve her, as though he were some evil spectre out of a children's story who could be invoked by name alone. She had realised that in a very real way he had become that to her. Besides failure and falling into obscurity, Jim Moriarty - with his uncanny brilliance and absolute amorality - had been the only thing she truly feared.

Without the resources to fight, or even any knowledge of whom she was fighting, she had been forced to flee, and abandon everything she had built for herself in San Francisco. In an addition of insult to injury, she had been forced to turn to her very last resort—her legal, original identity. It had been disused for so long that it almost functioned as an additional alias, and though she was required to spend nothing other than a minor fee to reclaim it, it carried a heavy cost in other ways.

Renée Wolfe's life in Edison had been all desaturated beiges and mute greys after the vivid, riotous colours and dazzle of possibility in San Francisco. She had found it depressing and almost oppressively reminiscent of her childhood, but she had resolutely carried on, letting a flat and finding work in retail, and reminding herself on a daily basis as she measured women's bra sizes and stacked folded trousers into neat hedges that her unborn child's safety was paramount and ranked above the matter of her utter boredom.

She had imagined that she was living the sort of exile that would have given Mycroft Holmes incredible satisfaction, had he known. "The Dominatrix who brought a nation to its knees..." now frequently on her knees herself—but only to restock boxes of shoes. In idle hours at the shop she had sometimes fantasised about notifying the elder Holmes about her pregnancy, and commuting her role of mother to Mr Holmes's niece or nephew as a way to reenter the country and not languish in suburban hell. But in her more sedate moments she had vowed never to turn to Sherlock's brother for assistance unless it were an absolute necessity, nor to stoop to using her own child - Sherlock's child - as leverage for her own gain.

Her belly had swelled, her thighs had thickened, her breasts had become fuller, and although she had been fanatical about her figure at one point, curating her curves as critically and ruthlessly as the topiary designers at Kensington Palace Gardens, she embraced the changes wrought by pregnancy. They had served as daily reminders that Sherlock's living legacy was growing and becoming stronger, and that he or she would represent a piece of the great detective, and great man, that Jim would never touch.

And then when Nero was only one month old, her small grey world had exploded back into full colour: Sherlock made the fierce and triumphant return she had expected—just ten months later than she had anticipated. After a week of trying to decide how to reach out she had sent him a
postcard, cheekily selecting one that had an image of Baltimore on it, which had been the destination of FlyAway Airlines Flight 007. She had meant it as a message that despite her dull life in hiding and her alias, she was still (mostly) the same woman he had known. On the back of the card she had crafted a coded message that would fool anyone else who might read it, such as John, but which he'd easily interpret. She had even spelled out the ongoing nature of her sentiments for him by signing off with 'yours'. She had posted it, and resigned herself to the fact that now that she had made her move, it was his play, and she would simply have to wait.

She had spent the weeks after she'd dropped the card into the post in a state of heightened suspense, caught between excitement and dread, and vacillating between the two emotions almost from one second to the next. Each time she'd fitted her key into her lock, she'd wondered whether she would find Sherlock Holmes on the other side, sitting on her sofa with, say, a bottle or soother in his hand. She had imagined countless expressions that he might wear, and had held silent conversations with herself in anticipation of his various possible reactions.

But the actual response had been far more difficult to bear than any anger or reproach she could've imagined: total silence.

At first she had rationalised that he mightn't have received it, but when she read his post-resurrection, feature interview in The Guardian, a photograph of him sitting in that same worn Le Corbusier chair had given her a glimpse of the bookcase just behind him—and of a familiar postcard that was propped up on it.

She had puzzled over that, uncertain about what it could mean. He had held onto it rather than discarding it, and moreover he had chosen to openly display it rather than hide it away? She knew that it was unwise to attribute sentiment to Sherlock unless the evidence were indisputable, but she had still taken it as a somewhat hopeful sign. Perhaps it wasn't that he wanted to have nothing to do with her; perhaps it was that he simply wasn't ready to take on something she acknowledged was intense and complicated. He had just recently suffered a harrowing ordeal during which he may have had to resort to lethal violence, and he was returning only to face an obliterated reputation and the broken trust of his friends and colleagues. No matter how stoic and unaffected he was acting with the press, she knew that any number of those things would've affected him; the combination of all three must have had quite a serious toll.

She decided that after one year had passed since his return, she would travel to London on the false documentation he had provided her, and introduce him to Nero then. She could wait in this purgatory; she could allow him that, at least. It was certainly a potential improvement on the future she had faced prior to his return. And if Mycroft Holmes's facial recognition software, or whatever Orwellian technology he might use to detect her return to Dear Old Blighty, did alert him to her presence, then so be it. Now that she knew Sherlock was alive, it was inevitable that Mr Holmes would learn about Nero as well.

But when Nero was ten months old, her course of action had been decided for her.

They - whoever 'they' were, although she had become convinced that it was Jim Moriarty - had discovered her in Edison too, and there it only took one narrow escape for her to rapidly re-evaluated everything that she had previously determined.

It had become time to talk to Mycroft Holmes.

Contrary to what he now believed, Irene hadn't been - and wasn't - interested in the protection he could offer, although it was a useful secondary benefit. No, she had required smooth, discreet, and uneventful entry into the country, specifically London. Though Jim was oh-so-changeable, there had been one consistency: London had always been at the centre of his web. Her instincts told her
that it was there that she would discover the truth behind the escalating attacks against her and Nero, and it would be there that she would confront and destroy the threat. She had also needed to approach Mycroft so that she could reinitiate contact on her own terms. Then she could devote the entirety of her time, energy, and ingenuity to her mission, without having to simultaneously evade the elder Mr Holmes.

She exited the train and made her way through the glazed terracotta tiled station of Barons Court, then turned right and crossed the road. She passed a row of familiar though slightly less well-maintained white plaster terraced houses before she entered a private mews and walked down the cobblestones to a small but charming house with a buttery yellow door. After flashing a smile that was a blend of cheek and seduction to an elderly woman who was giving Irene a death glare as she watered her potted petunias next door, Irene withdrew a key from her pocket and unlocked the front door.

Inside, a willowy redhead immediately stood from where she was seated on a sofa inside, the sleeping bundle of Nero in her arms and an open, welcoming expression on her face. For a moment Irene ignored her, too struck by the profound relief she always felt when she was reunited with her child, and she saw with her own that he was safe. Still, she had to admit there was something strangely soothing and familiar about having Kate waiting for her as well. It was an echo of her former life—a life that was now barely more than a ghost of memory.

"Has he been fed?" Irene asked, her tone business-like and identical to the one she had once used to ask Kate about new bookings or if she had picked up Irene's clothes from the tailor. She had become a mother and within the context and confines of that role everything had changed, but otherwise her essential character remained unaltered.

"Yes, half an hour ago... How did it go?" the other woman asked, her voice filled with warmth and gentle concern.

"Not well," Irene admitted as she pushed back the hood and then unzipped the heavy jumper. She made a small sigh as she casually discarded her outer layer to the side rather than hanging it up, a habit she had resumed almost immediately after reuniting with Kate. "I didn't tell him."

The woman's brows creased in sympathy, and she passed Nero to Irene's outstretched arms. He shifted in his blanket and made a sleepy murmur, but didn't wake, and she savoured his slightly heavy weight.

"About the baby?"

Irene looked into Kate's eyes, her face grave. "About any of it."

Kate's lovely pre-Raphaelite lips made a small 'o' at that, but she quickly schooled her expression back into one of concerned support, and she bent down to retrieve and fold the clothing. "I'm sure you'll find a moment that you think is best," she said.

"I'm not certain that there will be such a moment. I frighten him. Or more to the point, his sentiments for me frighten him, and he's determined to keep me at arm's length. I'm not so confident that I can break through his reserves as I did last time."

"If anyone can, you can," her former house submissive and occasional lover said encouragingly, although now Irene thought she could sense a trace of something unfamiliar, which sounded slightly like reproach, in Kate's tone.

She ignored it.
"I agree," she said briskly. "But now I'm not so certain that anyone can. He seems quite determined to push me away, and I won't use our son as a tool of manipulation."

"That doesn't sound like the Irene I know," Kate said, as Irene leaned down to press a kiss on Nero's downy forehead. "Ms Adler would use anything at her disposal to get her way."

Irene looked up and raised a brow. Kate had never displayed any type of insubordination towards her before, even accepting Irene's return - with a child in tow, no less - the previous day with little surprise and few questions.

"You will recall that Ms Adler is dead," Irene said, her voice steely and her gaze piercing, and Kate had the grace to blush and avert her eyes.

"Although," she added, her voice more speculative, "if I have my way, and I often do, London might see another resurrection—of sorts."

Chapter End Notes

If any plot points seem like they were glossed over in this chapter, or are missing, it's because they're going to be examined/explained in greater detail in later chapters. Some things you'll just have to learn right along with Sherlock ;)
“Tea?” Kate asked, and Irene supposed that it was Kate’s way of showing that she was as deferring as ever, but she suspected it also had to do with the way her own usually flawless posture now had a subtle wilt to it. She always felt the effects of jetlag several days after the flight itself, but she doubted that was the main source of her fatigue. If she were honest with herself, the meeting - confrontation, really - with Sherlock had been more taxing than she’d have preferred. She was tempted to have a kip in the bedroom Kate had made for her, but now was not the time to relax her guard; it was time to reinforce it. Tea would have to suffice in terms of restorative measures, for now.

“Yes,” she said without glancing up, although a trace of gratitude was audible in her voice. And even though she was certain that Kate remembered, she added in a more instructive tone, “A touch of milk, no sugar.”

“Oh course,” Kate said with a demure tilt of her head, and she rose gracefully and exited the room.

Irene sat on the sofa and gazed down into the sleeping face of her son, who at ten and a half months was beginning to look more like the child he would become. It was the first time she had seen him since she had visited his father, which in turn had been the first time she had seen Sherlock since she had even known she was having their child.

After seeing them both in such short succession, it was striking how like Sherlock Nero was. Then again, she and Sherlock didn’t only resemble one another in temperament and intelligence. They looked so alike that it was still hard to distinguish precisely whose wavy dark hair Nero had received, or whose eye colour, or blue-blooded fair skin. When he was a bit older, it might be difficult to determine whose bone structure he’d inherited, as well.

He had been born with fine, almost auburn hair and she’d initially wondered if he had inherited hair colour from her paternal grandmother, or perhaps Nero’s paternal uncle, who had a faintly ginger look about him. But then it had wisped away and returned as an ashy brown shade, which had slowly darkened over the past several months. She herself had been dark blonde as a child, and she wondered, not for the first time, how Sherlock had looked at this age.

She had laughed at that to herself before; naturally both she and Sherlock would be attracted to someone who looked just like him and herself. She knew that the actual basis for the mutual attraction was more complex and nuanced than that, but on the surface it was admittedly rather amusing.

But like his parents to one another, Nero’s resemblance to them was more than his looks. He was barely emerging from infancy, but she could already discern an alertness and intellectual liveliness in his gaze, and a confidence in the way he took in and related to his surroundings. Of course all parents were convinced that their children were brilliant, but she had more cause to believe that than most.

Still, there was no telling at this point what his personality might be—how his likes and interests would develop, or if his disposition would resemble either or neither of his parents. Would he end up loving sport and eschewing the sciences, would he find it easy to adapt in social situations or would he be an outsider, would he hero worship his father, particularly if Sherlock were absentee, and want to emulate him? The person Nero would become was a great mystery, and Irene wondered if it were the type that could ever capture Sherlock’s interest. A part of her believed that it would, and that fatherhood had the potential to challenge him in a more fulfilling and ever-
evolving way than any criminal inquiry ever could. It certainly would give him the opportunity to constantly explain, elucidate, and show off, which God knew he enjoyed. But of course, he had to first reconcile himself to the concept itself, and therein lied the difficulty. Sherlock hadn’t shared much about his background with her in their time together, but neither he nor his elder brother seemed like products of a happy homelife.

She was so caught up in taking in Nero’s sleeping face that she didn’t notice when Kate had returned to the room until she had set the saucers in front of them, and seated herself back on the sofa.

“You are completely smitten,” she said with a smile in her voice. She settled down in a chair across from Irene, and added, “I’m accustomed to seeing you behave a bit differently around males in nappies.”

Irene laughed in pleased surprise, and tore her eyes away from her baby to give Kate an appreciative, faintly speculative look. It was remarkable how two years had passed since she had seen her, and yet they were already falling back into their previous dynamic.

Kate lifted her cup in her hand and asked, “So at this point only Sherlock Holmes’s elder brother knows about Nero, and he’s offering you protection to make sure he’s safe...?”

Irene went back to gazing at Nero, and hummed her confirmation.

“And anything else I’d need to ensure that he has a proper upbringing, I imagine,” she said. “He’s very set on that - it's touching in a way. Apparently even so-called ‘Ice Men’ have their melting points, and the younger members of his immediate family seem to be his.”

“But you already knew that,” Kate said with a blend of admiration and teasing. “That’s how you knew to write him in the first place.

Irene gave a faint smile, but didn’t say anything. She hadn’t told Kate the full story; no one knew that but her. She had allowed Kate to have the same impression that she had given Mycroft: she was leveraging her status as the mother of Sherlock Holmes’s child into protection from his elder, powerful brother so that she could return to life in London—one that was almost indistinguishable in lifestyle to the one she'd left. Kate had no idea of the ongoing campaign of stalking and attempted attacks they had endured, and she felt mildly guilty that she was potentially subjecting Kate to the same danger. But Kate’s cozy mews house was the only place she could imagine staying at the moment.

Staying at Baker Street was out of the question for the time-being, if not permanently. The thought gave her a strange ache, but she had become relatively accustomed to disappointment and concession over the past year. Besides, when she paused to think about it, she couldn’t actually picture staying there for the long-term. Her previous visit had been a calculated, and successful, move that was one component within a greater strategy, but to make it her actual home? It was so absolutely Sherlock’s domain that it was difficult to imagine.

And in many ways, Kate herself felt like home to Irene. For several years she had been, and she continued to be, a trusted confidante who knew just what Irene liked, and intuitively gave her exactly what she needed. Her presence was both calming and invigorating; she effortlessly maintained the dynamics that made Irene feel powerful, capable, and herself, and it was a palpable relief after months and months of banal, tedious obscurity.

She straightened her spine and lifted her chin. “Kate dear, since I haven’t mentioned it yet: you’re a treasure for having us.”
Kate gave a small smile of pleasure, and tilted her head, her auburn hair tumbling over her shoulders in a most appealing way. “Anything for you, you know that. And the babe.”

Irene had certainly known that once upon a time, but hearing her state it now was gratifying and somewhat of a relief as well, though she didn’t let her expression reveal that. Instead she raised an eyebrow. “And I must be keeping you from work. I assume had no trouble after I left.” She’d had pangs of regret over leaving Kate which were mostly selfish, but in general she’d thought it kinder to completely cut ties from the woman. Irene’s stock had crashed, and Kate didn’t deserve to be tied to the liability Irene had become. And besides, women as charming and beautiful as Kate hardly languished for long.

“Yes, it’s not quite the same, but...”

“You don’t like him,” Irene said with knowing amusement, and she couldn’t help but feel a bit smug at the knowledge.

“Oh he’s absolutely dreadful,” Kate agreed with a laugh. “But harmless.”

“Then it’s no wonder you don’t like him,” Irene said with a teasing smile.

Kate chuckled in appreciation, and her cheeks went faintly pink. “It makes quite a difference to when I was with you. He’s a recluse—never leaves the house except once in a while to visit his parents. I have no idea why he took me on as a secretary—companionship I expect, although he seems to have no real interest in me. Though,” she added, “that means that at least he doesn’t paw at me like the last one tried to do.”

“And like I did, you mean?” Irene asked, her voice getting lower and coy.

Kate’s smile widened and shifted into something mischievous, inviting, and warmly familiar.

She said, “Let’s just say that he’s no you in every sense, then.”

“I’d be scandalised if anyone were,” Irene shot back, her eyes sparkling as she looked up at Kate. “Though I’m pleased to know I’ve no cause to be jealous.”

“No. Of course not,” Kate said quietly.

Irene felt a wave of fondness and gratitude for the other woman, and she recalled the easy and successful working (and occasionally recreational) relationship they had shared for several years. For a moment she wondered if she’d been a fool to ever gamble with that life, even despite her certainty at the time that she wouldn’t, couldn’t, fail.

But before she could allow that thought gain any traction, Irene stood with care not to jostle the baby, and began to walk towards the flight of steps that lead upstairs.

“Irene?”

Irene didn’t stop until she climbed the first step of the staircase, then turned to look at Kate over her child’s head. The other woman was standing, and now her face held a more a serious expression.

“I’m glad you’re back. Even if things are... different. It doesn’t matter to me. And you and Nero can stay as long as you like.” She hesitated. “It’s not Eaton Square, but—”

"No, but it’s lovely. It’s very you.”
Irene caught the start of Kate’s smile before she turned again and continued up the stairs, and she felt discernibly lighter and less brittle than when she had walked through Kate’s yellow door a quarter of an hour before. She was surprised at how energising it felt to have an ally and unconditional support again, after almost two years of isolation. During that time she had assured herself that making her own way in the world - on her own - was her natural state and inevitable, and that regardless, her personal concerns were immaterial compared with what she needed to do to maintain her and Nero’s safety.

But in retrospect, it had been dreadful and emotionally draining, and outside of watching Nero grow and develop, her time in Edison had been pure drudgery. It was ironic that she had fought and strategised and manipulated her way to the top for so many years, only to lose all that status and comfort in the bid to secure them permanently, and be sent to the start again.

No, that wasn’t entirely accurate—she wasn’t starting from nothing as she had before. She hadn’t had an asset like Kate back then, nor the full and considerable support of the British Government personified. And most importantly, she hadn’t had Nero. For him alone she wouldn’t rewind to her twenties for anything.

She entered the spare room that Kate had prepared for her and Nero’s use, and smiled at the sight of a vase filled with ivory-coloured roses. It was the same arrangement Irene always kept in her Belgravia home, and of course the gesture was intentional on Kate’s part and said even more than she would ever voice aloud.

Irene had taken the other woman for granted in the past, but she had to admit that she needed her now. And the flowers confirmed what she had already known: that Kate would let her lean on her, and it wouldn’t cost Irene any of her pride or sense of autonomy, unlike if she were forced to go to Mycroft for even her most basic necessities. It would fall naturally within the purview of their dynamic, and Kate would treat hosting her and her son as she did anything else she did for Irene, with all her customary warmth, wit, and grace.

She drew up to the travel cot she’d placed near the window and pressed one more kiss onto the top of Nero’s head. She breathed in his unique sweet scent, one that seemed to get stronger when he was sleepy or sleeping.

His eyes blinked open in disorientation, but she bounced him several times and shushed him in the soothing tone she’d only ever used in the aftercare portions of client sessions before having Nero, and his eyelashes fluttered closed and then stilled, and he gave a small sigh. She leaned forward to lay him down, but as she straightened, she happened to glance out through the wavy glass of the window.

Through the arched stone entry of the mews and spanning nearly the entire width of the cobbled road rolled a black Range Rover with tinted windows. It crept forward as thoug the driver didn’t want to provoke any attention from the mews’ residents, and Irene’s first reaction was a flash of intense annoyance. Apparently Mycroft Holmes was being his thorough - some might say overly-diligent - self; he must have learned that she’d visited Sherlock and tracked her via CCTV to Kate’s place.

On one hand she admired his effort to keep his word that he’d ensure her safety, but on the other hand she knew that his (or his agents’) presence was equally indicative of his need for control—over the situation and Irene herself.

But then the car moved into a wide bar of sunshine, and the light that streamed through the far window backlit the occupants inside. It revealed a profile that she remembered with sickening clarity; she had seen the same silhouette on her terrace a year before, when it had been backlit by
San Francisco streetlamps.

For a moment she stared in horror, paralysed. It wasn’t protection that was arriving, but the exact reverse, and her mind stuttered in shock that she could have been discovered yet again. She had intended to flip the tables and be the one to hunt down her would-be assailants, but somehow they had beaten her to it.

The car slid into shadows once more and the figure within become obscured, and a jolt of adrenaline socked her in the stomach and set her into action. She had to get out somehow, that was obvious. If they could trace her to this street, they could trace her to a street number, and it wasn’t an option to wait for them to trap her and Nero inside. Unlike some of the other mews homes, Kate’s house didn’t have direct access to the small rear lane where most of her neighbours kept their bins, which meant that she had no choice but to exit by the front door. Time was of the essence, so that she could slip out before they made it any farther down the road. The chances that they wouldn’t see her were laughably slim, but it was her only option.

She scooped Nero into her arms again, spun on her heel, and fled the room.

Downstairs, Kate was no longer in the living room and Irene couldn’t see her, and though she shouted out for her Irene didn’t have time to wait and see what happened. She felt a stab of anxiety and regret, but it was drowned by the all-consuming imperative that she get Nero to safety. She slipped the door open several inches and pressed herself up against the interior, then leaned her head out to check the progress of the Range Rover. She was relieved to see that it was still at the far end of the road, and the driver seemed to be craning his head one way and then the other as if he were searching for the numbers, which were difficult to discern.

Without hesitating for another moment she turned the other direction and began to make her way out of the mews in as natural a speed as she could manage in her state, so as not to call attention to herself. But before she made it more than several paces, another black car pulled across the north exit and came to an abrupt, screeching halt, so that she was trapped between the two vehicles. This time she didn’t pause to consider her options. Moving on pure instinct and adrenaline, she moved towards the house next door. The woman who had been watering her petunias had apparently gone in for the moment, but her hosepipe wasn’t shut off and the door stood slightly ajar. Who would’ve guessed that the judgmental old dear would be her potential salvation? she thought with a trace of hysteria.

Her strides were uneven and ungainly with Nero in her arms, but she made it through the door before anyone could exit the cars, and she spared a second to turn the bolt.

The elderly woman was at the kitchen sink having a cigarette, and she jerked upright and stared when Irene burst into the front room at a full tilt, a saucer-eyed Nero in her arms. It was only when Irene made for the stairs that she made a shocked, inarticulated sound of anger. Irene ignored her, but Nero began to sniffle, and then with a few tearful hiccups he launched into a wail and balled his fists in her hair, tugging hard at strands of it.

“I’m ringing the police, young la—is that a baby??” the woman asked shrilly, finding her voice at last. After a pause Irene heard rustling, and then three short beeps.

As she sprinted up the stairs she drew long, shuddering gasps of air, shushing her son on the exhale, and her mind blazed with the recurring thought that whoever was after her had very nearly arrived at Kate’s house before Irene had made it back herself. If she’d had a longer wait when she’d transferred Underground lines, she might have come back to an unconscious or even murdered Kate, and Nero would have been—she didn’t know, and she couldn’t let herself consider the possibilities. For a moment she felt overcome with nausea, and hugged her baby tighter. He
struggled against her, his crying increasing in pitch and ringing in her ears.

She reached the first floor and made her way to the back of the house, hoping desperately for doors that lead to a rear staircase, or even access to the roof. As she made her way down the corridor, she shifted Nero so that she held him with one arm, and dug her phone out with her free hand. Since becoming a mother there was someone whom she cherished and valued even more than her self, and though at times it was difficult to reconcile her personal desires with what was best for her child, she didn’t take her pride into the least consideration in that moment. Without hesitating, she dialed a number she’d once memorised and still knew by heart «07544680989», and heard the other phone begin to ring. As she listened, she arrived at a small bathroom that only had a long horizontal window near the top of the ceiling, and backed out to check the next room, the master bedroom, which was equally useless to her.

The unanswered ringing went on, drilling into her head. Sherlock wasn’t familiar with this new number, so why wasn’t he answering? She knew he preferred to text, but as far as he knew, she was a potential client ringing him about a career-remaking case.

With the third room, which appeared to be a disused spare room-cum-storage area, she thought she found victory, and she gave a small cry of relief. Unlike Kate’s house, this one did have a set of French doors that opened to a spiral staircase, which appeared to lead down to the rear alley. The only challenge was the fact that the floor of room was clogged with piles of rubbish, and she would have to clear her own pathway to the exit. Still, if the men had failed to notice her slip into this residence, she had a very good shot at an escape—unless of course there were more of them monitoring the back.

Breathing hard, she began to fight her way through the clutter of storage boxes, stacks of magazines, and cases of empty and half-empty pill bottles, kicking and toppling over everything in her way whilst still clutching at Nero to her with her tiring right arm.

Irene’s heart stuttered to a stop and then redoubled its pace when she heard the downstairs door explode open in a crunch of wood and screech of twisting metal. It slammed hard against the wall, sending reverberations up through the floor. They had seen her, or else they wouldn’t have come here so quickly.

The noise seemed to shock Nero out of his crying, and he stiffened in Irene’s arms and subsided into a fretful silence, with the exception of a few erratic sniffs.

Meanwhile the ringtone continued, unanswered, and her anxiety began to slide into a panic so pure and intense that not even the fear she’d experienced just prior to her intended execution could rival it. After listening to one more droning tone, she threw the mobile into her pocket with a silent cry of frustration. Though it was the worst possible scenario for her, she briefly hoped that them coming after her meant that at least Kate was safe.

Downstairs she heard the woman shriek some more, as well as the sound of heavy treads advancing towards her.

“Which way did she go?” a man demanded, clearly audible despite the muffling effect of the floorboards and thunderous roar of blood in Irene’s ears, but the woman didn’t seem able to answer; Irene only heard a few whimpers. “Which way?” the voice barked again.

“Upstairs,” someone else said calmly, and though she tried to discern whether there was any trace of Jim Moriarty’s D4 accent in the word, she couldn’t tell from that single word. One set of feet began running towards and then up the stairs, and then Irene heard a sharp, pain-filled cry from the old woman, which she understood meant that the other one of the two had struck her—for no
reason except to inflict terror and pain.

With another sound of frustration she tried to speed up her progress - the door was so close - and stumble over what she couldn’t knock out of the way, but with Nero in her arms her centre of balance was off, and it hindered her agility. She had just reached a dated vanity piled with a further assortment of rubbish, when a reflection in its mirror showed a body hurtle into the doorway, and the dark arc of a gun swing up towards her. She froze, looking with fierce yearning towards the rectangles of sky she could see beyond the French doors that were less than a metre away.

“Turn around,” a voice commanded.

Breathing hard through her nose, she complied, but only so that she could assess the person holding her at gunpoint—the man who had been hunting her down and forcing her and her son to live like fugitives for almost a year and a half. At once, she saw that this wasn’t the man she had seen before, but that made his weapon no less of a threat.

She stared him down in silence, her mouth pressed into a small line and her eyes large and dark with fury.

“Give it here,” he said, and it took Irene a moment to realise that he was referring to Nero, who was still silent and staring.

She looked off to the side and didn’t answer, causing the man to give a small shake of his head and one soft, humourless chuckle.

“I don’t have to hurt you, girl. Just do as I say and give it ’ere.”

Irene knew that this was a lie, but she was disgusted that he would even attempt that approach. What mother in the world would ever agree to such terms? Particularly when the man was disassociating Nero by calling him ‘it.’ Her expression tightened, and she felt the rage building in her begin to burn like acid.

It was obvious that she wouldn’t charm her way out of this with him, so she didn’t even consider it. He was obviously too focused on the promise of getting enough compensation to be kept in ketamine for ages, and nothing she could say would tempt him away from that prize. Except,

“...I can double whatever sum he’s offered you,” she told him, sounding strangely calm, though a dangerous and heated edge suffused her words.

"You’re crashing at your girlfriend’s house and you expect me to believe you could afford a tenth, let alone double?” He chuckled again and shook his head.

“Oh I have connections you wouldn’t believe,” she said, her voice still confident, but sounding distant and tinny in her own ears. “Why do you think he’s trying to eliminate me in the first place?”

“I don’t ask questions, darlin’, I just do what I’m told. And so should you. Now. Before—”

But before he could complete his thought, another man appeared from the hall. He came to a leisurely stop within the doorframe, and took in the scene as if he were viewing an unexpectedly charming tableau.

“Oh!” he said, in a pleased, bright voice.
Irene was accustomed to being the focus of a particular type of male gaze, but she got the feeling that the feral excitement simmering beneath the expression of blank detachment had nothing to do with appreciating her looks, although judging by not a few physiological indicators, it was borderline sexual. He was a tall man of exceptional, arresting beauty, except when Irene looked into his face she felt a deep chill, very similar to the one she had felt when she had once looked into Jim’s eyes. Except unlike Jim, there was absolutely nothing that this person liked, except perhaps hurting and killing things.

“She’s talking about Mycroft Holmes,” he said to the shorter man, his tone casual, and his accent unexpectedly posh. “But unfortunately,” he looked over his shoulder into the hall, then back at Irene, “I don’t see him at the moment.”

Her heart doubled its pace, and she felt another sickening jolt of adrenaline hit her in the pit of her stomach. Automatically her arms tightened around Nero more, who made several distressed sniffing sounds, but did still not resume crying. It was obvious that he could sense the extreme tension in the room, and his hands dug into her shoulders as he whipped his head around, looking at the strangers with round, frightened eyes.

“Ms Irene Adler. Or should I call you Renée Wolfe? Or Renée Laird, wasn’t it, in San Francisco? At last,” the man said, and his voice now sounded low and breathless. “And that we should meet right back here in London – elegant, thank you. Just my style.” He leered at her, the refined façade becoming less and less convincing.

“Who are you?” she demanded, backing up further, coming to a stop against the vanity. “Why have you been tracking us? What do you want? Answer.”

She fired off her questioned with increasing intensity, fuelled by the rage she felt at the men’s audacity to threaten her child, but he continued to just look at her with a penetrating and unblinking stare, whilst rising excitement seemed to flush his cheeks and dilate his pupils.

She straightened to her full height and lifted her chin, then said in her coldest, most contemptful tone, “You go back to your master and tell him that if he wants something from me, or wants me dead, he’ll do me the courtesy dealing with it himself, rather than send amateurs to make pathetic attempts. If Jim were the one to come after me, I’d already be gone—a fact I’m sure he’s all too aware of himself.” She managed a sharp smile. “And also pass along to him that I expect a little more showmanship to it as well. Hiring a drug addict to point and shoot is a bit beneath him.”

The man’s eyes widened for just a moment, and then Irene saw a flash of cold, feral rage. As soon as it had appeared, however, his face resumed its bland mask. Once again Irene was reminded of Jim Moriarty, though there was none of Jim’s relentless, calculating brilliance in this man. There was just an ocean of brute sadism beneath a thin veneer of good breeding.

“Yes, how amusing of you,” he said, and tone was silky and light, though she could see that the tendons in his neck were taut.

“You are right about one thing, though,” he added a moment later. “Not that it hasn’t been diverting, but this has gone on far too long.”

He turned to the man beside him.

“Shoot her. Aim for the head, we’re only making one kill today.”

As soon as he gave the command he seemed to relax, and then he turned his gaze onto Nero, who turned away and pressed his face into Irene’s shoulder with a muffled whimper.
She clutched onto him as a plunging, sickening dread rolled through her, but her final thoughts before the man leveled his gun were on what the taller man had said. *Only making one kill today.*

She could die if it meant that Nero would survive their long ordeal somehow, and one day Sherlock and Nero might find each other. The thought, at least, was consoling.

The man took aim, but before she could take one last, sucking inhale into her lungs, he lowered the weapon almost imperceptibly. He glanced from the side of his eyes at the man in the doorway, who uttered a disgusted, impatient “*Yes, point blank. What’s the problem, I did say to avoid the child.*”

Then without waiting to see if the man would comply, he made a grab for the weapon himself.

Irene reacted within a fraction of a second, on pure instinct. Her every sense heightened to what felt like an almost supernatural degree, she snatched up a canister of Elnett Satin hairspray that had been lying on the old woman’s vanity countertop, as well as a long-necked lighter that rested next to an adjacent collection of candles. Then with a velocity that almost shocked her, she swung her free arm up and sprayed the product, whilst pressing on the switch of the candle lighter under its stream. She noticed with vicious gratification that the long neck could compensate in reach for the way she had to awkwardly hold the baby to her chest.

The moment she pressed the lighter’s button, a blue and orange fireball spewed outward into the faces of the men, alighting the hair of the shorter of the two men and sending the tall, beautiful man reeling backwards. Acting with the most remarkable clarity she had ever experienced, she fisted her hand around the heavy aluminium can and swung it down hard against the forearm that held the gun, sending it clattering to the floor.

She dropped the hairspray and grabbed the back of the vanity chair, and spun it around to trip the man up as he reached for it. He stumbled over it and fell heavily to his knees.

Without sparing even a glance at the other man, whose hair was still sizzling and letting of small sparks of flame, she ran for the narrow French doors, praying that they wouldn’t be locked.

Her hand shoved down on the lever and with a relieved exhale, she slipped through. At the top of the small terrace she nearly stumbled at the precipice of the tight and rusty spiral staircase, before hugging the now screaming and writhing Nero closer to her and steadying herself on the banister.

“*Bitch,*” the man breathed, low and fervent, and before she reached halfway down the staircase, he was already over the chair, through the door and after her. Taking as brief a look back as she could afford, just to see how closely he followed her, she saw that he was no longer even faintly attractive. It wasn’t that her trick with the hairspray and lighter had done any damage—it was his expression. Though his face was flushed and his features were twisted in what appeared to be hatred, a spark of sadistic pleasure gleamed in his eyes. She recognised that look, he was *enjoying* himself.

She grabbed the handle of the rubbish and recycle bins that were lined in the alleyway and yanked them out behind her as she ran, sending them scattering into the man’s path. But rather than leap over them, he stopped short behind them, and she knew with chilling prescience what he was about to do.

With a low husky cry she ducked, and in almost the same moment she heard a loud whistling sound, and a bullet missed the left side of her head by millimetres.

Nero’s hearty cries became squealing shrieks at that, and though Irene was sick with mortal fear,
the primary emotion she felt in that moment was black, blinding hatred. She knew with absolute certainty that if this man didn’t succeed in killing her now, she would do everything she could to see him dead instead.

Not that this was a new resolution. It was, after all, the entire reason she had come to London. If she were just concerned with her own welfare, she might have started afresh yet again after the last incident in Edison, but she could not tolerate an unstable, constantly under-threat life for her child. She had returned in order to understand it—and to end it.

She spotted the exit to the back alley, and as she made her way towards it she bobbed and weaved, certain that she would feel a projectile burst through her back or her skull at any moment.

Another earsplitting popping sound exploded behind her, but she felt it whistle past her right ear this time, and then she was through the swinging wooden gate.

Two rounds down. Depending on the type of handgun, he could have up to eighteen left, and perhaps he was armed with his own weapon as well the other man’s. Her shoulders convulsing as she gasped in lungfuls of air in near-hyperventilation, she took quick stock of the street, and felt panic well up inside of her. The road was wide with little coverage, and she didn’t see where she could possible go, or how she could outrun him and his gun when he was only a few paces behind her. Hiding was probably out of the question as well, given Nero.

Then she saw the grey corrugated side of the single-stalled Sanisette public toilet, located across the street from a local gastro-pub and diagonal from where she had emerged from the alley. With its reinforced metal sides and automatically locking door, it could be her salvation or her destruction. If the door didn’t seal fast enough, it would be like shooting an animal caught in a snare, but it was her only chance.

Without looking to see if there were any cars coming down the road she ran in a full sprint towards the small structure, but her escape was cut off by yet another dark-coloured car, which pulled directly in of her path. She managed to dodge around the bonnet before she heard someone burst out of the side, but then her wrist was caught in a strong grip.

She pulled away hard whilst letting out a scream of frustration. She couldn’t push the person off with her other arm without letting Nero go, and so she clung to her child with one arm whilst blindly struggling, kicking, and pulling away from the new assailant. The person lost a hold of her with an anguished cry of “No!” and Irene’s momentum hurtled her forward, her lips pulled away from her teeth in a deep grimace, and her eyes locked on her destination of the public toilet. She didn’t know what she would do when she got there - be forced to ring Mycroft, perhaps, though the prospect didn’t bother her now - but she knew that it was essential that she do everything in her power to reach it.

“Irene, Irene it’s me!” the person called out in a desperate, pleading voice behind her, and Irene finally realised that the person was Kate. Kate.

For a split second she wavered, uncertain; the Sanisette was still potentially more secure. But it was also more of a gamble, and so with one last conflicted look towards the toilet she ducked behind the car, then pulled Kate down along with her. It was a navy blue Rover 25, she saw now, not the black towncar or Range Rover her panicked mind had perceived a moment before.

She lifted her head to the window and scanned the area around the exit of the residential back alley, but the beautiful (and dead, she thought with cold resolve) man was nowhere to be seen.

Her heart still lodged in her throat, she cracked the door open and hunkered down into the
passenger of the car, and Kate followed suit to her right. Before the driver’s side door even latched shut, Kate was shoving the car into gear and stepping on the gas pedal, and it jerked forward and then roared down Comeragh Road. They didn’t speak, but the interior of the car was filled with the sound of their heavy breathing, and Nero’s hiccupping cries.
Several miles north and east Sherlock was perched on the edge of his sofa, bent forward at his waist with two fingers of each hand pushed against his temple and his eyes pressed closed. But his physical location was immaterial to him; he was moving through the corridors of his mind palace, carrying in the mental proxy of his arms all the avatars he had created in association with The Woman.

He arrived at a small subterranean chamber, at the centre of which stood an industrial-sized incinerator. He envisioned himself dropping the collection of items to the floor, and then he cranked open the reinforced steel doors, listened to the protesting shriek of the metal hinges, felt the whoosh of heat roll over him, and heard the roaring crackle of flames. He picked up the first item, a black riding crop, and after a conscientious inspection, he flung it into the fire and watched tongues of flame catch around the edges and then alight, first blistering and then scorching the leather. As the flames began to consume it, his knowledge that was both tied to and represented by the object diminished as well, so that when it crumbled into ash and dissolved in the flames, his awareness of the object itself and the aspect or specific memory of Irene Adler for which it stood dissolved as well.

At least, that's how it was supposed to work, and how it always worked with everything else.

He was oblivious to how long it took in real time to carry out the protocol with every item associated with Irene Adler; it could have been minutes or several hours, he wasn't sure. He only knew that with each piece he had to repeat the procedure with absolute and consistent concentration if he were to have any chance of success. One item, an AK-47, let off an impressive series of explosions as the flames reached the cartridges of gunpowder, but soon it melted away to nothingness as well.

Feeling mentally exhausted by the time he'd finally completed the intensive process, Sherlock sealed the furnace door again, and backtrack until he reached a certain golden-lighted Georgian room. He pushed open the door, hoping to find it blank and featureless, but it was absolutely unchanged, as he had known with a resigned sort of dread that it would be—as it always had remained, no matter how many times he attempted this process.

The gun that had made such loud, brilliant explosions was still affixed above the mantelpiece, along with everything else that represented The Woman within Sherlock's mind. They were like the cursed artefacts out of teenagers' horror stories—items which would reappear in the home of the terrorised victims no matter what lengths they took to dispose of them. In fact while trite, it wasn't the worst analogy, he thought with a fatigued sort of sarcasm.

Distantly Sherlock heard the sound of familiar footsteps on stairs that signaled John was stopping by. A moment later he stuck his head into the front room to call out a hello, and then he was saying something about misplacing his keys, and that it was a good thing that Mrs Hudson had been home since apparently Sherlock hadn't heard the bell, and had Sherlock seen them?

Sherlock ignored his friend, but it didn't seem to faze John, who appeared to have gotten over his previous irritation. He took a few steps into the front room before pausing to sift through the day's post, and from his peripheral vision, Sherlock saw John tuck some envelopes under his elbow, then lift up Sherlock's mobile.

"Oh. Hey Sherlock, you have a voicemail," John said, his voice still sounding far-off, yet much too clear for Sherlock's liking. It meant that his concentration was waning.
"Mmm," he said, not answering so much as indulging John.

"From an unsaved number. It's a UK mobile: 0780—Sherlock?"

Sherlock squeezed his eyelids together more tightly but he could still hear his flatmate's voice, and with a final grimace he (temporarily) conceded defeat, and opened his eyes.

"Oi, are you listening to me? What are you doing?"

Popping straight, Sherlock twisted towards John with a falsely bright expression, hoping that a tactic of appeasement might be more successful in ending their interaction.

"How was your date?" Sherlock asked, and then he adopted a look of sarcastic sympathy. "Mm, not too good if you're back here."

"Sherlock..." John said, and then Sherlock heard him murmur almost inaudibly, "Where to start...."

He inhaled, then said, "First of all, it's the middle of the afternoon. We haven't even gone yet. Secondly Mary isn't just some 'date,' as you know full well, so don't talk about her like she's some sort of conquest. And finally - don't think I didn't notice you evade my question."

After a somewhat begrudging silence, Sherlock said, "Deleting. Or attempting to. It's not working."

"And should I ask what you're delet—"

"Attempting," Sherlock corrected in a growl, then muttered sotto voce, "Failing."

"—trying to delete? It couldn't have anything to do with why you've been acting so strange lately, could it?"

Sherlock made a reflexive noncommittal sound in response, but a moment later John's words sank in and he turned around again to shoot a look over at his friend.

"I thought you said you weren't going to pry."

"So there is something."

"I didn't say that."

John gazed back at him, then nodded. "Alright then. And yeah, I did say I'd let it alone, so... Anyway, do you want me to have a listen to the message and tell you if it's anything above a 5, or whatever?"

Sherlock waved a hand in assent, and in his peripheral vision he vaguely noted John touch the screen and then lift the phone to his ear.

But only a fraction of a second later and on a burst of fresh adrenaline, Sherlock launched himself off of the sofa, crossed the room in two long-strided bounds, and snatched the phone away from John before the other man could have the chance to hear the voice on the message.

John looked at him in astonishment, his hand still poised in the air.

Sherlock's mind whirred and without skipping a beat he said, "Let's not waste either of our time; you wouldn't know a 2 from a 9."

Still, John cocked his head and peered at him, but Sherlock turned his back and subverted his
attention to the phone. He'd erase the message without even listening, because even if he didn't recognise the number, he knew who had left it.

He acknowledged that that wasn't rational; it might, after all, be someone attempting to contact him regarding a potential case. But if that person were serious he or she would manage to reach him another way. And besides, perhaps there was something trivially satisfying about the fact that although he couldn't delete her from his mind, he could at least delete her from his phone.

His brow drawn together and his lips tight, he pressed his fingertip to the 3 on his screen. But then, unbidden, an image of Irene's face holding its characteristic lively and perceptive expression sprung to the forefront of his mind, and without pausing to second-guess his actions, he swiped his finger off the 3 and then quickly jabbed at the 2.

"Message is sav—" he heard the electronic voice begin to inform him, before he ended the call. Then he accessed call history and took a few seconds to memorise the incoming number, before deleting it from his phone. He shoved the mobile into his pocket before he could think too closely about what he had done.

"So, is there anything new?" a voice asked behind him.

Sherlock blinked and looked around to see John waiting expectantly.

"What? Oh, wrong number."

"That left you a voicemail?"

"Yeah," Sherlock said shortly before switching gears on the same breath. "Listen, John, I owe you a..." He made a slight frown at his phrasing and restarted. "There was something, yes. Just a small residual matter from last year, but it's been resolved."

"Oh God," John said, immediately cottoning on to what Sherlock meant by 'last year.' "Are you sure?"

No. "Yes," Sherlock said firmly.

"And you're all right?"

Sherlock's frown deepened, John's words all too resonant. "I'm fine. So let's just move on, shall we? Get back to normal."

"Or at least our brand of normal," John modified.

"Obviously." Sherlock forced a bit of a grin, and John studied his face for a moment before he returned a much easier grin in response.

"All right then."

"As soon as possible, in fact. Anything on your blog?"

"Not this morning, but I'll check again," John said, and he slid into the chair at the table by the window where his laptop sat.

Sherlock turned towards his own laptop and logged onto his email, his lips pursed and his eyes skimming over subject lines, dismissing one at a time with a glance before hungrily looking down to the next.
Work, he needed work, now more than ever.

Mycroft had just set his phone back in its cradle with a heavy sigh when he heard a commotion coming from the hall leading to his office. The echoes of sharp, staccato footsteps ricocheted off the marble floors and grew ever louder until three women burst through his doors. Irene Adler strode in first with Nero in her arms, and she lead his PA, who was in turn followed by a striking redhead he recognised from due diligence files he'd compiled several years before.

Irene's face was white, and he hadn't seen her look so rattled on either the night her phone had been cracked, nor just before her execution. Ah, but then, with the latter it was all make-believe, he thought wryly.

He rose. "Ms Adler. You've decided to make a reappearance."

"Mr Holmes," she steamrolled over him. "I was under the impression that you had agreed to ensure that Nero remained safe." Her voice radiated cold fury and authority, and Mycroft understood that it was unfeigned version of the voice with which many of his colleagues had once paid obscene amounts of money to be scolded.

It was evident that she was livid, although given the conversation he'd just had on the phone with members of his technical team, he was rather bemused by it.

"And tell me, how am I supposed to accomplish that while you're taking deliberate steps to evade me?" he asked.

Irene seemed thrown out of her angry focus, and her brow creased.

"What are you talking about?" she snapped, contempt etched in every line of her body and in her face.

"Oh you're perfectly well aware," Mycroft said in a detached, level tone. "We were able to trace you from Sherlock's through most of the Underground system, but we lost you on the District Line and weren't able to pick you up again. And you know why."

Irene narrowed her eyes at him for a moment, then pursed her lips. "Look, I don't care what you think I know, or what you're talking about—it's irrelevant. There are far more important matters to discuss."

Her eyes dropped down to his nephew, and he thought he saw a frisson of true fear on her face. Suddenly he sensed that her disappearance from his surveillance might have been less straight-forward than he'd first concluded, and he felt his irritation shift into anxiety and greater alertness.

The woman named Kate moved behind Irene. "Do you want me to look after the baby?" she asked softly, but Mycroft noticed Irene's grip on the infant tighten.

"Miss Asquith can take the child and stay in my rooms at Whitehall, just several minutes away. He'll be perfectly safe, I assure you."

"Like you assured me that you would keep us both safe? My son isn't going anywhere."

Mycroft's brow creased, and he took a small step back to cast his eyes over her.

There was a dry but reflective clear residue on her figures and wrist. He took a discreet inhale. The scent suggested hairspray, but she wasn't wearing any hair products, and by the increased residue
pattern, she had pointed the stream away from her, at eye level. Her former assistant was wearing a product, but it was a mousse, not a spray. There was a mixture of fine and grainy grit on Ms Adler's knees and the same grit was embedded into scrapes along the tops of her shoes. Macadam, obviously. On the trousers of her assistant as well. His nephew's face was pale and his eyes large and reddened. He was still and silent, huddled into his mother's arms. Kate, her assistant, wore an almost identical look.

"Ms Adler, did you sabotage, or have someone acting on your behalf sabotage, several cameras in the CCTV system around Barons Court station, with the objective of obscuring from me your location this afternoon?"

It was immediately obvious from her reaction to that news that she had not. She took in the information with palpable shock, and her pallor blanched even further.

"No. And that means that they already knew where I was staying. This was premeditated...planned out..." The woman looked nauseated, and her eyes darted down at her child again. "Tell me the details."

"My technicians were monitoring your movements, while another team separately observed and logged malfunctioning cameras in that area. By the time someone put the two together, the damage had been done; we didn't have a precise street name or number for you. It's residential, so there are fewer cameras there—although if you decide to remain in that area, its status will be upgraded shortly," he said darkly.

As Irene seemed to let that information sink in, Mycroft went on. "Perhaps you didn't evade me today, but you certainly haven't been thorough in your disclosures."

"No," she said again, her voice steely now. "Kate, you may go, but I'm not letting Nero out of my sight again."

"I could stay," the taller woman murmured by Ms Adler's elbow, but she shook her head, not raising her eyes from her child.

"I don't think so, dear. Mr Holmes and I need to have a conversation."

Kate nodded and retreated through the door Mycroft's PA held open for her.

There was a protracted silence in the room as the doors swung shut behind the pair of women.

"'They,'" Mycroft quoted sharply, when the two of them were alone.

Irene was doing an admirable job at maintaining her imperious, composed appearance, but it was clear to Mycroft that the woman was still badly shaken. She didn't immediately answer, and made her way to a wingback chair in the sitting area of his office. Though she sat down with grace, there was a forced fluidity that wasn't usually present.

When she took a seat, Nero squirmed and made a squawking whine of frustration, and she leaned over to set him on the floor. He sat back against her legs for a moment and then started to tentatively crawl forward, craning his head to take in the office with wide, curious eyes.

Mycroft took the seat across from her, and folded his hands in his lap. They both watched the baby for a time, before he sighed and said, "Tell me what happened today."

Irene's watchful eyes didn't leave her son as she launched into a detailed account of the two cars she had seen pull up on either side of the mews, her escape attempt via the elderly neighbour's
house, the men's demand for Nero, her gambit with a canister of hairspray and a lighter, the chase through the rear walk, and Kate's role in getting Irene and Nero away.

He had formulated a number of follow-up questions as she'd spoken, but when she concluded his prevailing reaction at hearing the danger his nephew had been in was anger, and he couldn't help but hiss, "Well this is hardly unexpected. Tell me, what did you think would happen if you came back to London and then just larked off on your own?"

Irene gave one sharp, rejecting, shake of her head. "No. My return to London was precipitated by all of this, not vice-versa."

He looked her over, appraising. "You're maintaining your original story, then. That you really were in danger in the United States."

For the first time, Irene's expression shifted into something less strained, and she looked up and met his eyes.

"Yes, I was telling you the truth about that. But have I disclosed everything to you or been fully candid? No."

Mycroft leaned back, and he felt his frown deepen as he took in the woman across from him. Very, very few people could make such a statement and be taken seriously—perhaps only two in the world. She was one of them.

"I haven't returned to London simply because Nero and I need your protection here. Your protection is an advantage, yes, but not the driving motivation for why I contacted you, or why I've come back."

"But—" Mycroft gaped, feeling wrong-footed yet again with this woman. With one breath she was telling him the unremitting threat she had been facing, and with the next she claimed she wasn't in England for protection...? Even as one of the most astute, shrewd people in the world, Irene Adler's intentions were indecipherable to him.

"I wanted to get back into the country, but I couldn't do so without factoring in Mr Holmes, the elder."

"Well. Clearly you did accomplish that without my assistance," Mycroft said begrudgingly, and he thought once again of how he would have to convince the PM to find and allocate funding for facial recognition software at the borders.

"Without your assistance, yes, but even I can admit that it would have only been a matter of time before you discovered my presence here, and I didn't want to be sidetracked or interfered with in any way."

"Sidetracked from what? For what reason could you possibly want to return to England, if not to seek out my protection and financial support?"

Ms Adler raised her chin but remained obstinately silent, and he felt his temper waver dangerously close to lost again. He took a subtle but bracing breath through his nose.

"This is not just your life we are discussing here. If it were, I think we both know that the circumstances would be rather different right now. It involves my nephew and the likely only heir to my family name, and if I am going to permit you to walk and talk and machinate as a free woman on British soil, then you will tell me everything that I need to know."
Mycroft could tell that Irene was chafing under that and actively suppressing her desire to retort something along the lines of 'Or what?' and he knew they had already tread that territory to death. And she had him firmly out-manoeuvred.

He took a different tact. "Let's go back to the beginning, yes? What happened to make you suspect you're in danger?"

She eyed him for a moment, then answered, "It's rather a bit more than suspicion. Someone has been tracking me down for a year and a half and making attempts on my life. After an incident that happened several days ago in Edison, I knew that I couldn't run anymore. Nero doesn't deserve to pay the sins of his mother—whatever they may be in this case."

Mycroft exhaled a long sigh through his nose and steepled his fingers under his chin. "Why didn't you simply tell me the entire story from the beginning?"

"You have resources that are valuable to me, but I wanted to do this all on my terms, not yours. This is personal."

"You really couldn't have expected to carry something out like that without attracting my attention? Particularly when you have to know I'm already keeping an eye on you."

Speaking of keeping an eye on her, he was reminded of the unforeseen visit she had paid his brother that day, and a sudden thought occurred to him.

"You went to see Sherlock at his flat today. I know you didn't tell him about Nero - I'd certainly have heard about it - but are you planning on involving him in this? Precedent would dictate..."

"'Planning' on it? Not necessarily," she answered quietly.

Mycroft relaxed by a fraction, remembering the gamble he had taken by telling Sherlock that Irene was coercing protection out of him by blackmailing him with the information that Sherlock had helped save her life. He'd had the best of intentions, but he could see that if Sherlock now learned the truth, things could go very, very badly for all parties involved.

"But I was there to tell him about Nero."

Mycroft was momentarily rendered speechless by that declaration, then managed, "I regret to point this out, we had an arrangement."

"I regret to contradict you, Mycroft dear, but no, we didn't. I gave you my terms, and you accepted them."

Her tone changed, softened slightly. "I didn't want you to tell him. In part, I wanted to be able to come to London so that I could see Sherlock myself."

Mycroft's composure faltered a bit more. "You... You had planned for him to know? All along."

"Yes."

Stress and dismay coursed through him at hearing the affirmative.

"But you didn't," he said to her, to reassure himself just as much as to seek clarification.

"No," she said thoughtfully. "It seems you and I have one thing in common, and that's concern for Sherlock's current emotional well-being."
Mycroft scoffed at that, remembering how little concern she'd shown for that when they'd all previously gathered together, but didn't voice his thoughts. There was something much more compelling to say.

"Will you?" he asked.

"I," Irene started, then gave a small sigh, "don't know."

He was surprised by her evident candor, though unnerved by her indecision. She had given him the impression that she was firmly invested in keeping Sherlock in the dark about his fatherhood, or else Mycroft never would have made such a risky play himself.

He cast his mind about for a change of subject, and was gratified when he seized upon something at once.

"Do you have any evidence about who is after you, any plan on where to start?"

"No evidence, no, but there's only one person it could be."

"Only one?" Mycroft said archly. "To a person, every individual that you've made your enemy has the money and connections to hire men to go after you, and a valid motive to do so."

"Yes, which is why I told your brother that I wouldn't last for six months. But Sherlock and I managed to come up with a solution to that, didn't we? Just like you, they all believed that video. The only difference now is—they still do."

He stared at her for a moment, then gave a sharp shake of his head as her meaning became clear. "You cannot be referring to James Moriarty. I'd have thought you'd be aware of this, but Moriarty is dead."

"I read the account on John Watson's blog, yes, but I don't believe it. It has to be Jim."

"Why, because he was aware of the precedent of you falsifying your death—? Ah, no. At least, not just for that." Another realisation clicked into place, and Mycroft nodded curtly. "You believe that Moriarty was acquainted with the individuals comprising the LeT cell that captured you, and would've known that the men in Sherlock's video were imposters."

"Yes, he would've known that it was a fake at a second's glance. It was the one flaw in Sherlock's brilliant plan..."

She took a breath, then pinned Mycroft's eyes with her own in a suddenly intense stare.

"And that, Mr Holmes, is the central reason why I've come back to London: to turn the tables on the bastard. I don't care what that blog says about Moriarty's empire being dismantled, either—everything I've experienced contradicts that. And he wouldn't leave London; it's been the seat of his empire from its inception, and he cares too much about symbolism and symmetry to let that go. But more than that he's obstinate and proud, and wouldn't ever consent to be chased out or sent into hiding. So I had to come here to end it." Her face hardened with steely resolve, and it made a formidable sight. "And if I must, I will kill every single person who has been a threat to Nero."

Mycroft was somewhat startled to hear her state such objectives so frankly, though he supposed he shouldn't have been, and in principle he supported the idea. Still, she was suffering under more than one misapprehension.

"While I commend your intentions we need to examine alternative possibilities, because it has been
ended," he said. "Sherlock sacrificed his reputation and dedicated almost a year of his life to ensure that."

"You don't think Jim could preserve a consortium made up of his inner circle, and continue in a limited but still functional capacity?" Irene asked, her eyes angry and incredulous. "If so, then you dangerously underestimate him."

"I think he might have been capable of that, yes," Mycroft said, feeling weary to his bones. "Might have been. But Ms Adler, James Moriarty is dead. He placed a firearm in his mouth and pulled the trigger, in front of Sherlock."

"And Sherlock appeared to jump to his death in front of witnesses, as well. Jim is every bit as resourceful and clever, and far more—"

"My team recovered the body," Mycroft interrupted, his tone subdued and matter-of-fact, and he saw her face blanche in response.

"We did an autopsy, which I supervised myself. Cause of death was consistent with what Sherlock reported to me: a through-and-through gunshot wound to his brainstem, inflicted by the 9-millimetre bullet that was discharged by his Beretta. We've incinerated the body, so in this one case I'm fairly certain the decedent will actually stay dead."

She took in a wavering breath as she stared at him and digested the information, and for a moment her eyes shone. She finally believed him.

"I take it that it's not the news that Moriarty is dead, in and of itself, that is upsetting to you—"

Mycroft said after a moment, observing her closely.

"Of course not," Irene snapped. "But someone is after us, someone who knew that I was still alive, despite what the rest of the world believed. Including you."

She abruptly rose from her seat and walked several strides to face the large window that dominated one wall. The office was mirrored in the wide, dark glass panes, and he saw on her reflected face an expression full of frustration and anxiety.

"You were the standard we needed to meet," she said tightly. "If you believed it I knew I was safe. Not just from you, but from everyone else who wouldn't be nearly as perceptive or thorough as you. I thought I understood how Jim could be an exception to that, but if this isn't him, it means..." She sighed and faced him again, and he thought she had aged five years in those few seconds. "I have to reassess everything. If our exposure wasn't caused by the reason I've believed, then it could be for anything, and I could be made totally susceptible again. Except now it's not just me who's at risk, but Nero as well."

"Precisely because of Nero this is not the same situation," Mycroft cut in.

A silence fell between them, filled in only by some intermittent, soft babbling from Nero, who had pulled himself up to a standing position against Irene's vacated seat and was looking between the two of them.

"Today, in Barons Court. Can you describe your attackers?" Mycroft asked.

There was no use in wasting any time moving forward, and they had yet not touched on those details; when she'd recounted what had happened they had focused on the events themselves.

She crossed her arms and leaned her hip against the window ledge, although the creases between
and around her eyes didn't relax, nor did the tension in her shoulders ease.

"Two men, altogether different in class, resemblance, education background, and personal investment in the situation," she recounted. "Neither wearing masks, since I imagine they didn't intend to leave behind any witness. Or at least one who could describe them."

"Physical appearance?"

"The one who came in first is inconsequential. But the second one..." Irene hesitated, and Mycroft observed the hair on her arms rise into goose pimples. That in itself was telling; he knew from personal experience that Ms Adler was a woman almost impossible to faze.

"Before I noticed his appearance I was struck by the facts that he was posh, elegant, and very, very dangerous. That was clear at once. I remember thinking I'd never accept him as a client—not that he would ever want to be placed in any subservient role in that context. He would want to be the physically dominating one, only not just for play... He seemed spontaneous, impulsive. Looks-wise he was very tall, slim, dark blond hair—"

As Irene spoke Mycroft felt a plunging chill spread through him in icy tendrils, followed by the prickle of the hairs lifting on his own arms and at the back of his neck.

It could not be, and yet the man she was describing was painfully familiar to him.

"High forehead?" he asked, and his throat felt suddenly raw and constricted. "Long nose, blue eyes? Cleft chin, pronounced philtrum?"

She looked at him with recognition in her eyes, and nodded. "You know who he is. How? And who?" she demanded.

But Mycroft barely heard her over the audible onrush of blood in his ears, and instead of answering he reached behind himself to grasp the edge of his desk, and then slumped back heavily against it.

"Yes. I know who he is," he said hoarsely, as his mind spun with the effort of trying to reconcile two incompatible and yet equally credible realities.

"We will need to tell Sherlock. This could... change everything. Everything that he believes he's accomplished, everything that he sacrificed so much to achieve. In spite of the potential cost, he needs to understand the full picture. And that includes knowing about the child."

He looked up into her eyes, and he fleetingly wondered if the anguish he felt was broadcasted by his expression.

For her part, Irene looked uncharacteristically stunned by his dramatic reversal.

"To make matters worse, it appears I may have made a... miscalculation, based on the incomplete data previously available to me. I did it to protect Sherlock, but I fear I've complicated things even further, and I, I regret that."

The now piercing stare of Irene's eyes told him that she was anxious and impatient for further elaboration, but Nero chose that moment to hold out his arms and let out a series of hiccupping, breathy cries, which soon escalated into full-lunged wailing.

Mycroft watched her bend and gather him up, and he was immensely grateful for the diversion; he needed time to consider how to proceed with the bombshell news Irene had just shared. Yes, it was possible that she'd had a previous acquaintance with the man and that this was all some sort of
calculated manipulation, but damn it, he believed the woman.

She had no need of pulling his strings since he would already accommodate her in any way she asked, but there was also a deeper, more intuitive reason for his trust. Though he had never been able to predict or anticipate her intentions, neither was he burdened with the blindspot that Sherlock had for her, and he had little difficulty with reading her emotions. The fear that had flashed across her face as she'd looked down on her son had been entirely real.

---

Sherlock came abruptly awake just as the sun dipped below the geometric urban horizon of terraced buildings, and the shadows in his room were beginning to deepen. He returned to consciousness breathing hard, the warm and darkly enticing mood of the dream that woke him still curling in his belly.

The dim flat held a specific quality of silence and stillness that meant that John wasn't in, and Sherlock knew that he would be with Mary for the full night, if not several days. Sherlock was alone, and he wasn't sure if he were grateful for that, or if he wanted distraction given all that had happened.

Despite his recent shower, his hair still smelled of chlorine from his hard swim at the Parliament Hill lido. Nothing had turned up on John's blog, nor on either email account, and cold cases from the Bow Street Runners were simply not mentally stimulating or compelling enough to distract him from the fact that Irene Adler had reappeared in his flat that very morning. He had needed to channel his mental agitation into physical activity, and because of the exertion, he had actually managed to fall asleep for two hours or so. Unfortunately, in retrospect he realised that instead of ridding himself of any excess, errant thoughts he had only deferred them, and they had returned with a vengeance in the form of a very lucid, very sensuous dream.

He rolled over and blinked, then saw his mobile sitting on his bedside table. He threw out an arm to grab it and without any deliberation or hesitation, he hit the voicemail button. In that moment he wanted to hear The Woman's voice murmuring into his ear, wanted to blur the lines between the dream he'd just had and reality, wanted to hear what else she might have to say to him that hadn't been said that morning, particularly since it was so obvious that something - something important, he reckoned - had been left unsaid.

He accessed his saved messages and lifted the phone to his ear, and as he listened to the electronic voice narrate the date and time that the ensuing message had been left his heart began to pound hard in his chest.

Seconds later, any remaining sleepiness or lingering warmth from the dream were shocked from his body, and he was sitting fully upright on the edge of the bed, digging his fingers into the mattress as he listened to what was unfolding in the voicemail. His muscled had tensed and his pulse had skyrocketed, but for an entirely different reason than he might have expected.

There were two men, that was evident at once. He didn't recognise either voice and it was hard to discern their accents from the muffled, disjointed way they sounded in the recording, though one sounded somewhat Estuary while some vowels in the second one implied a Received Pronunciation accent. The poor quality of the audio suggested that they were positioned at least a metre away from her, but it was obvious that they were threatening her with a weapon, a gun. They wanted something from her, though they never referred to it by name. But before he could discover whether they had moved in closer, or if she had given them what the first man had demanded, or if (he forced himself to complete the thought) she had been shot, the call cut off with a small beep. His lips pulled away from his teeth in a grimace and he frantically looked down, only to realise with a glance that after three minutes his answerphone had automatically stopped recording.
He shoved off the bed and while he punched in the number he had memorised earlier that afternoon he began to pace, strange panic gripping his chest. It didn't even ring on the other end, it went straight to a generic pre-loaded greeting. He tried again, knowing he would get the same result, and as he listened, he pushed his free hand through his hair and then tugged on the ends.

He sat down hard on the edge of his bed again, and stared wide-eyed at his phone, his heart thudding fast and hard against his ribs, the adrenaline making him feel nauseated.

Since the recording had been made hours ago, there was no immediate course of action he could take, and his absolute impotency in the situation was unbearable. Worse, he had no way of knowing how the confrontation had ended—in that moment was Irene alive, or was she dead?

He let out a deep groan, and his fist tightened around his phone.

He had warned her: she was not to return to England, let alone London. The last time they had spoken before they'd parted, he had stressed that that was of the utmost importance.

Of course she hadn't listened to him, hadn't played it safe, and the thought filled him with anger, frustration, and visceral fear for her.

Even though he was conflicted in his sentiments for her - sentiments which were further complicated by the fact that she was blackmailing his brother about Sherlock saving her life - he still acknowledged that the actual loss of Irene Adler would be devastating. She had surpassed in his regard every person he knew and had ever known with the exception of John, who was in an altogether different, though equally needed and valued, category.

For several days twenty months before he had allowed himself to be vulnerable to her, and intimate with her, and they had achieved a quality of closeness that he had never experienced before. It had been terrifying and rewarding in equal measures, and it had permanently changed him. She had permanently changed him. Since that time he could comprehend emotions and their consequences with far greater acuity, had developed a more sophisticated interpretation of the politics of human interactions, and saw value and meaning in things that he'd have previously dismissed—perhaps because he hadn't truly understood them. She had enhanced him in every way that mattered to him, as well as in a number ways that he hadn't realised could ever matter to him until he had met her.

That morning he had attempted to deny her a place in his future, but the fact was that in very real terms that was futile; she was as inherent to his future as she was a part of his past, because she was an inherent and permanent aspect of his self—the fact that he could never delete her from his mind palace proved that. Even if she were killed that would hold true, but it was intolerable to consider that that might now be the full extent of it...

He gave another low, agonised groan and squeezed his eyes shut; he couldn't tumble down that path now. He needed to focus on the message that she had left him, and determine if there were anything about it that was even the slightest bit actionable. Background noise, her word usage, the pitch of the voices, anything.

Think. Think! he commanded to himself. Something had compelled Irene to come back to London, something that she had opted not to disclose to him that morning. Something that—

His eyes flew open.

Something that Mycroft did likely know about, in the statistically probable event that the attack were linked to her blackmail plan.
He staggered back onto his feet and strode over to his wardrobe. With one hand he pulled out a suit as he dialed his brother's number with the other.

"Mycroft, was this you?" he snarled the moment the call connected, not waiting for Mycroft to speak.

There was a brief pause, then, "Ah. Are you referring to the threat to Ms Adler afternoon?"

Sherlock was taken aback at hearing Mycroft refer to it so directly, but recovered just enough to manage, "So it was you. I hope you've found that possessing whatever it is she had against you is enough to make the blackmail go away, but since it's Irene Adler we're discussing, I rather doubt it. Unless you...really did finish the job this time."

Something masochistic within him made him speak the words, and they didn't come out sounding as wry or offhanded as he'd have preferred. There was a desperate edge to his voice that he knew Mycroft would detect in an instant.

"Sherlock, you have my word as your brother that I had nothing to do with that. But I'm sending a car over to you now, because—"

Sherlock made a snarl of frustration over Mycroft's words then cut in, "If it wasn't you, then I can't waste any time—"

"I said I wasn't behind it, not that I can't... shed some light on it."

Sherlock paused, suspicious and breathing hard. "You know why she was attacked—what they wanted."

"Yes. Come to my office and we'll discuss it. The car will be there in five minutes."

"Tell me now," Sherlock said in his set and determined way that meant that he saw no room for discussion, but his brother only sighed.

"Five minutes, Sherlock. This is a matter that needs to be discussed..." Sherlock heard Mycroft hesitate as if trying to find the right words, before he concluded, "in person."

Irene had just finished feeding Nero and settling him into a fitful sleep in a cot that Mycroft had managed to procure as if from thin air, when she heard the outer doors burst open and a very familiar voice demand, "All right Mycroft, it's been precisely nineteen minutes by this point and I —"

A swooping sensation rolled through Irene's abdomen, and with one final glance over the baby she stood and stepped out of the anteroom.

"Sherlock," she said, and he stopped mid-sentence, his mouth remaining slightly ajar.

For a brief moment his eyes sparked with all the warmth and passion she remembered, and he took several automatic steps towards her. But then something - something that looked incongruously like hurt - shuttered in him, his mouth snapped closed, and his face set like cement.

He straightened to his full height, a defense mechanism she had come to recognise, and nodded curtly, faint colour seeping into his cheeks.

"Ah. You're fine, I see."
She studied him for a moment, then said, "Yes. Did Mycroft tell you about what happened this afternoon—?"

"No, I contacted him. After I got your message," Sherlock said, his voice sounding even lower and flatter than usual. "But you really needn't have gone to all the trouble."

"Message?" she asked. "Voicemail," she added, as understanding slotted into place. In the confusion and intensity of those moments, she had never actually rung off when she had phoned Sherlock, and so his answerphone must have recorded the exchange.

The realisation filled her with a sense of gratified triumph; perhaps Mycroft hadn't been able to record any of the attack on CCTV, but she was no longer empty-handed of concrete, viable evidence.

Sherlock gave a tight, ironic smile, and then turned on his heel and began to move towards the door, and her grim satisfaction turned into uncertainty, as she was struck by the second part of what he'd said.

"Sherlock," she called, and she took an unintentional step of her own towards him.

She struggled to recall if Nero had been crying at any time during the confrontation but that particular detail remained stubbornly fuzzy, and so she wasn't sure whether Sherlock's now rigid posture had to do with his full comprehension of the situation, or if there were another reason for it. Mycroft had said that he knew she hadn't informed him of Nero that morning, so he was confident that Sherlock still didn't know, but Irene knew all too well how skilled Sherlock was at subverting and repressing things that he found too emotionally overwhelming.

He did stop and turn back, but he didn't look towards her, keeping his gaze fixed on a point on the far wall behind her.

"If you heard it, then you can confirm what I've been telling your brother: I'm not safe."

Sherlock let out a soft, cynical huff. "What, from 'killers'," he asked rhetorically. She looked back at him, but the mask of his expression didn't soften.

"It doesn't prove anything," he continued. "Yes, I heard a bit of shouting, but you can't expect for us to accept that on faith. It's not as though creating what appears to be a dangerous or deadly situation to manipulate someone would be something new for you." He scrunched his nose sarcastically. "And since it's all out in the open now, you'll recall that we were even in on it together last time."

Irene's chin lifted as it became to clear to her: this wasn't about Sherlock learning about Nero, but about old, and apparently unresolved, history.

"You did believe it, your presence here proves that. It's clear that you wanted your brother's help finding out about what happened with me."

"Yes, and your presence here says rather a lot as well. Except I wouldn't categorise what you're getting from my brother as 'help.' 'Help' implies something that is freely given, not coerced."

Irene stared levelly back at Sherlock, but her mind began to race, and she wondered if Mycroft had said anything to Sherlock after she'd left his flat, or whether Sherlock were making assumptions.

Sherlock turned to his brother. "Did you see anything?"
"Unfortunately, no," Mycroft said, his tone subdued. "We experienced a bit of difficulty in tracking Ms Adler from 221B—there was some critical CCTV failure due to sabotage—but just when we had determined her proximate location, she appeared here, safe."

Sherlock made a face that clearly said he doubted whether Irene had ever been in danger in the first place, but he asked briskly, "Do you have footage of the person who sabotaged the cameras, or was it a remote firmware hack?"

"Remote—their memories were dumped without any credentials, by either exploiting this particular brand of camera's directory-traversal vulnerability, or through a brute-force login attack. We haven't determined that yet."

Sherlock opened his mouth, no doubt to make recommendations on how to proceed, but Mycroft continued over him.

"I have my people working on it, Sherlock. But pertaining to the immediate matter at hand, we do have a witness who seems quite affected. And there's the other, more... alarming matter—"

"Who's the witness?" Sherlock asked sharply.

"A woman by the name of Kathleen Asquith."

"Kathleen..." His eyes widened with the connection, then narrowed again. "Or Kate for short? Oh yes, I remember Kate." He gave a short, humourless laugh and said with heavy sarcasm, "That's credible. I met her for all of ten seconds and yet it would've obvious in five that she'd do anything Ms Adler asked of her." He turned towards Irene, his movement sharp, precise, and economical. "Very devoted, isn't she?" he breathed, his voice low and intense.

"That's fair to say."

"And tell me, was she or was she not complicit when you faked your death the Christmas before last? I'd say 'the first time,' but I hardly know that to be true."

"She wasn't, but she did know. I trust her implicitly."

Sherlock scoffed, but didn't say anything, and Irene felt her frustration and hurt ratchet up a notch, though she kept them tightly locked beneath an unfazed, cool exterior.

"I have no reason to be lying."

Sherlock's complacent expression faltered and his eyes flashed. He stepped closer still, so that he towered over her. "You have every reason to be lying."

Without looking away Irene said, "Mr Holmes, please inform your brother that you'd already offered me asylum, and that feigning any danger at this point would've been a pointless waste of effort."

Mycroft sighed heavily through his nose in acknowledgement, but Sherlock didn't move his eyes from Irene's either. His dark gaze drilled down into hers, and there was something about the intensity that churned in those depths that made her wonder what would happen if she tugged his face down to hers and kissed him - here, now. She wouldn't, she was more affected by his apparently righteous anger towards her than she cared to acknowledge, but she was powerfully reminded of the times when the edge to his gaze had been desire, not this fury that she didn't really understand.
"Feel free to talk to Kate, then," she said, hardening her tone to compensate for the emotional vulnerability she was beginning to resent that she still felt. "Since you still can't seem to read me, perhaps you'll take her word on it."

A slight sneer twisted Sherlock's features, but before he could retort Mycroft said, "Miss Asquith is being questioned by some of my best interrogators now, and shortly before you arrived I had word from my PA. So far she does seem quite sincere. Apparently there are no signs of deception, and plenty of indicators of distress. But the more pressing issue we face is—"

But before Mycroft could go on, Irene's emotions finally boiled to the surface and broke through her composed exterior, and she whipped her head around to stare at Mycroft with disbelief. "You're having Kate detained for questioning? Had you planned to do that from the start?"

"Of course," Mycroft said placidly. "I wouldn't expect naïveté from you of all people, Ms Adler. I am just as anxious for answers as I imagine you are."

Irene shook her head angrily over his words. "That's beside the point—you wanted Nero go with her," she exploded, her outrage causing the words to fly out of her mouth before she could properly consider them. And though Mycroft began to respond, Sherlock cut him off.

Looking between the two of them with narrowed eyes, he asked sharply, "'Nero,' who's 'Nero'?"
There was a heavy, very tense silence in the room following his question, and Sherlock huffed in impatience. "What, is he yet another unreliable witness?"

The strange hush stretched on for another moment, until Irene murmured cryptically, "Well, technically, yes."

At that, Mycroft gave one of the weariest sighs Sherlock had ever heard from him, and he looked over to see his brother slumped back against his desk, his hand spanned across his eyes. It was a reaction with which Sherlock was quite familiar, but it was usually he who provoked it. In this case though, he had the impression that there was something else at play, something just beyond his comprehension.

Suddenly he felt wary and uncertain, as though he were looking at the scene through a miscalibrated stereoscope so that what he perceived, and the truth, were almost but not quite in sync, distorting both.

"Who's - Nero," he repeated in a growl, and he saw Mycroft lift his head and look towards Irene. His expression was a blend of resignation, wariness, and dismay, and it caused Sherlock's brow to crease in confusion. His vague uneasiness intensified, and he turned in her direction as well, his eyes demanding an explanation.

Irene took in a quiet breath through her nose and squared her shoulders, then looked him in straight the eye. "Nero is my son."

In his peripheral vision Sherlock caught the movement of Mycroft lifting his head, but he was almost entirely focused on what she had said. The individual words made sense but when strung together their meaning became nonsensical and absurd.

"I'm-sorry?" he asked after a beat of more echoing silence, though it was a delay tactic so that he could attempt to process her statement.

"You don't have a son," he went on, trying to recover some composure by asserting known facts. "You don't have any children, you've never... given birth..." But as he spoke, his eyes travelled down her body almost of their own volition, and his words died in his throat.

She still had on the under-layers of her disguise as a homeless youth, but now that she no longer wore any of the bulky outerwear and he wasn't so preoccupied with the fact that he had discovered her alive and well, the changes were clear. They were subtle, but more than obvious enough to him —especially in contrast to how he had last seen her. The images of her body on that day and those that preceded it were vividly, permanently etched in his mind.

He stared, momentarily speechless from shock, and she took the chance to speak.

"So you see, Mycroft isn't just protecting me, he's protecting my child as well."

With difficulty, he forced himself to set aside her revelation and ignore the way it radically jarred with everything he knew about her.
"Because you're blackmailing him," he replied. "Don't play coy. The fact that you have a child now means nothing; it doesn't somehow validate your actions. And it obviously hasn't changed you in any way."

Irene studied Sherlock for a moment before she turned to his elder brother.

"So that was your explanation to Sherlock for how I could be in the country, that I was blackmailing you?" she asked.

"Well. In my defence you did threaten," Mycroft said with a faint and humourless smile. "But as I said - I miscalculated. It's a peculiarity that only..." But Mycroft stopped there, seeming to censor himself.

This exchange did nothing to elucidate matters and only confused everything further, which was infuriating. Irene was implying that Mycroft had lied about the blackmail - that she hadn't actually done such a thing - and moreover Mycroft was admitting as much in response?

"What the hell is going on?" Sherlock demanded at a near-shout, and he was almost as irritated that he was reduced to asking overt questions as he was by the fact that Mycroft and Irene were mutually withholding information from him. "You wouldn't suddenly accept Irene as some charity case just because she became a mother, that isn't you. So if it isn't blackmail, what is it?" He turned and looked Irene in the eye, though he still directed his words towards his brother. "Irene Adler would hardly risk coming to you unless she had significant leverage, not just a change in parental status. So what could be so special about..."

"Oh God," Sherlock heard his brother sigh under his breath, and when he looked over Mycroft appeared to be struggling not to say more. Still, something about his body language reminded Sherlock of when Mycroft had met him onboard Flyaway Airline Flight 007, and had pointed out all the ways in which he, Sherlock, had been played by Irene Adler. Sherlock turned his head back towards Irene, and her gaze on his was strangely intense and expectant.

"...about..."

And then something that had been elusive and literally unthinkable clicked into place—something that would have been obvious to him in an instant if he were in his usual position of being an uninvolved and impartial outsider.

"No," he said, and at first he sounded calm and dismissive. In that initial moment he was; he didn't actually believe the notion that had sprung to mind.

He waited for them to deny it, to rush to assure him that what he was obviously thinking wasn't true. They didn't, they just watched him.

"I—" he started, and now his voice sounded distant and tinny in his ears, then he repeated, "No." He struggled to sound assertive, but the magnitude of his realisation was starting to crash down on him.

His thoughts began to tune out like a station being turned to static on an analogue radio, save for the repetition of notpossiblenotpossiblenotpossiblenotpossible. No. No. Nonono that pounded through his mind like a desperate incantation. IUD - impossible - no—

"Yes," Irene said, her voice sounding just as muted in his ears as his own had. She gave a firm nod, though he distractedly noticed her swallow a moment later.

He remained still, but with that single word of confirmation every emotion The Woman had ever
evoked in him seemed to knock into him at once, seizing the breath in his lungs.

He sensed synapses attempting to connect in order to come up with something, anything, which could controvert such an implication, but his mind was drawing a blank. It stuttered on his repeated denials and could not proceed in any functional way, and that loss of mental control triggered a second wave of panic. As he blinked rapidly, his previously acute vision went wavy, and then blurred entirely, except for a clear pinpoint that centred on Irene's face. His eyes locked on hers, and fingers of cold spread from the top of his head downward, draining the blood from his face and settling it in his stomach like a weight. A rush of heat that engulfed him and made him feel faint followed, and caused his hearing to go a muted high-pitched hum. He swallowed once, and then again, but somehow he managed to remain upright, his knees locked.

Only seconds had passed since he had made the connection and stopped breathing, but still his lungs cramped and burned from the lack of oxygen. He drew in one deep inhale, and then held it to staunch against the low moan that he could feel building in his chest.

He looked between the two of them, both watching him with varying degrees of concern, and then without another word he turned away and strode towards the exit, his normally graceful gait ungainly.

He heard his brother call his name once, but he ignored him and pushed through the doors. He bypassed the lift and took the stairs, taking the steps down in the rapid, syncopated rhythm of his pulse.

He was too keyed up for the tube or a cab and so he headed towards Baker Street on foot, his breathing now heavy and threatening towards hyperventilation. His heightened agitation continued to give speed to his pace so that when he arrived on his street he felt that barely any time had passed, and he couldn't even recall any of the walk that had got him there. His mind was still a white blank of horror and shock, and his body buzzed from the constant flow of adrenaline. Instead of stopping at his flat he strode past his door and cut through the darkened park, and then took a flight of stairs down to Regents Canal.

In the very small portion of his mind that was still aware he was expecting his phone to ring, but it remained silent. He did manage to notice that a black car had followed him along his route home and then to the canal, and that some armed heavy in a black suit began trailing ten metres behind him along the pedestrian walkway. One of Mycroft's agents, obviously sent to make sure he didn't do anything excessively stupid in the aftermath of the news.

Outrage simmered atop all the other coursing emotions. Mycroft couldn't even allow him this one bit of time or privacy? He had to manipulate or micromanage every aspect of Sherlock's life, including something as personal and incendiary as this?

The fact that Mycroft had even known about the child before Sherlock had, that he was involved in this in any capacity whatsoever—something of the utmost private nature between him and Irene—was intolerable. Not only was it none of his business on principle, but Sherlock also had to admit that Mycroft's knowledge of his and Irene's physical involvement provoked in him severe discomfort, and not a small measure of mortification.

*But whose fault is it that he knows,* he thought with a flash of painful bitterness towards Irene.

And yet it was Mycroft who had apparently lied to him, Mycroft who had tried to engineer it so that Sherlock would stay away from Irene, obviously so that he couldn't realise the truth. And it was clear that Irene hadn't known that Mycroft had done that, nor had she been pleased with it. What did *that* mean?
His temporarily impaired brain tried to puzzle through that for several moments but he gave up with a rough, exasperated growl. On an impulse he pulled out his mobile and hit the messaging app, then typed, *John come to Baker St at once. It's a 10. SH.*

But before he tapped send he hesitated, then hit backspace until the message cleared. He stared at his phone, his heartbeat loud against his eardrums. Though his first inclination was to tell his best friend everything - absolutely everything - he wasn't even close to prepared to utter the actual words aloud. It would wreck all of his carefully constructed compartmentalisations where Irene was concerned and incorporate all of this into his 'real' life, and it was still far too fresh and raw.

Seething, Sherlock whirled around, sublimating some of his aggravation onto Mycroft's man. "You!" he roared. "Piss off, I'm not going to drown myself in the canal. Although the idea of tossing you in is getting more and more appealing."

The man didn't pause to maintain his distance after Sherlock stopped in place, but he did slow his pace into a saunter. "Good to know Mr Holmes, but I'm not here for that," he said, his voice calm but carrying across the air between them. "Your brother has assigned me as your protective detail."

Sherlock made an incredulous, contemptful sound in his throat. "What? That's absurd, I don't need a bodyguard."

The man stared levelly back at Sherlock, saying nothing, and Sherlock gritted his teeth and spun back around to stalk down the path, and did his best to ignore his shadow. That was all too easy to do when he was struck again by the information that had just blindsided him, which came thundering back to him just as potent as it had been the first time.

It was more than a shift in paradigm; it was a violent fracturing of fault-lines and a clash of tectonic plates, resulting in the obliteration of his old world and the creation of something new, unknown, and alien. He sensed with a numb horror everything he had rebuilt collapsing and crumbling away again like chalk, and the future, so comfortably assured before the night that Mycroft had visited him and brought up Irene, was now a void of uncertainty and insecurity.

Because he was William Sherlock Scott Holmes: consulting detective/proficient chemist/competent violinist/adequate fighter/even a friend. But what he was *not* was a... He could never *be* a...

He squeezed his eyes shut with a flinch.

He knew that news like this would be shocking to any man, but that at least the concept of fatherhood was something many men his age had seriously contemplated at least once at one point or another. It might've been prompted by times when they hadn't used protection or by the odd pregnancy scare when they were young, or being in a committed romantic relationship. But for Sherlock, such experiences and the subsequent thoughts on them had never been part of the rubric of his life, and so fatherhood even as a concept was completely foreign to him.

It wasn't even as if he had considered it and then dismissed it as incompatible with his lifestyle or interests, it had been so abstract that it had never even touched his radar; it had been the epitome of a nonstarter. Sexual relationships, family, a desire for a 'normal' life, concerns with being a role model - really anything that might facilitate or relate to parenthood - were all emphatically the domain of Other People.

That something so mundanely tawdry should happen to *him* was unthinkable and he had no coping methods in place, had no protocol to follow. He had been completely blindsided, and for someone who could anticipate almost everything, being taken so unawares exacerbated the shock even further. The entire situation was inconceivable, and was the worst, most hyperbolic proof of that
sentiment was dangerous.

He made an unconscious grimace at his choice of word. Apparently it was 'conceivable'. Wasn't that was the entire problem?

There had only been one exception to his obliviousness to sex and its consequences as they pertained to himself, with Irene, as per course. He had asked her about contraception when they had become physically involved—although admittedly even then the thought had only struck him after they'd already slept together several times.

But she had assured him that she had an IUD, and once he had accepted it, the conversation had quickly shifted into something far more prurient in nature. He both mentally and physically winced at that now; he'd been so naïve, so desperate for a reason to move past those concerns so that he could be with her again.

Given what she had told him, the conception was either an accident - albeit one with staggeringly long odds - or she had been lying about having an IUD... Which would mean that the entire time they had spent together had been in service of this endgame.

He had been leery at the time; part of him had suspected that she'd continued to act interested in him, even after his provision of an alias and access to funds, out of some additional scheme. Like his own mind hers stagnated at inactivity, and he found it not just plausible but likely that she had assessed the situation and was subsequently manipulating it (and moreover him) to serve some further purpose. Initially that had been easier for him to believe than that she could want to spend time with him out of genuine personal sentiments.

She had talked him out of that. She had been so perceptive in understanding what he was feeling, and so methodical and persuasive in convincing him that he was mistaken about her and her motives. Really, just like the discussion about birth control, he had been looking for a rational reason to justify giving in to how much he'd wanted her, and she had given it to him.

He groaned and brought his clenched fists up to his eyes, then pressed them flat so the heels of his palms dug in. No, he could not go down that rabbit hole now. Because really, did it matter how it had happened? The end result was the same...

His first reaction had been denial, and it was still the strongest impulse. No matter what Irene said, no matter that she had somehow persuaded Mycroft into believing it—it could not be true. Scientifically he knew that conception could occur in any given sexual encounter, if the man ejaculated and the woman were ovulating. Psychologically, however, it was much more difficult to accept that out of such a brief period of sexual activity in a lifetime of abstinence, such a thing could happen to him.

But some rational portion of his mind, still somehow coherent although sounding like a distant and external voice, interjected. He had seen the evidence for himself that she had borne a child. Her breasts were larger and a centimetre or two lower, implying that she was breastfeeding, and the curve of her lower belly was slightly rounder while her upper thighs had gained several grams of weight. With the exception of times he had been drugged, with or against his consent, he had always been able to rely on what his senses reported to him and how his brain interpreted that data. Unfortunately, he was all too sober and lucid now, despite the feeling that he was underwater, and drowning for it.

But just because she had given birth, he countered a bit desperately, that didn't necessarily prove he was the... prove his paternity, he finished, still avoiding even thinking of the word 'father'. He didn't know the child's age—hadn't gotten even close in those moments to consider asking—and so
he didn't know when the conception took place.

His rational mind, cruel now in its exactitude, was ready with the answer to that.

Surely Mycroft did know, and he would've automatically done the math and understood time of conception. In an instant he would've grasped the entirety of what had happened in those four days they had shared after Karachi.

It was obvious that Mycroft believed her without reservation, because Sherlock was correct about one thing—his brother wouldn't suddenly accommodate Irene Adler because she had become a mother. He might show some measure of leniency, but that would just entail handing the child over to Social Services and imprisoning her under an alias.

Instead, Sherlock had found her cosied away in the anteroom of Mycroft's office, which had told Sherlock everything he needed to know about their present dynamic: Irene held all the power. How? Her usual method, naturally: by discerning and exploiting someone's weakness or predilections, which in Mycroft's case was family and oblige. And for her strategy to succeed, Mycroft would have to believe with one-hundred-percent certainty that the child was his nephew. Try as he might, Sherlock could not imagine him being fooled on that critical (understatement) a matter.

Which was all to say that denial was useless; he was the paternal donor.

Sherlock was overcome by a wave of light-headedness, and he stopped in his tracks and bent over to brace his hands on his knees, his breathing coming out in loud and harsh pants. He felt overwhelmed, and angry, and absolutely, fundamentally unequipped and inadequate in the face of this news. That sense of shortcoming chafed in and of itself, and it unleashed an additional flood of resentment and anger.

Why now? it occurred to him as he tried to concentrate on slowing his breathing and focusing on the pebbled asphalt of the path. Basalt, dolerite, limestone, quartz—But it was futile, his thoughts were too compelling to be diverted by such trivia. Why, when the child had to be around 11 months, give or take a few weeks depending on the precise length of Irene's gestational period?

The idea that he'd had a son out in the world for almost a year blazed like a solar flare in his mind for a moment, short-circuiting everything else and causing him to lean even harder against his knees.

The child would've been born around one month before Sherlock had come out of hiding, right when he had been involved with the most intense stage of his mission. He remembered that time all too well, and it was almost impossible for him to comprehend the fact that while he had been dealing the final death-blows to Moriarty's syndicate, Irene had been giving birth.

Then he recalled the postcard that had arrived shortly after his return to London, and to 'life' himself, and he straightened up with sudden realisation.

Had that been an overture from her to gauge how he felt towards her? If he'd responded rather than protecting himself against that particular brand of emotional turmoil - since he was already coping with all the difficulties of readjustment to life in London - would he have found out then? He suspected yes, and in a sense he was grateful that he'd had that reprieve because he didn't know if he would have been able to handle the news at that time. Though really, he wasn't any more equipped to deal with it at the present.

He exited the park and crossed the Outer Circle, and when he turned onto his street it only took
him a step before he noticed another government issue sedan parked in front of his flat, and his teeth and hands clenched instinctively at the thought that Mycroft might be waiting for him within. Several moments later he passed by the car and gave a brief two fingered wave to the men sitting up front, then unlocked his door and stepped in. There was some ambient light filtering down the stairs but he had left his bedroom light on in his haste to leave, so it didn't necessarily mean he had an unwanted guest.

When he reached the top landing he stopped just inside the door to the living room, frozen except for his eyes, which scanned the room. After a moment he marginally relaxed and let out the long breath he hadn't realised he was holding; as far as he could tell the flat was still quiet and dark. Finally he was alone, and could think, as opposed to contend with the unsolicited presence of either his brother—or worse, Irene.

The instant he thought of The Woman another dizzying course of adrenaline shot through his body, undoing any measure of respite brought by the empty flat. All at once, dozens of things he might say to her if she were there surged in his mind, and he shrugged off his coat and began pacing back and forth across the length of the living room. Line after line played out in his head, each of which was caustic, accusatory, defensive, and irate in turn. He imagined all the various defences or excuses she could devise, and then formulated how he would respond, how he would refute them, how he would invalidate them. It was similar to when he used to have imagined conversations with her when he had been abroad, but whereas those had been sources of comfort and consolation, these only made him increasingly more agitated.

After several minutes he could no longer contain all the comments that clamoured in his mind, and he dug into his pocket for his phone.

He went to messages, hit 'compose,' and then his fingers flew across the screen, typing, Do not contact me. I don't consent to be a part of this. SH

His eyes skimmed over the text, and his mouth pulled down into a frown. That sounded too emotionally compromised, and was telling petulant.

He hit delete, then started again. Mycroft will see to your child. Do not contact me except through him and only in the case of an emergency. SH

I do not wish for us to have any further contact. SH

This doesn't change anything. SH

This changes nothing. SH

Wrong. This changes everything, he thought, and fear, anger, and helplessness swelled in him again. Everything.

After tossing his phone aside without sending anything at all he sank into his chair, drew up his knees, and wrapped his arms around his folded legs.
He dropped his forehead against the tops of his knees and closed his eyes with a low, shaky sigh, and it was a very long time before he moved again.

Chapter End Notes

I made a photoset to illustrate the beginning of this chapter! http://francesca-wayland.tumblr.com/post/69228421715/heres-a-little-photoset-to-go-with-the-next
Sherlock was roused to awareness when his phone buzzed from its place on the arm of his chair, and he cracked open his eyes to look down at the message with apprehension. Some of the tension leached from his shoulders when he saw that the text hadn't come from Mycroft or Irene Adler, but from John.

All right? Going to stay here tonight too, text me if anything comes up.

Tonight 'too'? Sherlock looked up, and he had to blink against the brightness of the room. Judging by the length of the shadows beginning to inch up the east-facing wall that separated the living room from the kitchen it was roughly half eleven in the morning. Of the next day.

His face pulled into a reflexive scowl when he realised that once again he had lost entire spans of time in concession to Irene Adler, and that this occasion had been just as unproductive as the last.

But then, what objectives could he set? What actions could he take? He had been forced into a passive role in this situation, merely reacting *ex post facto* to events that had already occurred and were therefore beyond of the reach of his control or influence. For a man who was driven by what some might term 'radical' self-determination, that sense of powerlessness was unbearable. He remembered his long-ago glee at her audacious subversion of the power dynamic with the most powerful family in Britain, and his approving remark, "that *is* a dominatrix." But when he experienced such treatment himself, it was far less and far from amusing. He still recognised her singular brilliance and daring, of course, and they still gave him a unique thrill, but he couldn't find much delight in a scheme that was both predicated upon him being a fool, and rendered him even more of one.

He swallowed, then remembered John's text message, which had been the impetus for his entire (*loathsome*) train of thought. He typed and sent off the word *Fine*, and then noticed a series of earlier notifications that told him that his brother had been attempting to contact him all morning. His jaw tensed and he shut off his phone's screen, then wrapped his arm back around himself.

He couldn't face anyone right now; certainly not Mycroft, and not even John. Perhaps especially not John, too, though for an altogether different reason. In fact, it was a palpable relief that he wouldn't be home yet, and Sherlock could have a temporary reprieve. John was still blissfully ignorant of how everything had changed, and still operating as if the world were the same one it had been the day before. He didn't know that in fact it had tilted on its axis and that Sherlock was sliding off into an abyss of the unknown.

For the timebeing, John was still a lifeline to Sherlock's 'real' life—or at least the one that he wanted and understood—as well as to the man Sherlock considered himself to be. He knew that the news would forever alter the way John perceived him, and he wasn't ready for that loss, particularly since he had expended real effort to regain John's trust and confidence after a tense period upon Sherlock's return, when he had made erroneous assumptions about how much John's relief would overshadow his anger at being deceived. Just when they had achieved a level of comfort and trust with one another that not only matched but exceeded what they'd previously shared, and when they had learned how to balance John's personal obligations with the work, Sherlock would introduce yet another crisis, this one with perhaps subtler yet more long-term consequences.
As he had realised the previous night, when John found out, everything would become real in a way that it hadn't yet done, and Sherlock knew that that would be when the full weight and implication of the situation struck him. The two parts of his life that he thought he would always keep mutually exclusive would merge, and there would be no going back.

And John, after he recovered from his initial shock—which he would set aside for Sherlock's sake—would be understanding, and supportive, and come up with all sorts of helpful and thoughtful suggestions, and it would be hateful. Because he would have a certain look in his eye as he glanced at Sherlock that had never been there before. Sherlock wasn't certain what it would look like, what elements of emotion would present (pity? concern? uncertainty? wariness?), but he knew that he would see it, and he knew that he would recognise it the instant he did.

He sensed the panic he'd felt the night before rising again, and his breath hitched.

No, he couldn't tell John about this yet, and he questioned whether he ever could—or, in fact, even needed to...

He straightened with an upward jerk as he contemplated that possibility. After all, he had expertly compartmentalised everything he had experienced with Irene until this point, why should this development be any different? It wasn't as if he would act as a parent to the child, and so why, really, should he have to tell John, and forever alter his view of Sherlock and the lifestyle that benefitted both of them? Why should he pay twice over for one mistake? The regret and complex ambiguity of emotions he was experiencing constituted a high enough price to be going on with.

With a noise of frustration he ejected himself from his chair and padded across the room to his violin case. He unlatched the clasps, pulled back the top lid, and contemplated the gleaming, well cared-for instrument inside for a long moment. This, at least, was a constant, this he knew. He also recognised how it could focus and quiet his mind and, if he wished, create for him an approximation of the oblivion that he once found in a certain cocktail of drugs.

He rifled haphazardly through his books of sheet music but nothing appealed to him, nothing seemed like it could begin to capture or express his mood, and so with a scowl he threw them all aside. They scattered to the floor, pages bent and askew.

He lifted the violin out of its case to his shoulder, poised the bow, and after some tuning, he began to improvise. It started off with a similar chord progression as a Mahler piece he had once learned, though with different and rather more erratic phrasing, and as he continued to play he abandoned almost all internal logic and symmetry, until it grew agitated-sounding and expressionist, almost to the point of resembling a violin adaptation of Schoenberg's *Das Buch der Hänenden Gärten*. The parallel wasn't only in composition, but in the raw and emotional tone it communicated as well.

The more frenetic and chaotic the piece became, the more the taut line of his body slackened, though his face remained intent with concentration as he felt his mind connect and merge with the music. The violent, atonal notes poured from him as if drawing infection from a wound, and though the process was painful, it was also somewhat cathartic.

The sound of a soft creak of floorboards and a faint sigh broke into the mental haven of the music, and in an instant he lost any sense of consolation that playing had brought him. He stiffened and turned at the waist towards his left, where the sight of his brother leaning against the doorjamb met him. With a discordant screech he stopped playing, and he stared at the other man, too outraged to speak.

When he saw he that had gained Sherlock's attention, Mycroft said, "Well. Regardless of my personal opinion of modernist composition, you're in a far better state that I thought I could"
Sherlock clamped his hands around his bow and the neck of the violin to stop himself from giving into the impulse to launch towards his brother and sink his fist into his face. His capacity to be incensed by Mycroft's entitlement and presumption was apparently limitless; no matter how many times he overstepped the boundaries Sherlock set into place, or intruded, or expected Sherlock to fall in line with some proclamation he dictated, each occurrence provoked a fresh outpour of indignation and anger.

Mycroft read Sherlock's expression, and said, "I did phone, but there was no answer, and I grew concerned. I still am, Sherlock. I know this can't... be easy."

Sherlock gripped the violin more tightly still, and his jaw flexed as he also suppressed the urge to unleash a torrent of abuse at his brother. He suspected it would feel just as satisfying, if not more so, than playing had, but he was already far too discomposed in front of Mycroft as it was.

"You knew," Sherlock finally said, and his voice was monotone but underpinned with barely-checked fury.

"Yes. I knew," Mycroft answered, and he sounded exhausted, though the observation didn't move Sherlock in the slightest.

"How long?" he asked.

Mycroft made a show of examining the handle of his umbrella for a moment, but when he couldn't delay his answer any further, he raised his eyes back up to Sherlock. "It has been forty-six days since I received Ms Adler's notification via post."

A corrosive sensation began to burn inside Sherlock's chest and sear through his body, carried in veins by blood that felt as if it had turned to acid. A loaded silence enveloped the room.

"So before she even arrived in the UK you knew," Sherlock said when he recovered his voice again, and it came out hoarse but intense. "You've been withholding this from me for nearly two months, but at the same time you didn't hesitate to use and manipulate me to find her."

Mycroft assumed a regretful, penitent expression that did nothing to assuage Sherlock's anger, and in fact stoked it further.

"Tell me where she is now," he demanded without forethought, though he mentally flinched the instant the words were out. It seemed that although he could withhold insults from his brother, questions pertaining to Irene could not be left unvoiced.

"She had intended to return to Barons Court with Ms Asquith, but I've persuaded her to stay in Westminster, for now."

Sherlock gave a brief, sharp nod to indicate that he had accepted and then dismissed the information. In reality the image of her there in Mycroft's Whitehall office, when he had found her alive and unscathed after he had feared the worst, was seared into his mind's eye like plasma screen burn-in.

Mycroft looked preoccupied with something of his own and didn't give any sign that he had noticed Sherlock's inner turmoil. He was worrying the edge of his umbrella's handle with his thumb, a telltale sign that he was considering how to broach what he considered a difficult or sensitive topic. The gesture was all too familiar to Sherlock, and he would've rolled his eyes in aggravation if the situation had been different.
Mycroft took a breath, then said, "She said I wasn't to tell you, Sherlock, and I—"

"Yes, why complicate matters?" Sherlock interrupted, and he crossed back over to his violin case to shove the instrument out of his sight. It suddenly felt like a token of something far too personal to be out on display during this confrontation. "It's you who can give her what she wants now, after all. I've surpassed any use at this point, having already done my part in all of this. Oh, but isn't this all so familiar."

He spat out the words, but the bitter ache they caused remained, and he couldn't quite believe that he had found himself in this situation for a second time.

*(Fool me once...)*

During the fleeting but indelible moments of exhilaration, happiness, and peace he had experienced with The Woman it had had been easy to forget that the pendulum of their relationship could swing all the way the other direction as well, especially since when they had achieved true intimacy in those days following Karachi it had seemed to him that nothing could divide them. With presumably the worst of the adversity they would experience put behind them, and the lingering emotional barriers between them broken down shortly thereafter, they had become two components of one whole. He had been confident that even if they lived in separate hemispheres and only saw each other several times a year, or even every several years, they would remain one another's constants, perhaps for the rest of their lives. But now that the arm of the pendulum had swayed towards the other extreme—again—he felt used, naïve, and small in a way that no one besides Irene had managed in a very long time, and never to quite the same extent. Whether it occurred during a crest or a valley in their relationship, whatever action she took, whatever she thought, mattered and affected him far too much.

*No such thing as too much,* he heard her voice chide him in its low and seductive tone, and he slammed down the lid of the violin case with more force than he should have. Without pausing to see if he had done any damage, he turned back to Mycroft.

"And then the voicemail to impress upon you just how much danger the child would face without your protection," he went on, increasing the volume of his voice in order to drown out his thoughts. "But not left for you directly, no—that would be too overt, too obvious, so she went through me. Masterstroke on her part, really, devising something that was guaranteed to penetrate the one crack in Mycroft Holmes's armour in order to reap all the rewards: his sense of duty to family. That aspect of her plan worked before, so why not try again, now with a new nephew? She really is extraordinary, I'll grant her that; I couldn't have played you better myself. I'm not burdened by that same weakness, but I don't suppose that matters much to Ms Adler in the balance of things."

Mycroft appeared to take his rapidly-fired rant into stride. After assessing him calmly for several seconds, he said, "Whether or not your criticisms of Ms Adler and myself are valid, I have determined that the threat most likely is. Yes, as impossible as it might seem that I could ever trust that woman," he said, at Sherlock's expression. "But whether the conception was an accident or something she orchestrated, there is no doubt that she genuinely fears for the safety of your child."

"*My child,*" Sherlock repeated in a voice dripping with derision—a cover for the striking fear the word had elicited. "Don't say it like that. I don't have a child, I'm not a - father."

"Sherlock..." Mycroft said, and Sherlock resented the trace of pity he heard in his brother's tone. "As unlikely as it would be for someone to infiltrate my lab, after the first positive result I had one of our technicians run a DNA test against a hair sample I gave myself. I observed the entire process, including the development of the film. No records were consulted, and it showed a close familial match. I understand that it's difficult to accept, especially like this, but Nero is your son."
"That isn't what I meant," Sherlock said through clenched teeth. Still, Mycroft's statement did eradicate the smallest trace of doubt he still harboured, and he felt a faint shudder ripple through his body. But there were biological and societal definitions of the word 'father,' and he had been referring to the latter, and stood by that statement.

"You've clearly made up your mind, and I won't try to persuade you out of it. In fact, I'll accept your decision to provide financial support, since I know for a fact that your portion of the estate can sustain even Ms Adler without making too much of a dent."

"I sense a stipulation," Mycroft sighed, and Sherlock gave a curt nod.

"I accept your proposal, with the understanding that whether the child is raised in Belgravia or Belfast or Belgrade, his upbringing won't be any of my concern. I have a life, and a child has no place in it. Nor does - she."

"Sherlock—"

"No, this is what you wanted isn't it?" he asked, his voice rising. "You lied to me, you said she blackmailed you with the fact that I had saved her life. Obviously you wanted to create enmity so that I wouldn't take a closer look at things, and end up finding out the real reason for your support."

"Yes," Mycroft admitted. "As I said, initially she informed me that I was not to tell you."

"And you obeyed," Sherlock said. He had meant for it to sound jeering, but it came out as an accusation.

"I complied—on my terms—because I was worried about what the news might do, how it might derail you," Mycroft said quietly. "Two years ago, before everything with Moriarty, it might have been different, but I confess—I felt concerned about your state of mind, and your ability to handle something like this. And I still do, but I've come to realise how essential it is that you make your own decisions on this matter, and I... apologise, Sherlock, for my role in the deception. It was misguided, but I had the best of intentions."

"Why you continue to cling to this long outdated older/younger brother dynamic is beyond me," Sherlock said with disdain, refusing to let Mycroft off the hook just yet, in spite of the seemingly heartfelt apology. "Maybe it gives you cause to feel useful and involved in my life, but it's tedious, and it's invasive."

"This instance notwithstanding, have you ever paused to consider it the other way 'round?" Mycroft asked evenly. "That you are constantly forcing my hand, and that you both benefit and take for granted that I will 'clean up' after you, because it allows you to take far more risks than you might otherwise? You can be impulsive, Sherlock, and you don't always think about the consequences of your actions. You don't need to, because you know, either consciously or not, that I'll mitigate the worst of them.

"So I am responding in the best way I know to a situation that you have created. Now that I know about Nero, yes, I am obligated to protect him and provide any support I can. But you are equally responsible for this situation as Ms Adler; none of this would be happening if you hadn't taken it upon yourself to extract her in the first place, and then decided to...engage in a physical relationship with her. All because you were 'burdened by weakness,' to use your phrase, and you couldn't just let her go."

Sherlock felt another stab of rage at Mycroft's intrusive but astute assessment of his emotional state, but focused his attention on the detail that he could actually reject.
"Really, you of all people think I have a weakness for family?" he asked with a scornful laugh, and he was satisfied to see Mycroft suppress a wince of hurt.

His brother lifted his chin and gripped the handle of the umbrella more tightly, then said, "In this context that remains to be seen. Maybe, with Nero, you will finally come to understand why I act in the way I do where you’re concerned. But no, I was referring to something simpler: sentiment. Your sentiment for Ms Adler, which caused you to fly halfway around the world to Karachi—and which you clearly still have."

Sherlock bristled and began to respond, but Mycroft spoke over him.

"If you didn't, you wouldn't be reacting this way. You'd have already found a way to compartmentalise the information, relegate the childrearing to the mother or a caregiver of her choice, put it from your mind and moved on to the next thing that caught your interest. But instead... well. You evidently do care—quite a bit."

Embarrassment and anger over Mycroft’s (correct) conclusion flushed Sherlock's face crimson. Though Mycroft might not have intended the words to sound mocking and derisive, years of disparaging remarks about caring and attachment imbued them with certain contempt.

"You say you didn't come to lecture me, and yet..." Sherlock managed at least, and he deliberately trailed off so that his point could land. "But how can you talk about my supposed weakness and 'sentiment' when for the past ten minutes your every word has revealed and accentuated yours? Obligation. Responsibility. Family." He made a noise of contempt.

"Because as opposed to what happened when you consummated your feelings for Ms Adler, I foresee no detrimental consequences to my complying with her. She'll be in the country and under our 'protection,' which is just as good as 'supervision' for our purposes."

Mycroft raised one eyebrow, and his expression darkened. "Conversely, I could predict a number of, shall we say, highly-unpleasant outcomes were I to refuse, and I'm not only referring to precarious matters of state. What most concerns me is how Nero would be raised, and the man he could become. An unstable childhood, his mother's capacity for deviousness, and his father's brilliance could create a perfect storm, and I rather think that after James Moriarty, I've fulfilled my once-per-career quota for mad criminal geniuses with contempt for social order and obsessions with my brother..."

Sherlock narrowed his eyes at such hyperbole, but he could almost see Mycroft's point—almost. And for the first time he appreciated the fact that he, Sherlock Holmes, had procreated with Irene Adler, The Woman, and that that their child was sure to be gifted and extraordinary. So yes, it was essential that he be given all the resources Mycroft could offer, and afforded a calm and secure home life so as to focus on learning and developing his talents, without any extraneous distractions.

Still: "You're beleaguering the point; I've already agreed not to oppose your decision to provide financial support, and if you'd like to draw up some perfunctory paperwork, I'll sign anything to that affect. However, as I've also said, I will not be involved."

"That is your decision, yes, but—"

"No 'buts'," Sherlock cut off, his tone steely, but Mycroft pressed on.

"I only—I only ask you to consider—"

"I have already considered anything you could possibly mention."
"—Siger," Mycroft finished.

A resounding silence followed that, and Sherlock felt as if Mycroft had just sucker-punched him in the gut. Hurt and a sense of betrayal layered over his anger, and he could only stare at his brother, speechless. Sherlock had considered every matter salient to the situation, and their father had never crossed his mind—nor should he have. To bring him up now was manipulative and an unforgivably low blow.

In turn the initial shock shifted into fresh anger as well, but Sherlock remained rigid and motionless, certain that if he so much as twitched a muscle it would spark a chain reaction that would end with him giving Mycroft a bloodied nose.

"I'm seven years older than you," the other man continued, unfazed by Sherlock's expression. "I saw what our father's inattention and apathy did to you, how you suffered for it as a child—"

"Shut. Up."

"I... regret... that I didn't do more to support you when we were boys, to be a proper elder brother even when I'd left for school. After that, I—" He paused, then gave a small nod. "I was selfish. I was too preoccupied: with my own escape, my own autonomy, my own pursuits. I left you to deal with home and everything that entailed almost entirely on your own for years, and," Mycroft sighed deeply. "Now that you do know about your son, it's your decision on how to proceed, and how significant your role in his life will be. And I don't want you to regret any of those choices... It's not something that even men such as us can find a way to undo or rectify."

Sherlock let out a laugh that sounded a bit manic even to his ears. "I think it's too late for regret, don't you?"

Mycroft made as if he were going to answer, but Sherlock wasn't finished.

"But oh, now we get to the heart of it, don't we?" he sneered. "This explains everything! A new Holmes boy—again tragically lacking a proper father figure—and a chance for you to atone for your perceived failures with me. Now you can start afresh and make up all of your fraternal angst. By all means have at it, maybe it will finally get you to leave me alone."

"That is neither fair nor true."

"Oh I think it is."

Mycroft brought a hand to his brow and looked down at the carpet as if taking a moment for weary reflection, then raised his head again and said, "We are diverging from the central point."

"Which is?"

"That this isn't about you and me, or even about you and Irene Adler. This is about Nero, and how we proceed from here. How we protect him."

Sherlock snorted. "Please. You might as well be trying to protect him from the bogeyman; this threat is just as invented."

Mycroft regarded Sherlock with tolerant patience, and after a brief standoff Sherlock gave a disgusted shake of his head and made a gesture for Mycroft to continue.

Mycroft looked down at the tip of his umbrella, which he pushed into the rug, bunching it. Then he
heaved another world-weary sigh, and looked up to meet Sherlock's eyes.

"In my office, I attempted to tell you—although I understand that the shock..." He gave a small shake of his head, and closed his eyes lightly. "There is something rather grave, something that gives me cause to trust her on her word, just this once, that I must share with you."

Sherlock just watched his brother, his face impassive but cynical.

"She described the men who attacked her. The ones you heard on the phone."

Sherlock still said nothing, didn't prompt Mycroft on.

He looked down at his recently-polished shoes, then back up. "One of them was well-educated, upper class, apparently ruthless. Very tall. Dark blond hair and blue eyes. Shall I go on?"

Sherlock felt a momentary pulse of adrenaline-spiked panic and his heart gave a few lurching thuds, but after another moment it slowed back to its normal cadence and he smirked.

"Oh, that's very good. I suppose she doesn't realise that we would know it's impossible. So then, not quite as clever or sound a plan as she'd intended."

"Is it impossible, Sherlock?"

"Yes it is, Mycroft," and he was irritated by the tired but indulging manner in which Mycroft had spoken. "Wait, don't tell me that that's why I had some armed moron following me just now. I hope you've enjoyed today's little waste of tax revenue; Irene clearly knew him from her time collaborating with Moriarty, and now she's using his description as a way to legitimise the claim of a threat."

"I don't think so."

"Then you're thinking like an idiot," Sherlock growled. "They're all dead. Well dead or incarcerated, but Moriarty, the criminal network he created, and bloody Sebastian Moran are dead. Do you really think I'd have come back and risked John's life if there was even the shadow of a doubt that Moriarty's psychotic second-in-command was still running about? DCI Lestrade's? Mrs. Hudson's?" he reeled off, his temper flaring again. "The only person who might have ever accomplished that was Moriarty, and he wasn't on hand, was he?"

For some reason, Mycroft gave a soft, wry smile at that, though Sherlock barely took notice. "No. That I can confirm."

As much as a part of him wished that he could interpret the news about Sebastian Moran as an explanation and justification for the things that Irene had done and said as his brother seemed to, he simply could not accept reports that he was alive. As much as he would want a reason to dismiss all his suspicions towards Irene, the alternative was far worse. It would mean that he had returned to London prematurely after falling for a ruse, and that the lives of everyone he loved were in danger, not just Irene's, as was the case in the corollary scenario.

When you eliminate the impossible...

Which is what he had done, wasn't it? Moran hadn't been a tactician, he had been a triggerman. He'd been the martial law of Moriarty's dominion, the brute force to Jim's caress and nimble manipulation, and the muscle to the Spider's mind. He hadn't been capable of such fine-tuned deception as convincing Sherlock Holmes of his death, and even if he had found a new master to focus and channel his need for brutality, it was implausible that the replacement would possess
even a portion of Moriarty's aberrant brilliance.

Besides, it wasn't remotely improbable that Irene would engineer the precise scenario in which they now found themselves.

"Nonetheless," Mycroft said, and his brisk and business-like tone managed to draw Sherlock's attention away from his churning thoughts. "I accessed the voicemail recording from your mobile network, and we're in the process of combing every resource at our disposal to locate a sample of Moran's voice. School plays from Charterhouse's video archives from the late 80s and early 90s, possible previous phone numbers for an answerphone recording, any recorded customer service conversations... Once we locate something, and I have every confidence that we will, it will only be a matter of comparing the data."

"Evidence is 'only good as the records you keep,'" Sherlock said. "I heard her say that once, you know. She isn't at all incapable of planting a file that contains the same voice on the message, to generate a falsely positive result. She phoned me and then didn't hang up, allowing my voicemail to record just enough; this could be a very deliberate trail of breadcrumbs."

"That would also presume she'd be able to locate and delete every other sample I could trace."

"Yes. And?"

"And besides the reality that she simply no longer has such extensive connections or influence anymore, you mean? She told you herself: I've already agreed to give her everything she asked, no need for additional theatrics necessary. Sherlock, she's the mother of your child, now. That is far better leverage than even the ambiguous contents of a mobile phone were, the most dangerous of which was probably the Air Bond code, which had already been released."

"Oh for God's sake—we are done hashing over this," Sherlock hissed. He was all too aware of the leverage the child represented. Nero—*that's his name—he has a name—he's real* flashed in his brain, less individually articulated words than a bright mental exclamation point—was the ultimate chess piece. Irene Adler's greatest victory and ultimate prize.

"Fine," Mycroft agreed, though Sherlock's relief was short-lived since he added, "But now that you're fully apprised of the situation, you will need to explain things to John as soon as possi—"

"No," Sherlock said, before Mycroft was even finished.

"You needn't go into detail, but I've assigned him protection as well, and sooner or later he will realise it and want answers."

Sherlock opened his mouth to argue the point, then closed it. Even if he didn't accept that Sebastian "Colonel" Moran had somehow survived, had somehow tricked Sherlock Holmes into thinking he'd been killed in a brawl over dogfight winnings, he didn't consider himself so infallible as to bet John's life that he was right.

Sherlock frowned, then muttered, "I'll handle it."

Mycroft appraised him but said nothing, and let his expression and language convey his conditional assent. With one last look at Sherlock, he grasped the handle of his umbrella and turned towards the door.

"Mycroft, wait," Sherlock said, and again he felt the force of something that demanded to be said. "What—" the first word came out in a rasp and he cleared his throat. "The child... Nero. What does he look like?"
Mycroft gave a fatigued smile, though whether it was at Sherlock speaking Nero's name for the first time, or for the question itself, he wasn't certain.

"Like you," he said simply, and then turned into the hall.

Long after he had heard the sound of the front door closing echo up the stairs, Sherlock stood in the middle of his living room and stared with a glassy, unseeing gaze at the empty doorframe through which his brother had departed.

When the shadows on the eastern wall had crept up to the crown moulding, Sherlock blinked and his eyes cleared. He crossed the room to scoop his phone from his chair, then typed in, *We need to talk*, and hit Send.

In two separate parts of London, Westminster and Clapham, the phones of John Watson and Irene Adler emitted alerts and displayed identical text messages.

**Chapter End Notes**

"He thinks he can solve everything by being sort of cold and remote. Our Sherlock even entertains the idea that he's above emotion. He's actually a terribly emotional man and ... far from being cold and remote, he's got a bunch of people who look after him. The support team is enormous. He doesn't quite realize that far from being the invulnerable ice king, he's actually perceived by his friends as ... one you have to look after."

-Steven Moffat
The following morning Irene came awake with a rush of adrenaline on the narrow bed in the anteroom of Mycroft's office, which she suspected got far more use than the bedroom in the home he maintained for appearances. The thought already on her mind was of Nero, and throwing off the bedclothes she rushed over to his cot, her lungs tight with the certainty that it would be empty when she reached it.

When she saw his peaceful sleeping face she put her hands against the rails and relaxed against them, exhaling the lungful of air she had been holding.

She reached in and traced her fingertips over his round cheek, and then rested her palm on his rising and falling chest, and was struck by the fact that her hand no longer spanned it as it once had. It wouldn't be very long before he reached his first birthday, and she found it unbelievable that almost an entire year had passed since she had gone into labour and given birth alone at an anonymous American general hospital. Not only had Nero changed in that single revolution of the earth (from a tiny and fragile infant with downy ash blond hair to a near-toddler with inky dark curls), so had she. It was unsurprising; she knew from professional experience how quickly behaviours could be altered when the proper motivation was introduced. Far more remarkable was how much she had remained unchanged. She had never given thought to having children herself, but she had assumed that it caused one to lose some fundamental part of one's self in the constant demand of putting someone else first. And while it took more strength and sacrifice than she could have ever imagined to be a mother, she had found that almost the opposite was true: the most essential parts of her were honed and amplified. Whatever drive and determination she'd had to secure a given objective for herself was nothing compared to what she would do to secure it for her child.

As she continued to gaze down on him her heart rate slowed until it almost fell into sync with his steady beat, and her feelings of intense love and fierce maternal protectiveness shifted towards her next thought of the morning.

*Sherlock knew.*

She felt her face tense at the memory.

Although she had been less certain about how and when to tell Sherlock about Nero after her talk with him in his flat, she'd still felt that he was entitled to know. Moreover she had *wanted* him to know, not just for his sake, but for their son's. In all the scenarios she had imagined however, none of them included blindsiding him in the presence of his brother and without any strategy in place.

She hadn't meant to let Nero's name slip out like that, but she had been exhausted and stressed by the day's events, and incensed that Mycroft would advise her to send her son with Kate despite his intentions to detain the other woman for questioning, particularly in light of what they'd just experienced. It had been an emotional response on her part, and it had set the tone for the rest of the interaction.

Because no matter how stoic and above emotion Sherlock Holmes thought he was, or rather aspired to be and strived to portray himself, not even he could take that sort of news in stride. Choosing to turn and flee was the most proactive action he could take, was the only expression of power and
choice available to him in that situation.

His actions had certainly struck a familiar chord.

She had given a great deal of consideration to how he might react to the news, and no matter how tactfully she informed him of Nero, she always suspected that he would have a flight response. Precedent had made it the likeliest scenario, since it was identical to how he had responded to the revelation that she was alive at the Battersea Power Station, and then how he had reacted when they had been on the boat leaving Karachi together, when she’d attempted to discuss where things stood between them during a particularly tense point in their relationship. He might be more susceptible to the effects of emotion than he cared to admit, but his years of active suppression and compartmentalisation meant that he had never developed coping mechanisms to process them, and he was easily overwhelmed by strong feeling.

Still, there was a difference between expecting that reaction and experiencing it, and she couldn't help feel brittle and a bit shaken in its aftermath.

She recalled the unprecedented shock of her own realisation that she had conceived, and how she had nearly torn herself apart in the following weeks agonising whether she should proceed with the pregnancy or terminate, and she felt the rare ache of empathy for what Sherlock was experiencing now. Perhaps it wasn't so surprising that it only ever happened with him; to empathise with someone required understanding and compassion, and she had experienced that combination with him alone.

But while she knew firsthand struggling with the shock of it, it was accurate to say that their respective reactions weren't identical. She had faced the challenge of bringing a child into a life of peril and insecurity, and the existential crisis about parenthood and identity had taken a backseat to the very demanding practical matter of caring for a newborn without any support network. The later threat to Nero's and her lives had only compounded that and she had had to reassess their security on a day-to-day basis, which left scant room for any self-indulgent angst. Sherlock, on the other hand, had finally settled back into his life in London and was by all accounts content with his work and network of friends, acquaintances, and homeless youths. For him the existential questions of identity and the implications of fatherhood would seem impossibly daunting. She imagined that he would see it as a potential threat to everything he had fought so hard to recapture, and panic at its potential to force questions of whom he was on a fundamental level.

If she had her way that window of time for panicked self-examination and anguish wouldn't last for long though, because there was another reason she wanted him to know—one which was an even greater factor in her decision to tell him than the moral obligation of his right to know.

As with the case that had first introduced them, she wanted to utilise the power of his brain in order to achieve an objective of hers. Though in contrast to when they met, she was certain they would share the same cause: smother this last gasp of Moriarty's that Moran represented, and ensure the safety of their son. She would do it on her own if she must, but she'd be an idiot not to acknowledge that Sherlock's unique skillset would serve as an enormous asset, and Irene was anything but.

Also, taking on the matter of Moran would be a significant coping outlet in a time Sherlock desperately needed one, and yet since it directly involved their son, he wouldn't be able to completely ignore or avoid Nero in the process. Moreover, it would help put to a rest questions he would have about whether he could remain the same man - the same brilliant detective - despite his fatherhood, since she was certain that if the two of them united in this they would prevail. They must, there could be no alternative.

Seconds after Sherlock had turned on heel and fled through the door the night before, Mycroft had
gotten on the phone and instructed that he be followed, and for a detail to be sent to an address in South London for John Watson. But when he'd hung up the two of them had both stood where Sherlock had left them, and for the first time since they had met silence reigned between them, and went on for a long time.

"Well then, that's done," Mycroft said at last, and she knew he wasn't referring to the orders he had given.

She didn't respond.

He sighed. "I think I'll take my leave of you, make sure he doesn't—"

"Where are you going?" she spoke over him, as his words managed to penetrate through the thoughts of Sherlock that had been swirling in her mind.

"To Sherlock's, of course," he said, looking surprised she would even ask.

"I wouldn't. Not yet."

Mycroft tossed her a resentful look, but then cocked his head and regarded her with begrudging acknowledgment.

"Yes, I suppose you're right." He heaved a sigh. "I never thought anyone would understand my brother like I do."

"I understand myself; understanding Sherlock is a natural extension," she said, but she stated it as if she were reciting some uninteresting, well-established fact, and without any relish.

"Yes..." Mycroft said, continuing to look at her in appraisal. "I am beginning to appreciate that."

"A compliment, Mr Holmes?" she asked, her voice was devoid of its usual teasing tone. It sounded dull, even numb, in her ears.

"Merely an assessment – take it how you will. But then again, there's a reason we're in this situation, is there not? You are 'The Woman' to Sherlock, the only one who ever caught his interest and kept his attention in that way, so far as I know. And not to boast, but I tend to know most things, particularly where my brother is concerned."

Irene considered his words. She should have felt flattered, but they only rung hollow and bittersweet in light of what had happened only moments before.

"In all the ways I've had to worry about my brother though the years, I really never thought I'd have to be concerned about something like this." His expression turned sardonic. "I assume you weren't tremendously concerned over such a thing yourself, from what I'm given to understand."

Before she could fire off a retort on principle he straightened and tugged down his jacket and waistcoat. "Fine. I'll give him the night, but in the morning we have work to do. He needs to know —"

"Yes, and so do I, Mr Holmes," she cut in with a much sharper tone. "You have information on who's after us, which you need to share with me—now."

He blinked as if he were thrown out of focus by being addressed by anyone in such a way, but then nodded.
"Yes... Yes. You're entitled to know. Please sit down..."

Irene returned to the present, and gave Nero a final once-over and caress before leaving the anteroom to the main office she was beginning to consider the War Room. When she entered, she saw that Mycroft was absent, but her suitcase had been delivered and she was relieved that she'd be able to shed her effective but undeniably tatty disguise as a member of Sherlock's homeless network.

She wheeled the case over to a regency-era writing desk, lifted it up, and unzipped it, and what she saw when she revealed the contents managed to momentarily divert her from her constant, almost obsessive thoughts about Moran. The anonymous underling who had chosen a selection of her things couldn't have known how prescient he or she really was when randomly grabbing the garment, or else the person simply had excellent taste.

As chafing as her temporary disguise had been, her identity of Renée Wolfe had been far worse. The inverse of what she had once told Sherlock about disguise always being a self-portrait also held true for her; the original legal identity that had been selected for her, as well as that girl's life, had nothing to do with the woman she really was. And as comfortable and deft as she was slipping in and out of various subsequent identities, always apt because she was the one devising them, it was 'Irene Adler' whom she considered her true self—and the only thing Irene Adler slipped into was couture. Her carefully curated look was just as much as much of an expression of her self as was Sherlock's, and so it was with a sharp and satisfied smile that she pulled out a long-disallowed white Alexander McQueen dress.

It was fitting she should wear it now that she was back in London, and despite the weight fluctuations she had experienced due to her incarceration in Karachi and her later pregnancy, it fit perfectly.

Until Nero awoke and demanded his breakfast, Irene spent the morning systematically working her way through Mycroft's large office. It was disappointingly devoid of anything interesting, at least of what was accessible, and while at another point she might have enjoyed the endeavour in and of itself, particularly since Mycroft would know what she had done in a glance and be irked by it, she was far too focused on finding out anything else she could about Moran.

She had recognised him from San Francisco, but she had never so much as heard his name mentioned prior to Mycroft's debriefing. But then, Jim Moriarty had been masterful at keeping the threads of his web disparate and untangled, with himself positioned at the centre from whence all other strands emanated and vibrated. Well, he and his second in command apparently, and now that she had a name and a face she was starved to learn even more—as much as she possibly could.

She had phoned Mycroft for a status update, but to her great frustration he wasn't answering (perhaps her actions were partly to irk him, then).

As she sat at his desk she watched Nero from her peripheral vision as he grappled with a small, very old and certainly priceless globe, while she stared down the flashing cursor in the computer's password field.

"You won't guess it," a dry voice said from the doorway, and Irene looked up to see Mycroft move into the office.

"But you and I both know I had to make the attempt."

"Of course," Mycroft agreed and he made his way over, idly plucking the globe from Nero's
chubby hands and setting it on an end table.

Nero made a face of deep consternation, which crumpled into one that threatened tears, but when he saw that Mycroft's back was turned it shifted again, into a look of concentrated determination. Irene watched with amusement as he speed-crawled towards the table and hauled himself up against it, then grabbed for the globe and knocked it down onto the plush carpet with a small squeal of triumph.

Mycroft turned at the noise and gave a resigned sigh, but didn't confiscate it again.

"I'll even tell you, though it won't be of much help, I'm afraid: it's the coordinates of the star Tarazed in the year of my birth. I memorise star locations several dozen constellations at a time, and I change the password at least once a day."

"And here I once read on John Watson's blog that Sherlock deleted even the fact that the earth goes round the sun—you two really aren't as similar as it might first seem, are you?"

Mycroft gave a grimacing smile that didn't reach his eyes. "All it shows, Ms Adler, is that I am the more clever of the two of us."

Irene made a soft humming sound, then said, "Perhaps in some ways."

"I've never had to resort to the tactic of deletion, I—" he broke off as her implication landed, and his eyes narrowed.

"In all the ways that matter," he said with slight disdain. "One needn't look farther than our current situation to see that."

Irene also heard a touch of anxiety and agitation in his voice that only Sherlock could provoke, then recalled what Mycroft had said the evening before about giving Sherlock time to process the revelation, and came to a realisation.

"You've just been to see him," she said, and she felt her pulse quicken again.

Mycroft glanced down for a moment and Irene saw him take a subtle fortifying breath before he looked into her eyes again.

"Yes. He insists that he won't have anything to do with the child and I said that it was his choice, but—"

"And mine, if we're being entirely accurate," Irene interrupted.

Mycroft tilted his head and looked dubious. "I'd be careful playing any of your usual cards, Ms Adler. It's evident that he still has feelings for you, but his mistrust of you borders on the pathological."

She lifted her chin with some defiance. "Overcompensation, perhaps?" she said, though with more bravado than she really felt. "Besides, who says I'm playing at all?"

"Even if you appear to be genuine he will twist it. Though I'm afraid you have only yourself to blame." Mycroft's tone turned faintly ironic. "'You reap what you sow,' I believe is the expression."

"But you ought to be flattered," Mycroft said in a lighter voice. "In spite of his mistrust he thinks very highly of you. Too highly, perhaps... His sentiment for you exaggerates your current reach, gives you too much credit."
"Oh I don't know," Irene contradicted, and it was her turn to sound ironic. "I've always found Sherlock Holmes to be fairly astute."

"Not when it comes to you, and we both know it," Mycroft snapped.

"Yes," Irene agreed. "And so if what you're saying about his distrust of me is true, you need to do everything you can to convince Sherlock to become involved—use that uncompromising 'Ice Man' logic on him, he seems unable to resist that. I understand better than anyone what he's experiencing right now, but any sentiment aside he's an essential asset, and we both know that I'm not one to let any resource go un-utilised."

Mycroft rolled his eyes. "Now I think you might be overestimating my influence."

Irene wasn't amused, and she cut her eyes to where Nero was smacking both his palms against a part of the antique globe the mapmakers had labelled 'Here be Monsters,' while he babbled to himself. Her son looked up and gave her his gummy smile, several teeth showing.

At that Mycroft looked chastened and he grew serious. His lips twisted to the side, and Irene saw that he was debating whether or not to share something with her.

Finally he said, "It might interest you to know that Sherlock's lasts words to me were to ask what the infant looks like."

Her heart felt as if it had dropped into her stomach at that revelation, but she kept her expression neutral.

"Sherlock is fundamentally curious," she said with a small shrug that was meant to appear dismissive, but Mycroft gave a minute tilt of his head.

"You think it implies more."

"Surely you can interpret that all on your own," Mycroft retorted. "He might distrust you, but despite whatever my brother might wish, the fact that he's fathered a child is one thing he won't be capable of deleting."

His expression turned thoughtful. "We both know that the man he aspires to be and the man he really is can sometimes come in conflict during times such as these. Oh he's capable of following that so-called Ice Man logic in everyday life, but when confronted with more extreme situations..." He trailed off, then looked at her and said, "Yes. His extreme distrust of you is, at least partly, overcompensation, but that doesn't mean you need to tread any less carefully with him. In fact, I'd contend it means the reverse."

"Your protectiveness is touching, Mr Holmes," Irene said with a trace of mocking, though she privately agreed.

Mycroft made a face. "Again, it's merely an assessment. And while I will tell you that I did try to persuade him to make peace with his paternity and speak with you, if he does choose to attempt it it won't be because of anything I said—and it won't simply be out of his 'fundamental curiosity'."

"What are you saying, then? On one hand his distrust is pathological and will discourage him from becoming involved, but on the other hand his sentiment will be what ultimately drives him to become involved?"

"The two aren't at all contradictory, Ms Adler, as you yourself pointed out when you said he was overcompensating. So while I'm entirely convinced that he will not - is constitutionally unable to -
ignore the matter, I'm afraid he has to arrive at the decision to participate on his own and in his own time."

Irene started shaking her head at him before he was even finished speaking. "We agree that Sherlock requires gentle handling, but I'm not willing to go so far as to passively sit by while he decides when he'll be ready to face his responsibilities. Every day that goes by is another day that Nero's life is in danger—and at the hands of Moran, the last of Moriarty's empire, the one who got away."

"And yet you might not have a choice," Mycroft said, looking chagrined. "Surely the rational part of Sherlock is desperate to track him down and understand how he was able to fool him last year, but as I said, my brother's rational and emotional selves are in conflict—to a degree I've never before seen. And if you push him on it, it will do more harm than good.

"Besides," he said before she could say anything to that, "it's not as if you and I won't be fully proactive in the meantime, and I will admit that we make for a formidable team, even without my brother. I also have all my top agents on it as we speak, and there are a number of promising leads on which I've just been briefed. In fact, that brings me to why I've come back; I've come to share what we've learned thus far, chiefly regarding a follow-up on some information your former assistant provided."

She began to demand that he share the details at once, because what on earth could Kate know? but then her mobile chimed from the top of Mycroft's desk, and the words stalled in her throat. Only three people knew her number and Kate had checked in with Irene earlier that morning, whilst Mycroft was standing across from her. That left only...

Without hesitation she reached for it, and what she saw caused adrenaline to jolt though her.

"We need to talk."

"It's Sherlock, isn't it?" Mycroft asked wearily, and Irene nodded, feeling dizzy.

"It looks like he think he is ready," she said, looking up from the phone. "Perhaps you have more influence on him that you give yourself credit for."

Mycroft's face was arranged to look detached, but Irene detected the same anxiety she'd seen when he'd first entered the room, and she knew he was still of the opinion that he didn't. It was obvious that he was thereby torn between wanting them to come to some sort of resolution so that they could all move forward with strategy without the chaos of sentiment impeding their way, and serious concern for his brother's vulnerable state.

"Better go, then. Don't want to waste a good chance to develop an asset."

Irene ignored the dig that she thought said more about Mycroft's state of caring for his brother than her own (did Mycroft really believe her to be closer to him than Sherlock in her fundamental makeup? Perhaps she was—but with everyone except Sherlock), and rose from the chair behind the desk. She crossed over to Nero, who gave his toy one last clumsy spin, then put his arms up to be lifted.

"Oh, but a final bit of advice," Mycroft said as she scooped him up. "Leave the boy with me."

—Except for Sherlock and to an even greater degree her son, that was.

"No," Irene said flatly, combing her fingers through her son's fine curls as he rested his cheek on her shoulder. "And his name is Nero."
"If you think that Sherlock will process a thing you say when he's confronted with his child for the first time—a child who is almost a year old that he, Sherlock Holmes, never even guessed existed—then you don't know my brother as well as I thought."

"Maybe you don't give him enough credit," she shot back.

"Or you give him too much." He rolled his eyes and added with a voice dripping in irony, "Oh you two are made for each other, aren't you?"

Irene felt herself bristle and her eyes flash. "I no longer trust you with my son."

Mycroft pressed his lips together in a gesture Irene recognised as being a fraternal trait, then opened his mouth for a moment before actually speaking.

"Yesterday's incident was perhaps mishandled, but I assure you that apart from you, no one in the world has Nero's best interests in mind more than I."

Irene's face was cold and set as if carved from marble, and she continued to look at him with blatant scepticism and hostility.

"You cautioned me last night that Sherlock wouldn't be ready to meet his son, and you were right. Allow me to... return the favour."

On a deeply primal and maternal level Irene was loath to part with Nero. Yesterday's incident with Moran wasn't even twenty-four hours in the past and her abject panic for her baby's safety was still all too fresh in her mind, but she had to admit that Mycroft was right. And since Sherlock's potential participation hung so delicately in the balance, 'treading carefully' with him necessitated sacrificing her desire to not let Nero out of her sight. Unfortunately, she had to admit that the long-term importance of Sherlock's involvement outweighed her valid, albeit short-term, fears.

She came to the difficult decision to agree, but said, "If I'm to go along with this, I need your absolutely assurance that you won't let him out of your sight. You will be the primary carer and keep me informed of everything that pertains to him, no matter what."

Mycroft looked into her eyes, then said gravely, "You have my word."

She studied him for a long time, then gave a minute nod and set Nero down again, hating that she must compromise on this, but recognising that it was a necessary evil in the long run, given the situation.

Her son began whine in protest as if he could sense that she would shortly be leaving him, which made her feel all the guiltier. He attempted to climb up her legs so that she'd pick him up again, but she just reached down to stroke his head and gently shushed him.

She turned away from Mycroft and closed her eyes lightly for a moment, before typing with her other hand, 

**When?**

The response was almost immediate, as if he had been waiting for her response.

*Tonight. Seven.*

Sherlock exhaled a slow, measured breath through his nose when he received The Woman's confirmation text: *Tonight, 7,* and to further distract himself he switched to John's message thread and responded to his friend's same question of when.
As soon as possible. Urgent.

John shot back a text right away.

*Urgent as in you've handcuffed yourself to the bath plumbing again in order to figure out escape strategies and you've failed to find any and need someone to unlock you?*

*OR urgent as in you've gone through your sample of Irish Wolfhound hair and need to me to track one down.*

*Or actually urgent. For once.*

Sherlock's fingers flew over the screen, typing back, *Don't be hyperbolic, John.*

*Need I remind you that all of those things have happened? Your LIFE is hyperbolic.*

Sherlock stared at that statement, working hard to tamp down the sudden panic triggered by the truth of it, but then another text popped up into the screen.

*And since you can still make smart-arse remarks I take it that 'urgent' falls somewhere in between the first two examples.*

Before he could respond, it was replaced by an even newer notification:

*Fine I'll use my midday break, be there an in hour.*

Sherlock set aside the phone and took in another low breath. One hour to pull himself together, and one hour to divert his attention to the plan he had devised, and complete it. He was almost grateful for the distraction it would provide; it would be a calm before the storm that was sure to rage that night.

*Tonight* – the word filled him with a dread about the imminent confrontation with Irene Adler, and the emotions that could (would) burn up to the surface. Touching the 'send' button on the text that had scheduled the meeting had been a triumph of will over cowardice.

But he only had one hour, he couldn't linger on that now—not when there were important tasks to be finished before John's arrival.

By the time his friend walked through the door of the flat, Sherlock had managed to complete his objectives, and was sitting stock-still on the sofa.

"All right, you summoned?" John asked, and Sherlock noticed that his voice was light-hearted and jovial as it so often was when he had just come from spending sustained periods of times with his fiancée.

"John!" he said equally cheery, though his tone was forced whereas John's had been natural. "Yes. You're going on a trip. You and Mary, to Dubrovnik. Call it an early wedding present from me. I've already packed your case, and your flight leaves in a few hours. So you'll need to phone Mary and tell her to put together a bag as well."

He finished his rushed statement and watched John with a proud and expectant smile, though internally he was tense and apprehensive that this gambit would fail. He had spent the past hour customising a holiday that he knew would be as enticing to the couple as possible, based on their interests, personalities, and previous comments about holidays they wanted to take if they could afford it alongside wedding expenses, but there was still no guarantee John wouldn't see through
the pretence.

In response, John turned to look over at the case sitting by the door, then faced back towards Sherlock, his mouth hanging ajar and the good-natured expression on his face quickly fading.

"What? Tonight..." John said, clearly still digesting everything. "Sherlock, I can't just leave my life and take off on holiday somewhere. Mary and I both have a full schedule with the practice, and—"

Sherlock cut in, forestalling John talking himself out of it from the get-go. "Sorry John, tickets are already booked. Hotel, too. Nonrefundable, I'm afraid."

His friend continued to look gobsmacked. "Er, why didn't you just ask me? Most people... I mean, why spring it on us so last-minute like this?"

Sherlock arranged his features into a wounded, slightly anxious expression, whilst mentally impelling John to just accept the gift at face-value.

"I wanted it to be a surprise," he said, inflecting his voice with the slightest amount of vulnerability and uncertainty. "Isn't that how you're supposed to carry out this sort of gesture? Makes it more 'romantic' for the two of you."

He noticed with satisfaction that it seemed to work; John's face softened.

"Look, Sherlock, I appreciate it - of course I do, it's a lovely thing to do - but with something like this you need to first figure out that the person can... Wait."

John's eyes narrowed as he put two and two together - probably when he spoke the words 'lovely thing to do' in connection with Sherlock, Sherlock thought in a mixture of wryness and frustration - and his entire demeanour shifted from confusion to high alertness tinged with anger.

He strode closer to Sherlock, his shoulders squaring. "Okay, what's really going on, are we in danger? Is this you trying to get us out of London?"

"No, no, nothing like that," Sherlock said in what he thought was a reassuring tone. "I told you, it's a wedding present. Don't you like it? I know you've mentioned wanting to go to Croatia—"

John put up a hand, and was already shaking his head before he broke in with, "Nope. Stop. I don't believe you. What's happened? And how about the truth this time, you've been dancing around it for days. I want to know once and for all: what's going on? If you're sending Mary and me abroad, I deserve to know why."

"Once and for all," Sherlock repeated, coming to a decision.

Yes, John did deserve to know the real reason he needed to leave the country (accompanied by someone from MOD, he would concede to his brother on that detail—for John's sake). The basic truth that was, without any unnecessary details or embellishment.

It wouldn't be accurate to say there wasn't another, more nebulous, motive for sending John out of town. One that was selfish and even irrational of Sherlock, since John was always an asset and would surely prove useful in his efforts to take down this final strand of Moran's legacy.

But no—sentiment, caring. They really were every bit the disadvantages he'd always suspected, but he simply wasn't prepared to tell John about the child yet. (Ohgod, ohgod)

His heart leapt into a sprint at that word, and he conscientiously turned his full attention back to
John, who was pursing his lips and staring back at Sherlock with a challenging expression.

Sherlock gave a small sigh then said, "My brother believes that Moran is alive, and is in London."

John took half a step back in disbelief.

"Moran—Sebastian Moran. As in Moriarty's triggerman," he asked, his voice level at first, but then rising as the information sunk in. "Bloody hell, Sherlock! Why have you been sitting on this instead of telling me from the beginning? Damn it, yesterday you said it had been resolved!" Sherlock watched John's face begin to flush as his anger at being kept out of the loop sunk in.

"And I'm not at all convinced that it hasn't been," Sherlock said, his voice calm but emphatic. "But in the very implausible chance that I'm wrong, we need to put precautions in place."

John stared at Sherlock, his shoulders heaving with the force of his breathing. Then his expression changed and became more calculating, so that Sherlock could anticipate his words before he even opened his mouth.

"No—no. I don't have to leave. I'll help; you won't go it alone this time over. I don't need—and I certainly don't want," he added with a sharp, humourless little laugh, "to be sent out of the way, locked up in some metaphorical tower..." His face set with stubborn determination. "No. I'm not going anywhere."

"I know you don't have to be. And I know you'd be useful," Sherlock said, thinking quickly. "But you have a fiancée to consider; this isn't just a run-of-the-mill case where you can take off and muck about with me, and then be home in time for Tea. If my brother is right, it's too dangerous."

Sherlock knew it was manipulative, but in the moment he didn't care. The ends justified his means, and what he said also happened to be true.

"And just who the hell are you to determine for me what's too dangerous?" John said, his voice rising even more, and his eyes flashing. "I've been to—"

"Yes, yes, you're a battle-hardened warrior," Sherlock spoke over him, and then he leaned forward to deliver the coup de grace. "But Mary isn't, is she. These reports suggest that if Moran is alive, he's bent on revenge for what I've done, and that puts everyone I care about in danger. Including Mary."

At the repeated mentions of his fiancée Sherlock saw the inner conflict blaze in John's eyes, and Sherlock knew the tide was turning in his favour. John's small, disgusted sigh confirmed it.

"Look, I'll speak to her, but I'm not bloody lying to her, I'm telling her why you're asking this of us. We don't keep secrets from each other. Unlike some other people I could name," he said with another long glare towards Sherlock.

"Ah John, you don't know the half of it, he thought in a mixture of resolve and despair.

"For how long?" his friend asked.

"The current reservations are for one week. I don't expect for it to take longer than that, but if it does, further arrangements can be made."

John shifted his weight, shaking his head again. "Maybe they can on your side, but—" he muttered. He then clamped his lips together, his jaw flexing, and Sherlock breathed an internal sign of relief at the sign of resignation.
"Fine," John said. "God knows I prefer this manner of getting me out of the way, to making me think I've watched you commit suicide."

Sherlock opened his mouth to respond, but before he could say anything to that John added resentfully, "So yeah, all right, we'll be on that flight unless Mary says otherwise. But I don't like this, Sherlock - I don't like this one bit - and I want you to swear that if you think that I can be of any help whatsoever, you will phone me immediately."

Sherlock looked into John's eyes for a moment, then gave a curt nod of assent, though he knew he would never make that call unless matters were truly desperate.

John turned around, then took a calming breath, and faced Sherlock again. "If it does turn out he's still alive... be careful, all right? I've already spent enough time thinking you were dead, you arsehole, let's not do it for real this time."

"Yes," Sherlock said.

They stood in silence for several seconds, then John walked over to him and clapped him on the shoulder and squeezed. The contact was unexpected, but not at all unwelcome. It was grounding, and a tangible expression of John's friendship.

He could always depend on John, was never confused in his affections for him, or felt that he needed to fear or compartmentalise them. John was unswerving stability and safety—a consistent safe harbour.

For a moment he felt the full explanation form on his tongue, felt an almost irresistible temptation to unburden himself with a long, rushed confession to his closest friend, but he managed to keep his lips closed against the words and just accept the fortifying message of the touch. And then John was letting go, giving him a small nod, and moving to the door to collect the suitcase. Sherlock felt his body relax from relief that he had managed to remain silent, and he wouldn't have to watch the look in his eye change, or experience him fuss and worry and, inevitably, judge him.

As he watched John shut the door behind him Sherlock realised that there was another explanation for his relief, as well. Despite everything, he was still very possessive and protective of his relationship and all his interactions with Irene Adler, and John didn't have a place there, as he did almost every other area of Sherlock's life. It was nothing personal against John, it was just the one part of him that he considered absolutely private, to be shared with no one—except, of course...

He tensed again at the thought of Her, as he remembered that the next recipient of the text wouldn't be quite as amenable to his will. Even more problematic was the fact that he hadn't the faintest idea what his will in this situation even was. For the second time in his adult life he was at a complete, untethered loss, and Irene Adler was just as responsible or this situation as she was for the first.

Chapter End Notes

"The fact is, [Sherlock] decides to put all that in an iron box to make his brain work better. Of course, the fact that that iron box bounces around and shakes and bangs from the inside is what makes the story interesting. He wants to rise above us like a snowcapped mountain, but he's actually a volcano, and that's where the story is. You know, you shove Irene Adler in front of him, and he just falls apart like most men would." -Steven Moffat.
Well that's at least in part where *this* story is. Thanks for reading!
Irene sat in the dark interior of the sedan with her face turned towards the window, though the images of strobing headlights and illuminated motorway lamps that reflected against her eyes as she and the driver streaked towards London didn't make more than a superficial impression. She had withdrawn into her mind, and while it wasn't laid out into the rooms and corridors of a palace it was still robust, and it had been given a great deal to consider in the past hour.

After making that night's plan with Sherlock her first inclination had been to spend the afternoon mentally preparing arguments and shoring up her resilience, but an instant later she'd recalled that Mycroft had returned to his office in order to share information, and that certainly took precedence over any emotional self-indulgence.

Irene had put Nero down for a nap and then she and Mycroft had taken seats across from one another in his wingback chairs, where he had informed her that in performing routine background and verification checks on Kate, one of his agents had stumbled upon a critical break in the case. As part of a checklist the MOD woman had paid a visit to Kate's boss, an alleged agoraphobe who only left home to visit his elderly parents—only to discover the house empty not only of its resident but of all its contents. Mycroft had directed his personal assistant Andrea to text Kate an image of Moran, and Kate had positively identified him as the man she'd known as her employer. When Irene had heard that, she had remembered with irony how Kate had dismissed the man as 'harmless'. He might not have shown sexual interest in the other woman but he was the diametric opposite of harmless.

She'd listened with growing fury as Mycroft had explained that further investigation revealed that the property had been purchased in trust of a company called Charterhouse LLC – the same name of the school where Moran and Moriarty had first met, according to Mycroft, when Moran had been a privileged but for all-intents-and-purposes abandoned trust fund child and Moriarty had been a scholarship student. The LLC was a subsidiary of a number of other shell companies, none of which had any holdings or discernible ties to active organisations, so that their only lead was the estate itself.

Irene had insisted upon going on the site visit with Mycroft and he had agreed with surprising readiness. Once the elder Holmes had received confirmation that his advance team had transmitted an electromagnetic pulse that would disable any outstanding surveillance equipment on the property, his aide and chief guard had sped them from Whitehall to the large home originally built by some minor gentry in Surrey. It was located less than an hour from central London and yet the estate felt isolated and obscure, nestled behind hedgerows in its copse of ancient oaks. As someone who had been maintaining her own illusion that she was dead, Irene could see how the place had suited Moran's needs perfectly.

Mycroft had remained silent and pokerfaced as they'd systematically walked through the home, their footsteps echoing in the empty rooms and corridors, but when they'd reached the staff floor at the top of the house he had tilted his head, then made a direct line towards a hall closet. With a sharp twist of his wrist he'd opened the door and glanced inside, and the subtle but unmistakable look of grim satisfaction that crossed his features had told Irene that he'd finally discovered what he'd been seeking.

She had traced his steps and looked into the narrow space as well, but she had to admit that her observation and deduction skills weren't as refined as Mycroft's. Beyond the suspicious and incongruous placement of a new-looking mains outlet, she couldn't see anything informative.
"It's harder to tell these days," he had mused as he'd leaned his shoulder against the doorframe. "The advance of technology means that large scale equipment isn't necessary to perform surveillance—equipment that leaves all sorts of unique marks and wall brackets—nor is it common anymore to find pinholes in the dimension of surveillance photos that have been tacked up.

"But by no means is it difficult," he went on sounding bored, and perhaps disappointed that technology hadn't progressed enough to yet constitute any challenge. "There was a cooling system installed - there." He lifted his umbrella in a vague gesture towards the back wall. "It's been dismantled and removed but you can see by the screw bores and the bevelled discolouration against the wall suggesting vents that this room housed an array of computer equipment, even though his 'home office' was two floors below. Then of course there's the updated electrical work, absolutely essential in an upper floor closet," he said in a dry drawl, pointing the umbrella's metal tip at the outlets Irene had noticed. "This is where the real work was done... Where Moran viewed the data sent by the monitoring equipment we've recovered from Miss Asquith's computer and home."

Irene had felt a chill wrack her frame at that revelation, so casually dropped by Mycroft, and as she'd looked into the dark, vacant closet she had envisioned Moran hunched over monitors with headphones covering his ears as he listened and watched, and waited—perhaps even while Kate was present several floors below.

Even after a single encounter Sebastian Moran already terrified her on a more fundamental level than Jim ever had, and it wasn't just because of the very real and relentless danger he posed to her child. Jim had unnerved her to be sure, and she was always aware of his threat potential, but until the very end she'd been confident that she could stay ahead of his more volatile moods. With him a person could rationalise, and convince him of one's utility, and when she had lost hers in the wake of the SHER Locked debacle, she had understood that the consequences that had followed were a twisted sort of justice—at least according to the terms of the game the two of them had played.

With Moran however she had immediately comprehended that his interest lay inherently with the pain and suffering he could inflict; they weren't merely in service of some greater objective. He had always been Moriarty's blunt instrument, and there neither could nor would be any reasoning with him.

The venture to Surrey had answered several important questions, such as how Moran had first found her in San Francisco: she had let it slip to Kate in one of her only communiqués with her, and then it must've just been a matter of tracing the rumours and whispers about a woman like her. It also accounted for the manner in which he had discovered her location the day before.

But it had raised far more questions than it had resolved, such as how, how Moran could have known to find her and Nero in New Jersey. After fleeing San Francisco she hadn't told a soul where they had gone, and yet like some evil spectre from a horror film he'd still found them.

Nor had it explained why Moran was pursuing her with such hell-bent fury. It felt to her as if he were after revenge, but she'd had nothing to do with the chain of events that had lead to Jim's death, so even if he had told Moran she was still alive prior to his suicide, why was Moran focusing his wrath upon her? In blunt terms, why were John and Sherlock's other loved ones still safe, whilst she was under attack?

Apparently she hadn't been alone in her unassuaged concerns. As they had stood on the circular, gravelled drive waiting for the car that would take her to central London and to Sherlock, Mycroft had been silent and terse, and as the car had drawn up to them he'd confessed, "I've missed something."
He'd grimaced and looked away. "There's more here than meets the eye, this doesn't fit together properly." He had muttered the next part so softly that she had difficulty catching his words. "That will not do."

"I told you from the start that I suspected Jim is behind this," Irene had started, feeling all her instincts and senses rev up to high alert in reaction. "That would explain—"

He'd pursed his lips, his brows furrowing in distracted agitation.

"And I told you, Ms Adler, that is not possible. But..." then he'd shaken his head, and had said no more except to acknowledge her when she'd reiterated instructions about caring for Nero in her absence.

As she'd turned in her seat and watched them both recede in the distance and then disappear when she and her driver pulled through the gates and into the wooded perimeter, she had felt intense foreboding and dread. She hadn't allowed herself to surrender to it though; she'd understood that it was a natural reaction to parting with her child in the wake of everything they had experienced together, and as Mycroft had correctly pointed out, it was a necessary evil. The conversation she and Sherlock would have needed to take place with the two of them alone, no external distractions or further antagonising factors present.

Now her mind was reaching forward rather than backward and the thought of the upcoming meeting filled her with a different kind of fear, although she certainly wouldn't be showing any weakness to Sherlock. She might allow him to see some vulnerability—or rather it might surface whether she intended that or not—and of course once upon a time he had conflated the two as the same thing. Once upon a time she hadn't seen the distinction either, but through her relationship with Sherlock she had come to learn quite a bit about herself and her capacity for not just sentiment, but love. In having Nero she had learned even more, though she still suspected such feelings were confined to dark-haired Holmeses.

Once there had only been one exception; now she had two. And while she was made more susceptible to attack because of her love for both Sherlock and Nero, that love wasn't a weakness in and of itself. Any threat was secondary, dependent, and exogenous rather than endogenous, although she could admit that it was nuanced distinction. Unfortunately, Sherlock might not just shut his eyes to that nuance, but disagree on principle. Given what he had been through with her and how much he had sacrificed on behalf of his closest friends, she imagined that he might once more view sentiment itself as a direct and inherent threat.

Certainly at the end of their time in Karachi she had watched him walk down the gangplank secure in the knowledge that he had grown to not just accept but even value his feelings for her, and had perhaps even integrated them (and her) into his so-called Mind Palace. It was only when she had seen the unanswered yet displayed postcard in the photograph accompanying his interview in The Guardian that she had become less confident. The card had struck her as a talisman against the sentiment he felt for her, which meant that the question wasn't whether he did still feel anything for her, it was whether he had once more categorised that sentiment as a detraction from or distraction to the life he wanted. She suspected that the answer was now a resounding yes.

Knowing Sherlock, he had viewed his return to London as an opportunity to reconstruct his life in accordance with an ideal. He would have incorporated values and objectives he esteemed whilst eliminating anything that might impede the purity of his brainwork; every decision and action he'd made since his return would have been in conscientious service towards that goal. Unfortunately, in the aftermath of the sacrifice he'd made for his friends, and as the immediacy and intensity of what they'd shared in Karachi receded ever into the past, she had to believe he wouldn't allow for
any such attachments in his new life. So no, it wasn't gone but it was certainly repressed as much as possible; Sherlock was more masterful at compartmentalisation and sublimation of his desires than even the most kinky yet vanilla-presenting bureaucrats she'd ever had under her lash or stiletto.

Though it would hurt - far more than she cared to contemplate in the moments potentially preceding it - she could accept a rejection of that sort of relationship. She was far more concerned with what a reaction of constructed indifference would mean for Nero.

Her arms tightened in automatic response as if trying to clutch her son more securely to her, and she felt another spike of anxiety over their separation, but then her face hardened in parallel with her resolve.

This was Sherlock Holmes, and although sentiment was never a guarantor of gaining his attention and in fact risked causing the reverse effect, a case was. She could, if circumstances called for it, appeal to the detective in him. She only hoped that his potential distrust of her wouldn't prove so inhibitive that he wouldn't even believe that there was any danger to investigate; that would be the worst-case scenario.

She frowned as she considered that, tactically, she should play down the threats to herself so that Sherlock didn't take any discussion of her being in danger as an attempt to emotionally manipulate him, but moreover she should avoid actually saying the name Moran if possible (even if Sherlock would see straight through it). Because as convoluted and problematic as their history made the present situation, Moran was just as integral to a different and yet equally thorny issue for Sherlock. Sherlock had sacrificed deeply and over a long period of time to safeguard his friends and ensure that the entirety of Moriarty's network had been dismantled, one component at a time, and to discover that Moran was still alive would render everything he had done irrelevant. To add insult to injury, Sherlock had only returned to London when he had been satisfied beyond reasonable doubt that Moran had been killed, and if the man turned up alive it would mean that Sherlock had been egregiously fooled.

The familiar thought of But how could anyone but Jim pull off something like that? burst into her mind again, and her heart gave another jolt, this time unrelated to seeing Sherlock. And yet she knew that Mycroft was telling her the truth about supervising Moriarty's cremation. Even if she hadn't already known he had every personal and professional reason to do so, his expression just before they'd parted ways had confirmed it.

The car pulled off of the Marylebone Road and she recognised that they were only moments from Sherlock's street, and with disappointing predictability, her breath seized in her chest as a wave of dizziness passed through her. It was fleeting, but it left her feeling slightly lightheaded and heavy-limbed.

The sedan came to a smooth stop in front of Sherlock's door and then idled, but she didn't exit immediately. She leaned forward to gaze up at the terraced home and saw a single lamp shining from the first floor windows, but when a shadow shifted against the net curtains, she leaned back again, her heart skipping a beat and then escalating into double-time.

Her pride wouldn't let her linger any longer. It wouldn't do to let him see her hesitate, and so she squared her shoulders, pressed on the door handle, then thrust it wide open and stretched out one slim and partly bare leg.

At the stoop she took a final steadying breath, then reached for the handle and found it unlocked. She would take that as a promising sign, though she still couldn't help but feel apprehensive as she climbed the stairs. When she'd first broken in over two years ago she hadn't appreciated the extent to which his home was his refuge—and in many ways as much of a fortress as his heart. She had
once broken into both without invitation and with impunity, but now she felt unwelcome and uncharacteristically leery.

As she turned on the landing and began to mount the final flight toward his flat she experienced a brief yet vivid flashback of the night that she had been lead from her makeshift cell to a large, crumbling asphalt room lit with over-bright halogen lights, the site of her intended execution. Her lips pursed into a quick frown, irritated that she should think of that night. She rarely let her thoughts drift to those moments that preceded Sherlock's appearance and now wasn't the time to dwell on anything but the situation at hand, which was quite enough to be going on with.

A moment later she entered the room to find Sherlock positioned at the opposite end, as far from the entrance as possible. He faced away from her towards the windows and his posture was rigid, his arms clasped behind his back in an almost militaristic pose. Every line of his body was taut and stiff and tension rolled off of him, creating the effect of a forcefield. She traced her eyes over the imposing figure he made, and recognised that he was wearing his own version of battle armour. His suit was impeccably tailored and pressed, there wasn't a curl out of place in a head of hair so overly-treated with product that it resembled helmet, and his collar was high and starched around his neck like a gorget.

She knew he was a self-trained expert on body language and so he had deliberately crafted an image that exuded strength, emotional imperviousness, and iron resolve. Unfortunately for Sherlock gauging people's emotional states was one arena in which she bested him, and she could see past the pretence to the anxiety and uncertainty beneath.

When she did make her way fully into the room she saw his shoulders give a small rise and fall as he took in what she knew he'd consider a traitorous steadying breath of his own.

"The large four-legged piece of furniture in the second bedroom," he said after a beat of silence, his back still to her. "It wasn't a desk, it was a cot."

She said nothing, but then, he hadn't needed her confirmation.

A moment later he turned to her in a swift about-face, and his expression was closed and steely.

He eyed the vicinity around her before looking at her, then asked, "You're alone?"

"Yes," she said, closing more distance between them. She suspected he was referring to Nero without having to speak his name, and her thoughts were confirmed with his next words.

"Have you left him with that other woman?" he asked in a rapid, brusque tone as if he were just establishing the basic facts of the situation before moving forward, but Irene found it interesting that he phrased the question in such a way, particularly since he was well aware of Kate's name. She didn't comment, though; she had to be selective about which battles she chose, especially since she wasn't certain what awaited them beyond the inevitable row about their son. Where the two of them were concerned there was always so much more lingering beneath the surface than the obvious, and he could be mercurial and therefore difficult to read, even for her.

Besides, part of her was unprepared to pull on that thread. She still wasn't entirely sure how much of his struggle was to do with how he felt about their ubiquitous emotional and physical attraction, and how much was his severe anxiety over surprise fatherhood and how it would upend his hard-won life back at Baker Street.

"No - with your brother," she answered.
The suggestion of a thundercloud passed across Sherlock's face and though it dissipated almost at once and his features returned to neutral, Irene knew that it was only through significant exertion.

She felt a pang of compassion for him as she understood that his stoic, aloof manner would be arduous if not impossible to maintain with her, even in spite of his ability to compartmentalise. He might be able to reach such a frame of mind through sustained and reinforced effort, but he had never been capable of regulating or censoring himself around her in the heat of a moment. Regardless of his views towards her, she would always be able to upset his careful homeostasis. He considered her a peer in general and in some ways even his better, but she suspected the essential reason for it was that he'd once revealed to her the vast province of his heart, and he could never rescind the intimacy and vulnerability that that had created.

And now in addition to all of that she was the mother of his child—one that he'd never expected nor wanted.

She swept her eyes down and then back up his body, and saw that already there were cracks in the mortar of that façade. His cheeks showed traces of colour and his interwoven hands were vice-like grips, and they hadn't even begun to approach the crux of the complicated situation between them.
Through the Looking Glass

The low light in the room bounced off of the interior of the windows and made them mirrors, so that when Irene Adler had moved into the space Sherlock saw her reflected clearly in the glass. Sherlock's decision to position himself at the far end of the room had been deliberate, but he hadn't been prepared for just how much his expression would betray how she affected him, and he had been grateful that when he'd first caught sight of her his face had been angled away. It had given him the opportunity to tutor his features, straighten his spine, and steel himself against the woman, unmistakably The Woman once again, who had walked through the door.

Still, he had already felt ill-equipped for this confrontation, as though he were entering into a duel outmatched, and those feelings were only augmented by the undeniable and enduring attraction he had towards her. It had been like a punch to the gut when she'd first entered the room, and had driven the breath from his diaphragm just as effectively. The research into early childhood development and benchmarks he'd done in the wake of John's departure that afternoon dispersed into vapour in the face of seeing Irene restored to her full splendour once more.

Her hair wasn't pinned up into the elaborate ridges and curls she'd worn when they had first met, but the dress she wore was undoubtedly of that vintage, and it fit her in a way he almost resented. Because while he had been cognisant of her words at the outset of their exchange and responsive in turn, he was distracted by the curves the beautifully-tailored white dress flaunted whilst concealing, as well as the smooth skin it revealed. He hadn't seemed able to tear his gaze away from the architectural capped sleeves in particular, which didn't didn't lay flush against her upper arms. Instead there were 2.5 centimetres of space there—just enough room for a finger to stroke up her arm and skim under the material. He had felt a prickling frisson of energy passing over his own skin, electrifying it, and layering their unique brand of tension over the inherently stressful confrontation.

But at her mention of Mycroft Sherlock snapped out of the mildly unfocussed state, and he felt a coil of bitterness tighten within him. He resisted the urge to start pacing and instead pressed the back his knuckles to his mouth before pushing the hand through his rigid waves. He had expended unprecedented effort to ensure that Irene was safe and protected from The British Government, and yet now the man personified was far more familiar with the ongoing fallout of that time than Sherlock himself.

The information asymmetry was unacceptable, he seethed, focusing on his indignation whilst resolutely ignoring other potential sources of the scalding sensation (jealousy? No, absurd. Or if yes, then of data. Of knowledge).

Still he couldn't help but spit out, his bitterness audible, "Ah yes, my brother. Making me the last to know."

Irene looked unfazed but not unsympathetic as she answered after a beat, "That wasn't originally the intention."

He didn't give in to the impulse to roll his eyes and instead kept them fixed onto hers. "Do you really expect me believe that? Irene Adler, who never had a waylaid plan or mislaid ambition. Who—"

"You once told me, 'no more Irene Adler,'" Irene interrupted smoothly. "Which was a direct consequence of a waylaid plan, if you'll recall."
"But you still had a plan, that's the point. And maybe it wasn't so 'waylaid' after all, since on account of Karachi you now have everything you wanted in the first place.

"And as for no more Irene Adler, that doesn't seem to be the case," he said in a louder voice, since it had softened and veered close to sounding vulnerable. "Here you are, back in London—back in couture..." His lips twisted with derision on that word.

Irene remained silent for a moment as if to acknowledge that at least those words of his were true, then said in a low but firm voice, "You were wrong in Karachi when you thought I still had something in play, and you're wrong now. Getting pregnant wasn't part of any plan."

The smirk froze and then dropped from his face, and he felt a tide of undiluted panic sweep from his head down through his entire body, making his ears ring and his heart pound. He wasn't ready to confront that particular issue head-on, and to hear her state it so frankly had caught him unprepared.

"The conception, yes," he recovered enough to say with a faint sneer, though he still held his stiff posture. "The very thing that secured you all you thought lost. You claim it was an accident, but it's convenient, isn't it, that an IUD is entirely internal—I had no choice but to take you at your word that sufficient precaution was being taken. Between an IUD and Depo-Provera, you were smart to say you got an IUD; I'd have been able to tell if you'd had a jab."

"It wasn't 'convenient' at all, as it turned out," Irene said, bristling slightly, and some lurking part of him was gratified that he'd managed to get a rise out of her, small as it was. In the dimness of the room her eyes seemed to flash like patrolcar lightbars, blue and black with hints of a red fury, as she went on: "And the suggestion that I would ever entrap you with a child is dull, lazy, and beneath you. I thought you might have been a better judge of me than that. Or is that all you've done since you've been back: watched Jeremy Kyle and let it rot your brain?"

Sherlock felt his cheeks warm though he somehow managed to keep his composure, and he felt a stab of masochistic pride at how well he was managing his potentially volatile emotions.

"We've only spent a handful of days together, so on the matter of whether I know you, I'd say no," he said, his voice cold.

"That's odd, I read in the Moriarty trial transcripts that you claimed to have known all you needed about him within a matter of minutes," she rejoined. "Two, was it? I'd have thought that days with me would be more than sufficient—am I really so much more complex?" She made a thoughtful sound. "I'll take that as a compliment."

Her statement was at once both accurate and inadequate. Upon their introduction a fraction of a second had been sufficient to tell him that he had met someone worthy of interest. Fifteen minutes after they'd met he'd realised that she was far more than just interesting, she was something he'd thought he'd never find: a kindred mind. That it was connected with someone he found physically appealing—almost as much of a rarity—had only compounded his enthrallment of her, though he'd tried to dismiss it as spill-over attraction for her intellect. But then, even after the months of texting and innuendo and the days of singularly intense intimacy between them, she was only a slightly better known quantity than she'd been after that initial meeting, though he still couldn't necessarily trust what he thought he knew about her. She remained the most entrancing and intoxicating, yet maddening enigma he had ever encountered.

Still, there was always precedent to rely upon...

"Make no mistake," he said, "what I do know is plenty sufficient: that you're apt to use any
resource at hand to further your agenda. Meaning this is right up your alley."

Her eyes as they looked into his were flint, and he saw that he'd struck a nerve. He felt a flicker of remorse, but deliberately shored up his defences again and met her glare with an unflinching stare of his own.

"IUDs are one of the most effective birth controls there are," he went on, in an escalating tone he usually reserved for honing in on a break to a case. "I'm supposed to just accept you're part of the 0.01 percent?"

"We," Irene corrected, her voice even again. "And yes. I have medical records showing I had an IUD implanted during our time together in Pakistan."

Sherlock let out a soft but sardonic laugh. "You've taught me not to trust any record you provide as evidence, is that really the best you can do?"

"Yes. That's the best I can do, since none of this was intentional."

He said nothing, just assessed her with a stony expression that conveyed his scepticism and distrust, and Irene crossed her arms.

It was the first defensive gesture she'd made, but he couldn't tell whether it stemmed from her preparing to tell a lie, or because she was feeling vulnerable to him. Rationally he wanted to dismiss it as the former, but something elusive and indefinable kept him uncertain. Or was that just another example of sentiment making him its fool?

Of course it is, don't be an idiot, he thought angrily.

"You might recall that I'd lost quite a bit of weight, and IUD efficacy can be reduced by that because it affects its fit," she said. "I grant that it isn't much, but my obstetrician agrees that it's the likely cause."

To his dismay, Sherlock's mind instantly proffered images of how she had looked at that time, painfully, borderline dangerously thin due to her incarceration, and yet still undeniably attractive to him because she was alive, and her mind was as brilliant and extraordinary as ever.

It...was plausible. But then of course it would be, coming from her lips.

He gave a rumbling growl of frustration and scrubbed at his eyes, feeling inundated by data and problematic emotions, and the ever-thorny concept of trust in regards to her. It appeared his self-congratulations on his self-control had been somewhat premature.

"Sherlock," she said in a gentler and more intimate tone, and to his disgust he felt himself responding in the same way he always had when she spoke his name. A bloom of pleasure warmed his chest, and though he tried to shove it away - angry with himself for his ongoing susceptibility, and angry with her for apparently sensing his moment of vulnerability and exploiting it - the feeling didn't dissipate.

"It was an accident," she said, looking into his eyes. "This changes nothing about what happened between us in Karachi."

"On that we agree," he snapped, and his vexation at how she'd managed to get past his armaments and under his skin gave his words even more bite. "It doesn't change anything that happened 'between us,' but it does reveal it for what it was."
Her crossed arms tightened and she said, "What it 'really was' was something neither of us expected to experience with someone else."

With a shake of his head he looked away, but his eyes fell upon their reflection in the over-mantel mirror, and his heart gave a jolt at the unexpected rightness of that image. With the two of them framed in the confines of the glass, she filled the negative space in front of him - the top of her head corresponding with the hollow beneath his chin - perfectly. The sight also filled and warmed the non-visible voids; those she had carved out for herself almost two years before which he had thought he'd (if not filled in, then at least) paved over. But with an intake of breath followed by a firm swallow, he averted his eyes from the mirror as well, denying himself the sight and all the rush of emotions that came with it.

She had noticed; there was no chance her sharp, shrewd gaze could've missed the way his eyes had lingered over the image or the way his expression had become tender, even if for an instant. He had confirmed her words in a way that no verbal denial could ever refute, and he was irate with himself at the tactical error.

When she continued to speak, her tone confirmed that she had seen, and (of course) understood, everything.

"And it resulted in a situation that neither of us expected to experience as well. But now we have to put our history and our egos aside, and act on behalf of my - our - child."

Those words induced a falling, rushing sensation, and he felt as if he were standing on sand that was giving way under his feet as the tide swept out, and that he was in peril of being pulled out to sea as well.

"You had it right the first time: your child," he shot out, focusing on minor detail rather than the whole.

She gave a quiet, bittersweet laugh. "As much as you may wish that were the case, he wouldn't have been made possible without your participation."

"So my brother likes to repeatedly remind me," Sherlock growled, almost to himself.

"Mycroft believes me now, you know," she said, fixing him with a look that told him she knew exactly how much mentioning his brother's name would agitate, particularly since it highlighted the reversal of previous dynamics he and Mycroft now had with Irene. "At the start he was as convinced as you are that I was putting some long con into play or exploiting the situation. Perhaps more legitimately so, since I'm not entirely sure you really believe what you're saying, or if you're just compensating for something else."

His stomach dropped at that, but he retorted, "Hardly; you've given me every reason not to trust your motives. If you'd believed yourself in danger, you could have contacted me directly. But no. Instead you went behind my back to my brother, who, oh! just happens to be holder of the appropriations purse strings and the de facto director of the Secret Service."

"I needed to get into the country—preferably without being apprehended and detained the instant I arrived—so yes, I contacted Mycroft first. Once here, I was going to consider the best way to tell you everything in person." Several seconds later she added in a lower, more sincere voice, "You were never meant to find out the way you did."

"You say that like you believe I care," Sherlock sneered, a knee-jerk reaction to the sensation of vulnerability, anger, and hurt that swelled up at both her words and the way she spoke them.
"Oh, you care," Irene murmured, not deceived for an instant. "In fact, you think you care far too much."

He stared at her for several seconds, then clenched his eyes and teeth shut, and took a deep breath through his nose. When he opened them, he had once more schooled his expression into one of cold, unyielding determination.

"Just suffice it to say, you've more than taken your retribution for me denying you what you wanted in the first place, and nearly getting you executed in the aftermath. So yes, I do care that you've disrupted my entire life here. But I don't care how you raise him, where you—"

"Oh enough, Sherlock," she said sharply, looking at him in open displeasure, and it felt like a blow even as the emotionally-self-sabotaging part of him revelled in it. "This posturing is a waste of our time and accomplishes nothing. I know you're lying and I know why, because I know you. It's funny, Mycroft thought it was all an elaborate plan to target him at the beginning, too. But it wasn't, and it isn't even about you and me. That's not why I'm here."

Before he could digest what she'd said about his brother, she continued, "This is about protecting our son, and so I also went to your brother first because as 'de facto director' of British Intelligence, Mycroft is in a position to help ensure our protection."

"No," Sherlock shot back, his voice hard and a prickling heat spreading across his skin. "That's what I did, when I created a new identity for you and got you a flat in America."

Irene eyed him for several seconds, then glanced off to the side.

"Sometimes I do think about how things might've turned out if I'd stayed in New York as Erin Sigerson," she said a moment later. "But I've always made my own way in the world, Sherlock—on my own, my way."

At once he imagined how that would have affected the course of his own life. One thought dominated all the others: he could have seen her in his time away from London. A slight obstruction formed in his throat as he contemplated what it would've been like to have an anchor point, stability, and someone in whom he could have confided. He could have used an ally who wasn't his brother, who had in the few times they'd conversed been detached and (aside from a throw-away line saying that he trusted Sherlock was holding up fine) uninterested in discussing matters outside of planning and logistics. In the context of their relationship anything else would've been awkward and unwelcome, but he had come to understand that as much as he had always strived to emulate Mycroft, he wasn't his brother, and in more ways than he was willing to do exhaustive legwork. For one, their comforts and their concepts of 'home' came in different forms. Mycroft's was his isolated, dusky office at the Diogenes Club or his private control room at Whitehall, and in the absence of John and his other friends, Sherlock's could have been Irene. He gave a mental flinch when he recalled that it still had been, except that his Mind Palace's avatar of The Woman had been an inadequate consolation that had only exemplified the depth of his loneliness at that time.

But no, it was better the way it had been, he assured himself with slight desperation. That arrangement would've done nothing but distract him from his work; he would've been lulled into complacency and lacked the urgency and incentive to fulfil his mission or even, perhaps, to return...

Although if Moran really were alive, what difference did all his sacrifice and isolation make?
He felt his lips pull away from his teeth in an involuntary grimace, and rejected the thought. It was almost as unthinkable as the fact that he had a son—and had nearly as many implications for his current life.

"And yet here you are, enlisting the help of my brother. Hardly doing things on your own..."

"Exigent circumstances," she said. After a short pause she added, "And I've also always been very good at adapting."

"And by 'exigent circumstances', you mean Moran," Sherlock said, ignoring the way the last part of her statement sparked further distrust and suspicion about what had happened in, and as a result of, Karachi. "Since you claim to have seen a man matching his description yesterday."

"Claim"— Irene repeated, her brows rising.

"Tell me," Sherlock spat, cutting her off as she opened her mouth to say more. "When you, Jim, and Seb all sat round tea to discuss ways to manipulate the Holmes brothers, did the pregnancy approach ever come up? Or was that too ambitious considering Moriarty's nickname for me—and was just another instance of you 'adapting.'"

Sherlock guessed that Irene was momentarily tempted to slap him by the way her fingertips flexed and her eyes hardened and sparked like the matching diamonds that adorned her ears once more, and he felt a heady, reckless rush from it. A driving part of him continued to want to make her angry, to provoke her, and maybe even wanted to make her hate him. Then perhaps the burden of retaining distance between them - distance which was the only way he knew to lessen the static of his attraction and interest - would no longer fall to him, since he sensed he might not be up to that task.

"I'd never seen him before I relocated to San Francisco," she said, and he was disappointed to hear that her voice didn't betray the momentary pulse of anger her face had broadcasted, and instead she now looked compassionate, which was the opposite of how he wanted her to look at him (and yet also felt like exactly what he needed, to his frustration).

"Well," he said, curt. "You couldn't have seen him there, either. He's dead. I made sure of it."

"The way your brother was certain I was dead?" she asked, wielding the single raised eyebrow that always managed always to make him feel reduced, or weighed and found lacking.

"I don't know if you've noticed this, but I can be rather clever," he said, flushing and averting his eyes. "Moran, not so much. Dog fighting and enforcement were in his wheelhouse, not elaborate death hoaxes that could stand up even to my scrutiny. The only person who would've had both motive and capability is nothing more than ash."

"I know why you're so resistant to the idea; it would mean that when you came back to London you were jeopardising everyone you loved, everyone for whom you'd sacrificed so much. But tell me, why would I lie?"

His head snapped towards her so quickly that he felt as if he'd given himself whiplash, and a dozen remarks flooded through his brain before he choked out, "Is that meant to be a serious question?"

"Yes. As you've just said, I do have everything I originally wanted. Mycroft confirmed that to you last night."

"Maybe - maybe," Sherlock said with heavy sarcasm, "you might have told me the truth immediately, the moment you learned that you'd conceived—even before you were felt you in
danger, or needed anything from me or members of my family. Taking your story at face value for just a moment, of course," he added with faint derision.

Irene's long, dark eyelashes brushed the tops of her cheekbones as she cast her eyes downward, and she looked frustrated.

Then she looked back into his eyes and said, "I was going to. I'd worked out just how I was going to do it."

Sherlock suppressed the sceptical noise he wanted to make, and gave her no response.

"But I found out I was pregnant just prior to Moriarty's crime and trial, and I knew mustn't distract or disrupt you then, so I put it off. And then..." she trailed off, and he knew to what she alluded, but he refused to let her off the hook.

"Fine. Except that I've been back for ten months," he said, his voice stiff and distorted from the effort not to raise it.

"And I reached out to you the moment I learned you were alive."

"You gave me an address," he shot back, his voice raising. "That's hardly the information I was owed, wouldn't you agree?"

He felt his throat constrict around those words, and at first he couldn't understand why. A moment later he realised that he had spoken aloud the notion that he was owed something by her—that he felt she had certain obligations to him, given who she was to him, and she had failed him. He hadn't been aware that he still harboured concepts of connection and mutual responsibility, but when he had said that, the pain he felt informed him in no uncertain terms that he did.

"I offered you a way to contact me and you ignored it. You made it clear that you couldn't or were unwilling to include..." she gave an uncharacteristic pause as she seemed to search for the right words, "something like what we shared, in your new life. I respected that. And I wanted to give you time to rebuild that life before I introduced you to—"

"Exactly - I wasn't operating with all the data, was I?" Sherlock overrode, not ready to hear her voice that name.

Irene stood silent and introspective for the passage of several breaths.

"Would you have done anything differently if you were?" she asked. "Would you have taken on the new challenge or would you have resented Nero for distracting you from your work and tarnishing your image as this impervious God of Intellect? ...As you apparently do now."

His first reaction was begrudging amazement that she still seemed to understand him better than anyone else whom he'd ever met, since he'd asked himself that precise question earlier that day, and it made him feel both exposed and thrilled. But those paradoxical emotions were obliterated by the ones set off a millisecond later by hearing her speak their son's name aloud.

"Nero," Sherlock repeated dully, feeling like he'd received the slap across the face that Irene had withheld after all. Even though he had heard the name from Mycroft and had spoken it himself earlier that day, it was the first time he had heard it from her lips since the original bombshell the day before. Something about hearing her say it caused shockwaves to reverberate through him again, forcibly reminding him that none of this was hypothetical. This wasn't just a contest of wills or about who could land the most winning shots. They were discussing an actual person, a person whom they'd created together and who would only grow, and mature, and become ever more
conscientious. The seriousness and permanence of it plunged down on him like an anvil, and he felt his knees nearly buckle under the weight of it.

Whether the conception had been accidental or intended, whether Irene had kept the child because of... love, sentiment... or means to an end, none of that mattered in any real way; none of those things changed or undid the current situation. Sherlock had a child, a likely brilliant, incredible child who was on the brink of an explosion of cognitive development, and a child who was, as of now, an innocent.

But what did Sherlock want? Ah, that was ever the question when it came to The Woman, wasn't it? She incited civil wars within him and made his two natures vie for supremacy: the man he ever strove to be, and the man he was, whom she saw in entirety.

His life wasn't as well-established as he liked to portray; he had tried to restore the status quo and even improve upon it, but he had been gone too long for that to be a possibility. Most significantly Sherlock had returned to find that someone else had usurped his role of most important person in John Watson's life. John was engaged to be married, and though many of his belongings remained at Baker Street, he essentially lived with Mary Morstan in Clapham. After their wedding, things would alter even more, and another tenet of his life—which he had taken for granted as being set on pause in his absence—would change in ways he couldn't anticipate.

In the aftermath of the worst of Sherlock's struggle with opiates addiction, he had embraced and clung onto the mindset that he was in supreme control of himself, his actions, and his future. He had needed to believe that then, and he had only incorporated those things into his life which could reinforce that view. He had to begun work with greater consistency with then-DI Lestrade, who had essentially let him assert his will at crime scenes and subsequent investigations, and he had chosen to let from Mrs. Hudson, who gave him mild scoldings from time to time but ultimately allowed him to live as he pleased. Even his friendship with John had seemed to adhere to that pattern at the beginning, with the other man validating his talents and life-choices by calling him brilliant and blogging about their cases. And yet in the past two years he had been slowly divested of the illusion that he could always enjoy perfect autonomy or the upper hand. Even when he and his brother had planned for every eventuality in the final confrontation with Moriarty and were ostensibly in control of that situation, he had been unprepared for the actual consequences of the Lazarus plan: living in hiding with the sole purpose of removing cog after cog from Jim's machine. He was further disillusioned when he had returned home. He had expected to discover everything in a state of suspended animation, and had instead found that life had moved on without him, and in ways that posed a threat to everything he had built.

But nothing had shattered his previous illusions as much as this. And now he was forcibly confronted with the question of whether he would he still attempt to live his life as he had for years - good, no, great years - or would he adapt? And if he did turn his back on the viewpoint that he had espoused for so long, and to which he could attribute so much personal success, what would it mean for his future... for being the man he'd always considered himself?


Sherlock swallowed, and his face crumpled in an expression of torment as he finally lost the thin veneer of resolve he'd been struggling to uphold since she'd arrived. (No. That was a lie. He'd been struggling ever since Mycroft had walked into his flat several days before and had spoken the name that had had the power to disrupt him for far longer than that of his son's: 'Irene Adler."

"You have no idea what this is like, to have this... information... thrust upon me," he said, his voice low with anguish. "What am I expected to do with it? I have a life. Do you know how difficult,
"Yes, I do," Irene cut in, her posture straightening so that she stood toe to toe with him at her full height.

"No you don't!" Sherlock shouted down at her, and it felt dangerously liberating to finally give in.

"Yes. I know exactly what it's like," Irene hissed up in return, colour starting to infuse her cheeks as well. "You're not the only one who had to start all over again, or have you already forgotten? I was making a life for myself in San Francisco, cultivating a clientele. I was satisfied, all things considered. Whips and chains and soothers and nappies can mix, but not like that."

"And yet you chose," he said with reproach, their faces only inches apart.

"Yes, I chose," she said, but then some of the defiance seemed to sap from her. "And so can you."

Sherlock shook his head, his lips drawn into a narrow line, and he whipped his shoulder around and stalked to the fireplace. "No. No, not like that," he said, focusing on the mantelpiece. "You could have terminated but you made the decision to carry it to term. You made the choice for the both of us to be—to become... parents." He spat out the word like it was profane.

"I chose to keep our child, yes."

Sherlock grimaced, and he screwed his eyes shut against her words.

"Why, though. Why?" he asked, turning again and opening his eyes to drill them into hers. "If, as you say, a child was the last thing you'd ever planned for—?"

Irene stared at him with incredulity and gave a slow shake of her head.

"You must realise why..." she finally said, surveying him with a look of disbelief.

He looked at her, at a loss and resentful over not catching her meaning, then gave a sharp snap of his head.

"Oh for God's sake, Sherlock," Irene exclaimed, her voice sounding strangled. "Think."

He felt blood rush into his face and he snapped, "Beyond tactical gains I can't imagine any reason why you of all people would want—"

"I thought you were dead!"

At her outburst he blinked and his mouth closed, but other than that, he gave no visible reaction. To the contrary he froze in place, his mind racing as he once more parsed his timeline with hers. When he did, he saw that the chronology of events aligned.

He refocused on her, and took in her face and her overall demeanour. Her breathing had become fast and shallow, the high colour in her cheeks stood out in stark contrast to the pallor of her skin, her eyes were wide and dark but intense, her slim brows were drawn together, and her lips were slightly parted. The overall effect created that familiar, inexorable pull towards her once more and he felt his heart lurch traitorously, and then start to pound hard up against his ribcage.

He believed her. Despite the alarm bells ringing in his head warning him not to accept a word Irene Adler said, warning that of course any story she concocted would correspond with all the facts, he did. An instant later it struck him that if he found her explanation for why she hadn't ended the
pregnancy credible, he also must accept that Moran had somehow survived Sherlock's purge; if she had kept the child for personal reasons rather than strategic ones, it followed that she didn't have the agenda that would necessitate inventing some outside threat.

After another moment he realised that at least in part he had resisted believing either assertion - that Irene had no ulterior motives for having their baby, that Moran was still alive - because if he accepted one he must accept the other as well, and both had very different yet equally catastrophic and far-reaching repercussions. He had still been resisting the idea that *Sherlock Holmes* could ever permit things to spiral so out of his control, but if he were to retain any vestige of his former self at all, he must not sacrifice fact for illusion; data for ego; the easy for the difficult.

Believing her on this one point didn't necessarily affect the mountain of other contentious issues between them, but it did shift something fundamental within him—something which he could no longer resist or deny.

"And I couldn't..." she went on, taking in a low breath, "bring myself to terminate the last living part of you. After that my decision was made, regardless of the cost to me, or to my plans. When you stepped off that ledge, it wasn't only your life that was changed forever."

She gave a shrug though it didn't come across as cavalier as she might've intended. "Well, as you like to say – sentiment."

Sherlock continued to stare at her, and the moment seemed to distil and go on for a very long time.
West of London in the verdant county of Surrey, Mycroft gazed down on the infant entrusted to his care as his driver and bodyguard, Anthony, circled around the car to open the rear door for them. The child stared back, and his blue eyes were wide, serious, and bright with intelligent awareness. Mycroft could see the ways in which Irene had contributed genetic material, particularly in the boy's nose and chin, but he couldn't get over the uncanny overall resemblance to his brother, and Sherlock's words about Mycroft feeling the need to 'get it right' the second time round echoed in his mind. He supposed that his initial emotional reaction could be attributed to how much he resembled Sherlock at that age, but to his great surprise he now felt a genuine fondness and instinct of protectiveness for Nero himself.

He thought of the ongoing and delicate political negotiations that he had believed threatened by the very existence of an Adler-Holmes child, and considered with bemusement what a difference a few days could make. He knew now that if the situation forced his hand, he would burn every professional bridge he had and send Britain's projected foreign policy into flames to ensure his nephew's safety. Perhaps Sherlock had been right about his need to make amends via the next generation, because he was now willing to go to lengths that he never had for his younger brother. But then, Sherlock was relatively capable and savvy on his own, whilst Nero was just an infant, and between Mycroft's sense of paternalism towards the nation and towards Nero, the latter would in fact come first. He intended to avoid matters coming to such a crux, and he would explore all avenues before he put himself in the line of fire, and yet...

He could admit to himself that he felt concern for a far more mundane reason as well: he hadn't looked after a child since he was little more than one himself, and even then he'd been rubbish at it. Until Sherlock had learned how to communicate at a better-than proficient level, he hadn't had much time or patience for him, and even after that Mycroft had often found it tedious and trying to interact with his younger sibling. It wasn't until their parents made the ghastly decision to integrate them both into school that he had discovered that his capabilities far exceeded the norm, and that by comparison Sherlock was – maybe, somewhat – clever. But by that point the kind of fraternal support Sherlock had needed hadn't had a thing to do with feedings or nappies.

Because despite both their exceptional (albeit not commensurate) intellects, the two Holmes brothers had not been alike. Secure in his absolute superiority, Mycroft hadn't cared about how his virtuosity had isolated him from others, and his imperviousness had given him significant if suspicion-tinged social immunity in school. Sherlock, on the other hand, had always craved validation to some extent, and, as children do, his classmates had picked up on that vulnerability, and had reacted without mercy. Perhaps Mycroft was to blame, for unintentionally instilling in Sherlock a latent inferiority complex, which had then been reinforced in other ways by the social rejection of his peers. And perhaps he had been even more to blame for not extending his own cachet to his brother when they were boys, though he felt that he had rather more than compensated for that lapse in their adulthoods.

But at the time, his brother hadn't been able to understand what was wrong with him. Mycroft would overhear Sherlock tearfully telling their mother that Mycroft had always said he was an idiot, but according to the boys in his year he was a freak and a weirdo for the way he knew the things he did, and that it didn't make any sense—which was it? Their mum had comforted him as best as she could by telling him to ignore Myc and assuring him that the other boys were just envious of how clever and gifted he, Billy, was, but Mycroft knew that that hadn't been a satisfactory enough explanation for Sherlock. As a child Sherlock never had figured out the answer to that, had never figured out where he fit in.
Sherlock had slowly disengaged from his classmates, and Mycroft had approved of what he considered the 'new and improved' version of his brother, viewing it as a sign of maturity and a victory for Sherlock's ability to exert self-control and prioritise what really mattered, brainwork. At the time he had smugly congratulated himself for being such a consistent and substantive role model for his younger brother, who, he had come to recognise, did have great potential. With the exception of when Sherlock had regressed and started using, the brothers had enjoyed—if not a closeness—at least a better understanding with one another after that.

But now Mycroft saw what a part of him had always suspected but ignored. Sherlock had never changed, at least not entirely; he had attempted to 'fake it until you make it,' to use a crude colloquialism. Mycroft was sure that it had been a desperately sincere undertaking, and it was true that Sherlock had cultivated a formidable outer shell and intimidating persona in adulthood, but beneath that hard mantel beat almost the same heart.

'Almost,' because to some extent Sherlock had succeeded in his effort, though it would never be a native impulse as it was for Mycroft, but an uneasy compromise between nature and nurture. Sherlock's vulnerability had transformed into a studied apathy and arrogance that had become ingrained as second-nature, and he pre-emptively rejected almost everyone, on the basis that contrary to what he believed in his early childhood - he was an exceptional man with an exceptional mind. Still, Sherlock would never entirely escape his essential self or the ghosts of childhood that haunted him, and so he did still crave the validation of those very few people who mattered to him.

That's what made Irene Adler so dangerous. Despite all of Sherlock's protests, she clearly did matter—too much, Mycroft daresaid. The Woman and her child could either dismantle everything Sherlock had built, as Mycroft had originally worried, and therefore destroy his brother (*Dear God, it would be Redbeard all over again, but multiplied a hundred-fold*), or else fulfil him in a way Sherlock hadn't considered truly wanting for himself since he was a boy.

Mycroft had once made a similar pronouncement about Sherlock's burgeoning friendship with Dr John Watson, and fortunately John had for the most part proven a great asset, but Irene Adler was an entirely different entity who brought with her an entirely different and far more potent variety of threat. And for all of Mycroft's established genius, not even he could anticipate which way the wind would blow in that situation. He could only push Sherlock to dedicate himself to the matter of Moran, because despite (or perhaps because of) his insights about his brother's heart, he knew that Sherlock would need the structure of a case and the rationality of brainwork whilst faced with such a difficult personal challenge. There were many reasons why Mycroft was eager to see Moran killed or incarcerated – Nero's safety and the final completion of the Moriarty mission chief among them – but the actual process itself would be just as beneficial for his brother.

When his thoughts turned towards Moran he was again struck by the certainty something was not quite right. He wasn't given to fanciful notions of hunches or feelings, and yet his mind churned around the disturbing, persistent sensation that there was a component that was central and essential to the resolution of this whole vexing matter, which remained evasive. He quickly mapped out the data that was available to him, and charted the inductions he could make based upon it.

Of one thing he was certain: that prior to his suicide Moriarty had indeed determined that Irene Adler was still alive—Mycroft agreed with Ms. Adler on that point. He further concurred that Moriarty had made the discovery when he had seen the footage of her 'beheading' that Sherlock had produced, and recognised that the men were imposters of the actual terrorist cell.

He also felt confident (with a 2% margin of error) that Moriarty would have briefed Moran on her
rescue, and that when Moriarty's network was being systematically dismantled, Moran had concluded that given Sherlock's death, only Irene Adler was capable—driven, Mycroft suspected Moran believed, by vengeance or perhaps an effort to proactively ensure her safety in Sherlock's absence. That was conjecture though, which Mycroft loathed, and yet there was no data to support the theory that anyone besides Moran could be behind this, and he certainly was no criminal mastermind himself. Rather, it was conceivable that Moriarty had created a number of contingency plans for Moran in the event of his own demise, including a way for Moran to fake his death in a manner that would fool even Sherlock Holmes, so that the network could survive in deep cover mode before rebuilding, but beyond that...? Moriarty was cunning, even Mycroft acknowledged that, but could the man have anticipated the development of events this far—years—into the future? Even if he had, what would ensure that Moran remained on-task with no master to govern him, and how would Moran react if events diverged from Moriarty's contingencies? Ms. Adler had been right; the situation positively screamed of the latter's ongoing involvement.

There was only one caveat; he had watched Jim Moriarty's corpse burn down to ash.

He pouted his lips, sucking his teeth in aggravation as Anthony finished circling the car and opened the door, then he bent forward to settle Nero into the recently installed car seat. If any of his counterparts in the EU or America could see him in that moment, he thought with wry amusement, his reputation as 'Ice Man' would never recover—no self-sacrifice for the sake of his nephew even necessary.

But in the same instant that he moved down and forward he heard a reverberating pop from a distance of approximately forty-three metres behind him, and he felt the air ripple as a projectile—a bullet—sliced though the space where his head had been just the moment before. It ricocheted off the rim of the car with a metallic shriek, and reacting on pure instinct, Mycroft shoved the baby seat farther into the car, where it tipped to its side and caused Nero to let out a surprised, dismayed cry as he tumbled out of it.

Almost simultaneously Mycroft heard another crack, and Anthony's head jerked before he slid down the driver's side door, caught out just as his hand had been reaching into his holster. Mycroft stared at the crumpled body and the puckered, dark wound a centimetre to the right of centre on the man's forehead, and for a brief moment time expanded and reality seemed to shimmer. When he broke out of the paralysis he lurched for the inside of the vehicle, and deliberately ignored all the safety and security protocols that placed him as Alpha Priority to block the car seat from the trajectory of the bullets.

There came a third air-rending crack and he felt as if someone had slammed his head into a brick wall—there was powerful pressure followed by a ringing in his ears and a sudden and catastrophic loss of cognitive function. His sight blurred out and then returned, although everything he could see separated and became side-by-side duplicates, and in a daze he reached up to touch his head. At the contact jagged, white-hot agony burst from his wound throughout his body and he dropped his hand with a retch.

When he saw the blood-covered fingers his jaw went slack, and then with a rush of disorientation a grainy, grey darkness closed around his field of vision. His knees buckled and he staggered forward, still clinging to the objective of getting into the car. His mind wasn't attempting to focus his own safety but on Nero's, and as his nephew started making the hiccupping noises that preceded full-fledged wailing, his disorientation clarified into a visceral fury he had never experienced before, not even on behalf of Sherlock during the worst of his struggles. The rage seared in his chest, and it fuelled strength and a resolve he mightn't have otherwise had.

Gritting his teeth he reached his right arm out, and it slapped uselessly against the side of the car
before he managed to curl his fingers around the edge and pull himself forward with great effort. The upper half of his body fell down onto the seat, and then he used his elbows to haul himself further into the interior. The grey was closing in and he shut his eyes again, nausea and dizziness pulsing through him as blood continued to gush from his head wound, dripping over his closed lids and down his face. He gave a harsh, shuddering gasp and tasted it thick and coppery on his lips along with the bile in the back of his throat, then rallied all of his strength and gave another lurch so that his knees got purchase on the edge of the rear seats as well. Panting and beginning to perspire, he turned over, his blood-soaked hair smearing against the backrest, and with a grunt of effort he swiped out his arm to hit the panic button on the central console in the backseat, before straining forward to pull the door shut. He missed the handle on the first pass and his blood-slicked hand slid off of it on the second, but with the third he caught hold. He knew he was seconds away from losing consciousness, but he seemed unable to retreat into his mind to do proper damage assessment, due either to the location of the wound or the percussive trauma to the area.

He had to close the door—despite his terrible impairment he knew that much. Once the door was locked, they would be secure; his car was the newest, and highest-end armoured vehicle available and was impervious to anything Moran could fire at them, even at point-blank.

His thoughts stuttered to a halt when he saw the figure that emerged out of the darkness from the wooded area beyond the manicured drive. The man swaggered towards him, his walk confident and his pace unconcerned, but his expression was searing and intense.

It wasn't Moran.

"No," Mycroft breathed in a low rasp, straining his eyes in the low light and blinking away the blood to look up as the figure ambled closer.

The man stroked his thumb across his pistol, which Mycroft managed to note was a different weapon from the one that had shot him and his man, and gave a smirk.

Mycroft could not accept what his eyes were portraying to him; this had to be some effect of the damage done to his brain by the bullet.

"Impossible..." he rasped, and the man cocked his head.

"What is?" he asked, and the drawling voice was impossibly familiar.

"You cannot be him - James Moriarty."

"Yep, that's my name," the man answered in a sarcastic, bland tone.

"I - watched you - incinerate," Mycroft said, his words disjointed with punctuating gasps.

"Mm, are you sure? Me?" The other man made a show of looking thoughtful. "Odd, I don't recall that at all. And I think I would. Maybe... it was just someone who looked like me?"

"It was - you," Mycroft panted, closing his eyes as he swayed and almost collapsed. "I - made certain. How...?"

'Moriarty' gave a grunt of amusement. "You think you're sooo clever," he hummed chidingly. "But you aren't, I mean, not really. Like today, jamming up anything that might be in the house and its vicinity with an electromagnetic pulse. Fine. Good! Only you failed to knock out a few sensors outside the gates – just at the turnoff. It told me the instant you arrived."

He made a mocking tsking sound with his tongue, but then without warning any residual
amusement drained from his gaze, and he swung the gun level. No muscles seemed to actually shift, but his face went very still and his eyes became hate-filled black vacuums.

Mycroft reacted instinctively, using the very last reserve of his mental acuity and physical strength to yank the door closed against Moriarty before the man had a chance to fire. With the knowledge that Nero would be safe and medical assistance was imminent but before he had a chance to create any message of warning for Sherlock, the swarming pixels of black surged together like waves of sand, obliterating his vision and pulling him into unconsciousness.
Gains and Losses

From the way John wrote about Sherlock in his online blog Irene gathered that his friends were far more aware of Sherlock's capacity for fragility than he might suspect, and perhaps even more conscious of it than Sherlock himself. But she subverted all of that and with her he was all too aware of it, and of just how compromised he was. The way he either couldn't meet her gaze or else met it with bullish defiance... his tendency to put pieces of furniture between them, usually his imitation Le Corbusier, to stand in for metaphorical barriers... the tight, stiff way he crossed his arms as if both shielding himself and trying to contain the sheer might of his emotions within his skin... those all spoke volumes of his current state. And such conscientiousness made him all the more vulnerable, because his best coping mechanisms – denial and suppression – were internalised, and useless against something so overwhelming. That was even truer now than it had been before; the stakes had become much greater, making what they had shared, already so consequential in each of their lives, even more impossible to relegate to the past.

But when she had told him why she'd ultimately decided to keep the pregnancy something seemed to shift behind his eyes. It was a look of acceptance similar to the one of succumbing that she had often seen in new or prodigal clients, including the faint self-loathing but with the addition of his lingering doubt. This at least he believed (or almost believed), and she felt a flicker of hope.

"I didn't accept the news at first," Irene said, breaking the long period of silence once her heartbeat slowed following the admission. "After all, since when do people like us ever actually stay dead?"

Sherlock opened his mouth, but then his eyebrows knitted together and he pressed his lips shut again.

"I expected you track me down and turn up at my door, high on the thrill of the chase and demanding that I tell you everything I ever learned or suspected about Jim."

"You never did," she added softly a moment later.

He looked away and gave a low huff through his nose, and Irene thought there might have been the barest hint of frustration in it, though she didn't understand it.

She tilted her head to give him a speculative look. "I don't know which was more difficult for me to accept: the thought that you were dead, or the idea that Jim Moriarty had bested you in the end."

At that Sherlock roused to life again and he jerked his head up, looking offended.

"Well he didn't, did he?"

Irene didn't respond right away; considering everything that she and then she and her son had experienced in the past year and a half, she couldn't so readily agree with Sherlock's statement.

"That remains to be seen."

"Remind me," he said, his sarcasm compensating for his defensiveness, "who's dead, and who's alive?"

"Your brother is certainly confident that he's dead—"

Sherlock tugged down on his jacket, then lifted his chin. "Yes, Mycroft—"
"—But even if that's the case," she continued, "that doesn't mean that plans he made years ago aren't still in play. I warned you once not to underestimate Jim. Thinking that the entire game is over just because his single piece has been removed qualifies. His suicide was meant to coerce you into losing, so obviously not even his own death was a major factor for him in the long-term."

"Obviously," Sherlock snapped. "Why do you think I spent all that time living in one vermin-infested hovel after another, on a string of identities, often just one misstep from exposure—for a nice spot of holiday?"

She didn't answer what was meant as a rhetorical question anyway, and they remained locked in a standstill, Sherlock's face flushed and traces of adrenaline still pounding through Irene's veins.

After almost a full minute Sherlock lightly closed his eyes and made a small shaking motion with his head. Irene watched him worry his lower lip with his teeth, and when he opened his eyes again he kept them lowered so that she could only detect thin gleaming crescents through his long lashes. They were darting to and fro, unseeing, as he turned something over in his mind.

"I did want..." he started distractedly and her heart-rate picked up again at once, but then his gaze focused and he hesitated. He gave another slight shake of his head and changed direction mid-sentence.

"If my brother and I had devised some other solution to that particular scenario of Moriarty's, one that would've kept me publicly alive and well, you're saying that you would have ended it—the... pregnancy."

She didn't allow herself to speculate at what he would have said if he hadn't censored himself. Instead she studied him with assessing eyes, weighing if she were willing to let go of the topic at hand since it would so easily segue into discussing Moran and formulating tangible strategy, which she was desperately anxious to do. But almost at once she determined that she ought to take advantage of Sherlock's willingness to talk about Nero while she could. Beyond personal reasons, which were secondary, investing Sherlock in their son as much as she could would only help her convince him to take action and accept the case. But more than that, these were things she did want to discuss with him. She had spent ten months since his return contemplating how the exchange about their son might go, and so far reality was both smoother and more fraught than she had imagined.

"I made a number of appointments at the clinic; eventually I might've gone through with it," she said. "What I told you once is true, I never did want children."

Sherlock's downcast eyes traced over the pattern of his carpet for several seconds before he asked, low and almost hesitant, "And...now...

She felt a twinge of compassion over how abnormally lost he looked, and she considered how much she should share with him about the intense and all-encompassing love she felt for Nero. While she wanted to be honest with him, particularly since he was so attuned to any sign of deceit from her, she also didn't want to overwhelm him even further.

"It would have been," she quickly scanned her brain for the right word, "simpler, if I'd made the decision not to have Nero," she said, and though it was true she felt an odd discomfort at the thought of that alternative choice that at this point. "Much in the same way everything would've been simpler if I hadn't switched my passcode to 'S-H-E-R'." She focused her gaze directly into his. "But when has either of us been attracted to what's simple or easy? I don't regret the passcode, I haven't for a very long time, and I don't regret our child."
She recalled how not so very long ago, just after she had given birth in that large, impersonal American general hospital (a difficult, high-risk delivery that followed a difficult, high-risk pregnancy), she might have questioned her sanity for bringing Nero into her mad world; her fear of the hypothetical at that time had nearly matched the fear of the manifested threat she felt now. She had loved him fiercely from the moment she'd felt him flutter within her, but carrying a child and caring for one were drastically different prospects, particularly for someone whose life had once been defined by autonomy and independence and which was still laden with peril.

But then Irene thought of her vivacious, gorgeous baby boy and the smile that he offered up so easily, a smaller, more frequent, and more toothsome version of his father's but with the same rare power to make her melt, and an answering smile touched her lips.

"I care about Nero – love him – in a way I never thought was possible."

For some reason Sherlock had gone rigid halfway through her answer, before she had even uttered the 'L' word, and Irene saw that despite her efforts at carefulness, she had spooked him.

"Ah..." Sherlock said slowly, his eyes narrowing and his voice edged with subtle derision. "So. You think that if you can feel that way..."

She didn't answer, but she did continue to look him in the eye as she recalled the words she had once said to him ages ago in a very different context, but which were relevant once again,

_We're the same, you and I..._

She was certain that the details of every conversation they'd shared in those few vivid days were etched into his mind, as they were in hers. It had been the only time they'd ever really spoken to each other beyond fragments of banter or her smug posturing and his subsequent bitter victory of the night of her own fall. The flicker of recognition that briefly widened his eyes and the stiffening of the muscles in his face confirmed he caught the meaning of her look, as well as told her that he knew she knew it, too.

"But the day to day," Sherlock said, breaking out of the heavy silence with a grimace and beginning to pace. "The constant demand for your attention, the crying, the need to make every decision for another, all that..." he seemed to grapple for words, "pressure of responsibility."

"In those ways it's not so different from being a dominatrix; you could be describing my former duties," Irene said, deadpan. "The crying in particular."

Sherlock paused in his stride to lift his head and shoot her a disapproving, unamused look; apparently he didn't appreciate levity at the moment.

Or maybe he could tell she that was withholding the real story, and he was letting her know it.

She sighed. "I'm used to anticipating needs and filling them, at being at the service of others whilst still maintaining the role of authority. As I said, it hasn't been easy..."

She considered sharing with him just how very difficult it had been at the start, at how close she had come to conceding she didn't have what it took to be a parent after all.

"But I've managed," she finished firmly, deciding that now was not the time for that. She felt a bit too fragile herself to delve into that simultaneously harrowing and wondrous period of her life.

"What about your former assistant?" he asked. He said it in a brisk, business-like voice, but she heard the trace of something else (resentment?) in his tone.
"Kate? What about her?" she asked, bemused at that unexpected turn.

"You appear to trust her, and I'm sure she would've been all too pleased to lend a helping hand."

Irene ignored the innuendo. "Yes. I trust her, but she was here in London pursuing a new life, and she deserved that." She didn't mention the way that Kate had been unknowingly aiding Irene's attackers in that life, but she would come to that, and hopefully soon.

Irene saw Sherlock's nostrils flare and she could tell he was holding himself back from lashing out And I don't? in response to her words. She was glad he managed. That entire line of conversation was exhausting, and she hoped exhausted—at least for the time-being.

"When you came back you didn't waste much time moving in with her," he said instead, the edge in his voice a shade more pronounced.

"Just as I'm sure you were eager to move back in with John Watson when you returned," Irene pointed out, raising an eyebrow. "Should I be as jealous as you obviously are?"

The comparison was apples and oranges, but she didn't much care. Sherlock flushed again and cast her another glare as he began to retort, but then he seemed to decide that he wouldn't dignify her comment with an answer. It wasn't her insinuation that offended him— the tabloid speculation had never bothered Sherlock— but the accusation that he was jealous. Or more to the point: her acknowledgement of his jealousy.

As for Kate, she did trust her—still, despite the fact that Irene's single, and in retrospect foolhardy, act of trust had set Moriarty's rabid dog on her scent in the first place. But it did verify what she had always believed: that trust in and of itself was never adequate. Unfortunately for her Sherlock held the same view, and once spurned it felt like it was almost impossible to regain.

"Kate is a dear friend," Irene said, then pouted her lips thoughtfully. "She's likely my only friend, because what you said yesterday... you're right. You aren't a friend, are you? 'Old' or otherwise."

Sherlock continued to stand stock-still, staring at her as though if he concentrated hard enough all of her features might rearrange and resolve into something comprehensible.

"Then what am I?" he finally asked in a low, terse voice, his eyes boring into hers.

It was a loaded question and obviously some sort of test, at least in part. But in this case Irene would wager that not even Sherlock knew what would rate a correct answer, or what he wanted to hear—not that the two were necessarily one and the same. Only one thing was certain: she would know by his automatic reaction whether she'd given him the right or wrong response.

Irene believed that there were certain moments in life that could shift its entire course in the instant of a decision. Previous instances from her own past included when she'd discarded her birth name once and for all, when she'd resolved to act on the MOD information to which she'd been made privy, when she switched her passcode to S-H-E-R, when she and Sherlock had become intimate, and finally, when she'd decided to keep Nero (both the first and second times).

This was another such moment, and though she usually thrived under pressure she couldn't help but feel slightly apprehensive. So much rested on this, and she needed to provide a response that fell within the miniscule overlapping areas of what Sherlock would accept hearing from her, and what he truly wanted to hear from her, whilst also ensuring she didn't derail them from the critical conversation they needed to have about strategy.

"You're someone who can help secure Nero's safety," she finally said. Her simple answer dodged
the essence of his question, but it was the only way she could respond in a way that addressed all
the complicated nuances involved.

Sherlock didn't move but Irene saw his jaw clench; so he hadn't liked what he'd heard, then.

"A means to an end, in other words," he said in the same soft, foreboding tone. "Of course."

"Even if that were the case, it's as much your 'end' as it is mine," she shot back, stung. "I know
you'd like to see Moran gone just as much as I would."

Sherlock's head jerked upright as if she'd touched him with a live wire. "Yes, because you know
me and what I 'like' so well, don't you?" he said, high colour spreading across his cheekbones.
Though her statement had been accurate and the approach sound, she chided herself for the
assertive and loaded phrasing. It had been careless when she'd needed to be more prudent than
ever, but she had been indignant and frustrated by how he'd construed her answer.

"You know, I've observed something in our time together, brief as it's been," he continued, and
both his expression and rapid-fire delivery reminded her of that dreadful night. "You have no
trouble dictating to me how I supposedly feel, what I'm experiencing, what I want, when I would
be 'ready' to learn the truth about the consequences of our time together..." He gave a wry grunt.
"You might not have your riding crop and syringes at hand anymore, but you're still ever
the dominatrix."

She maintained her expression of cool detachment, but Irene felt a surge of anger flare at that, and
her face began to heat as well. Yes she was intuitive, observant, and assertive, but she had always
thought that Sherlock had appreciated those qualities in her, just as much as she valued them in
herself. Her profession had been a concentrated and expanded expression of her essential self, but
with Sherlock she had shown that self without pretence, embellishment, or theatrics because she
had sensed that she could trust him to understand and respect it, and therefore her.

"And like an obedient little boy I've made every effort to meet your expectations," he went on
bitterly, "and been far more open and exerted myself more than I have with anyone else—and far,
far more than I find comfortable. But where is the reciprocity? Where is your transparency?" he
asked, stalking back to her until he breached her personal space again, then staring her down. "I
don't even know if 'Irene Adler' is really your name, or where you were raised. If you think that
we're so alike," he said with a faint sneer, "then it's time you treated us as equals."

"If you're feeling inferior, Sherlock, it's not because of anything I've done," Irene said, raising her
chin and pushing back her shoulders. God knew men and women regularly experienced that with
her, but when that happened she always grasped, and in precisely which way, that she was the
cause. She was accustomed to being the indisputable intellectual and social superior, but from the
moment she had met Sherlock she'd understood that he was a person who could challenge that
world order, which was one reason she'd been keen to establish her dominance through that parting
shot towards the end of their initial meeting.

This is how I want you to remember me, as the woman who beat you...

But the comment, it transpired, had been premature. Sherlock had proven even more astonishing
than she could have imagined. Jim Moriarty had described Sherlock to her in both resentful and
avid superlatives, but she hadn't appreciated what a revelation the man really was until she had met
him in person.

"Oh we've slept together, nearly died for one another, and now apparently conceived a child
together," Sherlock was going on, ignoring her remark and building a head of steam. "Yet you still
keep yourself as distant and apart as ever, all whilst demanding that I open myself up to you, to sentiment, to the concept of fatherhood, and telling me what I want, what I'd like."

"Yes," she said, her tone cool. "It's in my nature to bring out what I see you capable of. Because to know what people like one must understand who they are, their natures, and their thresholds of ability for all sorts of things."

"And I suppose you think you do," he sneered.

"Yes, I think so. Regarding you, and regarding myself."

"Splendid," he ground out acerbically. "I don't. Not with you."

"Not true," she contradicted. "You know what matters. Everything else is trivial."

"Correction. I know what you think matters. Even based on the very little I know about this sort of thing, I'm fairly sure that that's not how it's supposed to work. And, by the way, I happen to make my living off of so-called 'trivia.'"

"How what is supposed to work, exactly?" Irene asked, her tone mock airy and curious.

In an instant she regretted taking such a capricious attitude; for Sherlock, and for her as well, this sort of thing was not to be take lightly, or even with the suggestion of lightless. She didn't want to make him even warier of her than he already was, or even more guarded in his words, and so she took in a shallow breath and said in a much softer voice, "Turnabout is fair play, Sherlock... who am I to you?"

He froze and his expression tensed, then darkened, and he turned away from her once again. "But you don't play fair, do you," he breathed. "You claim you know me so well, and that may be true—particularly since I'm sure you didn't fail to catch that piece in *The Sun* in 2011," he said. "But you... I don't know you at all—you ensure it. You couldn't even answer this question. You evaded it, and we both know it."

"Please," Irene dismissed, although she felt tense and skittish at how the conversation was turning to focus onto her, for reasons other than the personal uneasiness it caused her. It was possible that Sherlock made a valid point, but it was beside the point of this meeting, which was to come to enough of an understanding that they could work together to secure Nero's safety. Everything between the two of them, important and unprecedented as it was, would have to defer to that matter.

"Do you think the fact that I know you were expelled from Cambridge when you were nineteen but managed to scrape together a degree at Imperial, or that you were on the verge of going to rehab before you found a new type of fix with that Met inspector gives me some sort of power or leverage?" she asked. "It's not like you volunteered any of that information with me, either, but it doesn't matter. I don't care about any of that, and I don't believe that telling you minutiae from my past would help you to know or understand me better. Everything you need to know about me you already do."

"That's not the point," Sherlock shot back, wheeling around, "Inequality of knowledge is the point."

"Yes, because it's intolerable when you're on the side with the deficit, isn't it?" she asked.

His eyes narrowed and his shoulders rose as he took in a breath to fire back some reproachful answer.
"But you're wrong," she said, forestalling him. "Nero, our child, is the point. I told you, none of this is to do with me, or us."

"Ah, in that case you won't have any objection to telling me your name," using on her the same mock-breezy voice that she had on him.

"None at all, since you already know it," she said, answering him almost in kind.

He cocked his head and shot her an irritated, cynical look.

"Irene Adler is my real name," she said firmly, and his look shifted into a glare.

"Your given one, I meant."

"Oh, I know what you meant, just like you knew what I meant. Don't you, William?"

"Case in point," he snarled at her reference to something she'd picked up in the Riley 'exposé.'

"The fact that you opt to go by Sherlock couldn't have anything to do with the fact that you have a brilliant older brother with a name like Mycroft, could it?"

He made a scoffing sound. "From the woman who chose to name her child Nero."

"There was a clear legacy to follow," she said, raising a mildly ironic eyebrow. "Siger, Mycroft, Sherl—"

"But why?" he interrupted, his demeanour now focussed and intent rather than agitated.

She hesitated, breaking the rapid-fire cadence of their exchange that had swept up both of them. "...I don't follow."

"I take it that you weren't feeling particularly nostalgic for Caffé Nero when you were stateside," he said, "so out of all the obscure names you could've chosen, why that one?"

She wasn't certain how to answer, and had in fact wondered about that herself. At the surface it was as though such a special child required an unconventional name, and he had seemed like a Nero; the name had materialised in her mind the moment she had first laid eyes on him. It had felt right and she hadn't questioned it, though she had always suspected that there was some deeper albeit evasive meaning.

Sherlock uttered a quiet exhale that she knew meant he'd made some realisation, and for the first time since she had seen him again his wary, guarded expression softened and the corners of his mouth relaxed. His eyes even took on an introspective, almost tender, look and without a word he made his way to the bookcase to the left of the fireplace. He went straight for an old leather-bound book on an upper shelf, and pulled it down.

He showed her the cover of the book, and asked, "Recognise it?"

Without waiting for her to reply he pushed it into her hands. For just a moment she forgot her anxieties of the present, as the tactile sensation of the aged cover brought her back to the evening she had been sitting across from Sherlock, skimming through this book to pass the time. After a while she had become far more engrossed in the sight before her than the historical narrative. She had set it down to watch as the blazing fire in the hearth reflected in his eyes, and the blazing engine of his mind burned behind them, her unprecedented fascination with and attraction for him growing exponentially with each passing minute. In that moment she hadn't yet betrayed him,
hadn't yet shown her hand. It was a perfect, crystalline instant in the timeline of her life.

She blinked to clear her head of that memory and slid into the same chair she'd occupied that evening, then looked down at the title.

_The Lives of Twelve Caesars._

"Chapter six," he said, then stiffly unfastened the button of his jacket and took a seat across from her.

Already knowing what she would find, she opened the book and scanned the table contents until her eyes fell on the words _Nero Claudius Caesar._

She felt a small but sincere smile touch her face and she looked up at Sherlock. "You _were_ paying attention."

He didn't say anything, but she saw his frame tense and his hands clasp the arms of the chair in a tighter grip.

"I'm flattered," she added, her eyes warming with genuine feeling as she gazed across at him.

He began to retort, "Don't be," but just after he opened his mouth, he closed it again, and his face hardened.

"Yes," he agreed a moment later, though he sounded as if she were coercing him into admitting something shameful, and the moment of potential progress between them evaporated.

Given that, his next statement surprised her at first.

"I almost kissed you that night. Well. Almost let you kiss me, if I'm going to be precise about it." But he still sounded forced and resentful, and his tone seemed to clash with the content of his admission.

"I did wonder about that," Irene said in a voice just above a murmur. "About what would've happened if we'd had just a few more moments of reprieve before the 'end of the world'... You never did tell me."

"No..." he said. Then his expression became even more closed off, and turned sardonic. "But then, you might not want to start the game of who never told whom what."

It wasn't a fair remark but she took it in stride. She was still preoccupied with her memories of that evening, which she viewed as utterly distinct from those of later that night.

Irene wanted to tell him that in that moment she had hoped he would kiss her, regardless of how extraneous it was to her grand plan—regardless of how she'd already gleaned everything she'd needed from him and had no reason in the world to still be at his flat, and every reason to have moved on to the next part of her strategy instead.

She recalled the heat of anticipation that had tingled over her lips and across her skin and had shocked her with its potency. She'd felt mild to intermediate levels of attraction towards men in the past and when it had furthered her agenda it hadn't exactly been a chore to get a bit physical, but neither had it ever felt as it had in that moment with Sherlock. Then again nothing had—at least not at that point in her life. It had been too visceral, too raw, and had made her heart pound too hard to be permitted in the highly curated life of _The Woman_, though she had felt powerless to even attempt resistance in that moment, nor had she much wanted to. She had already recognised that
Sherlock was special, both in general and to her in particular, but it wasn't until that moment that she had felt any flicker of doubt about the plan that would ensure her so much wealth and security. She hadn't discerned much of a personal cost until she'd realised the full extent of her feelings and attraction for Sherlock, and had understood what seeing the plan through meant losing—for both of them.

To her surprise, in spite of the discomfort and agitation she had felt minutes before and the knowledge that she needed to steer their conversation back to Nero once more, she was almost as seized by the desire to cross the metre-long chasm between them now as she had been that evening. She wanted to murmur, "Mrs Hudson won't interrupt this time," slide her fingers into the cool weft of his hair, and smooth her hand down the side of his face. The pull between them was inexorable as ever, although it now felt less like a flash-burning lust, and more like the deep and steady smoulder of a coal seam fire. Nevertheless, she was sure that that if given half an opportunity, that lust would resurface with a vengeance. The heat of their recent exchange more than proved how much passion still sparked between them, even if it manifested as anger and mistrust for now.

They did express their feelings with each other far better physically than any words could or would ever convey, and yet she wouldn't make any move towards him, nor even share with him what she'd been thinking during that time. She was well-aware of the brittle, volatile anger and suspicion he felt towards her, and despite his apparent frustration that she wasn't forthright enough, he would by no means be receptive to flirtation or any form of seduction either; he would view anything like that with absolute suspicion.

Even under the best of circumstances she could see that they had a long road to tread before Sherlock would be amenable to anything like that, if he ever could again. He was locking her out and his defences were formidable to say the least, obviously developed, honed, and reinforced over decades. To extend his own metaphor: if his mind were a palace, his heart was a fortress. Once, briefly, she had been the key, but it seemed he had changed the locks, even if it was evident that the content they guarded remained unchanged.

"You're right, I didn't tell you." She added in a tone as straight-forward and uninflected as possible, "And for that I'm sorry."

He still shot her a fleeting look of suspicion but re-verted his glance when they made eye contact.

"But if you're willing to listen now, I'll tell you everything."

"Why?"

Her eyebrows rose. "Isn't it obvious?"

This time his look told her both that this was the very type of equivocal behaviour to which he had been referring, and that if it had been obvious, he wouldn't have asked.

"Because I need you," she replied simply.

Whatever he had been expecting, it must not have been that, because his lip curled and he started with derision: "'Need'—"

"And by you, I meant the 'World's Only Consulting Detective,'" she clarified, using a variation of one of her more assertive professional tones. "There now, you have your answer: that's who you are to me."

His face betrayed a micro-expression of raw then suppressed hurt followed immediately by one of
relief, but if she weren't so adept at reading people she wouldn't have detected anything beyond the carefully neutral face he assumed next.

Her statement had been a lie of course, or at least a partial obfuscation (yes he was that, but not only that; Sherlock Holmes could never be any one thing to her), but it was a necessary one for at least the time-being. He would likely suspect she was being disingenuous or at the very least deceptively simplistic, but in this case she doubted he would resent her for it or probe beyond the face value of her words. Though they had different motives for doing so, they would enter into a mutual and wordless accord to ease off that subject, at least for the time being.

"You've also dedicated nearly a year tracking down Moran; there's no one who has a better shot of taking him down than you."

She waited for him to fire off an angry retort about how he already had taken down Moran, but he remained silent and tight-lipped and she remembered his look of reluctant acceptance that had told her that for whatever reason, he was no longer adamant that she was lying.

Still he watched her through narrowed, wary eyes, and she could tell that he was turning over all the known data in his mind and weighing her words against what was left unsaid.

"You want to be a client," he said in a concluding tone, his voice flat and revealing nothing, and therefore telling Irene everything she needed to know. As he became ever more emotionally invested, he compensated with a correspondingly more stoic, mechanical exterior, but she had long come to recognise his 'tells.'

"That's one way to put it," she said.

He continued to stare at her for another moment, then, without a change in expression he swept up from his chair to stand facing away from her with his arms folded rigidly at the small of his back. From his body language alone - his transformation into that cold, logical Consulting Detective - she could anticipate both his next words and the way he would say them.

"Fine," he said, his voice curt and uninflected. "I accept those terms." With a sharp pivot, his hands still clasped behind him, he turned towards her. "Start from the beginning."

Irene leaned back into the chair, crossing one leg over the other and nodding. "All right. I suppose the very beginning starts with my given name: Renée Wolfe."

---

Sherlock's face remained detached and expressionless as Irene recounted the chronology of escalating events that threatened her and her son, and he only interrupted to ask for clarification or elaboration. Yet despite his outward appearance he felt the agitation of emotion for the duration of her run-down, as it were acid-reflux or a painful hangnail. He wasn't sure whether the prime source was the now-inescapable fact that he had been so grossly deceived by someone he considered his inferior in every discernible way, and that his premature return had negated all of his sacrifice and put his friends in danger, or whether it was from the proximity of The Woman, and the fact that he had... they had... that there was a now a child to consider.

*Probably* a bit of both, he thought in the driest of sarcasm.

Throughout The Woman's description of events Sherlock also felt a growing unease unrelated to his personal circumstances. Irene had been correct when she'd said that he understood Moran better than anyone else could, but the events Irene described were inconsistent with the man he knew. Instead, they positively reeked of Moriarty's brand of treacherous brilliance. It was possible,
perhaps even probable, that Moriarty had left his Number One detailed and long-term instructions like some perverse Last Will and Testament, but given what Sherlock did know about Moran, he would be shocked if the man had the inclination or the discipline to adhere to such instructions, which were sure to be complex. Even if the body (and desire for revenge) were willing, the mind was weak. No matter how Moran might like to view himself, he had never been a leader. If Moriarty was a spider, Moran was a hammer, and as such required a capable hand to wield him in order for his purpose to be fulfilled; he was correspondingly impotent without that hand, or so Sherlock had thought. He certainly didn't seem impotent now, and Sherlock had a flare of irrational but intense fear that he had been tricked about Moriarty's death as well. What if they had both staged their suicides for the benefit of the other and their personal agendas, and just as Sherlock was alive and well, so was Jim?

But no, he assured himself. Mycroft had personally overseen the removal of Jim Moriarty's body, as well as the corpse's immediate autopsy and incineration, and only Sherlock had ever been capable of deceiving his brother.

Then, unbidden, he recalled the words Moriarty had said at the outset of their final confrontation, and that it wasn't only Irene who had claimed to be "just alike," to Sherlock.

With a furtive shake of his head he rejected the thought and refocused his attention on her exposition.

She was just concluding her description of the manor house in Surrey where Kate had unwittingly worked for Moran when the relative quiet of the room was pierced by a customised ringtone on Sherlock's phone. Other than a slight pursing of his lips he gave no acknowledgement to the sound and kept his gaze fixed on Irene's, and when the person rung off and then redialled he ignored that call as well.

A text alert came seconds later and Irene broke off and raised a brow, then said, "Someone seems rather intent on reaching you."

"Yes, and I know exactly who it is," he said, irked at the interruption. But in the next instant Sherlock recalled that Mycroft had been watching the child, and to his shock he felt a jolt of unease—his very first paternal impulse.

Without another word he launched himself from the chair and crossed to room to swipe his mobile from off the table, just as he received three consecutive texts from his brother's PA, each new chime cutting off the alert before it.

Mr Holmes, your brother is in hospital.

He's been shot.

Sherlock Holmes, ANSWER YOUR PHONE.

In 60 seconds I contact John Watson.

He stared, frozen to the spot as his eyes darted across the words in the texts over and over again. He had understood the content of the words immediately and yet they made no sense to him; they were, in fact, impossible. No one got to Mycroft. No one.

And yet there was only so long that his mind could protect itself by failing to process the plain message of the texts, and the instant he fully grasped the meaning of the words it felt as though time whipped forward in order to catch him up to the present, and he raised his eyes to The
Woman, feeling dizzy and faintly sick.

Irene was leaning forward in her seat with a mild look of curiosity on her face, though her forehead creased in concern when she read his expression.

"It's Mycroft... he's been injured—shot," he managed, and his voice sounded roughshod and faraway in his ears.

At once Irene shoved forward out of the chair, her face draining of blood until it appeared as white, thin, and delicate as garlic skin. "What?" she gasped. "Is he—"

Sherlock gave one sharp shake of his head. "Don't know," he answered, then breathed in a head-clearing dose of oxygen. "I mean no, he's been hospitalised, but she didn't state the severity..."

Irene took several stumbling steps towards him and for one brief, horrible moment Sherlock thought she might fall, and her reaction further snapped him out of his initial state of shock. She remained on her feet, but her suddenly-shining eyes were round and dark with fear, and created a strong contrast with her blanched pallor.

"Nero," she gasped.

It was ironic; earlier a part of him had wanted to see some sign of emotion or vulnerability from her, but not like this; the cost was too high. He was vaguely aware that social convention dictated there was some sort of ambiguous 'line' in what means could justify ends, and yet he was of the mind that his work was too important, and often too delicate, to practice such petty niceties. But for some reason that line stood out like neon now; seeing evidence that The Woman was just as subject to the destabilising, treacherous effects of emotion as he was wasn't worth watching her shake apart from desperation and fear. In fact seeing Irene Adler in such a state only made him feel more as if he had been cast into some alternate, bizarro world, where his elder brother was fallible and The Woman was unravelling into a nervous wreck. Moreover, she had so often been his emotional compass in the trying times they'd shared that seeing her this way left him feeling even more adrift and unnerved.

His heart pounding out a hard rhythm, Sherlock pressed on the missed call alert with fingers that somehow managed not to tremble, and put it onto speaker.

Mycroft's PA answered on the first ring, sounding breathless and more affected than he'd ever heard her before.

"Mr Holmes—"

"Andrea, what's happened," he cut in over her.

His sharp tone seemed to snap her out of her state, and when she spoke again she sounded more lucid. "Anthony, he was killed. And your brother... he's been shot."

"Yes but he's alive," Sherlock said, making it a statement not a question. It could not be a question.

"He is," she confirmed, and though the fist of panic that clenched in his chest didn't vanish, it loosened. "But his condition is very critical, as the bullet penetrated his skull. He's in surgery here in Guildford now, but he's been unconscious since we found him, so he wasn't able to tell me anything. I'm sure you'll want to take a look at the locus, but the team and I didn't see any indication that Mr Holmes managed to leave some sort of message before he lost consciousness, either."
"He was shot in the head," he said slowly, feeling reality further recede as the dread swelled at that information. He was aware that she had continued to speak after that, but he had barely processed another word. If this meant long-term brain damage, his brother was far better off dead.

"What—what part of the brain is affected?" he asked a moment later, bringing his hand up to pinch the bridge of his nose, then hover shakily at his hairline.

"I can't tell you at this time, but the entry wound appears to be posterior."

Ah, then depending on the trajectory of the bullet that meant that it could be cerebellum which coordinated motor skills, ie literal legwork, or possibly the hypothalamus which was responsible for attachment emotions and baser impulses. Which means no risk of any damage affecting Mycroft, then - he'll be the same as ever, his mind offered ironically, though it sounded edged with slight hysteria.

"The bullet," he said loudly in an attempt to drown out the growing sensation of panic, "Was it 5.56 calibre?"

"They're still in the process of extracting the one that hit Mr Holmes, but I caught sight of another one that ricocheted off of the car, and it was a bit banged up, but... yes. It's possible."

"Ballistics will tell you that it's Mk 262," Sherlock rattled off, desperate for the familiar solace that the structure and process of his work offered, as he felt his emotional barricades, already weakened by his meeting with Irene, begin to buckle at their foundation. "They're, erm, extremely accurate, and extremely deadly—and they're Moran's preferred ammunition. He became fond in his very brief time in the military, and th-they aren't supposed to be available to civilians but I don't think it should come as a shock that Moriarty managed to procure a steady supply them."

He looked towards Irene, for a moment thinking that this more than anything was the evidence he had needed to truly believe her, but The Woman's blanched, strained face propelled the thought from his mind. She grabbed his forearm with a hand that was a vice, and her eyes blazed with unsaid command.

"And Nero," he prompted, and now it was more than just speaking the name that caused his pulse to spike.

His brother's assistant started to answer, but then hesitated as if taken-aback.

"Yes even I know about him now," he spat out, irritation managing to penetrate through everything else. "But never mind that, is he all right?"

"Sorry—yes. The baby is fine. He was a bit worked up when we found them, but the nurses managed to calm him down and coax him into having some formula, and he's currently asleep."

Irene released Sherlock to wrench the phone from his hand.

In a voice tight with fear and low with contained but simmering fury she asked, "Where is my son?"

"I have him," the woman on the other end of the line said, and Sherlock watched as Irene closed her eyes and let out a long, controlled exhale. When she opened them again Sherlock saw that they sparked with a blue fire that he could only describe as cold, homicidal resolve. That expression and Sherlock's dawning understanding that she had been telling him the truth and they were now indisputably united in purpose kindled in him some deep, instinctive emotional response towards her, easing away the pervasive feelings of mistrust and wariness. It felt like equal parts awe,
empathy, and affinity, all brought to a head by the intense vulnerability of the moment and the breakdown of his defences.

For a few seconds he was diverted from the assassination attempt on his brother by experiencing - for the first time ever - a flash of real insight into what it could be like if he and Irene truly dropped their guards against one another and became involved. In that instant he grasped that having her as a partner might, possibly, be an endowment rather than a detraction or distraction; in other words, a relationship could potentially complement and enhance his life and work rather than serve as the tacked-on, weakening intrusion he had always envisioned--as long as it was with her. Of course it would depend upon her present sentiments towards him, and on that topic he was entirely without data. As with almost everything else personal, she revealed nothing.

He wasn't certain if she had really meant it when she had told him that he was a Consulting Detective to her (the 'only' being implied), or whether it had been a tactical manoeuvre of some sort, but the concept that he could proceed as if she were a mere client had been nothing more than a coping tool. It had been a flimsy and short-lived one at that, and one that had never proven effective. She hadn't even been a mere client when she had shown up in his bed those several years ago, and that had been before everything else that they had shared, confessed, and experienced with one another—all of which had left an indelible mark on him. When it came to The Woman he'd never be able to disentangle the sentimental from the cerebral; the issues and complications she introduced and the woman herself were linked at what felt to him like a subatomic level.

"I'm looking at him in his cot as we speak," the voice on the other end of the line went on. "But Mr Holmes, your brother..."

"Yes," he said, tearing his eyes away from Irene with great reluctance. His fleeting moment of grace was cut short at that, and a plunging sensation identical to how he'd felt when he'd stepped off the roof of St. Bart's surged through him.

"Where are you?" he asked, his voice hoarse. "Ms Adler and I will leave now."

"That's another reason I called, Mr Holmes; I've sent a car from the office and it should be there at any minute."

Downstairs, the doorbell rang.
The Ties That Bind

Sherlock followed Irene down the stairs, trailing behind her form in a blank daze and putting one foot out in front of the other like an automaton. He had the surreal impression that he was disconnected from both mind and body, so that he could sense the fear as if it were a component separate from himself. For a brief time he was able to observe it with dispassion, but then that reprieve was gone and he lost any sense of detachment. He barely perceived his surroundings as they exited the building, crossed the pavement, then slid into the rear seat of the waiting sedan.

Irene spoke to the driver in what registered in the periphery of Sherlock's notice as a sharp, interrogative tone, but she seemed satisfied with the answer the man gave her, which Sherlock also didn't process. From the corner of his eye he saw her settle back against the seat, although her posture remained rigid and her hands were clenched into fists at each side of her lap as she stared straight ahead. She was still ashen except for the dark spots of colour that tinged each cheek, and lips that were pink from being on the verge of chapped.

The tension and anger she radiated were possibly the only things that could penetrate through the numb dread that had come to settle over him, and he was surprised at just how attuned he was to her state of upheaval. It didn't help that he was caught up by similar sensations himself.

When he saw her lift her hand to give a jerky swipe at her eyes something within his chest seemed to crack and fall away like a sheet of arctic ice, and he turned his face an increment towards her. Her jaw was set and yet her compressed lips were trembling almost imperceptibly, though it seemed that it was from fury just as much as fear. Even emotionally compromised she made a striking, formidable sight.

He dropped his eyes down to the hand closer to him, balled up so that her knuckles stood out blue-white, and only inches away from where his own hand rested on the seat. His palm slid along the leather upholstery in a spontaneous reaching movement as the urge came over him to intertwine their fingers, though he balked just as the tips of his were about to graze the side of her hand. He scowled and drew his hand back with a low exhale, then balled it into a fist himself and looked out the window. He wasn't sure whether the motion had been borne out of a desire to offer consolation or to seek it, but he wasn't willing to test what vulnerability might well up if he acted on the impulse.

The car began to roll forward, and when Irene didn't move from her silent, erect position his thoughts returned intractably to what had – against all odds – befallen his elder brother.

For someone who made a living by deciphering and explaining the inexplicable, he was unable to grasp that Mycroft Holmes could have been so catastrophically compromised. Nothing aroused his suspicion that they were playing into an ambush or trap in going to see him in hospital, and yet it was also impossible to accept that someone had managed to best his brother. It contradicted fundamental truths he had known about Mycroft since they were both children, when even then Mycroft had seemed god-like. Most people became disillusioned with their elder siblings as they aged, or at least their sense of hero worship diminished, but in spite of their fractious relationship Sherlock's never really had.

Growing up, Mycroft had always made everything he undertook seem effortless. Whether navigating social situations, translating obscure classics, or interpreting their parents' moods during the rocky period of their marriage that had so confused and affected Sherlock as a child, Mycroft triumphed without a hint of exertion. Sherlock had always struggled along in his wake, and though he could somewhat emulate his brother he was an imperfect facsimile. Mycroft was the original
and the blatant superior. Worse still, Mycroft was all too aware of that, and all too forthcoming with his observations of Sherlock's shortcomings. Sherlock had carved out niches in which he could outperform his brother, but in those cases it was only because Mycroft had deigned not to bother—didn't need to bother; he rested so comfortably on his other, nobler, strengths.

They had left behind childhood, surpassed adolescence, and one of them even approached middle age, and yet Sherlock still couldn't see behind the curtain of Mycroft much better than the common layperson. It was just as impressive as it was maddening. In fact it had not escaped Sherlock that a good portion of his resentment towards his brother stemmed from the fact that no matter how hard he, Sherlock, worked or how much he improved, Mycroft still retained both the aura and actuality of natural supremacy.

And yet Sherlock had to admit that their dynamic, as much as it could grate at him, had been beneficial. The majority of the population was to him who he was to Mycroft, and he might've been satisfied with only above-average achievement if it weren't for his brother. It was Mycroft who constantly pushed Sherlock – through explicit criticism and implicit example – to do better, to reach, to continuously strive for the highest level of distinction.

To that end Sherlock had attempted to frame and characterise his brother's abilities in a number of ways, but to his disgust he had only ever come up with metaphors embarrassing in their inadequacy and reductiveness. Nonetheless one concept persisted: that of Mycroft as a virtuoso card-counter in the casino halls of life. The same rules and odds applied to him as they did to everyone else, but Mycroft was able to discern the patterns and algorithms and variations and sub-sub rules that were imperceptible to everyone else, even Sherlock to a degree. He manipulated these invisible threads to work in his favour and serve his agenda so that he always prevailed in a way that was uncanny to the outside observer.

But Mycroft, he always knew which cards were to come into imminent play, knew the cards held by every player at the table, and could also keep track of those hidden up the sleeves of any covert actors not officially dealt in. Anyone whom he suspected of possessing a hand that could threaten him or his interests would be isolated, analysed, and neutralised. Without exception.

Until now, Sherlock thought, and the impossible incident forced him to consider the seriousness of the Moriarty/Moran business in a way that he hadn't for almost a year. As the memories had faded – prior to being churned up so forcefully by Ms Adler's return – the toll of the day-to-day desperation and loneliness of his time in exile had become muted as well. But now that he recalled that time again he realised that despite the hostilities between himself and his elder sibling, it had been Mycroft who had been his consistent contact and confidant, his lifeline. John had been inaccessible for obvious reasons, and Irene... Sherlock gave a reflexive frown, and averted his mind from that train of thought.

His brother on the other hand had been an ally—Sherlock's only ally. He'd acted aloof, yes, and so damned critical, but had also been accessible and useful on the few rare occasions that Sherlock had admitted to needing anything from him. In retrospect even those brief and terse exchanges had been vital to Sherlock's ongoing well-being, and maybe even his survival. They had served to remind him of who he was, or at least who he had been, so that he didn't vanish inside the personas that inhabited that world of violence and constant danger. For those short times Sherlock had also been able to project his frustrations onto a familiar target rather than internalise them, and that had been more helpful that he could've known at the time.

Now the integral players were reversed, although John was still excluded. And even though Sherlock wasn't prepared to share with him the truth about Irene Adler, he still felt frustrated by John's absence. Somehow with his stoic best friend by his side Sherlock was always able to better
cope. There were many reasons for that, of course, one of them being that Sherlock thought of John as a sort avatar who absorbed and filtered anything difficult on Sherlock's behalf, so that Sherlock could remain above it, unaffected and observant. For some reason experiencing these crises with Irene seemed to have the opposite effect, and exacerbate any rawness of feeling. Perhaps it was because she preferred to remain as impervious as he did, and so the emotions – having no vicarious option - turned inward. Or, perhaps there was another reason for it altogether.

A less selfish and more analytical part of Sherlock acknowledged that it was for the best that at that moment John and Mary were boarding a flight out of the country and towards relative safety. Granted, if Sherlock survived John might murder Sherlock himself for excluding him, but if Moran were somehow carrying on the work of his former master, it meant that John could be in as much danger now as he had been at the height of the post-Moriarty affair. At least then Moriarty had just been killed which had thrown his organisation into chaos, and Sherlock had ostensibly been dead. To make matters worse, Mary was drawn into the dangerous game this time as well, making the stakes even that much higher.

Though of course nothing else raised stakes quite as much as Nero—

He gave a small, jerky twitch of his head, rejecting that thought as well.

Still, he couldn't help but make a quick inventory of all the people affected by Moran's vendetta, and he was taken aback by how many he included without hesitation. It was a far greater number than the list of three Moriarty had presented on that fateful day.

He had told John then that alone protected him, but even at the time he had been abandoning the principle that had once informed his every interpersonal experience. He had said it more to achieve an end in the context of his plan (get John to leave) than out of any lingering conviction. If anything, the inverse was more accurate – “alone protects you” – but it was (and had been) far too late to do anything about that. Now he had not only accepted the role of certain people in his life, but he depended on them. And because of the dreadful parity between that situation and now, he found himself needing once more to protect their lives from a threat he had incited.

Seizing on the task the way a drowning man would clutch onto a life-preserver, Sherlock set to work. He first made an anonymous, untraceable call to the Kent constabulary to report that there was a bomb in the Sevenoaks home where Lestrade’s ex-wife lived with their children. Following this he forged an email from Mrs Hudson’s nephew to say that her sister up in Hertfordshire had suffered a stroke and to please come right away. He followed up on this by hacking into the sister, brother-in-law, and nephew’s phone settings to disable service from calls out of area.

He was about to set into motion his plan to remove Molly from town when he stopped, dropping the hand that clutched his phone down to his lap. Molly… Molly was different. Unlike the others, she had known all the details of the Lazarus plan. Not just known, but had been instrumental in ensuring his successful and discreet transition to that afterlife. He couldn't embroil her in this current situation, it wouldn't be fair for so many reasons, but neither could he bring himself to deceive her after what she had done for him last time he faced similar circumstances.

He scrolled to her contact information, and put his thumb on the call icon, but it stayed there for several moments. Then, with a distinct feeling of cowardice, he opened up the text message function instead.

*Can you get out of town? SH*

Her response was immediate, and exactly what he had expected.
What is it, I can help.

Warmth and regret swept through him in equal measure.

*Could be nothing. Erring on the side of caution.*

*What's happened?*

He deflected her question with one of his own. *Can you take leave?*

*I'm not saying yes. But hypothetically how long?*

*However many days of holiday you have stored up.*

Once again her response was immediate. *Sherlock, that's a lot.*

*That's what I'm counting on.*

*And you're sure I can't help?*

*I'm sure you could.*

*But...*

He sighed internally. *But, so many things.*

*Trust me.*

When she didn't answer, he typed and sent another word. He knew in the past she might have viewed it with uncertainty, but he hoped now that she would know his sincerity.

*Please.*

The next text took longer to arrive, the suspension points that indicated typing flashing on and off, and Sherlock could picture Molly considering and then reconsidering how to answer.

*If you need anything*

*I know.*

He hesitated, then sent off, *Molly, thank you.*

When she didn't reply he put the phone down and frowned, perturbed. It felt as though Moran were causing Sherlock to have to scramble and play catch-up, rather than the other way around, as it ought to be. This was a disadvantage he felt keenly, and made even worse by the absence of his previous collaborator, Mycroft.

These weren't permanent solutions, and they weren't as comprehensive as the scheme he had devised to remove John and Mary from danger, but at least they did buy him some time. Like Sherlock, like anybody, his friends were made vulnerable by their concerns for their loved ones, but in his case he sought to capitalised on that for good. For additional security he emailed Andrea to state that security details must be placed on Molly, Lestrade, and Mrs Hudson, and should further measures be necessary (additional bomb threats made, automobiles breaking down, train services interrupted...), that they would see to them. It wasn't long before she texted her affirmation.
These tasks completed he expected to feel a sense of accomplishment but instead, with no further distractions, the shock of what had happened came rushing back towards him.

With a contrived, forced calm in the face of what felt like accumulating panic, he cast about for another way to engage his mind, his eyes darting to and fro unseeing as he considered his next step. When it occurred to him he let out a sharp exhale of gratification, and he turned to Irene, his demeanour more assured.

"The car will drop you at Guildford as planned, but I'll be continuing on to the locus."

She gave a slow blink that he wasn't certain was a sort of acknowledgement of his words. Otherwise she made no move, though it was the most recognition she had given him since they'd entered the car.

For some reason, he felt compelled to add, "There are precious few hours of daytime left and I need to see it fresh and in the light."

She still said nothing, and Sherlock didn't think he was imagining the tension rising between them again.

"Well, what is it," he said after a prolonged silence. "Don't hold back on my account."

At first he thought she would continue to ignore him, but a moment later her voice, low and knowing, came from the other side of the car, "It terrifies you, doesn't it?"

He stared straight ahead, but his jaw flexed in involuntary response.

"That's absurd. While there's real work to be done I can't be uselessly hovering about at some sickbed. I need to go over every bit of the site, because at this point it's all we've got."

"Mycroft's people will be doing that."

He gave a derisive scoff. "Mycroft's people. They're the ones who allowed this to happen in the first place. One of them died for his lapse. Clearly 'Mycroft's people' aren't to be trusted with this."

He was aware of the hypocrisy of his words, given he had just delegated his friends' security to Mycroft's people, but he opted not to examine it too closely.

"It wasn't just Mr Holmes's people who missed the signs," she pointed out.

"Obviously Mycroft was distracted," he said, certain that she would catch his implications, and feeling a petty morsel of satisfaction for it.

"And so are you," she answered, not reacting to the barb, and turning to look him in the eye. The firm, assured way she spoke did even more to unsettle his composure, and then she did something that shocked him. She raised her hand and stroked the back of his upper arm, before she rested it atop his forearm.

"I'm aware," he managed. The impulses to shake her off or let himself savour it warred within him, but meanwhile her touch continued to radiate heat into his skin, and the weight of her hand felt far heavier than it should have.

"His team will document everything," she said, and again he wondered – for the umpteenth time since they had met – what her current objective was.
"I require primary, not secondary data," he snapped, aware that his testiness was a defensive reaction from his uncertainty and her touch more than it was a reaction to her words. "I don't think I need to impress upon you how high the stakes are in this case."

He saw her face harden but this time she didn't reply, and the awkward feeling of having done 'not good,' and far worse, caring about it, rankled at him. But not enough to change his mind.

"It's settled," he said, and turned away.

Once more she didn't comment - she didn't need to, he'd heard the bluster in his voice too - and they returned to heavy silence.

Almost an hour later the car turned down an unassuming hedged road, and the change in velocity and road type caused Sherlock to resurface from his chaotic and disordered thoughts and see signs for the hospital lining their route. Immediately his every sense sharpened in a fear response, and the heavy sensation of dread pooled in the pit of his stomach.

"You can't put this off forever," Irene said to his left, and at the sound of her voice his heart-rate ratcheted up further.

"As I said I'm of far more use in the field than I'd be playing grieving family member. And it's not as if Mycroft would be aware of it even if I did." As soon as he said the words he wondered if she'd call him out on his choice of words. She was clearly able to see through the pretence of coldness to know that he wasn't playing at all. The way his throat had tightened around the second sentence made it all that much more obvious.

Instead she said, "I wasn't talking about your brother."

"What—" he started with a furrowed brow, disconcerted. A fraction of a second later realisation hit.

"Oh."

He didn't have any reference, personal or observed, on how to answer, and his mind stuttered uselessly for a few moments before he replied with a subdued, "I know."

He wondered if she had been 'not talking about his brother' before too.

The door beside her opened and she turned away from him, though before she exited she paused as if she were going to say something else. But he would never learn what that was, because what he had suddenly seen over her shoulder had blindsided him and pulled the entirety of his focus.

He swore, both at the situation and at himself for failing to prepare for this eventuality, then flattened himself against the seat in an attempt to lean out of view.

"Get out," he commanded through clenched teeth, and she raised an eyebrow so that he added with exasperation, "Or stay in—just pick one damn it and shut the door."

He only succeeded in eliciting a bemused, disapproving look from her, and then it was too late. He swore again, and slumped in resignation as his mother and father, who had been standing just outside the main entrance, caught sight of him through Irene's open door and made a direct line towards the car.

How could he have been so idiotic to fail taking into account his parents, even after he had included them in his mental headcount? Distracted, indeed. Of course Andrea would've notified them as
well, he'd been an idiot not to realise it. And with Irene here as well, for God's sake… He envisioned Mycroft's look of smug schadenfreude at this turn of events, and felt an irrational flare of anger at his brother both for that imagined (but unquestionably accurate) reaction, and for being the indirect cause of this situation.

It only took a glance towards Sherlock's parents and then one back at Sherlock for The Woman to piece together the situation, and the shine of understanding in her eye that usually preceded some sort of misbehaviour filled him with new foreboding. This unforeseen meeting could make the already hateful situation far worse.

"Irene," he said in as ominous a voice he could manage, but she was already out of the car and rising to her full height.

He shoved open the door on his side and circled the rear of the car at a brisk walk, but to his relief Irene simply stood aside as his parents approached, their expressions anxious and intense. After her moment of comprehension when there had been a flicker of life in her eyes, she seemed to have retreated back into her mind again and was no longer engaged in what was transpiring. It was disconcerting to see Irene so preoccupied when she was usually acutely present in a given moment and he was still wary, but after the week he'd had he welcomed anything anticlimactic.

Then, before he could prepare himself for it his mother was locking him in a tight, fierce hug, and was pressing her mouth hard against the plane of his cheekbone. When he was able to extricate himself he managed to dodge the worst of it with his father, although Siger did clutch onto his hand longer, and harder, than Sherlock would've preferred. He didn't want to pay too close attention to their fear and tension; it might derail the tenuous hold he had on his own control.

"Oh darling, so good to see you," his mother said with feeling, reaching up to touch his face where she'd kissed him as if to confirm he was really there, whole and intact before her. "Andrea said she'd notified you, but we… weren't sure if you would come. I was about to ring you myself, but here you are. Can you believe this? How could this have happened?"

"I don't know, but I assure you I'll find out," he answered stiffly.

His mother started to reply, but then stopped as she realised that there was a stranger in their midst, and she cocked her head towards Irene.

"Oh, hello, who's this? Are you one of Mycroft's as well?" she asked, somewhat nonplussed. Irene blinked and raised her chin, but before she had the chance to answer, Sherlock cut in with a raised voice.

"No, of mine," he said without thinking. "I mean, she's a client. But she's agreed that I'll put her case on hold for now, given... today's events."

He couldn't risk sending a warning look towards Irene. For her many other shortcomings his mother was well-versed in signs of deception after raising two exceedingly duplicitous boys – and so he just willed her not to contradict him.

Irene murmured, terse and not sounding herself at all, "Yes."

Then she did contradict him by looking into Sherlock's eyes with a weight incongruous with her being 'just' client, though whilst locked in that gaze Sherlock found himself uncaring, and for the smallest moment everything else faded away into background noise.

"Mr and Mrs Holmes, apologies for intruding," she said in a soft voice, and when she broke off eye
contact the brief immunity he had found there disappeared.

She inclined her head then turned, reaching into her pocket for her phone as she did so. The void she left seemed more significant than the space she had occupied, and all three Holmeses watched her as she departed.

His mother's stare lingered even longer than Sherlock's, and when she faced her son again, a probing look had partially replaced the one of anxiety.

"So who was that really?" she asked, and Sherlock felt a flash of mild alarm. His mother also had occasional, always inconvenient, bouts of caniness, and he very much could not deal with it at the moment.

"I told you," he said, and he hated the trace of petulance in his voice, "she's a client. She's got someone threatening her and her—er, reputation."

He had been about to say 'and her child,' (Rule 1: always adhere to the closest form of the truth when telling a lie) but something had stopped him from saying the words since he was, in fact, referring to his parents' very own, and only, grandchild. One whom they hadn't a clue existed—whom he hadn't even had a clue existed until the day before.

He felt the blood drain from his face as that entire additional dimension occurred to him. Of course his parents would want to know their grandson – could he go so far as to wilfully deprive them of that?

And dear god, did the ripples of consequences for caring, for wanting The Woman, ever end?

Perhaps because they recognised the futility of it neither his mother nor his father ever wheedled their sons about having families of their own. Still, it was obvious that the prospect would elate them both. They were always fawning over small children doing commonplace child things as if they were remarkable and didn't, in fact, happen all round the world every day, and when he was out with them he was often made to stop and suffer through their comments on all the "darling" miniature-sized outfits in children's shop windows.

Surely by now they had become resigned to simply listening as their friends regaled them of the joys of grandparenthood, but it was another matter for Sherlock to never reveal the existence of the child at all. Perhaps until very, very recently he might've rationalised that what they didn't know couldn't affect them, but now that he no longer felt resentful over his unexpected fatherhood, he didn't believe that. Knowledge, no matter how difficult or inconvenient, was always preferable to ignorance.

And what of the child himself? Nero could benefit from the stability of additional adults in his life, probably. Sherlock wasn't sure how that worked precisely, but he suspected it was one of those things—'conventional wisdom'. But unlike most general popular sentiments, which he found mawkish and irrelevant on the whole, perhaps there was merit to it... And it wasn't as if Irene had any support system in place herself. Whether her parents were dead or estranged or both, they obviously weren't in the picture.

What, he couldn't help but speculate, might it have done for him as a child to have had the sort of support network he knew now? How would things have been different for him if the influential figures in his boyhood hadn't been cleaved into two discrete groups: his parents, who represented, in the simplest terms, emotional intelligence, and his brother who represented the cerebral. His younger self had had the vague impression that the two were mutually exclusive, in competition with and contradiction of one another. His mother had shown through the abandonment of her
career for family that one didn’t – couldn’t – have both, but his brother had actively reinforced that and had also made it clear which of the two was the superior. Still, Sherlock hadn’t really believed him—not until that one summer, when he’d come to learn the difficult way that Mycroft was, as always, right.

But if each of his family members had embodied a semblance of the two rather than being falling into one category or the other, would he have learned how to reconcile those things in himself? Would he have learned how to cope rather than how to suppress and compartmentalise one aspect of himself to facilitate the other? His face twisted in distaste at the distinctly Jungian tone of his thoughts, and he cleared them from his mind.

"Yes but what on earth is she doing here – now," his mother was asking in a slightly raised voice when he tuned in again. She sounded bewildered, but he narrowed his eyes at her with suspicion. He couldn't tell whether she was being innocuous or if she were digging.

"Not that it's relevant but we were on our way somewhere and I had the car redirect when Andrea called with the news," he lied.

"But that's not what Andrea said to us, is it," she contradicted, looking to her husband who gave a nod of confirmation. "She told us she'd sent the car over to your flat to pick you up. That's why I thought, another one of Mycroft's aides maybe—well I mean, she certainly looks the part..."

"Mm, definitely Mycroft's type," Siger agreed, deadpan, and then despite the heaviness of the hour his parents exchanged an ironic, slightly humorous look, before turning their eyes back to their younger son.

Sherlock just glared back in disbelief, now at a loss as to what to say. It was remarkable how no matter his actual age, his parents, especially his mum, could reduce him to feeling twelve years old again. Of course he should have said she worked for Mycroft, it would have been the perfect cover story. He must have been more preoccupied with the all-too-pressing question of whether she really were a client or not, and he felt a traitorous tinge of colour start to infuse his cheeks.

At his expression his mother's eyebrows climbed towards her hairline, and after another exchanged glance with his father she said, "All right, we won't pry. Always so evasive, our boy." She amended, sounding more subdued, "Both of our boys."

"Let's get this over with, shall we?" Sherlock cut in, but it was with a ring of command he didn't feel. Instead a chill had begun to steal through him that had nothing to do with the forced air in Reception, and as he trailed his parents down the central hall it felt as if the soles of his shoes were transforming to lead. Each step felt heavier and cost more effort than the last, but he hadn't a choice. It wasn't as if he could tell his parents that he was only dropping off his 'client' at the hospital before visiting the locus; no, there was no pretext for him being there aside from visiting his brother. The investigation would have to wait, frustrating as the thought was.

As they moved into the bowels of the building they passed over a dozen men and women in dark suits, conferring in low and urgent whispers with each other or on their mobiles. One man looked up as they passed and his expression first registered surprise at seeing Sherlock, then some urgency.

"Ah Mr Holmes—! If you have a moment we need to discuss—"

"Not now," Sherlock's mother cut in fiercely, her stride never breaking. The man lowered his eyes and stepped back, but Sherlock looked back over his shoulder with a sort of frustrated longing as they continued up the hall.
Sherlock tended to avoid the above-ground levels of hospitals but he had a particular dislike for Major Trauma centres, even before one of them contained his comatose brother. They were the confluence points for two things he abhorred: irrational disorder and tedious bureaucracy—not to mention they were rife with rampant emotions. It was his policy to send John to speak with clients who had been injured during the course of an investigation whenever possible. He stuck to the cavernous, silent chambers of hospital sublevels where scientific inquiry and order reigned, as opposed to the chaos of the imprecise and ephemeral science of sustaining or restoring life. He had to admit that his distaste had a distinctly more personal feel now, though.

Several minutes later his parents' paces slowed and they took identical deep, fortifying breaths, but he didn't need such cues to know that the next room held Mycroft. The massive guards flanking either side of the entrance had given that away far in advance.

The shorter and stockier of the two opened the door and waved his parents through, though the other stepped forward and prodded a blocking hand into his chest when he followed. Without bothering to hide his impatience he stated who he was, and yet the hand remained in place, and the guard demanded to see identification.

Sherlock's annoyance was quickly replaced by his realisation that this could be a gift—his final chance to get out of seeing Mycroft. He was experiencing an extremely strong aversion to crossing the threshold, and he had to fully acknowledge now that his motivations for investigating the scene rather than visit Mycroft were more complex than wanting to allocate his time well. Straightforward fear, irrational as it was, drove him as well, because if he saw his (previously infallible) brother in this state with his own eyes, the situation would gain the weight of truth it mightn't have otherwise.

Within the room his parents had turned and his mother was beginning to swell with indignation, but before Sherlock could say that he wasn't carrying any ID with him, the decision was taken out of his hands. The guard who had opened the door said he recognised Sherlock, and the other one relented and dropped his hand. With no other recourse remaining Sherlock entered the dim room, but his feet dragged as if he were moving forward in a nightmare.

Mycroft, who had always towered over him in height and intellect during childhood and who continued to tower over him from the lectern in Sherlock's Mind Palace, looked diminished and inconsequential in unconsciousness. He was reduced in more than just a physical sense, and visceral dread plunged through Sherlock as he realised that it was due to his perception that there was something absent that had always made Mycroft the profound force he was. The sight was even worse than Sherlock could've anticipated, and his diaphragm clenched like he had been punched.

Beside him he heard his mother suck in another small shuddering gasp and he felt her wrap her arms around his shoulder and hug him, but this time he allowed it. The touch helped somehow; it rooted him in reality rather than the spiralling, snowballing comprehension of what losing Mycroft meant. What really losing him - previously impossible to fathom, let alone understand - really meant.

He stood just inside the doorway, unwilling (unable) to follow his parents as they moved in closer, and he watched in silence as his mother sat down and took hold of his brother's limp hand.

"They-they said they think he has a chance," his father said in a faint voice from off to Sherlock's right. "But they can't say what he'll be like… If he'll be the same… If…" His words trailed off into nothingness.

Sherlock's mother let out sharp exhale that was almost a sob and squeezed Mycroft's hand, but
Sherlock found that any words of his own were lodged inside his throat. Instead a single thought cycled through his mind over and over.

*This time, Mycroft, the East Wind has come for you.*

The room, his parents, the beeps and hisses emitting from the equipment hooked to Mycroft: all of it fell away as he looked from their joined hands up into his older brother's still, pallid face. Suddenly Sherlock wasn't feeling twelve out of any filial guilt, but because that age had also marked a crucial turning point in his life, when he had made the conscientious decision to become just like Mycroft, who never seemed to feel emotional pain over anything, who never suffered. Because he had been twelve when *that* incident had occurred and he had learned first-hand of the personal toll of death, and of caring.

More so than Mycroft, Sherlock's interests had veered towards what his mother had termed 'the morbid' and as a child he'd been fascinated with any dead animals (birds and frogs mostly, but also the occasional small mammals such as mice or hedgehogs) he'd find on their property. From a young age he had kept journals that marked rates of decay, insect predation, and the scattering of remains as time passed. But that examination of death had been cerebral and academic, and had nothing to do with the concept of loss. He had been attracted to it with a child's innocent curiosity and naivety.

That had all changed the summer of 1989.

It had been a warm, dry summer, and the weather had been exceptionally conducive to the local beetle population. Sherlock had spent the holidays observing various species around their property, tracking their movements, keeping notes on their diet and foraging habits, and taking photos with the 35mm Minolta Dynex that had been his birthday present from his parents that January.

On that particular day he had caught sight of the rare and impressive specimen, *Lucanus cervus* or the Stag Beetle, near their back steps, and he had rushed into the house to grab his camera. When he'd returned he was elated to see that the beetle hadn't scuttled out of view, and for over an hour he was totally engrossed in his observations and photography.

The sound of his father's car screeching into the front drive had registered at the edge of his attention but hadn't disrupted his focus. Siger's frantic shouts of "The dog, it's the dog!" had. His heart lunging into the pit of his stomach as realisation clicked in an instant, Sherlock's eyes had darted up to confirm that the rear door was wide open. In his haste and excitement to document his sighting of the beetle, he had neglected to latch it behind him.

With a throat starting to choke closed and eyes beginning to burn with tears, he'd pelted around to the front of the house. At first he hadn't seen anything wrong and he'd allowed himself a brief moment of relief, but then Siger had opened the rear door of the car and Sherlock had nearly stumbled to his knees. His beloved Irish Setter Redbeard was wrapped in his father's overcoat, sprawled across the backseat and bleeding from the mouth. It was obvious that he'd slipped past Sherlock without Sherlock even noticing, and had been struck by a car on the front road.

It was the only time his dad had ever been rough with him; in his haste and distress he had grabbed Sherlock by the nape of his shirt collar and had practically thrown him into the backseat next to Redbeard. He had already got behind the wheel and shifted into first gear when his mother came bustling out of the front door, throwing a coat over her housedress and looking stricken.

All Sherlock could remember of that dreadful car trip into town were tear-blurred images of Redbeard's unfocussed, dilated eyes and the irregular heaving of his gleaming sides, and that when Sherlock had stroked a hand along his face to comfort him, Redbeard had managed several meagre
licks of Sherlock's fingers before his head had flopped back down again.

Sherlock had latched desperately onto the hope that that meant the dog would recover, that Sherlock wouldn't be responsible for the death of his best friend, and for several days Redbeard had clung onto life. But in the end his parents had made the difficult though merciful decision to have Redbeard euthanized, and feeling the life waning from his body as Sherlock held him in his arms had been the most difficult experience of Sherlock's young life. He had hated his mum and dad for it but he had hated himself far more, although he had certainly not let the critical learning opportunity go amiss.

The pain of that loss had carried a weight that Mycroft's reproof never really had, and he had finally understood what his brother seemed to have been born knowing: every person must make a decision on how to expend their energy in the finite time allotted, and caring is both a hindrance and a disadvantage to anything of real value. One could not have it both ways. With several marked exceptions he had managed to practice the spirit, if not the letter, of the ideology.

Or so he had thought. Yet here he was again looking down onto the face of someone he loved, someone who was on the brink of death—because of Sherlock, and the consequences of his caring.

The past began to flicker in disorientating overlaps with the present, and as he stared at the still and contused eyelids of his brother it was as if he were also staring into the blown-wide eyes of Redbeard again. His younger self was mentally commanding those eyes, begging them, to refocus and regain their lively spark—standing in proxy for the adult who couldn't quite articulate the same feelings, though he experienced them just with at least as much force.

As the recrimination and panic pounded through him Sherlock took a few unconscious steps backwards, and then for the second time in a matter of days he wheeled around and all but sprinted from a room. He ignored the soft, startled calls from his parents and strode down the hall with the tails of his coat streaming behind him, not towards any given destination except away from that cramped, dimly-lit ward. For several moments he blindly groped about in his pockets for cigarettes before he remembered that he'd quit again and he let out a sharp, wordless cry of frustration, then slowed his steps and came to a halt in the middle of Reception. He almost wished that the sense of disembodiment and derealisation would return, because even though it had been unnerving, the numbness was far better than this.

"Mr Holmes?" a voice asked, and Sherlock dropped his hands and looked around to see Mycroft's PA Andrea regarding him. She wore her usual blasé expression, although a minutely raised eyebrow revealed her surprise at the manner in which she'd found him.

She paused to allow him to straighten his coat and collect himself, and he swallowed in a concerted effort to slow his breathing.

After a moment, she said, "I've just shown Ms Adler to her son. Are your parents with Mr Holmes now?"

He stared at her uncomprehending, and it took several seconds for her words to make any sort of sense.

He blinked hard, and struggled to find his voice. He still wasn't fully present there in the central hall; the image of his brother's feeble form lying under a hospital sheet continued to monopolize his attention.

"Yes—yes."
She gave a curt nod but continued to look at him, and he recalled what else she had said.

"And…" he said in a low, faltering voice, "Ms Adler, she's all right?"

"Yes." Andrea studied his face, then shifted her body back in the direction she'd come. "I can show you there as well, if you'd like."

"No," he said, too abrupt and too loud. He continued at normal volume, "I… I need to get back to…"

She just stared up at him with an even, bland face, and yet he got the impression that she was evaluating him in some way.

His brother had once said that she made an exceptional soundboard, and Sherlock could now see that quality in her. He experienced something similar with John, his 'conductor of light,' except he thought that Andrea's unruffled, composed demeanour far better complemented the personality of his brother. She provided a (deceptively) blank canvas upon which Mycroft could project his thoughts, but she was perceptive and savvy enough to marshal those thoughts with the subtlest of micro-expressions. In her own way Sherlock suspected that she was every bit as skilful a manipulator as Irene Adler, and more powerful than The Woman had ever been.

Although she may never again have the chance to either help or influence Mycroft.

Control, control, he commanded as that thought threatened to undo his veneer of composure. One side of his mouth gave a sardonic twist at the concept.

What control? For the duration of this entire affair he had been a position of reacting rather than acting. Outside, ungovernable factors had been in control, not him, and he found that just as disturbing as any of the other developments.

So change it, he ordered himself. Turn it around. Take control now. His first reaction to the thought was annoyance for its glibness, but then it was replaced by a realisation, and his eyebrows raised.

One primary factor that had been acting upon him was his own fear: for his friends' safety, of Moran's return from the dead and the corresponding fact that he had outwitted Sherlock, of The Woman's sentiment towards him, and of course, of his unanticipated fatherhood. To shift things in his favour and regain his capacity for rational thought, he needed to first and foremost confront and overcome those fears.

Starting with Nero—now.

His heart pounded wildly at the thought and his mind launched into double-speed to try to find another way, but his insight was sound. It was time to meet his son.

He shot a look outside and saw that the sky was fading into a dusky late-afternoon indigo, the last rays of sunlight slanting down at an angle through the thick flange of trees in front of the hospital. A quick calculation told him that even if he left for the locus now he'd be arriving onsite after the onset of darkness. The team would be setting up klieg lights soon, and so there wouldn't be much difference between investigating at ten or two at night. It was perfunctory, but it was the final bit of rational justification that he'd needed.

He swallowed then gave Andrea a terse nod, and despite the immensity of that decision he might as well have been agreeing to a cup of tea, for all of her reaction. She turned to lead the way at a brisk
pace, her heels clicking against the hospital linoleum, and in his ears the staccato sound was only slightly quieter than his racing pulse. This time none of the men and women standing vigil interrupted them, and instead they parted like the Red Sea before her path.

They passed the main doors and through them Sherlock observed the waiting car. It wasn't too late to change his mind but he knew he wouldn't, because in fact 'control' here was an illusion. There was something greater than conscientious decision compelling him towards the far wing of the hospital. It was both the equal and the inverse of why he'd fled Mycroft's room; where there he was repelled, here he was drawn in.

Still, it was far too soon before Andrea came to a stop in front of a closed door, crimped the corner of her lips at him in a not-quite smile, then turned again and left him standing alone in the corridor.

He stared at the unremarkable door, made of layered composite, reinforced with stainless steel, and marked with a great number of dents, scuffs, and various transferrants. Automatically dozens of observations poured into his mind, but none of them gave him any insight into what he might find on the other side or how it might alter things – alter him – forever.

Again he told himself that it wasn't too late to turn round. He'd fulfilled his familial duty visiting Mycroft, after all, and he hadn't even intended to do that much when they'd arrived.

But he wasn't standing in the hall now out of any obligation. As he'd already grasped something else had lead him to this threshold—or perhaps many things had: the thousands of minute steps he'd taken over the course of the past few years. Taken alone they were so small as to be almost unnoticeable, yet when threaded together they had brought him a great distance. They had brought him here.

It hit him with the force of a case-related epiphany that the change to him wasn't going to come in the form of some external thing waiting on the other side of the door. He was standing outside this particular door because those changes had *already* occurred. Nero, the living proof of that, wouldn't even exist for Sherlock to meet had they not done.

*No, you still haven't quite got it,* his mind admonished.

Then it came to him. It wasn't that he had changed, because he had never been and never could be the 'Ice Man' his brother was. It was far more accurate to say that the numerous layers of pretence and defence that he had constructed through the years had begun to fall away, one fortification at a time—one person at a time. So for him the salient message had never been 'caring is not an advantage,' because that rested on an impossible premise: that caring or not caring was *ever* something that Sherlock could choose.

A far more relevant prescriptive for him was 'For every risk taken, ensure that there are iron-clad safeguards in place for those that it puts in danger.' And that was one which he had long-since internalised, and had practiced since the day he'd stepped off the ledge at St. Bart's.

At that he felt a burst of determination and anticipation, and he reached out and grasped the handle of the door.

For three more seconds he rested his hand on the knob, feeling the coolness of the metal press into his palm and adrenaline kick its way through his body, and then he took in a deep breath and gave a wrenching turn of his wrist. The latch released, the door opened, and for the second time in ten minutes he stepped over the threshold of a hospital room towards some sort of reckoning.

It was as dim as his brother's, but the electronic pulse of the EKG monitors and the drips of the IV
tube that had permeated Mycroft's room were absent from this one. The effect was that the low light made it seem like a secluded refuge, distant and apart from the chaos of the rest of the A&E wing, rather than a clinical ward. Still, Sherlock felt the opposite of relaxed. Blood was thrumming through his veins and his breathing felt tight and short, and the palms of his hands itched with perspiration and nerves. He swept his eyes over his surroundings in small darting movements, but when they found Irene's figure his flight instinct vanished.

She turned towards him, and though he knew she must have spun around to see who had entered the room her movement seemed as slow and graceful as a pendulum swing. When she faced him their gazes locked together again, and after a moment of surprise at seeing him in the doorway, there was understanding as well as the gleam of something else in her expression. Through her eyes, and the deep connection he found there, the stillness and peace of the room managed to steal into him further and brace him for what he knew would come next.

Summoning all the strength of will he could manage, he detached his gaze from Irene's and dropped his eyes to the child clinging to her arms. Nero had lifted his head from where it had been burrowed in his mother's shoulder at the sound of the door opening, and the child's upturned face met Sherlock's look directly.

For an instant his rapid heart rate arrested in shock; Sherlock was staring directly into his own eyes. All the recognition and familiarity he had ever found in Irene's became literal as he looked into the pale grey-gold irises fringed with long dark lashes of his son.

Then his defence mechanisms kicked in, and he narrowed his eyes and began to catalogue everything he could about the infant before him.

Besides his own heterochromia, Sherlock spotted his mother's earlobes, his maternal grandmother's small right-cheek dimple, Irene's nose and skin tone, and other features he couldn't identify and therefore attributed to The Woman's recessive contributions: the baby's hairline and hitchhikers thumbs, to name a few. But the baby was also left-handed like Sherlock's father, in the process of teething, slept through the night more often than not, was partly subsisting on solid foods, and apparently had a predilection for mushy peas—one thing which he most certainly did not inherit from his father.

His ability to observe and analyse didn't last long. He had just a few seconds of respite, but then he saw that Nero had the identical trait of quirking his left brow as The Woman, and unfamiliar feeling rushed over him. It subsumed all of his previous fears, but replaced them with new and far graver ones in the process.

He didn't turn on his heel and bolt this time. Instead, in spite of the weakness in his legs, he deliberately walked forward, towards Irene and towards their child.

When he came to a stop several feet away he found that proximity wasn't enough, he felt compelled to actually hold Nero as well. As he drew even closer the child huddled against Irene and hid his face in her neck, but after only a moment he lifted his head again and turned at the waist towards Sherlock, a look of mingled curiosity and interest overcoming his shyness (from his recent trauma or personality? Sherlock thought fleetingly, suspecting the former). Nero lifted an arm and pointed at Sherlock, then looked up at his mother, clearly demanding an explanation, and she smiled at him.

Sherlock stared at the pure, un-cynical expression on Irene's face, and was even more astonished when, after only a brief hesitation, Nero beamed back at her, showing his gums and four small teeth. Sherlock's incredulousness shifted into a feeling of something close to exhilaration when he discovered what else his son had inherited from him.
"Sherlock," she told Nero.

He stared back at her for several seconds, his brow bent in concentration.

"Shull," he repeated in a small but confident voice, and Sherlock's breath caught at hearing his son for the first time.

"You've certainly captured his interest," Irene murmured. She looked over at him with playful approval dancing in her eyes, though that other, more complex emotion remained as well. "You should've seen him when he met Mycroft – almost total apathy."

Several abstract rejoinders floated into Sherlock's mind (He's as clever as he looks, We have something in common already, If I had any doubts as to his paternity…), but he found that he had not yet recovered his voice.

When her words were met with silence the teasing spark faded, but before she could speak he gave a dismissing shake of his head, and took yet another step closer so that he could feel the warmth radiating off of both of them.

"I've- I've never…” His voice was still barely more than a rumble and sounded halting and hoarse, as if he hadn't used it for ages. That was fitting; he felt that if anything, experiences rather than the arbitrary passage of time determined aging, and it was as if he had matured years since he'd made the decision to enter this room.

Irene understood, and she closed the small remaining distance between them. She then eased Nero out of her arms and into Sherlock's, which he held out with unprecedented trepidation. He wasn't concerned he'd drop the baby, that was absurd; this fear was related to something far less nameable, and welled up from some chasm within him.

Though Nero's breathe quickened audibly and he made a small noise of apprehension and reached back for Irene as she shifted him, he didn't put up any real fuss. The moment of transfer passed by in both overlucid clarity and rushed blur, and then Irene was stepping back from Sherlock, and the child was in his arms. Nero was heavier than Sherlock had expected, and his muscles automatically flexed in reaction to the unanticipated weight, so that his hold around the infant tightened.

More than knowing that Nero existed, more even than seeing Nero with his own eyes, holding his son finally drove home that Nero was real, an actual individual, not a mere concept and not just a tool for Irene to use as leverage. And though he was a man accustomed to parsing through and making sense of great quantities of information, even the densest and most complex data he'd ever processed could not prepare him for the onslaught of emotions brought on by cradling his child for the first time.

Because it was so familiar to Sherlock he was first able to identify the selfish, ego-centric aspect: how Nero made him feel—as a new parent, and as a man. There was the overwhelming sense of pride that he had somehow procreated this perfect, perfect child, but there were more complex, much deeper sensations at play as well, and he felt his throat tighten with unexpected sentiment. Concepts of mortality, of personal legacy, of worldviews he should pass on, all vied for his attention.

And Irene… this changed things between them, or at least it built upon the foundations that were already there. She would always be The Woman, the one he desired despite all reason and rationale, his match and his foil in equal measure, who had cured a specific loneliness he hadn't even known he'd felt until he'd met her, who had excited his body as effortlessly as she'd stimulated his mind…
But now she was also the mother of his child and he was the father of hers; they shared something even more exceptional than mutual talent and brilliance, and even more important than the singularity of their bond. Nothing could negate this thing they had accomplished, this child they had made together, and it was a profound relief to Sherlock that he would never again question whether he'd exaggerated the events of Karachi in his mind, or wonder if his feelings were disproportionate to hers. Even in the event that his fears were founded, which he now doubted, they would be eternally linked through their son.

As his mind raced along with his heartbeat, trying to understand the deep and primal emotions resounding through him like bells of St Paul's on Easter, one thing became clear. The main source of pride he felt was not for himself, or even The Woman, or for what they had achieved together, or what parenthood had the potential to make of them.

It was for Nero. Nero was far greater than the sum of his parts, and much more than the proof of his parents' unique connection or the embodiment of Sherlock and Irene's complementary strengths. He was *sui generis* in his own right.

At that Sherlock's eyes refocused on his son's face, who in turn was leaning back to peer up into Sherlock's, his eyes round and his mouth ajar. To Sherlock's astonishment, he could see signs of the mental process that he recognised at a fundamental level. Nero was far from the embryonic, blank slate that Sherlock had always dismissed a child of his age as being, and instead he saw that Nero was clearly taking in and rapidly processing everything around him – Sherlock in particular. It was Sherlock's own scan in literal infancy, and he stared back dumbfounded, so that father and son were each locked in thrall of the other. A new emotion jostled in on all the others: remorse that he hadn't been able to watch this progress, hadn't been present to see the glimmer of awareness and acumen develop in his son's eyes. He should have responded to Irene's postcard, but he vowed with a vehemence that took him aback with its ferocity: *I will not miss any more.*

His resolve turned even steelier as he recalled the active threat against those he loved, and the instinctive fears he'd felt for Nero when he first laid eyes on him came roaring back. More than anyone—more than even his friends, his parents, John and Mary, than Mycroft, than Irene—*Nero* must be protected. His readiness to kill for his loved ones should the situation call for it had escalated into something else now: an imperative.

Without looking away from his son's face, and in a tone that was now low and hard Sherlock said, "Moran. He has to die."

Without hesitation and just as steely Irene replied, "Yes."

At that Sherlock finally raised his head, and over the dark, messy curls of their son they shared a blazing look of accord.

For the first time since the time surrounding Karachi Sherlock felt that he and Irene were not only no longer antagonists but one united and indivisible force, and he was filled with a scornful sort of pity for Moran.

Then Nero stretched upwards and pressed his small dimpled hands to either side of Sherlock's face, and Sherlock stared again into the demanding and inquisitive eyes that mirrored his own in so many ways. The intensity of the moment blazed through both his mind and his heart, and it was suddenly as though a lever had been thrown and a room that had previously been illuminated by a small but brilliant array of lamps was now flooded with stadium lights. In that moment there were no shadows and no dark corners, there was only brightness, only Nero.
Irene had to admit, there were times – many times – when she believed that she would never witness the sight now before her. There was every reason to think that Sherlock and their son would never meet; knowing him, knowing herself, and the type of people they were and the type of lives they led, it had often seemed like an untenable hope. Despite the disparate components they had to form a family, domesticity and conventional monogamy were in neither Sherlock’s nor her first natures.

She’d been confident that her plan for insinuating herself back into the country and into Mycroft’s, if not graces, then protection was sound. With his pathological adherence to logic and duty she had taken it as almost a given that he would see cooperation with her as the only option. Any other response (refusal, a countermove no matter how surreptitious) would put all that he valued at risk. No, she’d known she had Mycroft in the palm of her elegant hand—the uncertainty came as ever with the more emotional contingent.

The younger of the Holmes Brothers was the volatile variable, in no small part because of her own subjectivity and investment in the situation. Despite the fact that she was deft at discerning what people liked and Sherlock was less of a challenge to that skill than he might prefer to think, and despite the intimacy they had shared for those fleeting, diaphanous days twenty months before, he was still impenetrable and unpredictable to her in many ways. (Not that she would admit that, and undermine Sherlock’s almost reverential belief in her powers of perception and intuition.)

Also, she’d had very little actual knowledge of his family beyond his fractious relationship with Mycroft, and so she had no means by which to predict how he would react to a child, or to the sacrifices needed to provide and protect for that child. She had only speculated that it would be tremendously difficult for him, perhaps to the point where he would refuse to acknowledge Nero. And for the past few days it had seemed as though her cynicism would be confirmed.

But now, here they were.

In the low light of the room Sherlock was looking at their child the way she had seen him look at her in the past, only distilled down into its purest form, in every sense of the word. There was intense fascination and a trace amount of wariness in the way his eyes darted across Nero’s face, but those were superseded by a soft, awed reverence. It was rare that she felt emotionally affected, but both of the exceptions to her natural guardedness were standing before her, enthralled by one another just as each of them enthralled her. She swallowed against the sensation of warmth and emotion radiating upwards through her chest as she watched Sherlock and Nero, the only people whom Irene Adler had ever allowed a glimpse beneath the diamond-hard exterior.

Except that contrary to what she’d like to believe given her predilection for control, she’d allowed nothing. Her experience with Sherlock had been akin to natural disaster both in its strength and in the elemental feel of it. It had reshaped her the way an earthquake shifts a mountain range or floodwaters alter a millennia-old riverway. The geological features remained as fundamentally imposing and obdurate as ever, and yet they were forever changed by a force even more implacable. It was the same for Sherlock. The mark on him of her, the mark of what they had shared together, were as clear as the effects on a coastline in the aftermath of a tsunami.

And with Nero her fierce, unconditional love had been a foregone conclusion from the moment she’d first felt that peculiar fluttering pressure inside of her, which had told her that he was real and not just an impossible concept. Ever since then she had fought for him harder than she’d ever fought for anything else in her life—against external forces, but also against her own demons and
doubts. And she would continue to do so for as long as she lived.

Mine, she thought with fierce possessiveness as she watched them, and her heart leapt into a sprint in response. She had never quite stopped thinking of Sherlock as hers, but she had also recognised that that stemmed from a blend of hubris and affirmative thinking. In reality she hadn’t known if that were the case at all, and when he had failed to respond to her encoded overture of the postcard her uncertainty had grown. Now, after they had shared that piercing look of understanding with one another, and were standing here in a charged but assured silence with their child, fresh certainty surged through her. It raced down her spine and straightened it, then filled the pit of her stomach with a fluttering, free-falling sensation that made her have to catch her breath.

There was still a great amount of work to be done, both in terms of rediscovering their previous intimacy and accomplishing what was required to protect their child, but it was clear that at least she and Sherlock were united in purpose once more.

She had been prepared to do this without him if necessary; she had created adaptable strategies for any foreseeable circumstance, though they had been built on the assumption of Mycroft’s participation, which was no longer possible. But moreover, pursuing Moran alone meant that Sherlock had wanted nothing to do with her and her son, and it was only now that she could confess to herself that she cared far more about that element than she had admitted when creating the strategies. Thinking in terms of pure tactic had been necessary at the time; she couldn’t give into sentimentality when crafting battleplans. But the intense gratification she felt now was much more personal than the strategic advantage of Sherlock’s involvement warranted.

“We should go,” Sherlock said, breaking the silence of the room and interrupting her thoughts.

“We,” she repeated, intending it to sound like a prompt for clarification rather than affirmation. In truth it was both.

“Yes,” Sherlock said, and his delivery was matter-of-fact, but the way he looked into her eyes answered the subtext of her question. “Moriarty’s approach was divide and conquer and Moran is clearly playing by his book. Together we make a far more formidable adversary.

“Besides,” he added, “as you’ve pointed out I spent almost a year chasing the man, and you’ve spent almost a year evading him. The fact that both you and Nero are still alive tells me that you’re doing something right. My own brother didn’t even—” Sherlock stopped with a frown, then bounced Nero gently in his arms in a movement that Irene thought was unconscious, and meant to seek comfort more than to offer it.

“Go where, the locus?” she asked before that line of thought could derail him.

“No. Change of plans.”

With some surprise she took in his clenched jaw and the eyes that wouldn’t meet hers, before a feeling of disquiet snaked through her belly.

What had ‘changed’ since their time in the car was that Sherlock had seen his comatose brother with his own eyes and had met his child, and it was clear that he had been unprepared for how much either of those things would affect him. And while his reaction to their son had affected her as well, she also didn’t want him to forfeit the logical integrity of their mission in a self-fulfilling prophesy about the cost of sentiment. It would only serve to undermine their work in the short-term, and cause him to resent and perhaps even reject his role in Nero’s life in the long-term—if indeed they managed to get that far.
She needed him to find a balance between his sentiment and his deadly, precise resolution so that one strengthened the other. She knew that it would be difficult, particularly since Sherlock didn’t believe himself capable of joining the two—that they were forever separate spheres within himself that he could not reconcile. It was asking him to manoeuvre upon the edge of a knife, but she also knew it was possible. She had seen it for herself in Karachi, but of course now he would need to discover in himself a more stable and long-term version of it, which could prove to be as much of a challenge to Sherlock as the capture of Moran.

“You said yourself that going to the scene of the attack was essential, that you couldn’t trust Mycroft’s people to document things properly.”

He made a derisive sound. “That couldn’t ever change.”

She waited for him to elaborate but he didn’t, and she narrowed her eyes, not appreciating the guessing game. “If it’s because it’s nightfall now and—”

“No,” he interrupted, but he still wasn’t looking her in the eye, and she felt her concerns grow.

“Then what,” she asked, and this time her voice carried a trace of The Woman’s professional command.

For a moment Irene thought he would continue to evade her question, but then his head whipped towards her and he pinned her with an expression that she’d never seen before. It was blazing look of determination, resentment, and even fear.

“What’s changed,” he said, his voice low and emphatic but his words so clipped and rapid they sounded rather like Morse code, “Is that I’ve realised how much this is still a game chess after all these years, only with a new player on the other side of the board. And now that they’ve checked the king the next move I make is reactive and defensive, therefore inherently weaker, and all the time the clock is ticking down time. How?” he suddenly roared. “How can this be Moran?”

He squeezed his eyes shut then reopened them and continued, “If he’s managed to get to my brother it’s only a matter of time before he gets to us, before he gets to—to Nero. And we only have a brief period of time in which to act in any way that’s advantageous—or at the very least to hit pause while we regroup. I intend not to waste that opportunity. Once we’re secure, then I’ll access the crime scene information that’s been collected. No it’s not ideal and I’m sure the MOD people will have missed out on loads—but then if Moran got his way, it wouldn’t much matter, would it. We’d all be dead.”

His eyes continued to pierce hers with a look both demanding and desperate, and she felt breathless as well as slightly elated by it. This was almost the Sherlock she had glimpsed in Karachi, the man who could integrate reason and emotion, and she felt a dose of heart-pounding sentiment of her own.

After what felt like minutes of intense, meaningful eye contact he wrenched his gaze away, as if suddenly self-conscious.

Still, when he spoke again it was with the same level of assertiveness.

“Gather your things, we’re going to Baker Street.”

That pulled her back down from her momentary high and she looked at him with bemusement, but he forestalled her questions with a curt shake of the head. “Just to stop by for supplies, not to stay.”

“Mm, I’ve always assumed you’ve all sorts of places throughout the city,” she said in a leading
He gave another sharp shake of the head. “None suitable for… this situation.” His eyes lowered to
to their son, who was finally succumbing to his exhaustion, his blinks becoming longer and longer,
and his head starting to sag forward against Sherlock’s chest. “I have something else in mind…”

“Where?”

He straightened and became suddenly business-like, ignoring her. “Do you have everything?”

She felt rising frustration further distance her from her swell of infatuation or whatever it had been,
as she realised that just because Sherlock recognised that they were united in purpose didn’t mean
that he would automatically adjust to that in practice.

She crossed her arms and took on a fixed stance. “Our destination, Sherlock.”

He shot her a look of surprise tinged with annoyance, but then his expression changed and he
appeared the slightest bit penitent.

“Far enough away that we’re out of the perimeter of Greater London, but close enough that we can
return quickly if necessary—and by far the most secure place in Britain outside the Borough of
Westminster, though you wouldn’t know it by looking at it.”

He noticed the escalating danger in her expression and let out a small sigh.

“Little Faringdon, Oxfordshire,” he said with a trace of something like resignation, or was it
embarrassment?

He added, nearly under his breath, “Mum and Dad’s.”

She couldn’t help but stare in surprise at that. Whatever she had been expecting—bolthole,
decommissioned tube station, WWII bunker, perhaps even Mary’s flat now that she and John were
absconded from town—that had certainly not been it.

His parents… She had often thought of who Sherlock and Mycroft’s parents could be, since they
were her child’s paternal grandparents, but she had never been able to settle on an idea of who the
people were that could’ve produced such a pair of brothers. She hadn’t even known whether they
were alive, and comprehensive online searches hadn’t yielded any results. She’d concluded that if
they were still living Mycroft had taken pains to hide their identities in case they were targeted due
to their relationship to him, but in all her speculation she hadn’t ever imagined anything like the
people she had met minutes before. The closest she had gotten to any theory of his parentage was a
distant and imperious father, and a mother more interested in appearances and her husband than her
sons, though in retrospect this was pure projection, with the genders correspondingly reversed from
her own experience. In reality, it seemed that his parents and his childhood couldn’t have been
more different from hers, which made it all the more fascinating to her that they had ended up so
alike.

“Doesn’t that run the risk of them learning about me, about Nero?” Irene asked, bringing them
back on track. She paused, then added, “Unless you want—”

“No,” he cut in, anticipating her train of thought. “I mean, not yet. I mean—” he closed his eyes
and gave a sigh and an impatient shake of the head, “no, they won’t learn anything. My mother’s
obviously booked them at an inn near the hospital so they won’t be home any time soon. I didn’t…
see much but I did manage to catch that.” Irene caught the slight hitch in his voice at that, and
something inside her went out to him, but she said nothing. “We’ll be safe, or as safe as we can be.
And I need somewhere to go where I can think without being too preoccupied with the logistics of security, and…”

He cleared his throat and his next words sounded far more assured. “We can use the house, at least for now. Moran won’t find us there, not even John Watson knows about it yet.”

After her concerns about their partnership she felt deep gratification at his repeated use of the word ‘we.’

She already knew that Sherlock understood on an instinctual and even on an intellectual level that they were equals with commensurate investment in this matter, and perhaps it had finally clicked for him that this translated into how things would proceed, must proceed, in action. He would have to adjust his usual modus operandi of taking charge and making impulsive, unilateral decisions to accommodate for the fact that they needed to be an indivisible team.

To be fair she needed to do the same. She had spent the past twenty months utterly alone to tremendous responsibility, and it had made her feel more lonely than she had known it was even possible to be—even as a young teenager when she’d been yanked away from the only life and family she’d known. She’d discovered the difference between voluntary independence and lone survival, but she had adapted and codified it into her life in the past few years. Now she would have to unlearn it.

In consideration of that, she closed the distance between them, ran a smoothing, caressing hand down the side of her son’s bowed head, then rested her palm against Sherlock’s arm.

His eyes seemed pulled down by the touch and she noticed the pulse visible just inside his open collar pick up slightly, and it took him several seconds to look back up to her face again.

“So that I know we’re in full agreement,” she said, and now it was her turn to hold firm eye contact. “We are going to actively track down Moran—and kill him.”

Sherlock’s eyes hardened to flints, and it reminded her of how he’d appeared she’d first seen him there in Pakistan, just before she’d heeded his words to run. It caused her own pulse to quicken, though whether it was from the associated memory or something else, something in that look that excited her on a fundamental level, she wasn’t certain.

“I recall that it was you who introduced me to the concept of ‘self-defence in advance’,” he said, and his voice was just as hard.

Irene ignored the feeling of gratification that he could quote to her words she’d said years ago, and tightened her grasp on Sherlock’s forearm.

“Yes, and I stand by that,” she said, maintaining eye contact. “The question is, do you?”

He stared back into her penetrating gaze without blinking then gave a sharp, decisive nod.

She believed him, and the glint that had come into his eyes transformed his entire demeanour into something lethal, and caused a new sensation to curl low in her belly.

---

The familiar terraced house on Baker Street was dark when Sherlock pulled to a stop in front of it, even the café downstairs shuttered with an articulated metal door covered in partially scrubbed graffiti.
Sherlock ushered Irene and Nero from the car and through the front door with furtive, probing looks around, and then indicated that she should stand on the landing as he continued up to the first floor. She realised after he disappeared from sight that she had caught and held her breath, and when Nero stirred with a faint sleepy murmur she smoothed her hand over his head to soothe him, her heart beginning to pick up its pace. Her mind raced to consider what she’d do if Sherlock were overpowered, and she resented feeling so vulnerable. She was about to ignore his instructions and follow him up the stairs when his face appeared above her again, pale in the darkness, and he nodded.

As he closed the door behind them her gaze landed once more on her Baltimore postcard, still propped in its place on the shelf, and when he came up behind her she knew his eyes had come to a rest there as well.

From the corner of her eyes she saw his mouth open as if to say something, but his sight remained fixed on the card and his expression froze. Beneath the still surface Irene could practically hear the gears of his mind accelerating up to their highest speed yet coming up without any data, and she gave a small, wry smile.

“Never mind,” she said, meaning it, and he shut his mouth then gave a short nod as his shoulders appeared to relax. And in an instant, any tension that had lingered between them over his decision not to respond to that overture cleared.

As if that had released a spring mechanism in him, Sherlock launched into near-manic mode, tearing around the flat, disappearing and reappearing from various rooms every few minutes, even going upstairs for something at one point, though he wouldn’t meet her eyes when he came down.

“All right, anything in there for me?” she asked in a mock prying tone, latching onto his apparent discomfort, though she was surprised then intrigued when she detected a slight blushing in his cheeks.

“I’ve some things that could fit you,” he said, his voice sounding stilted, “but we should stop for other things at some point as well.”

“And of course there is always my battle dress,” she pointed out, enjoying the mysterious awkwardness his body language conveyed. “It seems appropriate, given we’re about to head into one.”

This time he didn’t colour but she thought she saw his nostrils flair.

“I think they’ve still got the old cot stored up in the attic,” he said, acting as if he hadn’t heard her. “Not sure why they would, but hope springs eternal I suppose,” he said in a dry tone.

“They’ll be pleased, then,” she said, dropping her flirtatious tone.

“I’m sure of it.” His mouth tightened into a small frown. “My parents are very different people than my brother or me.”

She made a sceptical sound at that rather than take any offense, and he pivoted towards her looking defensive.

“What?”

She recalled of the look of adoration and captivation on Sherlock’s face when he’d met his son for the first time an hour ago and didn’t answer, just gave him a knowing, slightly patronising smile.
He narrowed his eyes but glanced away after a moment, either unwilling to hear her thoughts on the subject or in concession. Likely both.

They were in and out of the flat in under five minutes, and when they hit the A40, Irene realised that she was utterly exhausted, though she still felt taut and wired from both anxiety and the events of the day.

The miles passed below their tyres with Sherlock remaining rigid and silent behind the wheel, and as she watched him from the corner of her eyes she saw that his expression was hard and taciturn, though his frequent blinking and the way he clenched his jaw every few minutes betrayed that the thoughts beneath his façade were anything but calm. She knew that he could tell she was looking at him, despite his eyes never leaving the road - a gradient arc of macadam illuminated by their headlights in the darkness - but she did see his breathing start to escalate. Out of a sympathy she only managed to find in herself when it came to him she averted her eyes, though she didn’t stop the impulsive movement that brought her hand up to his forearm again.

Under her touch she felt the muscles flex and tense as his grip on the steering wheel tightened, and then a moment later she heard him let out a quiet, shaky sigh.

For a brief moment he looked up into the rearview mirror and met her eyes there, before he gave another, shorter sigh through his nose and looked away.

The quality of the silence changed then, as Sherlock tried to think of something to say to break the mood that was developing between them.

“How is Nero?” he asked, and his voice was cool but she could hear the underpinning effort that took.

A tiny movement twitched the edge of one side of her mouth: not quite a smile but not a sneer either.

She didn’t answer immediately – she didn’t want to let him use their son to dodge the developing intimacy in the car – and she saw Sherlock glance over again before refocusing on the road, though his eyes also darted down at her hand on his arm for a split second in between.

Still, his question made her thoughts spin out in her mind, and she pulled her hand back into her lap as familiar self-loathing and self-recrimination began to creep through her.

“He doesn’t deserve this,” she said softly several minutes later, turning her face away from him under the guise of looking out the window. “Any of it.”

Sherlock said nothing, but she could tell by the body language she saw reflected in the glass that he was listening intently.

“I almost gave him up, you know,” she told him, before she could stop herself. For a moment she was left panic-stricken at her admission, but just as quickly she let go of the feeling. He deserved to know.

There was a beat of stunned silence in the car, and when Irene faced Sherlock again she caught his face showing absolute shock, though he schooled it back into a neutral mask in an instant.

“‘When,” he said in a monotone.

“It was part of my birthplan in my third trimester. I was going to do it right after the delivery.”
“Maybe you should have.”

Irene almost laughed at his ruthlessness though she couldn’t fault him for it, since he was correct according to any rational indicator. But she also knew that like her he felt far more conflicted about it than his statement implied.

“Yes,” she agreed.

He pressed his lips into a thin bloodless line at that. What would he say, Irene wondered, if he weren’t still in the practice of guarding himself against her?

“Why didn’t you?” he asked. Presumably he thought this question was acceptable because it could be chalked up to curiosity rather than sentiment, but the quiet intensity of his voice betrayed him.

“Oh but haven’t you realised,” she said with derisive laugh that was chiefly directed towards herself, “I’m the most selfish person you’ll ever know.”

Again he was unable to stop his automatic response and his eyebrows drew together. Though they quickly smoothed again, the indentations where they had furrowed remained.

“Evidently I couldn’t stop misbehaving for anyone, not even our child,” she said, and to her dismay her voice came perilously close to cracking.

That drew a quick, sharp glance from the corner of Sherlock’s eyes.

“And now?” he asked after another moment.

“Never,” she said with a real, if sad smile. “Although I have gotten smarter, and savvier. But I admit…” she was reluctant to acknowledge this but something about the single field of illumination and the dark interior of the car, and everything they had experienced that day, created an atmosphere that allowed confidence, “some of that was dependent upon your brother.”

She took in a small breath. “Sherlock… I’m sorry about what hap—”

“Why are you offering me condolences,” he interrupted, his voice suddenly several decibels louder. “You have even more reason to want my brother around and functioning than I do. I can’t offer you the protection Mycroft can.” His expression turned bitter. “As long as he’s still useful to the government he has clout, he can make demands. Nero’s and your security is directly tied to Mycroft’s utility.”

He sounded angry, but she knew that it was his turn for self-reckoning. Irene had spent a professional lifetime honing her perception of frustration and shame in all their forms, and it was evident that Sherlock felt a good dose of both for his inability to provide that level of security himself. She hadn’t meant her confession to sound like criticism, at least not of Sherlock. It was meant as a reflection of her own failings, but she could see in retrospect why he would take her words in such a way.

“Sherlock, you have to be aware that you have strengths your brother can’t—”

He cut her off with a hard scoff, then tossed her a look of dismissive derision, though she knew that those emotions still weren’t aimed at her. Sherlock had it so ingrained in his psyche that he was the lesser Holmes brother—that any ways in which he might be more adept than his brother were also lesser and therefore not only irrelevant but detractions.

She was aware again of feeling that alien sympathy, but whilst she'd meant what she was going to
say before he cut her off, her words had also been calculating. She had already identified the fact that he needed to reconcile his emotions with rationality, but he would not accomplish that if he were weighted down by guilt or feelings of inferiority. She needed him to rediscover the self-confidence she had seen in him and found so enticing in him when they had first met, though in this case dealing with any emotions by just suppressing them was not an option.

She had already achieved that balance herself – had had to – and she could practically pinpoint it down to the minute that she had decided to not put up Nero for adoption. That initial choice had been a purely emotional one, but all the subsequent choices she’d had to make to follow up on that one had needed to be clear-headed and rational, though they too were made through the prism of her love for her child. Then, when the threat she now knew as Moran had come into their lives, she’d had to relearn on an almost daily basis how to unite her maternal instincts with the ruthless, survival instincts she’d honed as The Woman. And as difficult and even unbearable as that had been at times, she had emerged all the stronger for it. It had turned out that they weren’t quite as mutually-exclusive as she might have thought.

Necessity had compelled not just innovation but evolution, and their child’s safety was an absolute need, as primal a directive as breathing. Fortunately she saw that Sherlock was coming to realise that as well, though she would still do what she could to expedite the process.

It was a long time before they exchanged words again, though the silence was dense with all the unspoken thoughts churning through both of their minds.

--

They made one stop on their route from London to Oxfordshire; Sherlock pulled into an Asda just before the town of Wheatley in order to purchase clothing, groceries, and other miscellaneous goods. He performed the task as efficiently and rote ly as a machine following a program, such as picking out clothing in her current size without even an additional glance towards her. It felt surreal to Irene to be walking beside Sherlock Holmes with Nero in her arms in this fluorescent-lit suburban superstore amongst all the other families doing their shopping, but as they moved through the carousels and aisles of items she had to suppress an ironic smile. If she distilled their reason for being here down into its parts it was for their child and their family’s needs—just not in quite the same way as anyone else.

After Sherlock checked out with a bankcard bearing the familiar alias of M. Sigerson they returned to the carpark, and Sherlock stowed the bags then circled round and opened the passenger-side door for her. As she lowered herself into the car with Nero, Sherlock put a hand under her elbow to steady and support her, and Irene had to press her lips together hard to stifle an intake of breath. It was the first time that Sherlock had initiated any physical contact since they’d seen each other again, since his passionate kiss goodbye in Oman in fact, and it was shocking how sensitive and receptive she was to him. His hand felt like a heavy brand on her arm and at once every nerve reorientated itself towards that touch, and her entire body went rigid as it revved into high alert. He seemed to interpret her reaction as a negative response, because he snatched his hand away almost as if he had been the one burned.

Her lips tightened at the loss of the connection, but an instant later they parted as something occurred to her.

She needed to remind Sherlock of Karachi, of who he had been there and how he had been there, and of what he - what they - had accomplished even whilst in the grips of the most intense sentiment either of them had ever experienced to that point. She had neither the time nor the ability to use reason to convince him of such a thing, and neither could they afford to wait for him to find
his own bearings. The stakes were far too high, and their opponent far too clever. Sherlock himself had said that this tactical move only bought them a small measure of additional time; that they were already operating at a deficit. Irene had to *viscerally* remind him of those few days, and make him instinctively grasp the connection between then and now. And she could only think of one way to accomplish that…

She smirked to herself for conforming so perfectly to perceived type by concluding that sex was the solution, but then her heart swelled as the actual significance of it hit her, and she understood with a bittersweet pang that it was hardly just strategy that made her want this—want him.

Sex could serve an almost infinite number of purposes; limitations were really only defined by the extent of one’s imagination. With professional diligence she had explored a great range of them when she was The Woman, stopping just short of explicit acts in her scheduled sessions. There was no compartmentalisation or detached superiority now, she knew, and which the growing knot in her throat substantiated. With Sherlock sex wasn’t a separate, neutral thing that she could wield like a weapon or a tool, but something terribly personal.

*But how,* she thought as a lines furrowed between her brows. Far more than any other decision in their renewed partnership, this was not one she could make unilaterally… and he might not want her.

She gave a cynical mental laugh at that. ‘*Might*’ not want her? Unfortunately, she thought with another and even more painful twinge, his rejection wasn’t just a possibility but a serious likelihood.

Sherlock kept that part of himself under a tight lid, and in the past he had viewed any efforts at undoing it as an attempt to undo *him*. She hadn’t helped to divest him of that point of view, either —those had been her precise intentions when they had first met. And though he had managed to recover some trust in her, it didn’t necessarily extend to something so deeply personal, or mean that he would reopen what he considered Pandora’s Box.

What was more, it was plain that he was as wary of sentiment as she’d ever seen him, due in part to how it had made him suffer today, and in part because he saw it as a serious impediment to his abilities, which needed to be as sharp as ever. And though she had once challenged, teased, and pushed him out of his comfort zone with a destructive blend of sentiment and sexuality (both his and hers), she couldn’t do that now. That had been an altogether different situation and she had been a different woman—at least with respect to Sherlock Holmes.

As she watched tree after tree along the motorway materialise in front of them, bathed for a millisecond in silver-gold light, then whip past into the darkness, the obvious fact that simple seduction was also impossible occurred to her. The key components in seduction were artifice and theatricality, and she could feign those with anyone in the world except the man to her right. Oh, she might find other ways to have him – manipulative, devastatingly bespoke ways – but she found even the concept repugnant.

They might not be a family - yet, or ever - but she did need for them to continue strengthening that indissoluble partnership, and that precluded her from turning her skills inward, even for the greater good of that partnership. Sleeping with Sherlock was perhaps (*perhaps*) a legitimate strategy, but it was also far more than just that, and with this one person she could not weaponise sex.

Still, she couldn’t deny that for reasons that appealed to the both the rational and emotional sides that she had integrated so well she wanted him again, in the way she had wanted him in those days when they conceived Nero and just as much, and in that way she had never quite wanted anyone else.
It was possessive and she had certainly felt a flare of that earlier in the hospital, but this felt different. There were still notes of sentiment and longing, but his innocent touch had sparked a far baser reaction. Wanting to have people was nothing new, and in fact one of primary sources of satisfaction in her work as a dominatrix was her ability to gain someone’s unconditional devotion to her. But the entire point of that was the absolute imbalance of power in her favour—never before had she wanted the dynamic to be reciprocal, never before had she wanted to give to someone else as much as she had taken from those men and women. And realising that she did (again) was both terrifying and exhilarating in equal measure.

She had forgotten the full depth and potency of these feelings in all the chaos and her focus on motherhood and survival in the past twenty months—or perhaps she had suppressed them in the knowledge that she could never have that again, either because she’d thought he was dead or because he wasn’t responding to her communication.

But she remembered now.
Their Fearful Symmetry [Part II]

Sherlock had made the hour and a half journey from central London to Little Faringdon, Oxfordshire a number of times in the past, but never had it felt as long as it did this time.

First there was Irene's revelation about almost surrendering Nero for adoption, which had taken him aback in the moment but did make sense. If their positions were reversed, he suspected that he might've gone through with it. A pregnancy conceived despite the implantation of IUD would be high-risk and difficult, as would be the delivery; it was understandable that the emotional and physical stress combined with instability and fear for the future would result in giving up the child.

A part of him still stood by what he'd said, that she should have gone through with it, because the inclusion of a child vastly complicated a life that was challenging and dynamic, but at its core very simple. There was the brainwork and the constellation of people who supported him in the work, and then as almost an afterthought there was the maintenance of his tools and transport, ie his physical self. He had only just recouped that life, and it had been hard-won.

And yet…

The concept of strangers - a normal, boring, generic couple - having custody of and raising his and The Woman's child was unacceptable to him. It struck him that that would have been a great injustice to such a child, and would've deprived him of reaching his full potential or having the nonconventional and stimulating life that he deserved. It also would've robbed Nero of any guidance in understanding his gifts and coping with (the inevitability of) being different. Sherlock found to his astonishment that his concessionary thoughts for his son overruled any that he had for himself.

All the implications of what that meant raced forward: that he was relieved that she had kept the child, despite all the hardship it had caused and would cause in the future. …That his urge to protect Nero surpassed his own need to complete an unfinished mission and went beyond even the biological instinct to protect one's offspring, and extended to real paternal feeling. …He would choose to be in the present, surreal situation, in which he was driving to his parents' house with his son strapped in a makeshift carseat in the back, and the child's mother (whatever else she may be in addition to that), sitting beside him.

His mouth twisted in amused irony. Of course, this was their unique take on the typical familial scenario—for them even something so outwardly mundane was anything but. That brought him a measure of reassurance, though for a long time he drove with a thunderstruck silence in his mind, his realisations muffling out all other thought.

It was only the incident in the Asda car park that managed to eject those all-consuming thoughts, but they were replaced with something far worse.

He had reached out to help her into the car in what he had meant as a bland and solicitous gesture, but his original intentions had been forgotten the moment his hand had closed around her arm. Even through several layers of clothing the touch provoked a powerful reaction in him and with a mental shout of alarm he'd pulled his hand away, but the damage had been done.

As brief and innocuous as it had been, it had still broken down some carefully constructed fortification—although he had to acknowledge that he'd already been considerably been less than impervious to her…
A bored and derisive voice, still that of his brother's even now (especially now) interjected, Of course you aren't, or why would you have taken condoms from John's room back at Baker Street, no matter how impulsive? It wasn't innocuous at all. We both know that the 'damage was done' long before tonight, and that this was nothing more than an excuse.

An excuse.

Once that word materialised in his head he couldn't deny that it was true. Even when the thoughts of Nero had dominated his mind for the first part of the drive, the tension caused by her proximity in the car had been at the edge of his consciousness, like static on a radio. Every small sound – a sigh, a minute rustling of fabric as she'd shifted in her seat, a barely-audible parting of her lips – evoked memories of the times he'd heard the more extravagant versions of those sounds: a moan, her back arching up off of sheets, her mouth kissing and caressing the place where his throat met his collarbone... It was no wonder he had unconsciously sought a reason to touch her.

But unlike the thoughts related to Nero – which had only further firmed his resolve to remove the threat of Moran – these had been not merely distracting but maddening. On the second leg of the journey he had clenched his teeth and tried repeatedly to refocus on anything else: the road, his immediate series of tasks for when they arrived at his parents' cottage, the inventorying and organising of goods he'd collected and purchased for the time ahead... He seized on the last, and began to scroll through them.

Binoculars with nightvision – 2
Quad long-distance handheld radios – set of 2
Lockpicking kit – 1
Maglite Torch – 4, various sizes
High-Powered Electromagnetic System (prototype) – 1
Laptops – 3
Dongles – 5
SIM cards: 13
Burner mobile 1: HTC One m8
Burner mobile 2: iPhone 4s (unlocked)
Burner mobile 3: Ubiquam U-520

But at that model a stray thought interrupted his list, and his face blanched. He had purchased that particular phone before, for Irene, and he had given it to her in Pakistan along with the false documentation for a new life in America. It had the dual GSM and CDMA he wanted in a phone for her but its casing had also reminded him of her Virtu, so it had been both a rational and sentimental choice.

He tried to dismiss the memory from his mind and refocus, but the thought of Karachi niggled at him somehow, and not just because his thoughts were currently skewed towards the prurient.

In terms of what he had set out to accomplish it had been an unmitigated success. There had been a few unforeseen events – despite his abilities there always were, it was just part of the game – but Irene had been extracted, proof of death had been manufactured, and she had successfully immigrated into the United States under the counterfeit documentation he had provided. More importantly it had withstood the test of Mycroft's scrutiny, which was one of the crowning achievements in Sherlock's life as far as he was concerned.

These were the components of that trip that, on the rare occasions he permitted himself to think of it at all, he considered. They were safe. All the other parts, his and Irene's intimacy, the things that were said, his first forays into the physical - in essence all the parts that had also been a part of his
objective, though he hadn't admitted it until later - those were too dangerous.

And yet, a voice said, this time sounding nothing at all like Mycroft, it was all part of the same mission… He could compartmentalise, but it couldn't really be broken into a sum of its parts because like an intricate instrument all the mechanisms and parts were fitted together to form one ticking, integrated, moving piece.

As if to corroborate that, a memory materialised in Sherlock's mind of one of those 'unforeseen events,' when Irene had taken the initiative. If Sherlock hadn't first trusted in the efficacy of a plan of hers and trusted in her, and then later shown genuine hurt and anger in front of their captor when he'd thought that she was betraying him - if he had just behaved as his usual self - he might have sabotaged her efforts. It was Sherlock's sentiment that had validated her act, and her act had saved them both.

Even then he had found the feelings of betrayal and hurt overwhelming, he recalled, pursing his lips. In retrospect he had to wonder whether it was only the thought that she could have so effortlessly fooled him again, which had exposed his lingering trust issues with her that had bothered him. Or was it also the thought that he was losing who she had become to him…

He gave a fierce, short jerk of his head.

He wasn't ready to face these thoughts, not now when there was already so much to process, even for a brain such as his. And most certainly not when his entire body felt electrified in her presence anyway, as if the slightest spark would set him ablaze, and burn down his already very jeopardised self-restraint. After the car park incident he felt that even prolonged eye contact could do it, and he resolved to devote himself entirely to the work when they arrived.

The instant they pulled up in front of his parents' cottage, he stepped hard on the brake and shoved the gears into park. Before the car came to a complete rest he burst out of the driver's side and loaded his arms with the various bags from the boot, and then strode through the dooryard to the house, leaving her to trail behind him with the infant, who still seemed asleep.

"Is this where you grew up?" she asked, coming in and shutting the door.

"No," he said, not looking at her. "So if you were hoping to see my childhood bedroom you'll be disappointed."

He had meant it from the perspective that she'd want to get insight into who he was based on who he had been as a child, but the loud, crackling silence told him in an instant that she was thinking though not vocalising some innuendo along the lines of 'perhaps just the bed.' Or perhaps he was just projecting, but regardless he gave a quick swallow and was glad that his back was to her.

Again the irony of the outward appearance of the scenario was not lost on him, but for them this was a safehouse, nothing more. If there were a silver lining to Mycroft's attack it was that at least it was now fully available to them without the complication of his parents, because what a safehouse it was.

When his mother and father had moved to the family's holiday home full-time after his dad's retirement Mycroft already enjoyed a significant position with the British Government, and he had taken pains to make it as secure as possible, which included deleting it from satellite imagery available to everyone except the highest levels of MI-5 and 6. In the years since, he had added to its security until it was akin to fortress, and neither he nor Sherlock had ever spoken of its location to anyone. Of course his parents were far less discreet with their own circle of friends, nor did they bother with arming the many features that Mycroft had had installed, but Sherlock would see to it
that every mechanism was engaged during their stay.

With a deliberate effort that he probably wouldn't have managed if he hadn't been so practiced he began to tune out the familiar, homely surroundings of his parents' home. Then with a little more, he managed to do the same for the far more conspicuous presence of Irene and Nero.

He went into the study and there he switched on the desktop where Mycroft's people had installed the central control system software, which monitored and operated the thermal imaging and night-vision cameras, as well as an infrared laser surround. Mycroft had once even suggested a perimetre of landmines but their mother had quashed that with a fit of outrage. At the time Sherlock had taken the utter piss out of his brother for being so paranoid and dramatic, but he found he wouldn't have minded something that extreme now. Still, if anyone did set off the perimeter alarms, they would find something just as lethal inside the house. It wasn't just prophylactics that had been his contraband from John's room at the flat. It had been the illegal firearm John had left behind as well, and Sherlock wouldn't hesitate to use it. In fact he found that he wanted the opportunity, and the thought slightly unsettled him but fascinated him even more.

He signed into the software and authorised his mobile to be an extension device, and then went outside to run an array of tests. He spent over an hour trying to identify ways of outsmarting the program, but in every attempt he failed and triggered the alarm on his phone, and satisfied with his brother's system he mentally checked that task off the list.

At the thought of Mycroft Sherlock's face pulled into a frown, but he forced his mind to turn it into something productive: Andrea, aka Anthea. Ought he to inform her of where he had gone, and that he had taken Irene and the child with him?

She had been an asset to Mycroft ever since he had plucked her from the juvenile unit at Downview, although aside from the hacking that had gotten her arrested in the first place, she seemed trustworthy. She had never given him any cause to doubt her allegiance to his brother, and Mycroft certainly trusted her. That was an endorsement in itself, especially since Mycroft didn't have the weakness of sentiment-induced myopia that Sherlock had displayed in the past.

And yet Sherlock still had a number of questions as to how Moran could've managed to gain the upper hand against his brother, and one possible explanation was that he'd had inside help—perhaps he had reactivated a previous connection of Moriarty's since Sherlock knew from first-hand experience that the man had had people everywhere. That potential meant that Mycroft's people should remain out of the loop as much as possible.

Not that I've ever needed any of them before, he thought with clenched teeth, although he had to acknowledge that it was a disadvantage in this particular case. He wasn't so arrogant as to not see he was facing an unprecedented challenge and could use every resource possible. Unfortunately Mycroft and his extensive team couldn't be one of them. Irene, Sherlock, and Nero were on their own.

The thought of Irene and the child reminded him that he'd promised her the use of his old cot, and a moment later he felt a swooping sensation in his abdomen as adrenaline started to pump through him. He had been so focussed on the logistical tasks of their arrival that he had temporarily forgotten about them, but now everything was rushing back to him and it were as if there had been no reprieve at all.

He found the small bed in the attic, then popped out the front door to wipe it down, and thump out the pad and wrap it several times round with a clean flatsheet he'd grabbed from the linen closet. Once that was done he put the cot down in the entryway and gave it a few vigorous experimental rocks. It seemed sound, but he dropped to one knee and ducted his head under it to double check
that all the bolts were tight.

When he got back to his feet he ignored the vertigo that tilted the room sideways and pumped blood at a faster rate through his body and grabbed one of the two-way radios to put it into his pocket. He hoisted the cot into his arms and strode towards the spare bedroom, where soft yellow light was spilling into the hallway. But at the sight that met him he stopped short, and he felt both dizzier and utterly sober.

Irene didn't look up. He could tell that she hadn't noticed him in the doorway, and he felt furtive and uncomfortable.

It wasn't due to the fact that she was breastfeeding, that didn't faze him. It was that he was trespassing on a moment of total serenity and connection between mother and child, captured in the steadfast eye contact between them. Irene and Nero were locked into a moment in which Sherlock had no part, and he became even more dismayed when it occurred to him that he was jealous.

His face twisted in automatic derision – that he could be jealous of a dependent infant – but nonetheless there was no denying the burning, unpleasant sensation. It was something he'd only felt before in a platonic way, regarding John: not mere jealousy but also possessiveness.

Once upon a time Irene and he had shared that perfect understanding. For several days they had been locked in an extended moment of absolute understanding of their own, and seeing her share it with another only reminded him how extraordinary that had been—and how much he still missed it, despite the multilateral approach of denial, suppression, and distraction he'd used in the subsequent years.

In Karachi and in the days that followed, Irene had looked at him with that identical calm, absolute certainty, her eyes both composed and full, and his chest ached at its loss in a way that it hadn't since the time just after he'd returned.

But Irene wasn't the only cause of that feeling. He was also envious of the way Nero looked at her, and the entire relationship that that represented. It was the fruit of a bond built over almost the past year, time that Sherlock had missed and could never recover—and he mostly had himself to blame for that.

Just then her voice reached his ears, low and murmured, "You can come in Sherlock, Nero's just having dinner."

Immediately she seemed to recognise what she'd said because she gave a soft laugh, though there was no trace of embarrassment in it. On the other hand even in the darkness of the hall Sherlock felt utterly exposed, as if her seeing him there meant that she could also read every thought, both prurient and sentimental, that had been in his head in the past several hours. He wasn't sure which mortified him more.

He wanted to simply turn and walk away and continue his work, never to reference this, but her eyes were boring into his and before he knew what he was doing he had taken a short step forward.

The one step had a visible effect upon Irene – her expression softened and her blue eyes warmed – and then he was setting down the radio and moving further into the room.

When he came to a stop and set down the cot alongside Irene the visible eye of his son pivoted to fix on Sherlock with unnerving directness, though he didn't stop the industrious movements of his tiny mouth.
Sherlock pulled his eyes away from the sight and racked his mind trying to think of something at all to say, all while Irene sat looking patient albeit subtly tense—as well as radiant, despite the domestic banality of the scene.

"The cot – I've brought it down, it's clean," he said, and then mentally cringed at how stilted he sounded.

Irene's smile just sharpened, and he suspected that she was enjoying the rare sight of him so out of his depth. Although if he came to think of it, he supposed that seeing such a thing wasn't all that rare for her.

There was another drawn-out silence between them, and Sherlock started to feel flushed and evermore unnerved by the intimacy of the small room. He sensed that he was in danger at any moment of blurt out something he'd regret, and he was about to leave again when Irene spoke.

"Moran."

He blinked, trying to recalibrate his thoughts and grasp what she was saying.

She raised her eyebrows at his blank expression.

"Sebastian Moran," she said. "Mycroft told me about him, but I want to hear everything you know. As I've told you Jim didn't ever mention him to me, so I have no insights."

He stared at her for just a fraction of a second longer before he realised what she was doing, and he seized on it. If nothing else he could be the detective now; that was safe and familiar ground.

"Yes," he said with a little too much force, "I only learned of his existence after I dug deeper into the network and Moriarty's… staff, for lack of a better word."

She tilted head in prompt, her brows still raised.

"Jim and Seb…" he said with mock chumminess. "They go back to the 90s, when Moriarty became a scholarship student at the Charterhouse School in Surrey starting in fifth form." Sherlock let out a short bark of laughter, which didn't hold a hint of humour. "Moran is from a very old family, and I learned that our two families used to run together in the diplomatic circles, and that his grandfather was one of the first ministers to Iran after its coup d'état. But apparently the family has always been subject to rather violent tendencies... Mycroft said that he once heard our grandfather mention the elder Moran in connection to several assassinations during Operation Boot, prior to earning the minister post."

Irene didn't show any expression, but her gaze remained trained on his; she was absorbing every word he said.

"From what I've gathered," he said, beginning to pace and feeling back in his element, "Sebastian was pretty much left alone in school, but he was never what you'd call 'popular'—people probably saw something in him that unnerved them. And I think he saw something similar in Jim, and he took him under his wing so to speak, when Jim arrived. It wasn't long until the dynamic reversed. Moran is raw sadism, and Jim was never afraid of the element of violence, but it was dull to him—merely a means to an end or collateral damage rather than something to be enjoyed in and of itself. He was the tactician, the one constantly looking for a way to alleviate his boredom..."

He glanced down sideways at Irene, who was nodding her agreement both of his assessment of Moriarty, and of his unspoken comparison of Moriarty to the two of them.
Sherlock let himself linger in that moment of understanding for a moment before he broke eye contact and continued.

"Moran's school performance was *under*whelming to say the least, but his uncle is a high-ranking officer in the Army—obviously the wheels were greased for his Main Boards because there's no way he'd have been selected under normal conditions—and he managed to arrange a commission for Moran, though he was soon quietly discharged, for both underperformance and misconduct.

"But you've referred to him as—"

"The Colonel," Sherlock said with a curt nod. "It's what Jim Moriarty called him. Moran never made it above Officer Cadet in the actual army, but in Jim's organisation he was his second in command.

"By the time Moran got booted from the military Jim was in need of someone whom he trusted, who could embrace the less savoury elements of the work, and oh was Moran happy to oblige. Jim supplemented Moran's trust fund with enough money to keep him in the lifestyle to which he was accustomed, even paying for a flat in Mayfair and dues to several exclusive gentlemen's clubs in St. James.

"Just think," Sherlock interrupted himself with a sneer. "If Mycroft weren't so devoted to his own little club of high-ranking misanthropes, we might've uncovered and put a stop to all of this ages ago."

He came to a stop, and raised his face to stare at a point in the wall above Irene's head.

"It was the right decision."

*Ah, there it was*, the injudicious statement he'd been worried he'd let slip earlier. After sliding into the role of detective he'd automatically reeled off every last deduction in his head—including one he hadn't meant to. He frowned, but then realised that didn't regret it.

"What?" Irene asked.

"Not giving him up for adoption," he said, his voice growing stronger. He lowered his head and looked into her eyes. "That was the right decision to make. For Nero. Despite… all this."

Irene looked taken aback at the abrupt change of subject, but she took his words in stride, and after a moment she regarded him with expectation.

"I had normal – well," Sherlock made an equivocating face, "normal *ish* parents. They're my mother and father and I care about them," he tacked on with a wave of his hand. "But if I'd had someone other than Mycroft, who had bigger concerns than looking after some stupid little brother—key word, *stupid,* to…"

"You think you'd be better adjusted," she supplied.

Sherlock pulled his lips between his teeth, uncomfortable with the subject matter even though he had opened the door to it, and so it was with some surprise when he heard his low, contemplative answer.

"Maybe I'd be better at this."

His answer surprised her too, judging by her expression.
"My mother chose a domestic life over her work—instead of publishing innovative, progressive work in mathematics she was managing our budget and planning family meals. Eventually she just faded into obscurity."

"You aren't your parents, their choices don't dictate yours. And you aren't Mycroft, either."

Sherlock couldn't maintain the eye contact, and looked away.

"It all comes back to this dichotomy you have: the cerebral versus sentiment; your 'normal' parents or your puritanical, single-minded brother. You still feel like you have to remake and affirm that choice every day, or lose your understanding of who you are—lose yourself like you think your mother did. But you of all people should know that nothing in this world is binary." He heard the faint smirk in her voice when she added, "The fact that Nero exists is proof of that."

At that, Sherlock's eyes went to their son. Nero's lashes were resting against his plump, rosy cheek, though his fist had a tight clutch on the pyjamas purchased at the Asda, and he was still nursing with gusto.

His eyes fixed on Irene's again. "Yes. But there's a difference between what someone knows on an intellectual level and how they're able to act."

"I don't want you to change," she said. "I'd never expect you to be anyone—"

"You have," he cut in, defensive from the vulnerability that unfurled in him at the understanding and trace of compassion in her voice.

She raised her chin.

"Have I?" She sounded conversational but Sherlock could hear the iron beneath the silk of her voice.

He hadn't expected her to do that, to turn it around on him, and he found that he could not think of a single thing to back up his statement, aside from trivial and meaningless changes such as slight weight gain and shorter nails. To the contrary, all the ways in which he was Wrong! blared at him in his head.

"If you mean that I've become even more willing to go to any length to get what I'm after, then you're right," she said with a pointed smile, knowing full-well that that wasn't what he'd meant, but also knowing that he could recognise that it was true.

He also saw that while there was palpable caring and vulnerability in her, those things weren't evidence of any change—they were only extensions of what he had experienced himself.

Again his thoughts turned to Karachi as they had done all evening. He recalled the way she had looked at him during those few fleeting days and, with perfect sensory recall, the tenderness with which she had touched him. He also remembered her words, murmured just before sleep the first night, "there's never been... there's been nothing like this." She had meant it in the context of her attraction to him, but his being her 'exception' had come to stand for so much more. It hadn't only been his sentiment that had been so uncharacteristic and yet integral to those few days, but hers as well.

That sentiment had expanded to include her love for the child they had conceived there, but it was nothing new or changed; it was like energy which could be neither created nor destroyed, but only altered in form. Though it was bizarre to see her as a mother, The Woman was still there. In fact if she hadn't still been the woman he had loved, she and Nero probably wouldn't be in front of him
now at all. It was her ingenuity, grit, and determination that had enabled them to survive.

"I've done parenthood on my terms, Sherlock," she said, interrupting his train of thoughts. "Just as I have with everything else I've ever done in my life since I was a girl, and just as you have. There are sacrifices to make because it's not just about us any more, but it doesn't alter who we are. We've never bowed to convention with anything, why would we now?"

He recalled his thoughts in the car and again when they had arrived at the house, when it had struck him that even something that seemed boring and conventional – a mother, a father, and a child going to the grandparents’ – was anything but when it came to them.

"You really believe that I could… add value to his life," he said, looking down at his son. He'd meant for the words to sound incredulous and slightly scornful, but they came out hoarse and earnest instead.

Nero was still nuzzled up against Irene but he was on the verge of sleep, his mouth slack apart from the occasional burst of nursing.

"I do," she said, and he felt his throat clench around a knot, though he kept his expression neutral.

"And from what you've said to me, so do you," she added softly.

He sensed himself nodding, but felt like he was becoming enveloped in a fog.

He would be equally committed to this case even if Irene and her child played no part of it at all—that was fact. A chance to right the wrong that had been committed when Moran had somehow managed to fool Sherlock into thinking he was dead? Sherlock wouldn't have thought of anything else until he had destroyed the very last vestiges of Moriarty's empire, once and for all.

But it was also fact that there was a noticeable difference in how he felt towards this particular case versus any other past case, including his and John's encounter with Moriarty at the swimming pool or Sherlock's public fall from grace. Sherlock's younger self might've scoffed at that, and called his feelings useless and irrelevant because what did it matter how an investigator felt towards a case? It didn't alter the facts or the evidence, or make him any more invested in and dedicated to it than he already was.

Those things were still true, but they didn't make the entire picture, because with this very specific case how he felt did matter. It wasn't just Irene or Mycroft who saw his capacity for attachment, Sebastian Moran did as well, and that understanding clearly drove his entire strategy.

Despite the fact that there were a few of the same players, this matchup felt much different, and far dirtier. Somehow Moran was displaying glimmers of his late boss's brilliance, but while Sherlock and Moriarty had sparred on an intellectual level – with Moriarty only using Sherlock's connection to others as a supplementary tactic – Moran's approach was all raw ruthlessness. He somehow knew Sherlock's pressure points, and he was aiming to burn the heart out of him in a way that Moriarty had never managed.

Moran had already attacked Mycroft, and that welled huge and horrifying in his mind, an overturned pot of Indian ink that spread and blackened and saturated all that it covered. But Sherlock knew that it was only the start of what the man had planned, all because Moran had insight into Sherlock's character that he'd have never expected from such a mindless brute. Sherlock would've thought that someone else was directing this show (albeit not Moriarty because besides being dead this felt markedly different from his style), but who could have such insight into Sherlock's private self, and be so invested in something that felt like a revenge fantasy?
Regardless, the case demanded that he turn his lens inward rather than outward in a way no other ever had, because to ignore how Moran saw him in order to maintain some idealised but inaccurate self-image would only sabotage everything. Sherlock remembered something Irene had said to him twenty months before, which was just as relevant now as it had then: "We're the same, you and I." She understood that parenthood hadn't fundamentally altered her and it would be the same for him, because he already had the capacity for that caring. Perhaps for both he and Irene attachments only extended to a small circle of people, but that didn't detract from them—if anything the rarity of them made them all the more precious. He could spout all the rhetoric he'd like about how sentiment was dangerous, but that didn't alter the fact that it was an integral part of him.

Everything coalesced and crystallised in his mind then, after days - years, even decades - of ambiguousness and confusion. All at once the fog dissipated and he saw things more clearly than he ever had before. He felt the rush of endorphins that accompanied a mental breakthrough of a case in a way that he had only experienced in this way once before, although the stakes were much higher now.

Then he had been separated from his 'real' life back in England and he knew that he would return in a matter of days. The entire thing – from infiltrating a terrorist cell and then extricating Irene and himself, to what had passed between them – had felt like an exaggerated version of that life and a reprieve from reality, and didn't greatly affect his self-perception.

Now back in his so-called real life he didn't have the luxury of compartmentalisation, and he felt very real fear about that. But there were other, greater, feelings that subsumed that fear.

All of these thoughts streamed through his mind in a matter of seconds, his eyes unseeing and darting to and fro as he processed everything. When his eyes refocused he found himself gazing into Irene's. She looked both fascinated and anticipative, as if she had read every micro-expression that had flitted across his face—which he supposed she had.

She also looked extraordinarily beautiful.

Suddenly everything he'd felt in the car – that full-bodied, physical awareness of Irene – merged with the feelings that despite his efforts had never faded, and with slow deliberateness he crossed the room.

She held still as her eyes tracked him, and she only moved when he leaned over her, though it wasn't more than a small and involuntary parting of her lips.

His heart began to pound in response but he didn't make eye contact; instead he carefully slid his arms under Nero, who somehow felt much heavier now than he had when Sherlock had held him earlier that day, when he had been alert and holding himself upright.

Nero's eyelashes fluttered as he made a snuffling, grunting sound in his sleep and Sherlock froze, but after a few suckling motions of his mouth the baby settled, and Sherlock lifted him from Irene's arms and carried him over to the cot.

He settled him in looked down over his child, and his pulse rate escalated for an altogether different reason. He couldn't get over the resemblance to himself, particularly as he had looked in photographs at that age; it was the practical application of all his knowledge of genetics, illustrated with more personal immediacy than he could've ever imagined.

In past sentimental moments he had thought that he would never want to stop looking at Irene's face—that he would never grow tired of the aesthetic perfection of her features and the way her personality shined through them. It held just as true for her child—perhaps overlapped just a bit
with his own narcissism, he thought with the twitch of a half-smile.

He had intended to just put Nero in the cot and turn back towards Irene, but he remained riveted with his hands clasped on the railing.

At first he was only vaguely aware that she had come to stand by him, but gradually his focus shifted back from Nero towards her, and the atmosphere became as charged as it had been during the second part of their drive from London.

In spite of the fact that he hadn't moved and his eyes were still fixed on Nero, he knew that she could tell the precise moment that his attention was on her completely; his breathing gave him away.

In response she slid her hand over his in much the same way she had that evening at Baker Street in front of the fireplace, and he was also strikingly reminded of when they had stood shoulder to shoulder at a far different sort of railing, on-board the *Independent Venture* as it departed Pakistan. This felt like both a composite and reprise of those moments, which had been preludes of their own, but it also felt far more momentous than either.

They turned towards each other at the same instant, but it was Sherlock who moved forward, stepping into her personal space and towering over her in her bare feet.

He saw that her breathing was as rapid as his own had become, and that her eyes shined with the same openness and warmth he had seen when he'd first entered the room, though this time the look was directed on him. A thrill of deep satisfaction and something else – something profound – raced through him, and any lingering doubts or insecurity about whether she still cared about him as something more than just a means to an end vanished.

Without breaking eye contact he dropped his head, but paused just before his lips grazed hers. Irene took a near-silent intake of breath, and with the feeling that he was dropping a great burden he finally surrendered to almost two years of pent-up suppression and longing.

He pressed his mouth against hers with such fervency that they both stumbled from the momentum of it, but he caught her around the waist to pull her back, and then the kiss was an anchor and it righted them. That intangible sense of rightness radiated through him, at first feeling like warmth and then like *heat*, and it was accentuated by the perfect way their mouths joined and moved together. Her lips were warm and pliant yet firm against his, complementing and challenging him as the woman herself did.

While the kiss was forceful and cathartic, there was still an undercurrent of deep emotion that pierced Sherlock's chest and made him clutch onto her even harder. But more than anything else his entire body and even his mind hummed with the singular notion of *Yes* as they simultaneously tilted their heads to intensify the kiss, and her tongue slid against his.

It was like a part of him that had been starved and neglected was finally being nourished, or like the lights of a certain long-sealed room in his Mind Palace had all been switched on at once, so that it blazed welcoming and anew. Memories tied to these unique sensations – memories which he had tried so hard to minimise and forget – came roaring back to him, and he made a low sound in the back of his throat as he grasped her upper arms and crushed her tightly to his chest.

Her fingers went to his waist and dug into the material there, and she made an answering sound that shut his mind down of everything save the most essential operations.

Apparently this included the need to get the two of them horizontal, and without breaking their kiss
Sherlock moved them several steps until the end of the guest bed hit her behind the thighs. She took an abrupt seat and then slid onto her back, but she pulled him along with her so that he was pressed flush against her. He registered all the various sensations caused by the way their bodies met during the instant before they found each other's mouths again, and then they were rapidly losing even the small bit of finesse and tenderness they'd had at the beginning. Over the next several minutes the mood became ever more erratic and carnal, exacerbated by Irene biting at Sherlock's lower lip.

He gave a low gasp and jerked onto his elbows to stare at her, and found himself looking into the personification of the lust that was taking over him as well. Her gaze, both inviting and provocative, drilled into his, her cheeks were flushed with colour, and a smirk curled lips that were starting to look swollen. With an involuntary growl he dropped his head again and gave her a brief but deep and consuming kiss, then brushed his lips over her jaw to press them at her carotid artery, which was visibly flexing along with her rapid pulse.

She dropped her head back to give him better access to the heated skin there, repeatedly murmuring the same thing he had been thinking – yes. But it wasn't her words that were wreaking havoc on him so much as the sultry, breathless way she said them, as well as the occasional sighs and moans of approval and encouragement interspersed through them. These sounds had made a number of cameos in his dreams in the past year and eight months, but as affecting as they had been during those times it was nothing to hearing them live. Nor was he suppressing their effects on him any longer – to the contrary, he hungrily welcomed them.

Relinquishing himself to the drive he had repressed for so long, Sherlock's mouth made a heated path down the skin along the V neckline of Irene's pyjamas, and found then roughly palmed her breast. But as he rolled his hips against hers there was a muted crinkle between them, and she tilted her head back to look at him, her hair strewn in disarray around her face.

"Oh I see," she said in a voice full of satisfaction, and she dragged her hand down his side before she dipped it into his trouser pocket and pulled out a foil square between two fingers. "So this was the cause of all that lovely blushing earlier."

He didn't answer, not needing the final word when it came to her, at least not now; he only leaned forward to part her lips with his and thoroughly kiss her in affirmation. She let out another muffled breath and clutched onto his shoulder blades through the fabric of his shirt, her tongue meeting his in her mouth as he pressed her hard into the mattress with his body.

For the final time that night he recalled something that had happened in Pakistan, as if remembering a fragment from a long-forgotten dream. Shortly after he and Irene had slept together for the first time he'd reflected that he'd been correct all along about sex and its ability to distract and overwhelm. Now he knew that he hadn't quite got it right after all: it hadn't been the act in and of itself that had been so overwhelming, it had been the intimacy of the experience. Even now, despite how long it had been since they'd had sex, he was still vulnerable in all the ways that mattered. As strongly as he was attracted her body, he was in love with her mind, and it continued to captivate him as much as it ever had. Depriving themselves of the physical would accomplish nothing; it would not diminish her importance to him or lessen what the loss of her would do to him, or minimise how much she affected him. So what would the point be?

His lust-drenched mind instantly returned with, No point at all, but the thought resonated through him with greater meaning. It was the final, definitive response to all of the questions and anxieties that had been plaguing him for the past week. There had been no point to his denial, to his self-inflicted angst, to fighting this…
Or perhaps there was just one, he amended. The process of been difficult, but through it he had gained the strength and insight to take full ownership of the man he was and how he felt. It meant that he was aware of every risk and potential for vulnerability, and yet he still actively chose this—chose her. Irene had just been talking about the choices he thought he had to make in his life, and with this one came fear, but also unprecedented certainty and confidence. He would no longer look back to the past at what they had shared and, for a time, lost. Instead he would look towards a future in which somehow or another they would always remain touchstones.
A Turn of the Tide

Chapter Notes

Please note that this chapter is rated M.

When Sherlock and Irene had consummated their physical relationship he had felt as though it were a tidal wave: unleashed by a powerful and singular event – her exfiltration – and uncontainable, elemental, overwhelming.

This time it was a dam bursting after countless cracks had compromised its integrity to the point of destruction. As he pressed her down into the bed he felt a surging certainly pounding through him and gaining momentum, and though his mind buzzed with incoming stimuli as well as countless mental images and new desires, for the first time in days he wasn't overwhelmed. He was certainly surrendering, but it had been a considered and controlled loss of control, and so with it came a feeling of empowerment and release.

He had Irene caged beneath him on the small double bed, though despite being on her back she was hardly passive, and for someone so petite she seemed to be everywhere. The taste and fragrance of her – no perfume, just Woman – monopolised his senses, and in one moment he noticed her heel skimming along the back of his calf, and then in the next moment his attention was pulled in rapid succession from the press of her breasts into his chest to the pressure of her pelvis against his as she arched up off the mattress. Her hands had slid into his hair and the combination of the sharpness of her nails against his scalp and the dull but stimulating tug of locks wrapped through her fingers sent a hot, electric tingling across his skin.

For a time the thrill and license of getting to touch her, of feeling her pressed beneath him with the length of his entire body and hearing the sounds she made in the back of her throat as he stroked his tongue against hers, were sufficient. More than sufficient. Every intermingled breath they shared as they broke apart, the heat of her radiating up through the flimsy pyjamas as he grasped at an arm, hip, waist were infinitely more arousing than the act of kissing whilst fully dressed should warrant. His mind swam from the eroticism of it all, so abrupt after almost years of absolute deprivation, but so welcome, even necessary. There was the illicit thrill of it of course – the allure of what he had forbidden himself – but what really fuelled the fire was the singularity of their connection.

He had been a coward; rarely were things as plan or as simple as that. All of his justifications could stand up to the highest level of reason of course, but at their root they had been nothing more than avoidance tactics. He prided himself on his audaciousness in the context of the work, but with this he had measured up short. And yet now the same absolute surety that gave him a rush of both euphoria and clarity when he had a case-related breakthrough was thrumming through his veins.

Then, as aggressive and heated as their kissing had become it was no longer enough, and Sherlock pulled away from her breathing hard.

He looked down at Irene through narrowed, calculating eyes, then put one knee between her thighs and swung it outward, spreading her legs in one smooth movement. Almost simultaneously he grabbed her wrists and pinned them above her head, and she made a sultry sound of mingled surprise and approval. He pulled back farther to rake his eyes over her and gauge whether she were as far gone as he, and what he saw nearly made him growl with lust. He might be less experienced
in this than other men, but there was no mistaking the desire for him in her expression and body language.

During their past encounter Irene had been the one more inclined to move things forward, but this time he wanted to show her that no questions lingered in his mind; she was to be left in no doubt whatsoever of exactly what, who, he wanted as well. He was finally certain of it himself, and that filled him with unprecedented confidence.

It spurred him on as he joined her wrists together and clasped them in one hand, and as he pressed the other down the heaving line of her body then slid it under the elastic band of her pyjamas.

She wasn't wearing any underwear, and he felt a subtle but substantial tremor rack his body as the tips of his fingers brushed against a strip of short, springy curls.

Her mouth fell open with a small intake of breath, and he felt the same tension go through her at the closeness and the imminent promise of direct contact.

Now wasn't the time for teasing, he felt that this moment had been postponed long enough – far too long – and he didn't have the patience or desire to delay any gratification. He met her dark, anticipatory gaze again and without hesitation he stretched his arm a little farther to slide two fingers into the cleft between her legs.

He felt the muscles in her thighs clench as he began to stroke and manipulate the peak of flesh there, his eyes never leaving hers. A fevered heat rose off of his body as he left behind all things cerebral and turned the engine of his mind to recollecting this. By this point it wasn't a difficult transition to make; besides, he had never actually deleted even a second of what had transpired in Karachi.

He broke eye contact to lower his head alongside hers.

"I think you'll find I'm not quite the novice anymore," he said low and hot into her ear as he continued to press and circle with his fingers, part of him noting and reacting to the changes in her breathing and the throb of her pulse, and part of him lost in the sensual artistry of it. It wasn't so different from making music; she was as complex and demanding as a Bach partita, and the movement and positioning of his fingers must be precise and exact to draw out the desired chord. Still it was hardly all technical, either—it required him to invest something more personal and ephemeral as well. Her hands squeezed back against his grip above her head and she tossed her head as she let out a long Mmmmm – and there was the chord, or at least a prelude. His lips pulled back over his teeth in an expression of satisfaction, though it was hardly a smile.

Suddenly she pressed her legs together, pinning his hand in place.

"Careful not to get too cocky," she said with emphasis on the pertinent word as she broke one wrist free from his grip.

They were both of the same, impatient minds: she didn't spend any time teasing, but reached down and took a firm hold of him through the material of his trousers.

He didn't gasp outright but he let out a burst of air through his nose, and he had to release her other wrist to brace his hand against the mattress at the new sensation.

With both hands free Irene quickly undid the button and fly and tugged trousers and pants halfway down his hips, just enough to be out of the way for her purposes. Sherlock felt the cool air of the room on the febrile skin she had exposed for only an instant before Irene's hand had wrapped
around him again, and this time she did pull a deep, resonating groan out of him.

His head fell to his chest and the hand on the bed bunched together a fistful of duvet as he closed his eyes and let the pleasurable pressure take hold of him, though he managed to maintain just enough presence of mind to continue the small but meticulous movements of his own.

"I believe there's still a thing or two you could learn," she said, breathy but authoritative, and he forced his eyes open so that he could look at her face.

Seeing her upturned, alert, and fully aroused expression was like sucking down air after a long and arduous run: he took in as much of it as he could and though the oxygen made his head swim it felt absolutely essential, and still he needed more, still it was nowhere near enough.

In a way his desire of her was like any other physical hunger Sherlock experienced: for food, for sleep. He could only defer them for so long until he would give in, ravenous. Between cases he had been known to consume thousands of calories per day and sleep far into the morning or even early afternoon, and now…

Yet this desire was driven by much more than basic need, because for him sex had never been any such thing. And though it felt just as demanding, his appetite for her transcended the physical.

He let her have the last word but he made a teasing, complicated motion with his fingers to convey his response, acknowledging to himself that the physical was still bloody marvelous. Her jaw tensed slightly as her eyes slipped closed at that, but she recovered almost at once and when her eyes opened again they fastened onto his, sparking blue flame.

It struck him as interesting that in her professional work she had employed elements of her sexuality to humiliate, degrade, and reduce, whereas for him being with her made him feel nothing but empowered.

But the riding crops and floggers, the elaborate costumes and fantasies, the equipment… they had been props in the means to her true end, just as the more theatrical elements of certain investigative methods of his were. And as personal as their work was to both of them there was no performance here, with this. She was still The Woman, but to him that conveyed now someone slightly more complex and even more interesting than Miss Adler.

He grabbed up her hand again, raised it, and held her gaze as he pressed his mouth to the upturned wrist at the pulse-point. As her blood drummed a hard beat against his hyper-sensitised lips, he saw the fire in her eyes tempered by profound depth. He hadn't forgotten that look and in fact it had been a particular source of angst when they'd been apart, but now he felt that it was worth any future pain for the chance to see it again.

For the moment time slowed and their rapid-fire pace became more introspective. She lifted her other hand and stroked her fingertips down the side of his face, her nails catching on the short stubble and sending a shiver through his body that wasn't just a tactile response. He bent down as she raised her chin, and their mouths came together softly and with a tenderness that acknowledged this step forward and all that it signified.

Then her hand fell away and with the next kiss the feverish, almost frantic tempo resumed.

They were both still clothed, he in what was essentially his professional uniform of trousers and shirt, though at least the jacket had been left in the other room. In spite of his impatience to speed things along he found it undeniably erotic, perhaps because it was so symbolic of the situation itself. Just as she was 'Irene' rather than Miss Adler to him now, he was presenting himself to her
not as something approximating a 'dashing rescuer', or as a short-term lover, but as Sherlock Holmes of London, utterly himself.

To complete the metaphor they needed to shed the last remaining barriers between them, and he for one couldn't wait another moment for the extravagance of feeling his skin against hers for the first time in far too long.

With a short exhale he broke off from the frenzied joining, parting, and rejoining of their mouths and yanked her top up whilst also kicking off his trousers and pants off the rest of the way, and as soon as both articles were shucked without ceremony from the bed, she reached up for his shirt buttons.

As she nimbly moved her fingers down the wrinkled shirt he took in the sight of her nude torso and dusky deep pink-tipped breasts that were slightly fuller than when he'd last seen them, and he felt the heavy pulse between his legs throb in even stronger arousal. He wondered briefly how he must look to her, though judging by the avid focus on her face she more than liked what she saw as well.

Irene tugged the garment from his shoulders and he shrugged it off with impatience bordering on contempt. With his arms free he peeled her pyjama bottoms from her legs then slid his arms under her waist to heave her up against him.

He made a deep, satisfied sound at both the contact and the low moan she'd made, which turned into a groan of his own when she rotated her hips down against his front, the warmth of their bare skin turning into prickling heat where they were pressed together in almost the most intimate way. He pushed his hands down to grip her backside as he retaliated with an upward thrust that slid hard against her centre with a slick friction that made both of them choke out gasps.

Sherlock felt as though his skin had become a very thin membrane, and that his consciousness had expanded to a full-body awareness that simmered just below the surface. Every follicle and cell felt alive, raw, and receptive, so that even the ends of her hair brushing against him made him feel as if he might combust.

Her arms had tightened around his shoulders and for several moments they were locked into a sinuous and sensuous overture of what was to come, and their gaze – his the grey-green of a stormy sea and hers the deep navy of open waters – never wavered in its connection. In the past Sherlock had been daunted by the shared stare and all that it conveyed, though he had never been able to look away. Now there was nothing to hide (from her or from), no uncertainty, and no hesitation. He met her penetrating look full-on, and in his own gaze he expressed to her all the sureness, sentiment, and desire he felt.

They continued to slide and move together as they became reacquainted with the stretches of plains and the dips of valleys of each other's bodies, and all the time their mouths just hovered inches from each other's, open and tensed.

Without conscious thought his hands began to explore the terrain of her as well, stroking hard down her side and then up over her stomach to roughly cup a breast. This time there was no barrier of fabric, and so there was nothing to prevent him from feeling the texture of her skin as her nipple tightened against his palm. He let out a heavy exhale at that and ducked his head to sample that texture with his lips and tongue. She let go of him to lean back heavily onto her hands and he latched his teeth over one bud, biting down softly but firmly, and then flattening his tongue and flicking it over it.

In his state of abandon he grew rougher than he ever had before, leaving faint streaks from his teeth and the patchy blots of lovebites across the swells of both breasts. She only encouraged it; she
collapsed backwards and pulled him along with her, his head hugged to her chest. Then she slid her hands down to press her nails into his triceps and made reciprocal marks of her own.

One of Sherlock's hands went to clutch at her hip as the other slipped between her thighs again, delving into her now rather than only skimming at the surface, and with a choked moan she tipped her head into the pillow and dug her nails in even deeper. They were too short to break the skin but the sensation further ratcheted up his desire, and he blindly pressed his open mouth to the hollow between her breasts, across her heaving ribs, against her shoulder—anywhere he could reach her—as the plunging motion of his fingers became ever more unrefined.

He could tell by touch that she was even more aroused than she had been even minutes before, when every physical indicator had broadcasted her desire for him, and he found the thought of delaying for even another minute intolerable.

Still holding tightly to her hip, he stretched his other hand out for the condom Irene had fished from his pocket, which she had set on the bedside table.

Irene got up on her elbows, her eyes dark and her teeth pressing into her lower lip as she watched him, and before opening the packet he leaned down to kiss her mouth open with his.

She raised her chin and it was brief but intense, with a clash of tongues full of promise and intent.

He wrenched himself away to tear open the package then quickly rolled on the condom, glad that the method was relatively simple given that it was his first time using one and he wasn't operating at standard mental acuity.

He thought that it was similar to the sensation of putting on contact lenses—odd and distracting at first, but nothing to which he couldn't adjust. Then the thought popped like a soap bubble when Irene joined her fingers and thumb into a ring shape and encircled his latex-clad erection, challenge and the heat of anticipation bright in her eyes.

He roughly grabbed her wrists up in his hands and pushed them down so that they were pinned against the mattress again, this time on either side of her head amidst her tousled strands of ebony hair. She raised an eyebrow, though the flush that bloomed in her cheeks told him that she found it thrilling the way his self-assured swagger was no longer confined to the cerebral domain.

He didn't smirk, in fact he knew his expression was almost severe in concentration as he interlaced the fingers of one set of hands, then released her other to reach in between their bodies. Her free hand followed his, and their fingers brushed as together they both guided him into place.

As soon as they were aligned he clutched onto both of Irene's hands again, then used the leverage to cant his hips forward and join their bodies completely.

Irene let out a loud sigh and her entire body curved up into his, though he just barely managed to register either.

Swelling through him was a sensation so strong and overbearing that he thought he might have even climaxed without the latex barrier that slightly lessened its intensity. Still he had to clench his teeth and his eyes shut as he teetered on the knife's edge. Endorphins, hormones, physical stimuli, and even emotions all colluded to overwhelm him, but he tightened his grasp on Irene's hands, and focused for a moment on that connection instead.

When he finally risked opening his eyes and seeking out Irene's again, he saw that she looked just as close to spinning out of control as he felt. Her eyes were glossy and round and her chest was
rising and falling in short, shallow bursts, but her grasp on his hands was strong.

As he looked down on her exquisite and familiar face the word that popped into Sherlock's mind, startling but with the ring of truth, was home. The feelings of relief and rightness that had come from kissing her had only been a preface to this, and only now that they were joined did he realise how homesick he had been.

The thought set a new tone, and made the moment about so much more than just the rush of blossoming pleasure.

He tightened his hold on her hands and planted one elbow as he deliberately made one long, slow thrust. It was incredible to feel every inch of her like this, and though her eyelids almost slipped shut at the sensation she managed to keep her gaze pinned on his. He felt her shift a little beneath him and when he repeated the motion, somehow maintaining tenuous control, he slid in even deeper.

He didn't release her but he did break their eye contact at that, dropping his head to muffle a low groan into her neck as he sensed that same intoxicating mixture of stimuli and emotion swim back up to the surface. He felt as though every muscle in his body were tensed with years of coiled and pent-up energy, and he wouldn't be able to staunch the torrent for much longer, but while he still had just a sliver of control he wanted to take in everything he could.

He attempted to maintain a consistent rhythm but with every stroke he ceded a little more control to the animalistic side of him, and she when she started raising her hips up to meet his in faster and rougher parabolas he braced himself and looked into her face again. They held eye contact, and it was in that that he found the most significant and intimate connection with her.

He was getting everything he wanted down to his most base desire, so as he moved over her he couldn't understand why along with the pleasure expanding through his lower half there was an ache growing inside his chest. Looking at her, mutually inhabiting that single space of consciousness… it was painful, as if a hairline fracture were cracking open inside him, raw and oxidising in the exposed air. He found it bizarre that in such a heated and carnal moment he could feel so vulnerable as well, and he gave a low and faint whine and pressed his face into the side of her neck, holding her tightly as he continued the nonstop torque of his hips. Breaking eye contact temporarily lessened the effects of his sentiment, but then after several moments the balance tilted too far the other way and the pleasure surged almost to breaking point.

He quickly pulled back and shifted up onto his knees so that he could have better control of his pace, and he raised a hand to press a second rhythm into the flesh between her parted thighs. In response she reached up and slid both hands down his chest, her touch slick against the perspiration that was beginning to glisten over the skin there. Her palms came to a rest against his ribs so that the fingertips of her right hand covered his heart, and that ache spiked inside him again. Her eyes were dark and feral but her expression was serious and held no trace artifice or pretence, and he found that he could now accept that look without reservation. It hurt, but it felt unlike any pain he'd ever experienced. It wasn't like what he'd felt when he'd found her phone on his mantel or when he'd followed through with the necessity of leaving her on the ship and returning to London. The closest approximation was when he'd found himself needing her during the long and bitterly lonely slog of dismantling Moriarty's network. It was a bone-deep longing, as well as fear from subjecting himself to potential loss, to future pain. He accepted that risk, though, without reservation.

When he identified it he regained some control of it, and with control came better awareness and the understanding that she was feeling the same thing. He leaned forward again and kissed her, and this time the desperation was more than just physical.
"Oh God," she exhaled raggedly against his mouth, and her hands came up to clamp down on either side of his face. She gave him another hard, glancing kiss before tossing her head back and sliding her hands behind his head to interlock in the curls there, as he braced on arms that trembled with the effort to support him.

"Harder," she demanded. "Don't--don't be gentle."

With a groan he instantly put her command into action, as if they really were one mind and his own brain had willed it. He reached up to grab the edge of the mattress then gave a hard snap of his hips, and she answered with a husky cry of approval. Blinding the sweat from his eyes he repeated the motion with even greater force, and then he allowed himself to finally let loose the torrent of desire within him.

Several minutes later he was once again terribly close, but still a small portion of him wanted to linger in this hard-won intimacy and so he fought against the climbing, unfurling sensation that accumulated with every stroke of his and with every encouraging, heated moan of hers.

"Ah," he panted, clenching his fists both in pleasure and in the exertion of fending off his climax, and seconds later his arms finally buckled and he fell against her.

Irene took the opportunity to roll Sherlock onto his back and then she surged over him like a cresting wave, relentlessly pounding down into him again and again. Without hesitation he again reached for the juncture of where they joined with increasing urgency to stroke her firmly with the pad of his thumb, and he saw a flash of teeth as she bit down on her lower lip.

As he looked up at her with eyes wide and she looked back, he had never felt closer to anyone, and he had never come closer to uttering an admission of love. He felt the pressure of it pushing up from that place in his chest and build behind his lips, but then she grasped onto his shoulders and began to swivel her hips as she rocked so that for several seconds he even forgot how to breathe.

Before he had the chance to recover Irene's entire body was tensing and her mouth had dropped open into a soundless cry, and then she was coming undone above him and around him. She was silent except for her unsteady, shuddering breaths, but her face was pulled into lines of excruciating ecstasy. The sight of her with her head thrown back so the tendons in her neck stood out in taut relief, entire body pink and flushed with escalating, cresting pleasure, first distracted him from his fevered altered state, and then set it even more aflame, so that when she finally collapsed against him with a moan, he was incoherent from his own oncoming release.

He wrapped both arms under hers and grasped her shoulders, clutching her to him as he mindlessly, desperately slammed into her.

"Yes," she said low and satiated into his ear, and hearing her voice utter that one syllable blanked whatever was left of his higher mind with unadulterated lust. Then she grasped a handful of his hair again and angled his head back to kiss and bite the column of his throat, and he was lost.

The full-body conscientiousness that had been buzzing and tingling beneath several thin layers of dermis suddenly expanded into a supernova of pleasure, and from the point of where they were joined a rolling, cascading surge of energy pulsed outward to the ends of his limbs, curling his toes and clenching his hands. He was senseless to how long the climax lasted; it reached a point when it was almost unbearably intense and then finally broke and receded in ebbs and flows that left him gasping, inarticulate in word and thought, and holding onto The Woman as if she were his only tether to reality.

For a time neither of them spoke or moved, too winded and, at least for Sherlock, euphoric.
They remained pressed together in the unkempt bed, Irene's limbs splayed out over his as their heartrates continued to race. Sherlock took in a breath then kissed her deeply, and she kissed him back slowly but with just as much feeling. When they broke apart, she gave him a small but sincere smile and carefully rolled off of him, then started to brush the backs of her knuckles up and down his thigh in a distracted manner. He continued to suck in air and blink up at the ceiling, and he felt dazed but remarkably content in spite of the ongoing threat they faced. In many ways his entire world had changed for the better in the past hour, but unfortunately that part had not.

"I've been impressed with your learning curve in the past, Mr Holmes," Irene said, breaking the calm silence in a low purr. "Now I can say that your information retention is outstanding as well."

That pulled a short but deep chuckle from him, both at what she'd said and at her reference to him as 'Mr Holmes.' It was as close to a term of endearment as he could expect from her – her equivalent of his honorific 'The (The) Woman.'

"You should know I only keep things I consider of utmost importance."

She gave an approving hum and turned her head to brush her lips against his upper arm.

"That was…" He trailed off in part to catch his breath, but also because he wasn't sure how to finish the sentiment in a way that could do it any justice.

"Good?" she offered, then glanced up at him through her lashes with an ironic smile.

He responded with a close-lipped smile of his own, but it quickly grew into a grin, and he felt the corners of his eyes crease in warmth.

"Perhaps even 'very good,'" he answered in a poor attempt at his usual deadpan, and she raised her brows in mock astonishment at the praise.

"Nero?" he asked suddenly, starting to rise.

She pressed her hand down on his chest and shushed him. "Oblivious. Believe me - he would've let us know if it were otherwise."

He looked into her untroubled eyes and gave a short nod then settled back, relieved. Thinking back on the past forty-five minutes he felt faint embarrassment for the utter loss of control, then promptly dismissed it as irrelevant, and felt the smile tug up one side of his mouth again. This time it was somewhat cocky.

His smile faltered into a slight frown down at the condom that was starting to feel distinctly clammy and unpleasant, and Irene gave a soft laugh.

"Roll it downward and then slide it off."

He quickly followed her instructions, and after tying it off and tossing it into the rubbish bin beneath the bedside table he collapsed onto his back again. He felt a bone-deep, satisfied fatigue begin to steal through him, but he fought against it and dragged his hands over his face. If he were going to attempt to balance work with pleasure, it would take reliance on his years of compartmentalising, and he now needed to gather his energy to switch gears. He pressed the heels of his palms into his eyes, then let out a bracing huff and raised himself onto his elbows.

Irene let her inquisitive expression ask the question for her.

"Work," he explained, gently taking her wrist and moving her hand from his thigh before he
pivoted to sit on the edge of the bed, slipped on his pants, then stood.

"You aren't tired?"

"I can sleep after."

She gave a soft laugh then said in a conspiratorial stage whisper, "Darling, it is 'after...'

"I mean when this is over," he said, though not without a trace of residual tenderness in his voice. "Moran already has us at a disadvantage and I don't intend to increase his odds by wasting time in bed." A moment later his lips tightened in chagrin at his phrasing, because he didn't actually feel that last three-quarters of an hour constituted anything close to a 'waste', but Irene seemed unfazed.

"Oh I remember," she said, the humour in her voice now faintly mocking. "John Watson once mentioned something on his blog about how you avoided sleep while on a case. I thought it was just his hero-worship talking."

"John can exaggerate—but he didn't with this," he answered, partly distracted by the fact that she could still quote facts about him from long-ago entries.

She gave a nod and then rolled away from him, pulling the covers with her and wrapping them around her shoulder.

"Wake me if there's anything important that comes up. Oh and turn off the light when you go, please."

At that she stilled and went quiet, and he hesitated by the bed, feeling a bit nonplussed at the abrupt dismissal.

He frowned to himself, then after a few tenths of a second of internal debate, he arrived at a decision. If he wasn't going to compartmentalise, he could at least compromise.

"I'll stay til you're asleep."

At once she turned to lift the duvet for him, and when he saw traces of suppressed satisfaction on her profile it hit him that he had been effortlessly played. He switched off the lamp and settled down beside her and found that he didn't care; in it only increased his feeling of well-being.

As he listened to her breathing slow into a deep, steady rhythm he recalled his mid-coital urge to tell her he loved her, and he was glad he hadn't said it. Eyebrows pulling together, he tried to reason why that was the case.

It certainly wasn't accurate to assert that he didn't feel that way, because he couldn't deny that he was in love with her just as his father was in love with his mother, or as John was in love with Mary. Rather it was the opposite issue: the notion and connotations of romantic love were inadequate for what they shared, oversimplifying and not conveying the depth and transcendence of their understanding. To use the conventional three-word phrase in the context of their relationship was to damn it with faint praise.

So while she was precious to him in all the ways one lover was precious to another, she was so much more to him than that. The immensity of her importance to him was the very reason he had suppressed his feelings at all, but the fact that one of the components was a romantic/erotic love was almost an incidental, and maybe even beside the point. It didn't constitute the bedrock of her importance to him, so to reduce his feelings to that would distract and detract from the whole of her true value.
There was no pithy expression to convey the complexity and gravity of what he felt, and nor should there be. Perhaps one day he would find a way to convey it in words but until then he would have to rely on physical expression, as he – they - already did.

A small, dark smile curled his lips at that. There were worse options than that, he supposed.
In Darkness, Light

Chapter Notes

The beginning and end of this chapter contain very mature content. Scan for the page break if you prefer to avoid that sort of thing. Otherwise – enjoy!

Irene slept deeply for what felt like several hours, then all at once she was awoken by the sensation of adrenaline coursing through her body and making her alert. She tried to pinpoint what had interrupted her sleep and her thoughts rushed to Nero as they always did when she woke suddenly, but this felt different. Then she heard Sherlock’s heavy, ragged breathing in the dark behind her, and she realised that this time the full-body awareness was actually arousal.

Ah so he had stayed, she thought with a thrill of satisfaction, although when Sherlock’s breath gusted hot against the outer shell of her ear, that satisfaction inverted to need. She was very familiar with the sounds of middle-of-the-night desire and could maybe tell better what Sherlock was feeling than he knew himself. And if he wasn’t going to act on it, she would.

Her own breath quickened in response and anticipation, but before he could react she pulled away from him and flipped around. She found his face in the dark with her hand, stroked the pad of her thumb over his lower lip and down his chin, then leaned in and kissed him with immediate urgency. There was no patience in her to ease into this, she had come awake already aflame, and judging by his low and unsteady panting he felt the same. He made a sound in between a whine and a growl and wrapped his arms around her shoulders to pull her in closer so that her breasts crushed against his chest, and she threw a leg over his thighs then slid down against him with deliberate slowness until they were pressed flush together.

His breath caught deep in his throat at that and she felt a heady dose of gratification, although it was entirely different from the kind she’d derived as a professional dominatrix. That had been sport in which she’d always kept meticulous score, but this had long since stopped being a game.

The hard shape she felt between them confirmed that he was as aroused as she was, and when she closed a firm fist around it he pulled back a hairline from her mouth to let out the loveliest groan, which sounded loud and indecent in the darkness. Irene gave a passing thought of thanks for the fact that Nero had become such a good, deep sleeper, and then entirely dismissed him from her mind. Sherlock’s hands had flown to her head and his fingers dug into her scalp as he angled her mouth to his, but as she increased the speed and pressure of her hand he broke away again to drop his head back on the pillow. She gave a sharp, self-satisfied smile and bent her head to his chest, and his hands moved with it, still tangled up in her hair. She sucked hard and then scraped her teeth over a budding nipple, savouring this more brutal way of giving him pleasure. He gave an involuntary grunt that she knew wasn’t in protest but pleasure, and his grip tightened so that it pulled her hair at the follicle. She thought it was intentional – either a spark of rebellion at her rough treatment or an acknowledgment of the direction she was going – and she felt liquid heat pool in her belly at both possibilities.

The next time their mouths joined the contact was seeking and demanding, with a clashing of teeth and the parrying of tongues. All the intoxicating stimuli began to break down the rational order of her mind until only one thought remained, though it made her feel even drunker on desire.
There was something about him now that hadn’t been present before, a new self-assurance and assertiveness that paralleled the swagger of his professional personality that she found so enticing. As much as she had enjoyed playing an integral part in Sherlock’s earlier sexual experiences, she was relishing this boldness even more. He had started to show signs of it on the final day on the ship, but on the whole he’d struck her as rather adolescent then. Now, although he still retained a sincerity that moved her in a way she would never admit, his actions backed up what he’d said about no longer being a novice. She could be wrong but she didn’t think he’d slept with anyone else, so she could only conclude that his new and very attractive demeanour stemmed from a newfound (though hard-won) confidence in this—in them.

With a low, harsh hum Sherlock released her hair and pushed hard on her shoulder, rolling them over so that he pinned her with his full weight. Wasting no time he slid his hand to the juncture between her thighs and with those long and dexterous musician’s fingers of his he repeated the motions from earlier that night which had worked to great effect. Her physical awareness was suddenly focused by his clever touch, and she felt like the physical embodiment of String Theory—named in reference to the instrument Sherlock knew so well. When he stroked or pressed one part of her there was an answering, resonating vibrata elsewhere to create a harmonic of pleasure, until she felt like she was only a series of disembodied points joined by an invisible current within the vapour that was the rest of her body. She took in a shuddering breath and threw her head back onto the duvet, and surrendered to a decadent sensuality she almost never permitted herself to feel.

Not just in her work but in her personal life as well she had always held the upper hand, and all of her other sexual relationships had been defined by a power dynamic of one sort or another. Sex had been as carefully curated and crafted as every other part of her life. She’d found a great deal of pleasure and satisfaction in the affairs, and still thought of some of her previous lovers with both fondness and residual attraction. But with them she’d never relinquished full control, of the situation or of herself.

With Sherlock things were different - not in that he was a man, and somewhat in spite of it - but in the way that all of her carefully-guarded boundaries and protocols dissolved with him. There were no rules and no presets, there was nothing but uncharted territory. It was terrifying, but for a woman who had long-thought she had everything about herself figured out and neatly compartmentalised, the fear was tempered by the thrill of new self-discovery.

Touching her as he was had a direct effect upon him as well; he was a searing-hot iron brand against her palm. Then she was left empty-handed as he shifted his weight and dragged his mouth down her body, pausing for several moments to give her breasts the same treatment she’d given his chest before he skimmed over her ribs on a downward path to join his mouth to his fingers. She appreciated the gesture but by now the already limited patience she’d had had completely vanished, and she jerked his arm upward.

“Just fuck me,” she growled.

Irene felt Sherlock’s entire body go rigid at her command and thought she felt gooseflesh rise along the skin pressed into hers. She had never spoken to him quite so coarsely before – sex between them so far had mostly been expressions of various sentiments more than raw physicality – and she had some doubt that anyone else had either.

But things between them were charged in a different way tonight, and a fraction of a second later his instincts took over and he was kissing her again, this time with a new desperation that seemed to meet and even surpass her own.

For an instant she recalled what she’d thought on that last day aboard the Independent Venture,
about the dazzling potential of a physical relationship with Sherlock. Not only was there an understanding between them that imbued everything with an unprecedented weight, but there was the entire matter of observation skills and the dexterity and precision of his musician’s touch to act upon them. It was an ironically potent and specific set of talents for someone who rarely indulged his libido—or at least not with a partner (and the subsequent mental image of that seared into her mind and made her moan into his mouth). And if he were ever inclined towards selfishness in bed, as he was occasionally prone to be out of it, she in turn was more than equipped to correct that behaviour. Of course it also didn’t hurt that from a purely aesthetic point of view she thought that he was absolutely beautiful, and she had always loved beautiful things… Her heart pounded and she felt an answering pulse between her legs at the thought that this was potentially the start of that possibility, realised.

Then she was literally pulled back into the moment when she felt him wrap his hands around her ankles to yank her legs into position, which sent yet another hot jolt of fresh arousal through her.

Except for the faint gleam of moonlight there was absolute dark in their room in this house in the countryside, and in the absence of sight the other senses were coming alive. Sounds such as the crinkle of the condom wrapper and Sherlock’s shallow, laboured breathing as he put it on were magnified, and the mild roughness of his handling as he pushed his hands up her legs edged into pleasure.

She leaned back on her elbows and dug her fingertips into the sheet, and the blood roaring in her ears was raising to a crescendo just as much from ceding control – to Sherlock in part, but moreso to her own basest instincts – as in anticipation.

His face emerged from the darkness when it was inches above hers again, and she could just make out the glint of slightly bared teeth and the swelling black desire in his eyes as he looked down into hers.

She was so ready for him that when he did grasp hold of her hip and rock into her with a force that knocked the breath from her in a strong burst, there was no discomfort. There was only a shockwave that reverberated from where they were joined through her abdomen and out to the tips of her fingers and toes, and made her feel hyper-aware of every part of her body.

Just as they had skipped all but the most cursory foreplay there was no slow build-up to a more frenetic pace now; at once Sherlock planted his face against Irene’s neck and she dug her heels into the mattress and matched his sinuous but forceful movements thrust for thrust.

A rough, rumbling groan tumbled from Sherlock’s mouth against her ear, fitting into some primitive part of her mind, and without hesitation she raked her nails hard from his shoulders to his waist, then dug them into the backs of his flexing upper thighs. The way his muscles rippled and contracted in their wake and the sound he made – this time low and sharp – filled her with dark satisfaction. It fizzed within her like top-shelf champagne, heating her with a tingling warmth and making her feel even more inebriated.

He retaliated by sucking hard on the point where his mouth was pressed against the side of her neck, then he raised himself up to his arms and bent his head to her breasts. She gasped in pleasure as the sharp feeling hovered just at the threshold of pain, and she felt the developing lovebites throb in time with her rapid pulse.

He let out another low, adamant sound in his throat in answer then moved away from her for several seconds to rise up and plant his knees more firmly, but he compensated for the temporary deprivation with an even stronger torqueing of his hips in the new position.
She bit her lower lip then stroked both hands down the front of his torso, over his raised nipples, heaving ribs, and taut belly, not to mark him in a fit of lust this time but to commit to memory the feel of his compact and sinewy form in the darkness. She could picture him in her mind’s eye, his pale skin glowing with the flush of arousal and exertion, but feeling the heat and perspiration of him under her touch, following the line of muscle, bone, and tendon with her fingertips, made this real in a visceral way, and a feeling of deep sentiment mingled in with the eroticism it. He was utterly human beneath her hands and in turn, she was utterly human beneath him. Even amid issues of persistent mistrust, they could still be their most private and fundamental selves with one another in this way.

Her hand had reached the place they were joining with increasing speed and urgency and she dragged her fingers over to herself, where she synchronised her strokes into her flesh with his. Attuned to her as he was, he let out a gust of air from his nostrils and then slid his hands under her knees, pushed them upward, and leaned down hard, pressing his chest against hers. Without thinking she let out a full-throated moan at the deeper and even more intense pressure, and Sherlock dropped his head to smother it with an uncoordinated kiss.

She caged his shoulders in her arms so that he had to drop to his elbows again and then she wrapped her legs around his waist so that they were a tight squareknot tangle of skin and limbs. He continued to piston his hips in a hard roll, hitting a place deep within her that was starting to blossom.

“Al-almost,” she gasped against his mouth, and his tempo faltered for only a moment before it recovered and sped up.

She had lost all sense of time and place, only aware of the sound and feeling of Sherlock all around and inside her, body and mind, and the imminent but still elusive promise of release building up in every nerve.

Her fingers continued to fly over her flesh in firm circles and then she felt his hand envelop hers, and begin to copy her motions. She let him take over and reached up to grasp his arm hard enough to hurt him as she focused on the incredible sensations he was stirring with his deft touch. And not only did she not care that her grip might be causing him any pain but the dark thrill of it stoked her excitement further—besides, she knew he was in the same inflamed state as she, and would take literal pleasure in the roughness.

Meanwhile the opposite process was happening for her – the pleasure was escalating to a point that was becoming almost unbearable, and she squeezed her eyes shut and let out a voiceless cry of frustration. At that Sherlock snapped his hips even harder whilst bearing down with his fingers where she was most sensitive, and just when she thought she might go mad without release from the ever-cresting, never-breaking feeling she crossed event horizon and hit the point of no return. The powerful, crackling energy swept over her skin and through her body, drawing her towards sweet oblivion with the inexorable pull of gravity, and she arched her back and neck and pulled in hoarse, deep gasps, powerless against the fundamental, elemental sensations pounding through her.

An unknown time later she returned to some awareness panting, and grabbed his hand away from her, interlacing their fingers. Seeing her through her release had apparently given him license to chase down his own, and he tilted his head towards her so that his forehead pressed against hers and his breath came in hot short gasps on her face. When she raised a hand to his she felt how it was contracted into a grimace, with etched-in lines of effort and desperation.

Her pleasure had receded into a pleasant hum of physical and personal well-being, but it had been replaced by the new and almost as demanding desire to experience a secondary release through
Sherlock. She had always ensured her partners left her bed satisfied but that had been tied in with her own pride regarding prowess and control; now she wanted him to have pleasure purely for its own sake—and his.

She clenched internal muscles around him and raked her nails across his skin again, hard enough to spur him on but not so hard as to distract, and he choked out a low groan, the muscles of his back tensing up further under her other hand.

She chased this with murmured words of encouragement and to her gratification the sound of her husky, satiated voice seemed to be the final impetus he needed. His arms suddenly contracted around her, crushing the breath from her as he held her through his own silent but shuddering climax. She could feel his heart pounding hard and fast against hers and the hints of sentiment she’d felt before came surging back. They were undiluted and unconstricted now by the lust that had been consuming her before, but rather than alarm her they added to her overall sense of equanimity.

Sherlock finally collapsed then laid sprawled over her for several moments before he rolled onto his back with a soft grunt of effort, and she stretched up to kiss him on lips that were still parted as he tried to catch his breath. He moved his mouth against hers but she could tell that he was even more spent than she was, although when she nipped him on the lower lip he did give a retaliatory squeeze where one hand had come to rest over the swell of her arse, which drew a pleased half-smile from her.

Irene usually returned to full alertness within a matter of minutes after sex, and sleeping with Sherlock wasn’t necessarily an exception to this. But in the wake of this afterglow she was left rather dazed, and instead of fighting it she let herself enjoy the rare, uncomplicated feeling. She reached up to push her fingers through the damp, lank curls at the crown of Sherlock’s head with perhaps slightly more force than necessary but then soothed with a gentle hand down his neck and shoulder, before she turned over so that the length of her back was pressed to his side. And as the rise and fall of his chest steadily slowed she fell into an easy, untroubled sleep.

The second time Irene came awake, it was gradual and with some mild disorientation.

She remembered that, to her initial surprise, Sherlock had often held her following sex, and after their first round it had been no different. She’d found to her equal surprise that she hadn’t minded, and she still didn’t. Instead of feeling possessive or stifling, his arms around her felt like a natural extension of and conclusion to the intimacy. A smirk quirked her lips at that practically romantic thought but she didn’t shy away from it, which was telling.

But now she felt chilled despite the soft pinging of the radiator (had he left to work as he’d intended?), and the room seemed bright on the other side of her eyelids. Her brows creased in confusion; motherhood had honed her internal nighttime clock, and it didn’t feel like it should be morning quite yet… in fact, it felt as if it hadn’t even been an hour since she’d closed her eyes.

She opened them to see that the bedside lamp was on and Sherlock was still beside her, propped up on one elbow and looking down. Next but almost simultaneously she noticed that he was tracing one hand across her skin.

His expression was set and his eyes were quick as they moved over her torso, and she understood that his touch wasn’t meant to be seductive; he was cataloguing and taking stock of the changes to her body since he’d last seen her naked. Sherlock had committed her every physical detail to memory on that final day they’d been together, and comparing her changed figure with the one he had known so intimately helped him to recreate and understand all the time that he had lost in
between, when they had been apart. It was also romantic in a way, but not intended to be erotic.

Nonetheless she found it just as arousing as any foreplay, if not more so because of the active involvement of that sexy brain of his, and she smoothed the tangled sheets away from her body as a silent invitation to continue.

He looked into her face at her movement and his expression softened but he didn’t look surprised that she was awake, and he resumed his movements after just a short pause.

“I was just leaving but I noticed…”

She tilted her head in question.

“Striae,” he said as he brushed a finger across a span of skin that seemed to particularly interest him. “Specifically striae gradivarum, caused by rapid stretching of the dermis as well as various hormonal fluctuations throughout pregnancy…”

“I know what a stretchmark is, Sherlock,” she said with some teasing in her hoarse voice, though she understood that he was saying it for his benefit.

“Like Lichtenberg figures…” he murmured in the baritone rumble that always transmitted straight to her core.

“Mmm?”

He didn’t answer, tracing his finger along one of them instead, and she noticed that at some point she had started to hold her breath.

He glanced up with a small, slightly smug half-smile - ah, so he knew exactly how this was affecting her, she thought with more of that earlier appreciation - then dragged his fingertip along another one, this one lower down by her navel. She let out the air she’d been holding and her breath began to come out a shorter and higher.

His precise, assured touch continued along her skin and she felt her entire body wake up further and begin to rouse under it again. Her breathing hitched and then escalated into a soft moan when he bent his head and brushed hot, breathy kisses along the silvery marks.

She was about to wrap her arms around his head and encourage him to resume the act she’d interrupted before – this time she was definitely in the mood for and receptive to that – but he moved his weight back onto his elbow and his hand came to a rest on her hip. She gave it a look of pointed disapproval, and Sherlock registered it but seemed preoccupied with something.

“What was it was like,” he asked, his frustration contained but still evident.

“What?” she asked, nonplussed at the sudden change in direction.

“I can only parse together so much and then it just all becomes…” his voice trailed off, and his expression tightened.

Ah.

“I can’t see it. What did you look like, did you gain weight, did you experience any cognitive anomalies? I’ve read that brain function can be impaired, but it seems like that’s just anecdotal and there’s no real—”
“Oh you’ve read, have you?” she asked, and enjoyed the very subtle flush that rose on his cheeks.

“Well?” he prompted, undeterred.

She gave him a wry look. “Those are all very different questions.”

He went silent, and his expression grew even more serious before he asked, “Are there any pictures?”

Irene almost answered no, because she had been entirely on her own during that time so who would’ve taken any? Then she remembered that when she had gone for her seventh-month check-up her OB/GYN had encouraged her to take some full-body photos of herself. The doctor had said that it would be a way she could track her progress, but in retrospect Irene had to wonder if she had sensed Irene’s turmoil and she thought that it could be a way to get her to connect with her pregnancy. At the appointment she had privately scoffed at the suggestion, but that evening she had felt especially alone and out-of-sorts, and so she had grabbed her phone and taken a series of photos in her full-length mirror. They were the only pictures she had ever taken during her pregnancy, and she hadn’t thought of them for over a year.

Without saying a word she bent over the side of the bed to pull her phone from her bag, and after a few moments of scrolling she found them: a pair of images that showed her from the side, and another pair that showed her from the front.

She remembered thinking at the time that the pictures had turned out better than expected in that they didn’t make her look nearly as stressed as she had felt, but looking at them now she was appalled by how palpable it really was. She looked gaunt – lack of weight-gain was among her pregnancy’s complications – but also haunted.

For her Sherlock Holmes had died twice: the first moment she’d heard the announcement of his suicide before she’d been able to convince herself that it was a trick, and the day she’d finally come to believe that it wasn’t. The pictures had been taken after that, and her eyes were filled with the awareness of what she had lost, and the fear for the last remnant of Sherlock that she had, his living legacy. Still, there was a gleam of defiance and protectiveness in them as well, and one hand was curved around her belly.

With a burst of more of that uncomplicated contentment, something she’d seldom felt in her life, she wondered how she looked now—besides thoroughly debauched, she thought with satisfaction.

To elaborate on the thoughts she’d had the hour before, something had fallen into place: a vacancy she’d felt in the abstract for her entire life was now occupied by Sherlock. It wasn’t that she’d been in any way incomplete on her own, she’d never entertain something so absurd, but neither had she ever had someone - friend, confidante, or lover - who understood her and could relate to her the way Sherlock could. Nor had she ever been had, not really… Not in the way Sherlock had her and she had him, and she didn’t mean only in the indelicate sense. In fact it wasn’t even that it was romantic or sexual in nature that made what they had with each other so exceptional, because at first her infatuation with him hadn’t been either. But Sherlock had been such a beautiful, thrilling creature – at once both an enigma and known – that he had seduced her mind long before she’d tried to seduce his body.

There was still so much for them to accomplish, but in a way she never had before Irene now had an equal and a partner, one who was as invested in her safety and the safety of her (their) child as she was herself. That was essential, because as important to her as Sherlock and their unique understanding was, nothing could surpass the unexpected and profound bond she shared with her child.
She looked over at Sherlock, who flicked his eyebrows up in question, and then with one last glance at the photos she passed him the phone.

Although his expression barely changed Irene saw the array of emotions register on his face: alarm, tenderness, regret, and perhaps even some awe among them.

He took in a breath, paused, then said, “You look…” He broke off with a slight frown.

“Yes,” she said, confirming what he'd left unsaid.

“You didn’t like being pregnant,” he ventured, clearly out of his depth, and she found it endearing that such a brilliant man so well-versed in nuance of almost every sort would need to so simplify something as complex as emotions.

She lifted her hand and traced it down his face, resting her fingertips on his cheek, and instead of his expression stiffening as it once might have, his eyes softened.

“It isn’t about like or dislike, Sherlock. It’s not that simple.”

“Good. Simple’s boring.” A smile was back in his voice and she knew he was avoiding a deeper conversation on that topic, but she brushed her thumb over his lips as hers curved in answer.

He pushed the blankets further downward so that they were slung around her hips, then with a look of concentration he spread his hand over her abdomen, and she could see that he was picturing how it might’ve looked spanning the 7-months pregnant belly he had seen in the images. Watching him she was struck by two transposed images of past and future: Sherlock as he would’ve looked as a child engrossed in some task, as well as what their son would look like in several years time. Her throat tightened, and partly to hide the moisture that had sprung into her eyes she slid her hand behind Sherlock’s neck and pulled him down for a hard, demanding kiss.

He didn’t hesitate to reciprocate in kind. His hand went from her belly to her waist, and with his arm wrapped around her he pulled her on top of him as he moved onto his back. With the other hand he cupped the base of her head, pressing her face closer to his, then tilting his face so that they could deepen their connection.

Apparently all the close scrutiny of her body had affected him as well after all, because she could feel the evidence jutting into her upper thigh, and the sensation pushed an icy-hot thrill through her body, igniting all her nerve endings and making them sensitive and receptive again. She didn’t think it had even been an hour since they’d last been together, but she found that her appetite for him was as voracious as it had been when it was all new and illicit.

Still straddling him, she pivoted at the waist to lean over the side of the bed, and this time she was the one to sift through their discarded clothing and fish a foil wrapper from his trousers’ right pocket.

Their first two times had been animalistic and frenzied, the second even moreso than the first, as a torrent of pent-up desire and worry and emotion were unleashed after nearly two years of deprivation. This joining was still tinged with underlying desperation, but it was intense in a different way. They moved slowly and languidly with each other, in perfect synchronisation as if in time to a melody that only the two of them could hear. The sentiment that had risen to the surface towards the end of the last time coloured it, and made her feel both vulnerable and tender in a way she hadn’t felt since their last time on the ship, when they hadn’t known if they’d ever see one another again.
She laced one hand into the soft, sweat-dampened curls behind his head and held onto his shoulder with the other for better leverage as she rocked over him, whilst Sherlock clutched at Irene like she was a life-preserver. His large hands pressed into her skin at her waist, hips, upper thighs, and arms so hard that they left white imprints that darkened into a rosy red. *Like a brand,* it occurred to her in a fragment of semi-coherent thought as she rolled her weight over him and ground down against him, and she found the thought incredibly erotic rather than objectionable.

Sherlock must have seen the lust flash across her face because with a look of glinting determination that made her pulse jump he reached up to draw patterns against the apex of her centre that were familiar but no less effective for it. She rewarded him with a look of narrow-eyes approval, aroused on several levels by how quick a study he was even in this, and swivelling her hips into his touch. Then with a suddenness that almost took her by surprise the internal and external points of pleasure flowed together like swelling ink spots and merged, before saturating her entire being and then blotting out everything else from her consciousness. This release wasn’t as shattering or all-consuming as those she’d felt earlier in the night, but it carried on for a long time through a series of minor aftershocks, and she was still trembling through one when Sherlock suddenly pulled her down and held her to him with arms that were vices. They had never finished at the same time before, and sharing that experience through to the final shudder of completion intensified the sense of intimacy that had been growing between them over the course of the night.

Apart from the occasional shuddering breath or low, murmured hum they had remained silent the entire time with everything they needed to say conveyed in their sustained eye contact, and Irene didn’t think she’d ever felt so connected with another person, besides Nero. Obviously this was entirely different…

While she’d considered various possible outcomes of their situation for tactical and strategic purposes, she had never *seriously* entertained the notion that they wouldn’t succeed in removing the threat against their child. But for the first time, lying side-to-side with Sherlock and feeling dazzled with the potential of their combined abilities and strengths, she thought that it was impossible for them to fail.

At that her soft smile sharpened into one of vicious anticipation.
Revelations

Chapter Summary

Just a reminder that Andrea = Anthea. (A page from the ASiP script reveals that this is her actual name.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"What was it like for you?" Irene's voice came out of the dark a short time later, before he had even started to exhort himself to return to work again. He couldn't bring himself to regret the break; he felt invigorated and revitalised in a way that wasn't only due to the brief but deep sleep he'd had earlier.

He'd just resolved to do so last time, even managing to turn on the bedside light and begin to dress, when something on Irene's form had caught his attention. He'd spent a lifetime training himself to extrapolate from a detail the greater picture, and the striae across her lower abdomen that glinted like seams of mica in the lamplight made the conception and her pregnancy real to him in a way nothing else quite had, not even Nero himself. He had only meant to trace the network of lines that were the physical evidence of his son's growth in order to recreate and recoup a bit of what he had missed, but then she had woken up, and then… He felt a prickling flush sweep through him at the very recent memory and he cleared his throat.

Right, she'd asked him something.

"Hm?"

She moved around in his arms to look at him, and her face was outlined in faint silver from the moonlight that came through the window. It was really nothing short of inconvenient that she was so beautiful.

"Those ten months. When everyone thought you were dead…"

He pursed his lips, suddenly no longer distracted. "Not everyone. My brother knew."

She nodded, and whether she had pieced it together herself or Mycroft had mentioned something it was clear that this wasn't news to her.

"But…" he let out a short sigh, "that hardly made a difference. On the rare occasions we did interact he was Control, not a 'brother' – whatever that means. It's completely reasonable, I needed to do the work and not dwell on anything superfluous, and the faster and more efficient I was the sooner I could return to London to rebuild my life and reputation. I needed someone to help keep me on point instead of coddling me, and when necessary he fitted that role perfectly."

Too late he realised that in a few brief sentences he had shared far more than he'd intended, and with a momentary feeling of consternation he thought that a post-orgasmic state was almost like truth serum. He hadn't even been this open with John, and he had been actively trying to garner his sympathy.
Of course she'd picked up on his allusions.

"It was more difficult than you'd anticipated."

"…Yes."

"At the start you felt energised, ready to take on the unprecedented challenge of it, but over time the cost and intensity of going at it completely on your own for some indefinite time began to weigh on you in a way you'd never expected."

"Ye—" He interrupted himself mid-word and gave her a sharp look. He had become aware that she was actually describing her own experience rather than imagining the hypotheticals of his, though he didn't know if it was in reference to her exile or motherhood. Perhaps it was both.

She only nodded, though Sherlock looked at the far wall, thoughts about her pregnancy and the concept of loneliness churning in his mind. It occurred to him that it should come as no surprise that the two of them would react to both sets of circumstances in such parallel ways. Still, knowing that despite the physical and psychological distance that had been between them they had been having such similar experiences made him feel even closer to her. It helped him relate to that time differently, if only a little.

"This afternoon. You said that during that time you expected me to track you down and turn up at your door, 'high on the thrill of the chase and demanding that you tell me everything you ever learned or suspected about Moriarty'."

Irene cocked her head up at him.

"I wanted to," he said. He added in a voice so low he barely heard his own words, "I wanted you."

He felt her go still at his confession but then she relaxed, though he could hear that her breath was a bit elevated as she waited for him to go on.

He lightly closed his eyes as he sorted through his thoughts, then opened them again. "I mean—yes, that, a bit. But—"

"I know," she said, low and surprisingly earnest.

"There were times…" He stopped, blinking hard, and redirected: "Having your assistance would have been… very useful."

"The same thought crossed my mind about you," she said, and though she now sounded breezy he knew she was still serious. "So, here I am."

"Yes," he agreed, but he found that he wasn't finished with his line of thought, and his brows creased in concentration. "But it wasn't possible; the timeline was incredibly inflexible and all my resources had to be allocated to the job."

She rested a hand on his bare chest, her nails pressing bluntly into his skin.

"There's no need to explain."

"No. But I…" The simple truth was that he wanted to. He had never talked to anyone about that aspect of his time away, and though his brother had surely known that he was having a difficult time Mycroft had always preemptively dismissed it by stating that he trusted Sherlock was fine. To actually broach the matter would've been to indulge in something dangerous in Mycroft's estimate,
and at the time he had likely been right.

"When I got back I needed to leave that time in the past and move forward. I had new cases again and there were other relationships that demanded my immediate attention and time. Not just John," he said, anticipating her words. "Yes there was my inner circle of friends and acquaintances, but then there was everyone else – dozens of people whom I employ from time to time. I had to track them down and re-establish my credibility and working relationships, as well as relocate and reassess my 'rats,' people who act as markers for all sorts of things in London.

"The postcard dredged up things that I associated too much with something that was by the time I received it a closed chapter, or so I told myself." He clicked his tongue against his teeth. "The irony is that if I hadn't wanted you so much during my time away, I probably would've responded. But I did, and so to do so seemed far too dangerous."

He pressed his lips together and here was a long silence.

"I don't find it easy," he heard himself admit, and a voice in his mind snorted in derision at that admission, but he ignored it.

"What?"

He made a rotating hand gesture that he felt summed up the concept all of this.

She didn't answer, and after a few moments he asked in a low murmur that was more to himself, "Why is this different…"

"This was your idea of easy?" she asked with a heavy dose of irony.

They made eye contact and then shared a low, wry chuckle, and to his surprise she lifted her head and kissed him, her lips soft and lingering on his.

It was a different sort of kiss than they'd ever experienced before, fuelled neither by sentiment nor lust. It was a sort of conversational punctuation, and it made his heart pound with all that it implied.

When they pulled back they looked at each other and the eye contact lingered, similar to the sustained gaze they'd shared in the heat of passion, although they didn't need to be joined for him to feel the power and pull of the connection now.

They had been at this threshold just once before, right before they'd parted in Oman. They'd been provoked into raw honesty by the imminent and perhaps permanent parting just as much as they were shielded by it, because to admit deep attachment then had carried no real risk or long-term implications. This was different, and any professions made now would carry far more weight.

Despite that, he felt a compelling need to have her affirm things in some way or another. Things between them had been so ambiguous for so long, and for a while that had been part of the allure for him; it fed and sustained his intrigue in her as well as appealed to his fear of getting too close to anyone—particularly someone who might see and understand him so clearly. But for how far they'd come and all that they'd faced together and would face together in the near future, that no longer sufficed, and he realised that he needed assurances. If he could see her the way he could others, or if they hadn't had such a fraught and antagonistic past it might be different, but then again those were manifestations of who she was, and if she weren't those things this line of thought would be pointless, because then she wouldn't be The Woman.

He didn't expect or even want her to make any conventional sort of declarations, and if she did it
would probably raise a red flag, but he had to know, once and for all, without pretence or equivocality, where they stood. He needed it to feel legitimised in how much he had dropped his guard and bared the essence of himself to her in the past few hours, and in going forward he needed it to reinforce the sense of indivisible unity that that time had fostered. He had asked her the day before, but things between them had progressed so far since then, and he thought that if he asked her again she might give an answer far closer to the fullness of the truth.

He drew a quiet breath.

"Yesterday afternoon when I asked you who I am to you, you told me that you were a client…"

This time it was his turn to feel her heart pounding through her ribs, and her face froze into a blank expression with only her eyes betraying any internal commotion.

"You know why I said that…"

He continued to drill his eyes into hers, not allowing her to evade the accountability of his gaze.

"Yes. But I'm asking again – now."

She continued to study him, and then her features smoothed, telling him that she understood why he needed this and that it was something she could give him.

"Who you are to me…" she said, her eyes large and black as they stared back into his in the dimness of the light. "I used to only imagine going to any length to protect myself. Now there's our son, and there's you."

"Nothing has changed and everything has changed,"
he said quietly, repeating something she had said to him two days before. Now that he knew about Nero, he grasped her meaning far better than he had in that moment, and he felt a warmth both for the fullness of understanding and for Nero bloom his chest.

"Still my exception," she replied, her voice now low and throaty as she quoted back even farther, to what they'd said in that other rare moment of emotional vulnerability. "Just no longer my only exception," she added a moment later, inclining her head towards the cot.

He followed her gaze and saw that from his angle he could just make out a section of round pale cheek and glimpse of ashy dark hair, and his pulse-rate exploded into a sprint for an altogether different, though certainly not unrelated, reason.

"I never thought…" he heard himself begin, but he found that he didn't have the words ready to go on.

He looked down at Irene and she gave him a tight, knowing smile, and then broke eye contact to rest her head on his chest again.

"You realise that the hardest part might not be getting through this, but what comes after…"

Sherlock didn't answer and only stroked a hand over her hair, but he knew that no reply was required. He had fixated on the immediate future not only for the imminent threat of it, but because as dangerous as the situation was, it was familiar ground. Moran was a clear-cut antagonist and Sherlock was confident in how to proceed in such a situation. On the other hand, the matter of Nero was far more ambiguous in both how he felt and how he would go forward – and far more daunting.
"Particularly if Mycroft never recovers, since he's the only one who could facilitate your return to the UK," he said.

"I wasn't referring to logistics."

He knew that too, but again he said nothing because there was nothing he could say. Instead he continued to comb his fingers through her hair that was drying into waves, and tried to cling to one last moment of the sense of peace and well-being he'd felt earlier, before getting out of bed and returning to the work.

"But since you've brought it up, tell me, what is Mycroft's prognosis?" She raised her chin to look at him, her face solemn.

He felt that sense of well-being recede in an instant and regretted using Mycroft to deflect from thoughts on his future, since it was only trading one source of anxiety for another.

He shrugged with one shoulder in the hope that it would be enough to convey his uncertainty as well as dismiss the topic.

"Sherlock, I know you care," she said.

Ah, of course it wouldn't be.

He often liked how when she said his name; low and enunciated like a verbal caress, it sounded like a term of endearment. In this case it only made him feel exposed. It was funny how he could still feel that way around even her after all they'd shared both physically and emotionally over the past few hours, but Mycroft was a point of vulnerability no matter what the context. That was especially true now, with him lying so close to death - or something worse than death - in hospital.

"Oh?" he said, and then mentally flinched at how petulant he sounded.

"Yes," she said, calm and not deterred by his tone either. "Something that's fascinated me in the past week is the relationship between you and your brother and just how much you both care, though you mask it with constant competition and enmity." She gave a small, amused huff. "You must know that when it comes to you I'd find that all rather familiar… Of course I already knew that there was a lot going on there but it goes even deeper than I'd realised, and I'm aware that your concern for his well-being goes well beyond his utility regarding me."

Irene studied him, taking in all the indicators of anxiety he was displaying, and a brow rose.

"I've touched a nerve." There was only the faintest trace of contrition in her voice, and if he were anyone else he might not have even detected that. The prevalent tone was one of curiosity.

He released a heavy sigh, and squeezed his eyes closed. She had just admitted something personal when he'd put her on the spot; perhaps he could return the gesture.

There was more to it than that, though. There was an ache that he'd been ignoring ever since he'd fled his brother's private room, which felt inflamed and infected at the slightest probing. Perhaps it was time to excise the wound, before it could cause even more damage and distraction.

He opened his eyes and kept them fixed on the coved darkness of the ceiling, and then opened his mouth, not entirely sure what might come out.

"When I was a kid… the family had a dog – an Irish Setter, Redbeard. One day he got out of the house and onto the road, where a car struck him. It was my fault."
He had never spoken those words – *It was my fault* – before. Even as a child he had felt the horrible truth of it pounding in his chest, and he'd wanted to shout out his confession to his mother time and time again in the days following, but he couldn't bring himself to. What if she hadn't *realised* that it had been his fault, and once he made her aware of it she couldn't forgive him? Instead he'd turned the guilt and shame inward, and used the experience as a brutal lesson. Now, saying it aloud, he felt twinges of that same terrified guilt twenty-five years later, though this time the potential consequences were far worse. This time they concerned his brother.

"It was three days of touch-and-go, but he did die in the end. It was my first experience of loss, and it—it's inextricably linked with the sense of fault."

He had never consciously made that connection, but when he said the words into the darkness he knew that they were true—and that on some level he had known the truth of them for a very long time.

He also knew that Irene wouldn't reassure him that Mycroft would be all right, that it wouldn't be a parallel of Redbeard's protracted death – she wasn't at all the sort. But she did understand him, and that was far better consolation than any meaningless platitude of comfort.

"I see."

A knot formed in his throat and he swallowed, his expression grim. Yes, he was sure that she did.

"Do you blame me as well?" she asked, and he heard something sharp beneath her airy tone.

He jerked his head to shoot her an incredulous look.

"Don't be absurd."

"Why wouldn't you? It's just as much my fault as it is yours. *I* brought this back to London, and Mycroft was at the manor house because of me."

"Yes, but I—"

She made a marvelling, humming sound, which for some reason sounded like *checkmate*. "My, but aren't we rather arrogant."

He went rigid with indignation but before he could think of anything to say she was speaking again.

"I'm not some passive component in the complex of your guilt. Nor is Mycroft. We've *all* had to make difficult and contentious choices—none of which I regret or would change, for my part. You see how absurd it is when I assume any guilt—it's the same for you. I know when people deserve punishment *and* when they don't, even when they think they do. And Sherlock, you don't." Her eyes took on a glint of irony. "At least, not about this."

At first he felt compelled to say that it was his sentiment and need for redemption that had precipitated everything in the first place, but he found after the briefest consideration that it was just a knee-jerk reaction. He couldn't summon up any of the fire that had once fuelled him on the topic, and if he didn't need to have the last word on the matter it meant that on some level he accepted that she was right. Besides, the alternative option would have meant her death at the hands of Lashkar-e-Taiba, and that was… no option at all.

He saw what she was doing, and he felt gratitude for it. He had needed the harshness of her disapproval, as well as the underlying compassion and forbearance it was really offering, and he
felt a slight lightening of that decades-old burden like a physical weight lifting from his shoulders. Silence fell between them again, until something she'd just said clicked into place and provoked a question that had been on his mind since he'd first seen her.

"Why now?" he asked, and one slender brow rose in question at the apparent non-sequitur.

"You managed for all these months on your own – obviously something convinced you that it was no longer possible. Why did you come back to London, Irene?"

She assessed him for a long time, and then pursed her lips and looked away. "I couldn't do it alone anymore. I needed you."

At that he felt a thrill of gratification and the stirring of something even deeper at those words, but he was able to ignore it for the most part.

"So you said before. But why?"

"They found me in New Jersey. After that I knew couldn't afford to give you the luxury of distance any longer."

"What. Happened."

"The lift in my apartment building – it was sabotaged."

His eyes narrowed and adrenaline-fuelled anger burgeoned sudden and strong in him, bringing him to full alertness. With perfect recall he remembered the 'Out of order' sign on the lift doors in her lobby, and how he'd diverted towards the stairs without losing any momentum. He had thought he might be moments away from seeing The Woman again – only to be met with a vacant flat and the realisation that he might not ever see her again.

He felt his arms tighten around her. Even despite all the turmoil and upheaval precipitated by her return, he had come to understand that he wouldn't exchange this moment, this connectedness, for the false tranquillity of his prior ignorance.

"The drop probably wouldn't have been enough to kill but it would've been enough to incapacitate," he said, cold despite the warmth of their closeness.

"And then - who knows," Irene said, sounding flat.

His heart gave several accelerated thuds as he considered the array of possibilities, all distinctly unpleasant, and he knew that she could hear it loud against her ear.

Had Moran succeeded that day then Sherlock really might've never seen Irene again, and he would've never known what had happened to her. For the rest of his life she'd have remained a question mark in his mind and the very worst of what was already loathsome: an unsolved case.

Unless Moran paraded her death in front of me, Sherlock thought with another chill of fear and anger. He wasn't sure which would've been worse: never knowing and always wondering about the fate of Irene Adler, or finally having proof that The Woman was unquestionably dead after so many feints and misdirects. Holding her now, skin still flushed and hair still damp from their passion, both options were impossible to entertain.

"But you managed to avoid it, clearly."
"It was sheer luck," she admitted, and beneath the flush her complexion paled. "My next-door neighbour had just signed for a parcel and when the lift arrived the deliveryman thought that something seemed off, apparently by the way the doors opened and how the chime sounded. He reached in to select a floor to test it, and as soon as the doors closed we heard the entire carriage plummet to the ground floor. I don't need to tell you the odds of that happening without intentional sabotage, and I left an hour later." She shook her head. "But the point is—"

"Yes. He found you again."

She gave a tense nod.

"It's what caused me to believe that Moriarty wasn't dead after all, and was behind it all. I already had my suspicions, of course, given that no one besides you, Kate, and a former protégé of mine was aware I'm even alive—and I know that none of you would betray me."

He opened his mouth to argue but she forestalled him.

"Sherlock, he's the only one who knew my birth name, which is the only thing that could have given away my new location. It was a risk, but it was the only identity I had on hand with the few resources left at my disposal. Otherwise I was careful, there was nothing else that could've linked me from San Francisco to Edison."

Sherlock knew first-hand that she'd been careful, since he hadn't been able to find her himself. Still…

"Morgan would've had access to his files, he could've found that information in them."

"Why don't you tell me how you're so certain that he is dead," she countered, and to his surprise he detected an almost child-like fear of unseen monsters in her voice. She wanted to hear irrefutable proof that this one had indeed been slain.

"His pallor went completely white," he said, replaying the memory that was still etched vivid and horrifying in his mind. "And then there was the brain matter," he added with a trace of sarcasm.

Even in the near-darkness he could tell she was unconvinced.

"But besides that, Mycroft oversaw his cremation personally," he said with finality, but to his surprise her head jerked up at that.

"What?" he prompted.

She glanced back down for a moment, formulating her thoughts, then met his eyes again.

"What if your brother and Jim struck a deal, and Mycroft did for him exactly what you did for me? …Although probably for different reasons," she said drily.

Sherlock started to answer with an emphatic and derisive Why would he do that, but hesitated as his thoughts tore off in a sprint.

Is that the missing piece in all of this? he thought with what felt like growing dread. Had Mycroft brokered a deal with Jim Moriarty for some opaque, complex reason of State? His brother was a man of reason and strategy, not sentiment, and if Moriarty could offer something of indispensible value in service of Mycroft’s idea of the 'greater good', Sherlock could easily imagine Mycroft planning something like what Irene proposed.
And now Mycroft was out of the picture, perhaps permanently, which would essentially liberate Moriarty and grant him unparalleled immunity, since people considered him dead and his organisation defunct. As far as motives for murder went that one was potent, and Moriarty would have certainly had people killed for less.

Speaking of his 'death', was part of the plea deal that Sherlock would dismantle the remaining network, in an attempt to neutralise Moriarty and remove the main incentive for him to make just this play? Had the rooftop confrontation at St Barts been a double-bluff with Mycroft pulling Sherlock's strings rather than Moriarty's—with Moriarty knowing full-well that Sherlock was going to fake a suicide? With a mixture of awe and horror Sherlock had to admit that his brother would be capable of such a thing, both in terms of engineering it and having the lack of qualms to execute it.

He wanted to believe that if it were true, Mycroft would've briefed Sherlock on the situation once Moriarty's threat had become evident, but knowing his brother as he did, he felt doubt. If informing Sherlock posed any threat to an ongoing, tenuous strategy Mycroft had in place, he would withhold any and all sensitive information as he saw fit. This would hold especially true if Irene Adler were involved, given how Sherlock's poor judgment in respects to her had caused one national mishap and nearly lead to another, far more catastrophic one. Mycroft might've thought that he could handle it 'in-house,' but if he had he had been wrong for one of the first times in his life—and perhaps the last.

We've all had to make difficult and contentious choices, Irene had said, referring to Mycroft as well as the two of them. How prescient had that statement really been?

"I… I can't eliminate the possibility," he said, then pulled his arm from under her and pressed the heels of both hands hard against his eyes. "You haven't questioned him about it, have you?"

He already knew the answer.

"The possibility only just occurred," she said, sounding frustrated and strained.

"If a then b," he said through clenched teeth. "If Moriarty is alive, my brother is complicit. There would be no other way to explain his claim of witnessing Moriarty's cremation. I might have fooled him when it came to your death, but it's only because I was able to exploit his weakness towards me, and his concern about how your death would've affected me. Moriarty wouldn't have such an advantage."

"We don't know actually know that he is alive, though," Irene conceded. "Everything is circumstantial."

"No, but this entire time something has been bothering me about all of this. It's felt like a vendetta, and yet Moran doesn't have the capacity for this level of planning and organisation himself. But that raises the question – who else would care? Who else would invest this level of time and energy into stalking and threatening you and Nero? Moriarty was a foster kid, he doesn't have family, and besides Moran none of his associates are unaccounted-for; they're either dead or sitting in prison, I've double-checked. The only convergence of all points implicates Jim Moriarty, but based on Mycroft's word I've been operating under the absolute assumption that he's dead."

He rolled out of bed, threw himself to his feet, and stepped into his underwear, all the confidence that he'd felt in dealing with the situation when it had only been Moran dissipating in the face of this new and devastating possibility.

He began to pace and the kinetic flow of muscle, bone, and tendon activated the process of entering
his mind palace. He continued to move, but transitioned from the physical to the cerebral, and the sight of the room around him faded and was replaced by a mapped-out schema of all that he knew about the situation so far. His brow creased with some additional effort as he delved back several years to summon up all that he could recall about his interactions with Moriarty, and after a brief sensation of mental whirring, that information glided forward as well. Like molecules, the new fragments found gaps in the chart and fitted themselves into various spaces to complete the structures and change and evolve their original meanings. He took a mental step back and took in the completed diagram, and as he flicked his attention from one section to another to another he felt a mounting sense of panic. It was as if someone were turning the tone knob on a radio all the way up, so that it went from muffled and distant to sharp and immediate.

The logic of the motive, the elegant subtlety behind the pattern of superficially brute attacks, the fact that Moran had even managed to fool Sherlock into believing he was dead in the first place, and so many other small details that had seemed insignificant out of this context—woven together into one great picture the explanation appeared incontrovertible.

*When you've eliminated the impossible, anything that remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth.* Never had that axiom seemed more relevant that it did in this moment.

"How could I have been so stupid?" he roared, breaking from the conceptual and returning to the concrete.

Irene lifted herself up to one elbow and watched him pace, but said nothing and looked grim.

"He's trading on the fact that we don't know he's still alive or behind all of this. All this time, all the 'incompetent' near-misses with you—it was by design, a long-game meant to lure you to the country and bring us all back together again, and get Mycroft out into the vulnerable open since nothing short of family obligation could compel him to do legwork. Everything seems simplistic on the surface, but that was the point. It's deceptive, because really it's very, very complex. That deliveryman who stopped you boarding the lift? It wasn't luck at all – he was a plant. You weren't meant to be killed, you were meant to feel just threatened enough that you'd come back to London—just like I came back once it seemed as if Moran were dead…" further realisation dawning.

"Moriarty knows—" he registered that he was using present tense now "—that I've done my research on Moran, and that if I thought this was him I wouldn't need to be as nearly careful or vigilant. The added bonus is that with Moran as a figurehead Moriarty could continue to operate under the immunity of 'death.'"

He stopped and turned towards her.

"He wants to give me everything back again, and let me have some things that I never thought possible," he said, his voice going low as a chill worked its way through him. "Only to destroy it for good."

Grey-blue met deep blue as they locked gazes, and he noted that her breath was quickening as much as his was.

"And Mycroft," he resumed at full volume, tearing his eyes away from her and beginning to pace again. "So solicitous, so uncharacteristically accommodating. It wasn't concern – for me, for Nero – at least not for the most part. It was guilt." He felt rage sear up through him when he considered the grief he had felt, the dreadful fear, the guilt. Irene has been correct about that, too. This wasn't his fault at all. It was *Mycroft*'s.

"Sherlock, if Jim Moriarty's alive—"
"It's the only thing that fits," he repeated in a hiss. "This entire time, you've been right and I've been wrong. I made an assumption about Mycroft Holmes that I never ever should've done. He's one of the most dangerous men in the world, and I trusted his word – on the sole basis that he's my brother. Because I cared," he said, throwing her words back at her.

"If Moriarty is alive..." she started again, her voice steelier.

He turned his head towards her and saw that she had an eyebrow raised, and he felt somewhat chastened. No, this wasn't like the last time either of them had dealt with Moran and Moriarty's network—neither of them was going at it alone now, and that was a critical difference. The recognition that they were now an indivisible unit soothed some of his agitation, and after a pause he gave a small nod.

When she saw that she had his attention she took in a breath and her face softened. "I don't like it and neither will you, but I've an idea."

An hour ticked by, and then another, and neither Irene nor Sherlock bothered to dress beyond minimal underwear as they became consumed in planning primary strategies, which they then followed up by devising various exigencies. Outside the mullioned windows the sun tinted the Oxfordshire landscape a dusky purple, then peach, and then gold, but their only concession to the passage of time was when Irene fed Nero his first breakfast of the day. Even then she worked through it, holding the sturdy apostrophe of his body to her breast with one arm as she pointed or wielded a pen with the other.

They had come to a mutually-uneasy agreement on the essentials but were still debating the finer points of one particular component of the plan when Sherlock froze mid-argument, the hair on his arms rising and his heart launching into a hard gallop. Beyond the closed door the sound of creaking floorboards was coming from the far end of the corridor.

For a fraction of a second he thought he couldn't have heard correctly given the rigorous testing he'd done with the security system earlier, but then he saw Irene launch from the bed towards a corner of the room where Nero had gotten into their discarded clothing and was pushing one chubby foot into his mother's shoe with both hands. From the corner of his eye he saw her hastily pull on her dressing gown and then stand between the child and the door, and at that point all thoughts of their planning were aborted as the entirety of his focus was pulled towards the sounds.

"Impossible, I checked everything myself——" He cut himself off as he thought of the gun, but in the heat of everything he had left it in the other room where it was useless to them now.

He cast his eyes around the room in quick darting movements and he saw Irene doing the same, with wide eyes set in a drained complexion that he knew mirrored his. His elevated state did sharpen his mind as it always did, and his eyes settled on a weighted doorstop in the shape of an owl, which could act as a suitable blunt-force instrument. For once he felt grateful for his mother's predilection for the folksy and frivolous, and he hoisted it up just as the doorknob began to turn.

He lowered it but didn't put it down when Andrea, his brother's PA, sauntered in. She was engrossed in something on her handheld device, and it was only when she was all the way inside of the bedroom that she looked up at them, as if she were only casually noticing them there.

"Mr Holmes, Ms Adler," she said, cool and apparently unaffected by the way she'd found them. He supposed that given she knew about Nero and the circumstances of his conception she wouldn't be fazed.
"How did you get in here?" Sherlock barked. "I armed the system."

"I built the system," she said, blasé.

His fear response had calmed slightly when he'd seen who it was, and slowed further at that explanation, but he was still on high alert.

He glanced behind him at Irene, but before he could answer his ears detected other sounds coming from the living room, and he dropped the doorstop and charged out of the room, vaguely noting that Irene had scooped Nero into her arms and was following at his heels. Nero gave a wail of frustration as Irene's shoe slid off his foot and clunked to the floor, and he continued to fuss and complain as Sherlock and Irene strode down the corridor.

In the front they found another agent, flanked by a pair of uniformed officers, and Sherlock saw that it was the man who had attempted to speak to him at the hospital. He looked up at the sound of Sherlock entering, but now instead of entreating he looked exhausted and grim, but determined.

"Mr Holmes. I take it you have a moment now?"

"Thomson," Andrea said by way of introduction, but Sherlock ignored it.

"What's going on?" he demanded, his glare resting first on one and then the other.

"We've come to arrest Ms Adler," Thomson replied, and the two men locked eyes in intense challenge.

"And you'll not be interfering unless you want to be taken into custody as well," he added, reading the expression and body language Sherlock was broadcasting.

Sherlock's jaw worked hard at that but he tamped down his natural defiance because obviously that wasn't a choice, they couldn't both be incarcerated. That would be disastrous, perhaps even akin to a death sentence in this situation.

"On what charge? What evidence?" Irene asked, looking pale but as icily dignified as ever.

"Evidence that implicates you in a long-term conspiracy to assassinate Mycroft Holmes."

The statement landed with a thud, leaving an echoing hush in its wake.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Sherlock exploded, breaking the silence.

The other man gave him a wary but somewhat disdainful look.

"Whatever you might think is going on here," he said, making a point to take in their state of dishabille, "she's been using you, Mr Holmes. I'm sorry - it's your brother she wanted. Although given his condition, you might be grateful for that."

Sherlock's face began to contort, not at the thought that Irene had been using him to reach Mycroft, but at Thomson's patronising words, and his not-so-thinly-veiled suggestion that Sherlock had allowed lust and infatuation to blind him to Irene's true agenda once again.

Granted, not so very long ago ago hearing someone articulate that private fear might've provoked a fight-or-flight reaction in Sherlock, but the past day had marked a critical and perdurable turning point. Neither of the charges were true, and he knew that without even feel the flicker of doubt.

But he wasn't able to dwell on the remarkable progress they had made, not now that they were
facing a far more explicit threat to their partnership.

Sherlock shot one last look of disgust at Thomson then turned towards Mycroft's PA, who was again staring intently at something on her phone.

"Andrea," he said in his most imperious, commanding voice—his best impression of Mycroft, "put a stop to this."

"My responsibility is to your brother, Mr Holmes," she said, before looking up for a moment. "It's not to you, and it's certainly not to Irene Adler."

He took several steps towards her. "To whom you answer is irrelevant here. You know who I am, you know I'm never wrong."

"That's almost right," she said, sounding detached. She had clearly recovered from her initial shock over Mycroft's assault, and she was once again the unfazed, aloof woman he had known for several years. "I've only known you to be wrong once, and that was in your judgment about Ms Adler in the first place. I seem to recall that months of work that Mr Holmes and I had put into a project meant to save lives was sabotaged in—was it 8 seconds, I believe your brother said?" She turned to Thomson. "Caution her, please."

"Irene Adler, or whatever the hell your name really is, I am placing you under arrest for conspiracy to commit murder, as well as attempted murder. Should Mr Holmes succumb to his injuries the charges will be amended to reflect that. You do not have to say anything, but it may harm your defence if you do not mention when questioned something which you later rely on in court. Anything you do say may be given in evidence."

Thomson turned to the pair of officers uniformed in Thames Valley Police black and gave a casual flick of his hand towards Nero. "Take the infant, he goes to Child Services."

"Sherlock," Irene said, wrapping her arms more securely around Nero's waist and neck and only now letting alarm show clearly on her face, which had suddenly drained of all colour. Nero's small noises of discontent escalated as he sensed his mother's tension, and his uneasy cries began to fill the room, tears starting to spill down the rosy apples of his cheeks.

The male officer made a move to follow Thomson's order and Sherlock stepped in between them, and a mottled red haze began to ring his vision as the sound of blood thundered in his ears.

"That child does not leave the house."

Thomson huffed out a short, impatient sigh. "I'm afraid you'll find that you don't have any legal authority in this mat—"

"The hell I don't," Sherlock interrupted at a roar. "That's my son."

There was another ringing silence throughout the room, but then Thomson levelled at Sherlock a look of even more pronounced condescension and derision. You poor, stupid bastard, it said.

The look only ratcheted up Sherlock's anger, and in a voice low and threatening he said, "You—will not—be taking him anywhere."

"I…think we're going to need more than just your say-so—"

"Oh for God's sake, use your eyes! Look at him, it's obvious, isn't it?"
"It's true," Irene said, then turned her head so that her eyes blazed into Sherlock's.

She took in a breath, looked down at Nero, and then faced Thomson. "And if you let him stay, I'll come with you."

"Irene, no," Sherlock growled, but she acted as if she hadn't heard him.

"Oh you're coming with us either way, Ms Adler," Thomson shot back, but Irene continued to stare him down, and he sent a glance of uncertainty towards Andrea.

The other woman gave a nonchalant nod of confirmation and assent, and like that, Nero could stay. Thomson looked frustrated, but Andrea had seniority and the final say in the matter.

Sherlock felt his body relax slightly at that concession, though the adrenaline coursing through him at the concept of Irene being (willingly) taken away and the two of them being separated didn't abate. He could still feel the pulse of every heartbeat in his throat and the way every muscle in his body was tensed to attack.

To bleed some of it, he wheeled around on Thomson.

"I expect you think there'll be some sort of payoff for you in all of this," Sherlock sneered, his eyes sparking with fury. "But I'd hold off on the festivities if I were you. You're a pawn."

"I'm doing my job," the other man said wearily, looking like he'd now prefer to have all of this over-with.

Sherlock gave a bark. "Is that so. Well that's humiliating for you—Mycroft would see through all of this in an instant."

"According to this evidence, it's because of her that he isn't."

"Evidence that's been fabricated."

"Because the concept that your lover could've had anything to do with the shooting of your brother is impossible, is it? But people aren't always what they seem, Mr Holmes. They lie. And from what I've heard I'd have thought you already learned that particular lesson."

This time Sherlock was able to ignore the dig, too intent on what he was saying.

"You're playing right into the plans of whoever's really behind all of this," he shot back, his voice sounding hoarse with barely-suppressed frustration and fury.

"No Mr Holmes, I'm arresting the person behind all of this. And once your, er, blood cools a little then maybe you'll finally see sense too.

"We're done here."

The man made another gesture but before they could hustle Irene out of the room Sherlock crossed the space in two long bounds and took her face in his hands. Heedless of the people grouped around them he kissed her without finesse, but deeply and with some desperation, expressing in action everything he felt about the situation, and about her.

"All right," Thomson said in a blend of impatience and distaste as they broke apart, breathless and studying each other's faces for a moment that seemed to go on for a long time.

Then the same uniform who has stepped forward made a soft scoffing noise next to Sherlock, and
with effort he didn't act upon the desire to round on him and knock the other man out. Instead he focussed on the flushed, tear-stained face of his son, and he and Irene awkwardly transferred Nero into his arms.

In the next instant Irene was wrenched away from him and frogmarched towards the door, looking grim and blanched of all colour, but resolute. She broke her eye contact with Sherlock to look at Nero and her eyes took on a glossy sheen. Then she sent one last, penetrating look to Sherlock before she was turned away and hustled out of the door by the officers.

*Protect him*, the look said. *At all costs.*

Sherlock stared at the now-empty doorway, still feeling the pressure of their last kiss on his lips. His mind, usually so lithe, was still trying to process what had just transpired—that in the space of five minutes he had gone from beginning to engineer a counterattack with Irene in bed to being separated from her, and potentially for good this time. He felt the cold horror of that very real possibility begin to steal through him, although beneath the ice his anger at the situation churned and boiled.

Going into custody put Irene in severe peril, especially if the news that she was in detention somehow made it back to Moran or Moriarty. She wouldn't have the immunity of Mycroft's protection nor the benefit of the partnership she'd formed with Sherlock; she would be confined without allies, and therefore incredibly vulnerable.

Of course, the thought of being solely responsible for an 11-month-old infant was having a marked affect on his blood pressure as well.

Andrea's words broke into his thoughts from a far-off place, and sounded muffled through the roar of blood in his head.

"Oh and Mr Holmes? You're under house arrest until Ms Adler is remanded. I'm reinstating the security system and we have people posted out front – there won't be any 'heroic' rescue this time."

"Not a bad Mycroft," Sherlock said, whirling around on her with his teeth bared. "But if he never succeeded in 'grounding' me it's laughable that his PA thinks she could manage." He said 'PA' with all the scorn he could muster, but Andrea remained unfazed.

Instead she raised an eyebrow and gave him a blithe look that said *We'll see, shall we?* and then she fixed her attention on the screen in her hand, and proceeded out without lifting her head again. Thomson followed her looking grimly satisfied, though he didn't meet Sherlock's eyes.

When the living room was empty of everyone save Sherlock and Nero, he gazed down upon his son, feeling momentarily paralysed in the wake of Irene's abrupt disappearance and the assumption of primary guardianship of this infant.

At first Nero had reacted to his mother's forcible removal with a look of blank confusion, but the confusion was now shifting into something else. Then Nero took in one deep, shaky breath, and erupted into full-bore hysterics, the volume of it so shocking to Sherlock that he momentarily lost his grip. Nero began to choke and cough from the force of his own wails and his small body went rigid as he flailed all of his limbs, striking Sherlock's face, chest, and thighs with surprising strength.

It was contributing to the din in Sherlock's head, but it also diverted him from any unproductive anxiety. He had an immediate responsibility, and an immediate set of objectives to accomplish in order to meet it.
He wracked his brain to recall what he had once learned for a case about comforting children, when he had infiltrated a family by posing as a university student reading child development, who worked part-time as a childminder. But he had apparently figured he wouldn't need it again and deleted it, because nothing substantive would come to mind. All he had at his disposal was the small bit of reading he'd managed the day before and the example Irene had set for him in the brief amount of time the three of them had been together. In other words, he would have to wing it.

Sherlock attempted to gather the distressed child closer to him but Nero resisted, bracing against Sherlock's chest, arching his back, and lashing his head back and forth.

"No. No! Mama, Mama," he cried in his small, unfamiliar voice, before unleashing a shriek that jumped to a pitch that seemed to go beyond the range of human hearing.

But instead of the exasperation, contempt, and need to make a swift escape that Sherlock always felt in the presence of a screaming infant something in him felt a deep and compelling need to console the child. Even as Nero continued to wail and contort his body in Sherlock's arms so that he had to grapple with him to keep him from crashing to the floor, Sherlock could feel a tendril like a fresh green shoot curling out towards the baby from the core of his being. It was the tender beginnings of a bond that once forged he knew would never break, and instead of fighting it – which he sensed would be futile anyway – he gave in.

He felt something great and eternal intertwine through the two of them like the vines of the Morning Glories in the dooryard outside, and begin to blossom, and then the impossible happened. He was someone's father, and in every meaning of the word.

For a moment he only felt a numb, stunned awe as his mind attempted and failed to comprehend the immense magnitude of what had just happened. Then he drew in a wracking, shuddering breath and allowed himself to become lost in feelings of overwhelmed panic.

This went on for four full seconds before he reined himself in and turned his focus away from himself onto his child, in a shift that was he sensed was the new precedent.

Nero was still in full meltdown mode, and Sherlock now felt a striking and almost possessive need to be the one who calmed him.

"Yes, I know you miss her already," he rumbled low against the baby's crown of mussed hair, and he felt a weight drop like a stone into his stomach as he realised that he was speaking for the both of them.

Sherlock had been fearful for Irene's life in the past, but the fear had never been this visceral, this gut-stabbing, because despite all that they'd shared in that ship's berth on the Arabian Sea he'd never been this invested in the concept of some sort of shared future, especially now that they had Nero. But now one potential scenario after another presented itself to him, each more ghastly than the last, and it was only when Nero gave let out a different sort of screech that Sherlock realised he was clutching on to him too tightly.

"All right," he said, trying to calm himself as well through the pacifying mechanism of thought. "All right…"

He needed to concentrate now, to think. It was harder to withdraw and find a point of entry into his mind palace with Nero still writhing and inconsolable and the agitation of Irene's situation heavy in his mind, but he had honed the ability through years, and had developed strategies for contentious situations. …Although he wasn't certain if he'd ever been in a situation as emotionally contentious as this.
As he paced, holding Nero firmly to him and making the occasional swinging, dipping motion, he spoke aloud, and he kept his voice measured and low so that it rumbled through his chest and into his son. Not only did it have a soothing, recalibrating effect on him, but eventually the lack of din in the room penetrated his attention and he saw that it had soothed the baby as well. Nero’s sobs had subsided into intermittent, disconsolate-sounding cries, then occasional hiccups, and then they stopped entirely.

Sherlock looked down at the tear-stained face of his son, and Nero stared back up at him, looking wide-eyed and quizzical as if trying to make sense of what Sherlock had been saying.

Sherlock was suddenly struck with the thought that this reminded him a bit of the old days, before John, when he had used Billy the skull to bounce around ideas and talk through theories. He meant the comparison favourably, but John had still been a marked improvement—most of the time.

He paused mid-step, and his heart began to pound with renewed force.

*John Watson.* He needed John Watson.

He looked down at Nero again, who was still staring up at him, his mouth half-open.

"Nero, I believe it's time for us to call back your Uncle John." Speaking the words aloud sent jolts of panic through him but he swallowed and forcibly tamped down the feeling. "It'll probably seem like he's about to have a coronary at first sight of you, but don't worry—he's proven to be made of sterner stuff than he looks."

Nero twisted his face, his brow denting so that he looked both sceptical and concerned, and for the first time since Irene's arrest Sherlock felt a smile, or at least the ghost of one, touch his face.

"My thoughts precisely."

---

**Chapter End Notes**

Comments and feedback are greatly appreciated, many thanks!
Into the Breach

The shadows in front of the Holmes cottage were beginning to stretch and deepen into velvety shades of indigo when Sherlock took up his post at the top of the drive.

Based on his calculations, which took into consideration the time it would take to pass through customs given Gatwick Airport’s present schedule of incoming flights, rent a car, and travel to Little Faringdon with current traffic conditions, John should be arriving at any minute. The thought that the confrontation he had been delaying was possibly minutes away was more than daunting, but Sherlock stiffened his posture and remained stoic, refusing to let himself lose composure over imagined (albeit probable) hypotheticals.

He had spent the morning and afternoon mentally rehearsing how to tell John about Nero – and consequently about Irene Adler – but had devised and dismissed one idea after another. Some had struck him as too theatrical, others too defensive, and still others too patronising. He wasn’t always conscious of when he was using brusque or disparaging attitude, but other time he wielded it intentionally for all sorts of purposes, such as to provoke and get rises which could be telling in the context of work, or get his way when he knew that the other person didn’t have the desire or energy to deal with him. But now it was essential that he be mindful and deliberate in not presenting any traces of arrogance or dismissiveness. He would have to approach John with unprecedented humility so as to garner as much sympathy and understanding from him, as opposed to animosity when he discovered that Sherlock had once again deceived him on a massive scale.

...Or at least, he needed to try for humility.

Ultimately Sherlock had resolved to let John see Nero for himself and after the requisite shock and yelling, piece together things about Irene on his own. Despite their experiences at Dewer’s Hollow Sherlock knew first-hand that there was nothing like seeing the impossible with one’s own eyes to transform it into reality.

He felt his face blanche as he considered that Irene had already conceived Nero by that point. That case seemed like ages ago – and in fact it was before the Great Hiatus that had left such a mark on him – yet his life had already been set upon the irrevocable path that had lead him, them, to this point.

And now at this point there was so much more to tell John about than Nero and Irene.

Moriarty - alive. His brother, complicit.

After Nero, where ought he to even begin? He was having difficulty seeing past John’s introduction to the infant as it was, with the emotional aspect making things so difficult to predict. His own emotions clouded matters to be sure, but it was John’s that really made the next part so uncertain. After the revelation his friend could either set aside any shock and anger to focus on the work as Sherlock had done …eventually… or he could react as Sherlock had done at first and lose all control. There was no time to accommodate a reaction like that now, but Sherlock knew that in that respect John was the better man.

But of course that was the trouble with emotions. By definition they were irrational and no consistent laws governed them, so really he didn’t know what to expect, and they hadn’t experienced anything quite like this that he could use as a template.

He felt the threat of the panic that had by turns surged and settled through him all afternoon and he
squeezed his hands together where they were clasped behind his back until the pain clarified his mind.

He had briefed John on certain aspects of the situation when he’d rung his mobile in the morning. At first Sherlock had been brief and terse, informing him that he must come home right away and that Sherlock would tell him everything when they saw one another in person, but John had refused to cooperate until Sherlock explained things. Of course it had been a bluff – for decorum or his own stubborn pride or Mary’s sake – but Sherlock had tamped down his impatience, knowing that he would need all of John’s good graces later, and had humoured the request—at least in part. John was now aware that Moran was confirmed alive, and that Mycroft had suffered a gunshot wound to the head and was in hospital on life-support.

Sherlock felt a flicker of grim satisfaction when he recalled how mortified John had been upon learning of Mycroft’s attempted assassination, since John probably thought he should’ve respected Sherlock’s wishes to tell him the news in person after all. It made no difference to Sherlock, but he did wonder if he could commute any of John’s guilt into greater tractability when he learned about Nero and Irene.

Off to his right the guards watched him from inside their vehicle; the only times he had interacted with them was when he’d marched up to the car and told them to procure him infant formula and bottles – the nappies they’d bought the evening before at Asda along with other assorted items – and then when they had passed the items to him from the courier, inspecting each one.

In Sherlock’s opinion he had been competent in the various demands of infant care, relying on quick Google searches to supplement whatever he couldn’t immediately piece together himself, or confirm what to do when he was in any doubt. The tasks were menial enough that they didn’t pull him from the train of his thoughts, and he also thought that Nero was old enough to explore on his own with only minimal supervision, once Sherlock removed any items that might posed a threat, and closed the doors to the kitchen and the basement.

Besides Nero’s frustration with both closed doors, which mostly just pleased and amused Sherlock, the only point of contention had been when it occurred to Sherlock that infants required naps. Despite exhibiting all the signs of exhaustion Nero had fought against sleep with a stubborn tenacity that reaffirmed whose child he was. For as far back as Sherlock could remember he had never been able to fall asleep easily, his mind racing too quickly with thoughts, questions, and hypothetical scenarios to ease into slumber. Even in adulthood he only managed it if excessive exhaustion or excessive boredom compelled him, and it was fascinating to see that trait replicated in this unknown child.

_The wheel turns, nothing changes._ Like the logic of a Boolean expression, how simultaneously true and untrue that was now...

Sherlock suspected that the struggle to get Nero to sleep would become monotonous at best and infuriatingly tedious at worst when experienced on a regular basis – as it surely had been for Sherlock’s parents – but in that moment he hadn’t felt it to be either.

When Nero had finally succumbed it was into a deep, heavy sleep, his wispy forelocks moist with perspiration and his breathe gusting out through a tiny, parted mouth, and it was with mixed feelings of triumph, pride, and fear that Sherlock looked down on his son. He was such an expression of both of his parents and yet so distinct. Sherlock had stood like that for a long time. He had only torn himself away when he’d glanced at his watch and had realised that John was due shortly. Then he had taken time to scrupulously attend to his toilette, combing and styling his hair and ensuring his suit and shirt appeared pristine. The polished, almost severe aesthetic and the
persona that it conveyed had always served as battle armour for him, and today would be no different.

Within minutes of Sherlock taking up his post a rental car pulled up to the front of the drive, and John Watson jumped out. Sherlock felt a paradoxical blend of intense relief and deep apprehension at the sight of his closest friend, stout and precise as he cut a line towards Sherlock, and he tightened his interlocked hands into even more of a death-grip to brace himself for the impending storm.

“You all right?” John called as he approached.

Sherlock gave a terse nod, his heart-rate picking up pace beneath the crisp cotton of his shirt.

“They’re keeping you secure, aren’t they?” he said with a wry jerk of his head towards the guards.

“Yes,” Sherlock said, not clarifying the way in which they were meant to be ‘securing’ him. He forced himself to ask, “Is Mary all right? Did she return to London with you?”

“She was more concerned for you than anything else, given everything that’s going on. She did want to come back, but after what you said I convinced her we shouldn’t let the entire holiday go to waste. But yeah, she understood…” He shook his head with something akin to awe. “I think I’ve somehow managed to find the one woman in the world who gets all of this.”

At that Sherlock thought of Irene. What was she doing, right now? Where was she? Had anything happened yet? Because something was bound to happen. He expelled air hard through his nose; he detested this passive position, waiting.

“Sherlock…” John’s voice broke through. “I just wanted to say again that I’m sorry about what’s happened with Mycroft. I know your relationship is complicated, but he’s still your brother. Everything with Harry… Look, I just know how hard it can be.”

Sherlock wanted to spit out with his most venomous sarcasm, Yes, well, karma’s a bitch, but he opted for another curt nod.

John watched him for several long seconds then averted his eyes and took in the homely red cottage, and Sherlock was grateful for the brief reprieve, even if there would be a far greater reckoning in moments.

“What is this place?”

“Just a safehouse I have.”

“It’s yours?”

“Not mine personally. I know the owners - they allow access from time to time.”

“Track down their gnome collection for them?” John asked, casting a look around the dooryard.

Sherlock ignored the remark. “Look, John. Thank you for coming back.”

“I never wanted to leave in the first place, remember?” he said, setting narrowed eyes on Sherlock.

“If it’s any consolation, it’s more dangerous than ever.”

“That does help a bit, yeah.” One corner of John’s mouth twitched. “So…”
He began to make his way towards the front door but Sherlock stepped in front of him, blocking his way.

"First…" he began, tugging at his jacket to smooth non-existent creases. On the fabric of his upper right arm he spotted a fading ring of moisture from where Nero had planted his open mouth earlier, which he’d missed when getting ready several minutes before. Not for the first time he was grateful that John’s didn’t share his perceptiveness, although it wouldn’t matter for much longer. He swallowed, and once again tamped down rising panic.

John was watching him again, bemused.

"Sherl—"

"There’s something… I have news," Sherlock said, speaking over him.

"You don’t have Jim Moriarty in there, do you? I mean if Moran is alive…"

John gave a chuckle that died in his throat when he saw Sherlock’s expression.

"Just a joke… sorry, not very funny."

"No. No." Sherlock gave a light shake of his head. “But there is something inside that is… going to come as a shock, I think. I’ve been considering how to tell you, but I think just showing you will be best.”

John stared at him for another moment and then let out a sardonic grunt.

“And I think that you should give me more credit after some of the times we’ve had together. Whatever it is, I’m pretty sure I can handle it. You wouldn’t have called me back if you didn’t think I could, yeah?"

Sherlock certainly did have his reasons for telling John to return, but they had far more to do with Sherlock’s own agenda than faith that John could handle this with any particular ability. Sherlock was fairly sure that John was imagining a dead body, or a stockpile of weapons and incendiaries, or perhaps even a bound-and-gagged Moran, and if any those were the case then yes, John would cope with flying colours.

But Nero was something that John would never, could never, have imagined, and Sherlock was certain that the 11-month old baby John would find instead would be more incomprehensible and horrifying for John than all those other things put together.

Into the breach, he thought, and he gave John a nod then turned his body to let him pass. Without another word John moved by him in his bullish, determined stride and headed into the house. With a small, fortifying intake of breath Sherlock followed.

They passed through the central hall into the living room, and John scanned his eyes over every surface and corner and craned his neck to peer into the various adjacent rooms. When they came to a stop he turned to Sherlock with a probing, accusatory stare, but instead of speaking Sherlock lifted two glasses of Siger Holmes’s finest whiskey from a nearby console table and pushed one into John’s hands.

“And what’s this for, consolation or courage?” John asked, staring at it blankly. “Or…a toast?”

Sherlock bent his lips into an ironic smile, though he felt disjointed and lightheaded from the currents of adrenaline coursing through him.
“Let’s call it all of the above.”

He dashed the drink back and felt it blaze through him, enough to sear away the sharpest edge of his apprehension, though not enough to intoxicate.

John stared at him in astonishment, and Sherlock saw that he was beginning to truly realise that there was more awry than Mycroft’s critical injury. At that he decided to follow Sherlock’s lead, and he took a hesitant sip. He gave the glass a frown of approval, then fixed Sherlock with a gimlet eye.

“All right, what’s going on? Because you’re clearly out of sorts, but I’m not exactly seeing anything earth-shattering here.”

Sherlock gave a soft huff under his breath and looked into his glass, avoiding eye contact.

The warmth of the liquor bolstered him just enough so that he could manage, “The sofa.”

John wheeled around to look, but as the cot was below even John’s line of sight, he missed it. Or perhaps he had registered it just enough to dismiss it as irrelevant.

He pivoted back towards Sherlock, growing impatient. “What am I meant to be seeing?”

The corners of Sherlock’s mouth turned inward and he let out a measured burst of air through nose. “Look again.”

John shot Sherlock a glare but dutifully turned towards the sofa again, his grey-blond head turning slowly as he scanned his eyes from right to left.

His double-take when he saw the cot and the sleeping child in it was almost cartoonish, and murmuring “what…” he moved towards the cot as if wading through the landscape of a dream.

“Sherlock…” John started when he was standing over it. “What the hell are you playing at?”

Sherlock found that even though he’d thought that it might slightly lessen the shock if John put things together himself, when it came down to it he couldn’t say the words either.

“You know what I do,” he said, turning the responsibility of it onto John. “Go on then…”

John turned to Sherlock with a look that said he was in no mood for such evasiveness.

“What’s baby is this?” he demanded.

“He’s mother’s been arrested and so through no intention of mine I find myself in the position of carer,” he said, and he realised he was adapting The Woman’s tendency to appear to answer yet give away anything at all. Still, he couldn’t equivocate or misdirect for long, and he knew the moment that all cards were put on the table was moments away. Then, everything would change.

“A client? What are you doing taking on cases right now, when bloody Sebastian Moran is still running about?”

“Not precisely…”

John’s brow creased in confused irritation, and his eyes darted back to the cot. For his part Sherlock said no more; he only waited for the inevitability of John’s realisation and tried to savour the final seconds of the life he’d known before.
Ultimately, it was neither Sherlock nor John who forced the issue to a head. It was Nero.

At the sound of raised voices the infant stirred from his sleep, his inky, lush fringe of lashes fluttering against his cheeks for several seconds before opening to reveal his pale grey-green eyes, which fastened directly onto John’s.

After the space of a single yet eternal second John gasped low and sharp, then his entire posture went rigid and he staggered backwards as the breath caught in his lungs.

There came another long moment of silence, the breathless pause before the tumultuous dénouement of a final movement, and Sherlock was hyper-aware of every heartbeat and every breath in his body.

_Five, four, three, two, one…_ he counted down in his head to channel his focus.

“Why…” John started, but his voice was no more than a harsh rasp, and he cleared his throat. “Sherlock, why does this kid look exactly like you?”

“Don’t be absurd,” Sherlock replied with some disdain. There was a strong resemblance, yes, but Nero wasn’t a clone, for God’s sake.

Misinterpreting what Sherlock meant (which wasn’t strictly by accident), John seemed to shake himself and hear the ludicrousness of his words. He gave a sheepish laugh, although the fine lines of unease didn’t leave the corners of his eyes and his shoulders remained tense.

“Yeah… yes, too right.” His eyes darted down to Nero again as if trying to find physical evidence to ease his mind, and Sherlock thought he detected John piecing together part of a Punnett’s Square in his head. “But… well it is a bit uncanny though, you’ve got to admit.”

Sherlock didn’t say anything, only pressing his lips into a firmer line.

“If it were anyone else,” John continued with a weak, faltering grin, “I might ask you about your alibi for twenty months or so ago.”

He looked at Sherlock expectantly, clearly waiting for him to reassure him with a contemptful word or a dismissive snort, but Sherlock remained tight-lipped and unresponsive. The time had come.

He returned John’s look with a solemn and unflinching one of his own, trying to express all that he couldn’t say in words to his closest friend, though it would take reliance on all the years they’d spent together honing their silent communication.

At first John only stared at him with incomprehension, as if unable or refusing to accept what Sherlock was conveying, but after several moments his expression began to change, and Sherlock noted the precise moment when horror overtook bemusement.

“Sherlock… This child’s not—he isn’t…?” John faltered, momentarily losing the power of speech.

“Isn’t…” Sherlock prompted, and through the roaring sound in his ears he discerned that so far he was managing to sound collected.

“Tell me that what I’m thinking can’t possibly…”

Sherlock lifted his chin and squared his shoulders, and fought the impulse to pull his jacket straight again.
“No,” John said, wagging his head. “No, in order to get *that* you need to…”

“What?” Sherlock asked sharply, piercing John with a look that dared him to finish that sentence.

“To…” he trailed off, and then his look of horror intensified.

“Mother…” he repeated, as if he were just now processing the word, and he turned a blazing look onto Nero, who stared back, locking the two in mutual scrutiny.

Sherlock drew in a breath to speak, but with his back still turned to him John shot up a single silencing finger, his arm rigid and slightly shaking, and every muscle in his body beginning to radiate the highest tension. Sherlock saw something click irrevocably into place in John’s mind—it was the Punnet Square, completed.

Sherlock’s mind raced, but before he could make a decision on what to do or say next John whirled around, his face devoid of all colour and his mouth working but sound taking a while to emerge.

“Now John, before I go any further, I—” Sherlock started with no clear idea how to continue, but John cut him off.

“Who is his *mother*, Sherlock?”

John began to advance on Sherlock, a ruddy flush darkening his complexion, and it struck Sherlock that John *was* experiencing the same fight or flight response that he himself had when first seeing Nero. The difference was that John was opting for the other choice.

Sherlock took a step back that was intended to be neat but didn’t quite succeed.

“You can’t hit me,” he said coldly, hoping the tone would return John to his senses. “Not in front of my son.”

“Your…” It was hearing Sherlock speak that word that froze John in his tracks, and he closed his eyes, swaying slightly on the spot and shaking his head as if stunned by a blow himself. But when he reopened them there was dark determination on his face, and he continued to move forward.

“Mmm, I can – he’s too young to understand what’s going on.”

“You know, people don’t give infants enough credit for their cognitive abilities. Besides he’s mine, so…”

John came to another lurching halt, his eyes bulging, and the two men stared at each other, one exhibiting all the signs of stress and agitation that the other was still managing to conceal – barely beneath a veneer of composure.

“You absolute bastard!” John suddenly exploded, arms striking out like pistons and hands grasping Sherlock by the collar and jerking his head forward. Sherlock clenched his eyes against the whiplash and then braced himself for the blow, but when it didn’t come he tentatively opened them and saw that shocked anger was no longer the only expression on John’s face. He thought he saw deep fear and apprehension as well.

It couldn’t be that easy, could it? This wasn’t exactly taking the last of the toilet paper for makeshift filters or replacing the biscuits in the tin with hair samples from corpses and returning it to the kitchen cupboard without comment. Even he could grasp that.

“Does that mean that I’m forgiven?” he asked. “That’s what that sort of resigned outburst usually
means, isn’t it?”

John gaped at him as if that were even madder than the revelation of Nero, then exploded, “No it absolutely, bloody well does not! How—??”

He took a deep breath and released Sherlock with a shove, then repeated in a slightly less strangled, lower register, “How.”

“Oh…” Sherlock hesitated, fixing his collar as he tried to determine exactly what John was asking, or how personal he was getting.

“I’m not an idiot, you know.”

Sherlock eyed him in a mixture of wariness and bemusement. “And by that you mean…”

“I know exactly whose child this is,” John answered, his voice full of contempt. “And not just because he looks just like her too, since his parents are a pair of bloody narcissists. Who else would it be? It’s not like the fact that she was supposed to be dead has ever stopped the likes of you before!”

His voice had started to climb into hysteria again, but he dropped it to add, “Like I said, I’m not an idiot. Same can’t be said of you, though.”

Sherlock darted the tip of his tongue to the centre of his upper lip, ignoring the sting of John’s words. “So you realise…Irene Adler is—”

“Shut up,” John interrupted, shaking his head to and fro.

“Well you were asking ‘how’ and—”

John cut him off with an incredulous bark of laughter.

“John, please, I’ll explain everything, but there is a reason I’ve called you back. As I said it’s still dangerous, moreso now than ever, but—and I need your help.”

“No.”

“…Excuse me?”

“I said no,” John repeated, his features setting into stubborn lines. “Why should I? Who am I to you - just your blogger it seems, and only when convenient. Because yet again you couldn’t find it in yourself to trust me with the truth, and once again the deception goes back years. You can apparently conceive a—” he paused to let out another sharp, disbelieving laugh “—with the world’s most manipulative dominatrix – who was ready to throw you to the dogs might I add – and I assume go to loads of trouble getting her a new identity, but God forbid you tell your best friend a damned thing! This is… this is…” But apparently John couldn’t find words sufficient to express his outrage.

“It wasn’t for me to—”

“Shut up, Sherlock,” John repeated in a low growl. “Because I also know why you didn’t tell me, and it’s nothing to do with anyone’s life being put in danger. You can try to insult my discretion all you want – I know that it’s deflection.”

Sherlock looked at his friend, momentarily devoid of a quick comeback, and he recalled what his
first reaction had been when he thought about telling John about Nero and consequently about The Woman. Dread began to pool in his abdomen as he sensed that John was about to hit the nail on the head.

John shook his head, his lips pulling into an aggressive, teeth-baring smile. “Well first there’s your brand to consider, and since I’m the one who sells that brand I can’t be letting on that you actually have a heart or any type of ‘ordinary human weakness,’ can I? God forbid we compromise this image of you as some purely rational, cerebral machine. Oh and then there’s the fact that I’m not in your damaged genius club, ‘authorised entrance only.’ I’m not sure it’s all that good though, to have someone else validate everything that you do. And vice versa.”

“You’re absolutely right John,” Sherlock put in quickly, “and that’s why I need—”

John cut him off with a loud snort. “You’d have gone the rest of our lives without telling me about any of this, but now that she’s been arrested and your brother’s in a coma, you ‘need’ me.”

“I—”

“I’M NOT FINISHED,” John suddenly roared, and Sherlock snapped his mouth closed. “A bloody baby, Sherlock, for God’s sake…! You’ve done a lot of stupid things—I mean a lot—this takes the fucking cake!”

He paused, cocking his head at Sherlock, a look of scornful speculation on his face. “Do you even realise that? Do you realise how spectacularly idiotic it was – is – to allow that woman leverage like this? And rather a bit more importantly, do you get what it means to have a kid?”

Sherlock’s heart gave a hard lurch at that and he opened his mouth to answer, but John still wasn’t finished, and it saved Sherlock from having to muster up some response. He didn’t know if he could have, at that.

“I don’t know - maybe no one ever thought they needed to have the sex talk with you.” He scrunched his nose. “Or did you just not care?”

“Believe me, I know it’s a lot to take in. I just found out myself and—”

“What?” John asked sharply.

Sherlock opened his mouth to explain how until several days before he’d been just as unaware of the child as John, but saw that his friend was no longer listening to him, and was looking around the flat.

“Where—where is she, then? Irene Adler. Why have you got him?”

“Nero.”

John stopped and gave Sherlock a look of such absolute bewilderment that Sherlock would’ve chuckled at it if his throat didn’t feel so dry and tight.

“That’s his name.”

“Oh my God…” John said to the room at large before mouthing to himself, Nero?!

“And The Woman isn’t here. As I mentioned earlier, she’s been arrested.”

“Of course she’s been—” John started, then did a double-take. “The Woman still, is it?”
Sherlock said nothing, and only acknowledged John’s words with a thinning of his lips.

“Your brother was right, then – he thought it was a salute. Of course Mycroft was bloody right,” John muttered, before quoting ironically, “‘It’s a fine line between love and loathing.’”

“There is no loathing,” Sherlock snapped, and he was gratified to be back on the offensive; it was a far more comfortable and familiar position than the defensive. “You’re right, I have kept you in the dark about Irene Adler, but that also means that your information is almost three years out of date. So do us both a favour and stop making assumptions based on obsolete data.”

John flushed at that and then began to swell in outrage.

“Do you see at all that I’m fucking worried about you? All right, yeah, I’m a bit pissed off that you never told me about what happened with Irene Adler, but that’s not really the main issue and frankly I can’t say that I’m very surprised, what with that whole ‘damaged geniuses’ thing. But a kid!” he said, spitting out the word as if he could barely vocalise such an outrageous concept. “You can’t ‘fix’ this by being clever enough, Sherlock, and your favourite tactic of good old-fashioned suppression is absolutely worthless here too.”

“I know that,” Sherlock shot back, his voice rising as well.

“Do you?” John pressed. “Because I’m not so sure. This isn’t some experiment to be flushed as soon as the novelty wears off or the results don’t go according to what you’d expected. This is a person we’re talking about.”

“Yes John, shocking as it may be to you I am capable of grasping the gravity and significance of this situation without you spelling it out for me!”

The two men came to another impasse, both glaring and breathing hard, and Sherlock saw in his peripheral vision how John’s hand involuntarily shook and flexed, as if it were still keen on punching him.

“Your concern is unwanted and unwarranted,” Sherlock said in a more level voice. “If you do really care—” John looked even more scandalised at that but Sherlock went on, “then you will help instead of lecturing me.”

John looked as if he had a dozen separate retorts he wanted to make, but let out a weary sigh instead.

“You know that I didn’t really mean it when I said that I wouldn’t.”


John looked into his eyes then averted them just as quickly.

“Yeah well you’ll need all the help you can get if she’s involved,” he said, before adding muttering something else under his breath. Sherlock caught part of it, which sounded like “supervision.”

“Three years. Out of date,” Sherlock repeated, his tone growing dangerous.

“Certain things don’t change, mate,” John said stubbornly, an English Bulldog with something caught up in its mouth.

Sherlock felt his face go hot. “What about Mycroft, would you accept his opinion? Because she gained his trust even before she’d got mine.”
“Can’t exactly ask him, can I?” John shot back, but at once he looked horrified by what he’d said. His body language said that he was about to apologise, but Sherlock wasn’t interested.

“*Look*, Irene may not have the same mundane moral compass as the population-at-large, but she does have an internally-consistent code of her own.”

“Oh and you understand it, I suppose.”

“For the most part… now… yes. A bit. Enough.”

John gave a soft scoff and peered into his empty glass as if hoping he’d missed the last drop.

“*More* than enough,” Sherlock amended, “to know that she’s told me the truth. Perhaps not the entire truth, for her own reasons, but pertaining to this – yes.”

John shook his head, looking slightly stunned. “God, there’s still two of you isn’t there?”

“Mm,” Sherlock said. “Well… three.”

John’s face slackened at the reminder and his eyes shot over to Nero, who had got to his feet and was clutching the top of the cot and lifting a leg to try to climb the railing, beginning to protest his confines. When he saw Sherlock looking at him he stretched out a hand and made grabbing motions, his expression beseeching.

Sherlock set down his own tumbler and crossed the room towards the infant, who raised both of his arms.

“Up. Up,” Nero said in a voice husky from sleep, and behind him Sherlock heard John let out a quiet gasp and clutch hard at a sofa arm.

Sherlock lifted Nero, and found that he was still surprised by the warm heft of him, and even more surprised by his immediate awareness of the primal bond he’d first experienced that morning. For a moment the room, the situation with Moriarty, Irene’s arrest, his brother’s injuries, and John’s shock - all of it – fell away and he became transfixed by his child, as the word *mine* played in his mind. He’d only every thought of one other person with that type of honorific, and his heart gave a surging jolt as he revised the word regarding Nero to *ours*.

Nero’s thoughts seemed to run in the same direction, because after he gave a yawn and lifted a fist to rub hard at his eyes, he looked around the room, flicking his eyes from place to place with increasing urgency.

“Mama?” he asked, his brow denting in concern, and his posture growing more alert.

“You’ll see her again soon, Nero, not to worry,” Sherlock said in the rich, resonant voice his son seemed to respond to best, and he jostled him a bit. His attempts at comfort didn’t seem to work though; Nero called out *Mama!* again, this time at a near-bellow as if thinking that maybe she hadn’t heard him on his first try. Sherlock quickly assessed his options and concluded that distracting Nero with food was the best recourse, then located and ripped open a packet of fruit melts that Irene had added to their shopping basket the night before. It took multiple attempts but Nero finally allowed himself to be diverted, though he remained fussy and disgruntled.

For a time Sherlock had forgotten that John was there, but he soon as he’d persuaded Nero to eat he became aware of the heavy, shocked silence in the room, and he dragged his eyes from his son to risk a look at his friend.
John’s eyes were wide and his mouth hung agape, and Sherlock could read his thoughts as clearly as if he were narrating them.

For one sickening moment Sherlock felt mortified and ashamed, as if John had caught him doing something deeply sentimental or indulgent, which couldn’t be justified by the work—which was in fact precisely what had happened. Then Sherlock glanced back to Nero and felt the glowing burst of that unfamiliar pride, linked to him but mostly placed in someone else, paternal pride. He was certain that Nero would be every bit as brilliant and incorrigible as John was thinking (worrying).

As for Sherlock’s own concern about how John might now perceive him, he would always value the opinions of John Watson more than he cared to admit, but it was not the time to worry about them. Ensuring Nero’s safety, reuniting with The Woman and, somehow or another, neutralising Moran and Moriarty—those things were paramount now. His personal apprehensions were a problem for a more placid future.

John looked between the two of them as if he were viewing a match at Wimbledon, and helpless confusion came over his face. It was the look of someone whose established world was tilting on its axis so that previously-familiar landscapes were no longer recognisable, and Sherlock felt a rare pang of empathy for his friend.

“Maybe…” John started, his voice weak. He cleared his throat. “All right, maybe I misjudged things a bit earlier. Maybe you – somehow – you do get…”

He trailed off then gave another grunt, but for the first time there was the faintest hint of amusement in it. “But if I had any doubt as to who his mother was before…”

Sherlock shot him a narrow-eyed look.

“Because I’ve only ever seen you—never-mind. Look, can you please just… start at the beginning?”

“The beginning…”

More than anything else so far, this brought up Sherlock short. Dear God, when was that? There were so many fits and starts and progress and regression in his relationship with The Woman that it was impossible to pinpoint when he’d passed the point of no return with her.

“I guess that would be when you realised that you were willing to risk your life to save Irene Adler’s,” John said as if reading his mind, his native dryness even more evident. “Or am I wrong in assuming that’s what happened?”

“I—” Sherlock started in protest, but then frowned. “Yes…basically.”

John nodded to himself, looking grimly pleased, and Sherlock gave a sigh of resignation. He certainly wasn’t going to get into the deeply personal aspects of when and how he’d realised that the value of Irene’s life was worth as much as his own to him, but he could at least share with John the logistics of her rescue.

“I suppose you could say that you were my alibi,” Sherlock said, referencing what John had said at the outset, although John looked nonplussed.

“You were at a wedding in Northampton when I had to go. I’m not sure how much he told you, but part of what Mycroft believed was correct – she was being held outside of Karachi, Pakistan by a cell of the Lakshar e Taiba organisation. But where he got it wrong was that we exfiltrated her and managed to get out of the country – though not before creating an execution scene for his benefit.
Then we went our separate ways, she to America and I back to London.”

John’s mouth opened and shut as he processed what Sherlock had said, then opened again.

“You... I remember that. You acted like you thought I’d been at the shops instead of out of town for days – asked me about coffee...”.

“Like I said…” Sherlock answered, and he couldn’t help the smugness that twitched up one corner of his mouth at the memory.

John blinked and shook his head, looking close to overwhelmed again.

“And the two of you…” He looked slantways at Nero, and let the question go unfinished.

Sherlock felt a flush creep into his face, but any answer was unnecessary. Nero’s age spoke to his time of conception on its own.

“And I assume she knew all about the faked suicide?” John asked, his tone regaining its bitter edge.

“No.”

John’s brow creased in surprise at that, and for once he didn’t seem to have a retort ready.

Sherlock looked away, willing himself not to give away anything else when describing that time. He was already making himself appear far more fallible than he cared to.

“No, she found out I wasn’t dead along with the rest of the world.”

“Why didn’t you tell her,” John asked bluntly.

Sherlock’s frown tightened further, before he let out a sigh.

“I couldn’t,” he admitted. “She didn’t end up using the identity I’d given her. She accepted my help when it meant survival but she wanted to recreate her new life on her own terms.”

“Which included having your child,” John said, with the air of having to remind himself of that fact. A moment later he gave another humourless grunt of laughter. “Although I still find it fairly interesting that she never chose to contact you until now.”

“The postcard on the shelf is from her,” Sherlock said quietly, and John’s mouth dropped in a way that Sherlock felt was very satisfying.

“That wasn’t from a kid…?”

“No.”

“I thought you had it out like that as a—”

“I know what you thought.”

“But you didn’t reply?”

“No.”

John looked startled at that, but then it appeared to relieve some of his disquiet and anxiety. That
wasn’t flattering; John had evidently thought that Sherlock would’ve gone running to Irene at the slightest provocation, but knowing that he had once shown some prudence seemed to improve John’s view of Sherlock’s judgment now.

“Why?”

“The timing wasn’t right; it was shortly after I returned and I had a couple of in-house things that called for the courtesy of my full attention.” He sent John a pointed look, suffused with as much warmth as he could muster in the moment.

The two men shared another look, but this time it was far more as comrades-in-arms rather than antagonists.

“So this is what you were up to earlier this week. And…” John groaned in further realisation, “why you didn’t want me go with you.”

“Yes.”

“You weren’t even in Washington, DC, were you?” he asked, almost to himself.

“No.”

“A case that someone wanted to keep confidential, but posted on my public blog.” John punched out another acerbic laugh, and Sherlock grasped the implication perfectly. Maybe it had been three years, but Irene Adler was just as capable of throwing Sherlock off of his game as ever—that as John had said, certain things didn’t change.

Sherlock let out a loud noise of impatience. “There’s so much to catch you up on, we really haven’t the time for this. Now that you’ve got accustomed to Nero and Irene, there’s—”

“Excuse me, what?” John broke in, over-enunciating in the way that always meant that Sherlock had crossed some line.

“I said—”

“Are you serious—! No, Sherlock,” he said, staring at him with fresh disbelief. “I’ve not got ‘accustomed’ to— God it’s been what, ten minutes...!?”

“Well hurry up, we have to move things along. There’s an even more pressing issue at hand here.”

“More pressing—!” John spluttered. “For Christ’s sake, I know that you’ve said Moran is still alive but I hardly think that that’s more significant than your actual child—”

Sherlock took in a small breath, then looked into John’s eyes.

“I’m not talking about Moran.”

“What do you mean, not talking about—” John started, but Sherlock held his gaze, and as John studied Sherlock’s face his agitated, quizzical expression began to fade, then shift into one of dawning horror.

“Don’t say… Don’t you bloody dare, Sherlock… Not after… not with everything I went through—we went through. No. I was joking earlier when I mentioned…!”

John continued to search Sherlock’s face for a sign that he was playing a cruel trick or that John had somehow misunderstood him, but when he found no respite there his alarm ratcheted up even
further. He jerked back, this time wagging his head in denial rather than disbelief.

“He was dead—no. NO! What – what bloody X-Files parallel universe am I trapped in??” he tipped his head back to bellow up at the ceiling.

“Shh,” Sherlock said when Nero whimpered in answer, but John didn’t appear to be listening. He advanced on Sherlock again but this time it was with barely-contained desperation rather than aggression.

“What are you doing about this, Sherlock?” he asked, low and intense. “Because I can’t go through anything like that again, do you understand? And I can’t put Mary through it either. So you tell me, right now, what are you doing about this?”

“Getting my best man to the case, for starters,” Sherlock said, and gave John a grim closed-lipped smile.

John came to a stop and went very still, although his chest rose and fell in shallow, rapid movements.

“Right... Right.” He took in a deep, bracing breath, then glanced around the room. “Where’s that whiskey?”

“Is that wise? We need all of your wits on this, such as they are.”

“Just pour.”

Sherlock complied, and John collapsed onto the sofa where he downed down the contents of his glass in one swallow, then sat at the edge of a cushion and stared out into the room with glassy eyes.

After several moments Sherlock tried to break into John’s dazed state to start discussing their next steps, but John gave a single sharp shake of his head before resuming to look shell-shocked. Sherlock felt impatient and anxious to begin, but with everything that he was laying on John he supposed he could concede to him this, at least for a little while.

Another minute passed before John roused himself back to alertness, but when he did it seemed to also signify some great transformation. He shifted forward on the sofa a beleaguered friend then rose from it a military officer, lifting his chin to pin Sherlock with a steely blue look and standing at full attention before him.

“Right then,” he said, his shoulders squared and his expression resolute. “What is it that we know so far?”
Sherlock’s posture relaxed though he knew that he was still miles from repairing this damaged trust with John, especially given that the trust he'd just restored with him was so nascent and fragile.

But he also knew that the best possible prescription for the two of them was to throw themselves into the work, and so at least in the immediate future they would be colleagues and associates—they could focus on friends later. Perhaps it would even sort itself out; collaborating like this might remind John of why they had become such a unit in the first place. It also might reassure him that even though it appeared that everything had changed, certain things were fixed and immutable constants, since he understood that part of John's reaction was based on fear and uncertainty about what this dramatic development meant for his life as well.

He gave a short nod to himself, recalibrating his thoughts.

"Someone has been tracking Ms Adler and the child all over North America, and has even made what seemed like various attempts on their lives. She grasped fairly early that it was Moran, but now things are a bit more complicated."

"And you said she's been arrested…?"

"Yes, by Mycroft's people under suspicion of conspiracy and attempted murder. I'll get to that. But as I said – it's a bit more complicated."

"But you say you trust her with this, you don't think she's involved…” John prompted, his eyes widening at the severity of the charges.

"I don't 'think', I know."

John started to reply but then shut his mouth and gave a brief nod, though Sherlock could tell he was humouring him. Still he was eager to get on with things, and he would take it.

"Everything I've been telling you about – Moran and Moriarty being alive, Mycroft being shot – it's all connected to what's been happening with Irene."

"Okay… How?"

"First,” Sherlock drew in a small breath, "you should know that it's come to light that Mycroft was aware Moriarty faked his death. Not just that, but I have reason to believe he had a hand in engineering the entire thing, and in fact it's why he was shot—"
At first as Sherlock spoke John stared at him in more of the same wide-eyed incomprehension, but then he did something Sherlock could've never anticipated: he broke out into loud, unrestrained laughter.

It was Sherlock's turn to look shocked as John just continued to laugh, ignoring him apart from glances in his direction that sent him into fresh fits.

"No. There's no way, Sherlock, this is where I draw the line," he gasped after almost half a minute, struggling to resume control of himself. "Your brother would never do that, come on."

"You think you know my brother better than I do," he asked, narrowing his eyes.

"Apparently! I'm not his biggest fan but even I can see that—"

Sherlock suppressed the urge to comment that he was surprised John could spare any sentimentality for a sibling after his dealings with his own sister.

Instead he said, "Oh I assure you – he's capable. I've seen him make decisions that would curdle your blood, John, and he doesn't even blink."

"I don't doubt it," John said, still catching his breath but now sobered. "But you're his brother and he wouldn't do that to you. I mean you've got to be aware of that…?"

"Moving on," Sherlock said curtly, and after a moment John gave a resigned sigh.

"It's been a long con, all in the effort to assassinate Mycroft. You see Mycroft must've been the only one who mattered who still knew Moriarty was alive, and if he took him out of the picture Moriarty would be able not only to resume his work, but to do so with even greater freedom than before since by all official records, he's dead.

"The trouble is – _how_ to get at one of the most powerful, protected men in the world, especially when he never goes out into the field and has no apparent points of vulnerability?

"Answer: you engineer a scenario that would provoke Mycroft out into the open by exploiting the only weaknesses he _does_ have—obligation and family.

"Meanwhile Moriarty would've seen the video of Irene's 'execution' when it went online, and recognised that the men were imposters. He would've grasped in an instant that she'd faked her death, and he would've made it his business to track her down. As soon as he learned that she'd had a child he would've realised how he was conceived, and he would've understood what a golden opportunity Nero was for getting to my brother.

"Enter Moran – Moriarty used him to move the pieces of both me and Irene back into the places on the board where he wanted us. He faked Moran's death so that I would return to London, and he used him to threaten Irene just enough to coerce her into coming back to use her one remaining connection for protection – Mycroft Holmes."

"All right, but this is still all based on the assumption that Mycroft has anything to do with this!"

Sherlock gave an exasperated sigh. "How long have you known me, John? I never _assume_.

"No. So you've missed something."

Sherlock compressed his lips, fighting frustration. "Mycroft told me that he oversaw James Moriarty's cremation, but inductive reasoning shows that he's still alive. Ergo my brother lied,
because there's no way he could be tricked that egregiously. So tell me, do you have another explanation?"

"Well…no, but I'm not you!"

"Your words," he said, meaning QED.

"Yes, but—"

"Do you think I want to believe that my own brother is responsible for all of this?" Sherlock suddenly exploded as a torrent of emotion broke through his fortifications, unleashed by finally being able to talk to one of the people he trusted most in the world. His frustration wasn't directed at John, but John was the vector for it now and he had faith that his friend would understand that distinction.

"But what I want to believe is irrelevant. Because this what I do, John, I examine the data and I reach conclusions, and what my clients want to hear doesn't matter. How many times have you seen me deliver bad news, how many times have clients told me 'that's impossible,' even in the face of irrefutable evidence? It's the same now, only… only I'm the client…" he finished quietly, feeling sapped of all energy.

"Yes, but—"

"But Mycroft's role in this doesn't really matter anymore. It's done. What matters is the consequences. Moriarty is alive. Nero and especially Irene are in danger."

"Even if Mycroft was the target and he's been shot?"

"They're still loose threads, and if you haven't noticed Moriarty has always been impeccable in his tailoring."

John gave an appreciative grunt at that and Sherlock allowed himself the ghost of a smile, albeit a very grim one.

Then he heard John pull in a sharp, deep inhale, and he saw that his friend had gone paper-white, and that his eyes were fixed on Nero, who was now crawling at a swift diagonal across the room, his eyes intent on Sherlock's SudoKube resting on the cushion of his chair.

John turned back to Sherlock, slowly shaking his head. "I'm sorry, I can't get over this. I keep forgetting about it, about… Nero," he said as if testing out the name, "and then it comes back to me all over again in a rush."

"Yes," Sherlock said, "I know."

"A kid."

Sherlock nodded, and John took in another deep breath then made his way over to the child.

"Hallo Nero," he said putting on a bright voice, though Sherlock could still hear the tension in it.

Nero darted a glance in his direction but then continued to strain forward to reach the cube. When he managed to wrap his hand around it he sat down heavily on his bottom and then finally graced John with his notice, lifting up his prize to show it off with a proud coo.

"Yes, very good," John praised, squatting down before him and smiling. Nero gave him a self-
satisfied, toothy smile in return before turning the entirety of his focus back onto the SudoKube, and John made a low humming sound.

"I can't get over the resemblance, it really is uncanny. But I see her a lot of too…"

He barked out a high-pitched, shaky laugh. "This is unreal. For God's sake, prior to this I didn't even know if you'd ever…"

"What?"

John raised his eyebrows and cleared his throat, and as soon as Sherlock grasped his meaning he made a sound of frustration and threw John a look of reproach.

"That again? Irene Adler, Sebastian Moran, and James Moriarty are all alive, and my brother who's deceived me on a massive scale is on the brink of death—and oh by the way, yes, I do have a kid—and that's what you choose to focus on?"

John looked sheepish for a moment, then thoughtful, but then shook his head and gave a shrug.

"What can I say, we all need a bit of levity at times like these," he said, as Sherlock made another noise in his throat.

"And it's just – I'm sorry, but you really are the last person I'd have expected this to happen to."

Perhaps it was his own contrary nature, but Sherlock was offended by John's insinuation that he was so inexperienced, whereas if John had reacted with some smug and knowing wink he would've been insulted by the suggestion that Sherlock was as susceptible to the baser things in life as others.

"People don't fit into neat little boxes, John. They can surprise you," he said, and again his thoughts were drawn to Irene. And you can surprise yourself, he added as a private afterthought.

"But you label people all the time!" John protested. "'Smoker,' 'shoplifter,' 'adulterer,' 'compulsive gamer.'

"Labels of behaviours and proclivities are necessary to the work I do in order to categorise and access data and patterns. Even if individuals are unique, in the aggregate behaviours are very, very telling. However labels on myself are less than helpful, unless I'm using them in the process of creating a persona."

"No labels in your personal life, got it."

"Personal life," Sherlock scoffed softly. "I don't have a personal life."

"Well there's a baby right here who might say otherwise."

The glib expression on John's face faded as he looked down at said baby again, and then as if to reaffirm to himself that he was real John reached out to stroke Nero's fine, messy curls. He paused, looking awkward, and rested his hand on Nero's small but sturdy shoulders instead. Nero glanced up for a moment, but continued to twist and turn the cube. Then, without taking his eyes off it he scooted over to John and settled against his bent legs, and John looked shocked but touched, and then did reach up to comb his fingers through Nero's hair.

With fascination and a deep-seated gratification Sherlock watched them, two people who had profoundly changed his past and present life—John certainly for the better and Nero… well. He hadn't yet reached the point where he could put Nero's effect on him into words; it was still too
new, too different and intense.

"Sherlock..." John said quietly, not looking up. "Erm, congratulations."

"Thank you...?" Sherlock said, sounding stilted. He'd meant his thanks, but his ongoing uncertainties and anxieties inflected the end.

"Regardless of everything else, he really is... extraordinary."

"Yes," Sherlock said, not with any conceit but as someone sharing his admiration.

"I just, I just need some time to get accustomed... I mean, it's a lot to..." he trailed off.

Sherlock let out a soft, sardonic huff. Yes, rather.

They remained silent for several moments, watching Nero as he continued to play with his cube, which included sticking it in his mouth, making John laugh at the absurd familiarity of it. Sherlock knew John had seen Sherlock do the same with unknown substances on more than one occasion.

"Do you reckon it'll happen again?" John asked, and Sherlock blinked.

"Having a personal life? God forefend," he answered, his sarcasm returning as an automatic defence mechanism.

"You and her. So," John gave a one-shouldered shrug, "yeah."

Visions of what had already happened within the previous 24 hours came flashing back to him in flickering shots of interplaying skin and shadow, but Sherlock managed to remain outwardly poised.

"I haven't given it any thought," he said curtly, but again Irene's words about the part that came next being considerably more difficult for people like them played in his mind.

Sherlock hadn't been lying when he told John that he didn't have a personal life, because with Irene intimacy and the work had never been mutually exclusive, though with her each aspect elevated the other. In that way it paralleled his friendship with John, except that there existed within it an edge of danger and smouldering sexuality to John's safe haven and absolute security. Both of them validated Sherlock in some vital and necessary way, yet very differently.

What he had with The Woman did undoubtedly have a personal element, but so far they had only explored it with the superstructure of intellectual collaboration to support it. The dynamics of their relationship corresponded with who they both were as people: a man and woman whose work and identities could be indistinguishable.

It was one reason compartmentalising hadn't worked as well as he might've hoped; by the time he'd left her at a loading dock in Oman she had become integral to every part of him.

Their cerebral and professional interest in each other had served as a Trojan's Horse for sex and sentiment, and yet when the battle was over where would it leave them?

John must've sensed the honesty in Sherlock's words, because from the periphery of Sherlock's vision he saw his friend give a small nod of acceptance.

They settled back into an easier, but still slightly discomfited silence to watch Nero, whose face was serious and bent in concentration as he twisted around the blocks on the cube. It was an
endearing impression of an adult—No, of him, Sherlock realised with a strong jolt.

A personalised text alert on his phone interrupted that thought, and now the adrenaline coursing through him was for another and far more familiar reason.

He whipped his phone from his pocket and glanced at the screen, which was finally displaying the words for which he'd been waiting and preparing all day.

*Project Carrot is a go.*

His eyes were hard and triumphant as he typed back, *On our way.*

Thank *God* – the hateful waiting was over.

"Let's go, John," he announced, as he began to move around the room to collect the spread of Nero-related items and shove them into the child's tote.

John's mouth fell open, but he dutifully jumped to his feet.

"Er, go—? Go where?"

"Back to London. It's time."

John's stunned look shifted into one of shrewd appreciation, and he let out a low chuckle.

"Of course you have a plan to get around the guards."

"Of course I would've – if I'd needed one."

"If— But aren't you under house arrest?"

"Glad to know that it was convincing," Sherlock murmured, still not looking up.

"Wait, what?"

Sherlock added the last bit of detritus to the tote, the cap to Nero's dummy, before turning to John and straightening to his full height.

"Oh there might have been one or two things I left out before," he said, favouring John with a genuine grin that lifted his cheeks and creased the edges of his eyes; now that things were finally happening he could appreciate the brilliance of The Woman's plan.

"I'm not actually being held here—and Irene Adler isn't really under arrest."

The sun was about to sink below the horizon behind them as Sherlock streaked after the dark vehicle with the blazing sirens; briefed by Andrea the MOD men were now escorts and guardians rather than guards.

John was quiet and tense in the passengers' seat, but Sherlock knew that he was only working out how to ask his questions.

"Well, *go ahead,*" he prompted sounding impatient, but in truth he was eager to explain the fullness of Irene's plan now that it was going forward.

John opened his mouth, closed it, and then opened it again. "So when you said you knew that the
"No. I really did know."

"Still, why do I get the feeling that whatever's going on was her idea?"

Half of Sherlock's mouth twitched upward, along with a rush of admiration and warmth towards The Woman. It easily surpassed the small spark of jealousy he felt at John's assumption that Sherlock hadn't come up with it himself.

"Irene Adler is all about perception," Sherlock said. "How she's able to perceive others – like understanding what drives clients, what they like, their weaknesses, as well as the perceptions that others have about her and how she can manipulate them – how to appear to be the perfect foil or fantasy in her work, for example, depending on the individual.

"All right…"

"In Karachi she saved both our lives by understanding and then exploiting both our captor's perceptions of her and mine. She used those assumptions to her advantage—to both of ours, although I didn't realise it in the moment. She's done the same thing this time, except—"

"This time you're in on it too."

Sherlock nodded, but those words sent a thrill through him that had nothing to do with getting back into action. Irene was more than capable of coming up with any number of contingencies that didn't require his help but she had elected to include him, and that was tangible proof of the evolution in their relationship; she had demonstrated that he had earned her trust and that his trust was important to her.

When she had first told him that she had a plan on how to work Moriarty she'd said that he wouldn't like it, and in many ways she'd been right. Being put into the passive position as she placed herself in danger, and secondarily the prospect of assuming prime guardianship over a child both so alien and so fundamentally precious and familiar were both unappealing. Yet despite those things, being included in her scheme had meant more to him than he was willing to admit – even to himself.

"But… why?" John asked. "Why have her arrested?"

"Several reasons. First, to make Moriarty think that he's succeeded in deceiving everyone so that he becomes more complacent, but mainly to force a move ourselves rather than just react, as we've been doing so far."

"Okay, how?"

"We're setting up Irene as bait – a carrot – to lure out Moran. I'm sure he's all too eager to finally get to take down his prey after only playing with it for all this time."

_The hunter becomes the hunted_, Sherlock thought with savage pleasure, though it was too clichéd to say aloud.

"But _how_ does Irene Adler getting arrested set her up as bait for Moran?" John asked, frustration mounting in his voice.

Sherlock took his eyes off the road for a moment to glance at him.
"Remember Pentonville Prison, the Bank of England, and the Tower of London?"

"Yeah, of course. But what—"

"How did Moriarty achieve it, such apparently impossible things?" Sherlock prompted. "It wasn't through some bit of code, that never existed, so…"

"He… had people on the inside, right?"

"Exactly," Sherlock said. "Like Irene, Moriarty is adept at having people exactly where he needs them, when he needs them. She pointed out that if this is him he would've found someone on the inside to leak him information, so he'd always be one step ahead—which he has been.

"I phoned Mycroft's assistant Andrea and I asked her if anyone had taken special interest in this case. She told me that one man, Thomson, who doesn't work directly for my brother but is fairly senior in the security services and has peripheral security clearance, has inserted himself into things. Moriarty must've screened the MOD employees with access to my brother, and uncovered something on Thomson – something bad enough to force him to be complicit in murder and treason. I have my suspicions as to what it is, but anyway…"

"Then we – Andrea, Irene, and I – put on a performance for his benefit, and he bought it." He gave a low chuckle. "I even told the idiot that it was a distraction."

"So the house arrest part - that was for Thomson's benefit as well," John said slowly.

"Yes, to make him incautious as we set up the real trap – getting Moran, which will bring us that much closer to getting to Moriarty. And key to it was that Thomson would believe that both the arrest and its execution were his idea, making it even less suspicious."

That had been Irene's idea as well, and he had been seized by the desire to kiss her when she'd said it, though he had managed not to act on it.

"Andrea went to Thomson with what she 'interpreted as evidence' that Irene was complicit in Mycroft's attempted assassination, and he acted on it just as we predicted. We asked Andrea not to keep us briefed on the plans, and not even I knew she would be able to access the house – the more realistic the arrest, the more convincing."

He grinned at John. "And now we're going to turn Moriarty's 'asset' into the very thing that could help bring him down."

Explaining Irene's plan to someone else exemplified the brilliance with which she understood people, their vanities, their insecurities, and their foibles. She could play them with the virtuosity of any first-chair violinist, and though he had often felt insecure and uneasy at the notion of that skill being used on him, it was exhilarating to see her turn it on others.

"Well there's another thing you and Irene Adler have in common," John said sardonically. Sherlock narrowed his eyes. "What?"

"You both love your theatrics."

Sherlock frowned and clicked his tongue in impatient dismissal, as well as some irritation that John wasn't fully appreciating Irene's brilliance.

"What's this text message that's got you all riled up, then?"
Sherlock's grin returned.

"The plan worked. The facility where she's being held just alerted Andrea that Thomson showed up with paperwork for a 'prisoner transfer'—a transfer that no one ordered and wasn't authorised, of course, except that all system records backed up the paperwork to show that it had been."

"Oh God… so where is she now?"

"Going through with it, of course. We can't let Moran know that anything has changed, it might tip off Moriarty and send them both into deeper hiding. Andrea is monitoring Thomson's phones and he's just texted Moran that the transfer went smoothly and he'll be ready to hand her off soon."

"In London."

"Yes."

"Are you having them followed?"

"God no, we can't risk tipping him off."

"Then he mentioned where they're meeting…"

"No, but Moriarty isn't the only one who can do some digging on Thomson," Sherlock said with a tight and predatory smile. "The Woman and I even got a head-start on it before her 'arrest'."

In the early morning hours while they were still debating the finer points of the plan they had also begun vetting Thomson's mobile phone records, availed to them by Andrea, whilst she accessed and processed his personal and work computer networks. Just prior to and after the arrest there had been no outgoing or incoming communications – encrypted, coded, or otherwise – regarding possible meeting points, which indicated that a meeting point had already been established, and in order to allow Irene's plan to go ahead and allow Thomson to take her into his custody, they needed discover where that was so that they could set up the ambush.

Going back further in the month Sherlock discovered periodic blackouts in Thomson's GPS data, and while unofficial MOD policy might 'request' that its agents shut off mobile tracking in order to evade various regulatory and accountability measures, when he compared them with the work logs Andrea provided unexplained lapses still remained.

Thomson's car GPS was unhelpful for a different reason: both its data output and blackouts did correspond with his work logs, but Sherlock hadn't expected anything different; the man would've never used his registered vehicle to go to a meeting with Moran or Moriarty. Still, in the very absence of data Sherlock uncovered something significant. There were a number of nights that Thomson didn't move the car from its secure spot at his residence even when his flat's keycard record showed that he was out, although of course this wasn't suspicious in itself – in London taking the Underground was almost always preferable to taking roads. And while there were a number of times he was out without his car during which his phone and GPS activity remained active and unsuspicious, the unaccounted-for blackouts in his phone GPS did always fall on nights when his car remained parked whilst he was not at home. This confluence of factors told Sherlock that these were nights that Thomson was occupied with something – something he was trying to keep covert.

In addition, these data blackouts started just before The Woman was attacked in Edison – almost like he were being prepped for her return to London and the role he would come to play then, Sherlock thought sarcastically.
When piecing together his internet records Andrea had discovered a deleted Gumtree advert in which Thomson inquired about a Kawasaki Ninja, a workhorse motorbike that wouldn't stand out anywhere in the capital. CCTV showed no signs of a bike anywhere near Thomson's residence, but Sherlock wasn't surprised that he would keep it in a place unconnected to him.

Thomson would often take the tube home, and on those days he entered Bank Station station after work at his team's office in The City and become lost to view in the heave of commuters. On most evenings they were able to pick him up exiting the underground station near his home twenty-odd minutes later, but on nights that fell on the pattern he didn't appear. He also always used Day Travelcard tickets despite the inconvenience, and so they weren't able to trace him through his Oyster Card activity, nor did he give away the pattern by only using paper tickets on those select days. The fact that he had been so conscientious made Sherlock all the more pleased that he, Sherlock, had discerned it anyway. Besides, in truth he would've found it suspicious if it really had been that simple; Thomson was many things, but an idiot was not one of them, despite what he'd said to John. There was also the minor fact that he was being puppeteered by one of the brilliant minds Sherlock had ever known.

The much-needed breakthrough had come late that afternoon when Sherlock had suggested not searching through footage of the packed departing trains on the dates in question, but the exits of the adjacent Monument Station. It was the only underground station in central London that was accessible from a completely different station, Bank, and it also served as a Docklands Light Railway station, so that the cross-traffic and the sheer number of people in the maze-like interchange between the two stations provided even more cover.

Sure enough, Thomson was glimpsed slipping out of Monument at Cannon Street, albeit now wearing thick-framed glasses, a baseball cap, vest, jumper, and messenger bag. They tracked him on foot to a private garage, and he was spotted exiting on the Kawasaki shortly thereafter. This time the CCTV techs managed to capture the registration plate and were able to follow his movements across the city. When they returned to that garage on all the other nights that adhered to the pattern he could be seen making the trip to the same destination, albeit taking different routes each time. Now that they knew where the exchange would take place, there would be no need to call off the transfer and Irene's plan would go forward, to whatever ends...

He felt John's gaze on him and glanced sideways to see him studying him with wry amusement.

"What?"

"Nothing, it's just… I was picturing you at some parent-teacher conferences ten years from now, still referring to Irene Adler as 'The Woman'."

Sherlock didn't let that mental image sink in; he tossed John a look of rebuke and then proceeded as if the other man hadn't said anything.

"Thomson and Moran are set to rendezvous at an industrial section of the Union Canal. There's a number of waste management plants at the junction of the West London Line railway, the A219, and the Paddington Arm of the canal, and I've memorised all the facilities' layouts and floorplans, though based on CCTV and private security cameras on the premises I've narrowed it down to one."

John nodded, looking sombre and pale again, no traces of humour lingering on his face.

"It's true then, isn't it? He really is alive. Moriarty."

"All evidence points to it; none controverts it," Sherlock said, feeling beads of sweat begin to
collect at his temple as they raced on towards London.

Sherlock and John passed a long stretch of silence, and aside from the minimal expenditure of focus needed to drive Sherlock retreated into his mind again, forgetting that John was even there until his voice broke into Sherlock's thoughts.

"Don't think I didn't notice you dodged my question earlier."

After another moment John turned his face away from the window, fixing Sherlock with a level but penetrating look.

He didn't specify which question, but he didn't need to. Sherlock knew that John was referring to when it was that Sherlock decided Irene's life was worth endangering his own.

John shifted in his seat to fully face Sherlock.

"Look if I'm going to risk my life taking on something, someone, that I thought we'd never have to deal with again, I deserve to know all the details, don't I? I mean, there's a reason Moriarty has been using Irene Adler like this and let's face it – you're vulnerable in ways you've never been before because of it. I just want to understand everything that's at play here. I think that's fair."

At one point Sherlock might not have even acknowledged John's comment, but he felt compelled to be open with him now, and it did go beyond the sake of 'fairness' or clearing the air. It also wasn't because he felt that he had to atone for the deception surrounding Irene, because in fact he didn't feel guilty about that. John had been right in a way, about wanting to keep what he shared with Irene between the two of them only.

"You remember that night," he said, referring to when he had cracked Irene's code, and he was surprised to hear how tense he still sounded when talking about it.

"What? Oh. Yeah. I've never seen you look so…" For his part, John's voice had gone very soft.

Sherlock darted a sideways glance at him, at once deeply curious and deeply wary to hear what John was going to say, but John seemed unable to finish his thought.

After Sherlock had briefed John on the barest particulars later that night and a bit more the following morning no one had ever broached the subject, and so he hadn't been forced to put it into terms he could understand and communicate—and then subsequently compartmentalise. His initial simmering anger had shifted into a heavy numbness almost as soon as he was out of the house, and he barely could recall his journey home. Then it relapsed with a vengeance into a haze of fury, betrayal, a deep stabbing disappointment, almost like grief, that he hadn't really understood – as well as a blazing, bitter satisfaction at her defeat. The emotions had cut deep, and even now after shared intimacies, multiple occasions when they'd entrusted one another with their lives, and a nearly year-old child it remained a scar between them, raised, blemished, and hypersensitive.

Yet even though she had been the one who had (ostensibly) been defeated, he thought that he had a far more agonising and conflicted relationship with that evening. At least for her the revelation of her feelings for him had ultimately secured him being precisely where she needed him to be, and when. Meanwhile he had had to live with the knowledge that he had sent someone who had thrilled and attracted him more than anyone else he'd ever met, and who cared for him in turn, to certain death.

_Ah_, Sherlock thought, coming to a realisation. In addition to the need to have an ally and confidant in John again, he still carried his own demons from that time, and this felt like a chance to exorcise
them – at least in part.

"What did happen?" he heard John probe gently. "You never really said and I got the feeling that you were holding back on details."

Sherlock gave a terse nod; he thought that recalling the particulars of that night might never fail to send bolts of unpleasant anxiety through him.

"Sherlock… what was her passcode?"

John asked it with an air of casual curiosity, but Sherlock got the distinct impression that this was something he had been dying to know for a very long time, and he let out a resigned sigh.

"S-H-E-R."

John stared at him uncomprehendingly, and then blinked when he recalled the format of the lock-screen that Sherlock had obsessed over for months.

"Oh. So it wasn't all an act, then." He seemed to contemplate this for a moment and do some mental rearrangements, and then his eyebrows shot up. "And you still…?"

Sherlock didn't miss the disapproval in John's voice.

"Shit…"

"Yes. I knew full-well that she wouldn't last six months, and I was…" The word exultant popped in his mind but he wasn't willing to admit to that much. "It wasn't my finest moment."

"Yeah… no. I'm beginning to understand a bit more why you ended up going to such lengths later. I mean, besides the obvious."

Sherlock didn't contest what John was implying, as he once might have.

"Do you think you reacted so strongly in part because of what her passcode was? She really did feel that way and she was still willing to betray you?"

Sherlock suppressed his desire to retort, "Ah, using that psych practicum from medical school," because he had to admit that he'd wondered something similar himself, though that was just one aspect of it. Then he wanted to say, "That's the only part of the whole thing I could respect," but that impulse was an artefact from another time, and of another man. Besides, it was patently untrue.

Instead he said nothing, but he could see the wheels in John's head continue to turn, more connections being made and questions being raised.

"The morning you said she was being released, you'd said you were pleased because in custody Irene would've stood a chance."

Sherlock mentally flinched at that, mostly for the reminder it served of his awful frame of mind at that time.

"That's a one-eighty from where you ended up, so I have to ask – what changed your mind?"

As far as Sherlock was willing to move outside of his comfort zone in order to rebuild trust there were some things that remained far too private, and the answer to that was firmly within that domain. Moreover the truth was that he didn't even know how to put the painful process into
words. Still, John did deserve an answer of some sort.

"No single thing, it wasn't as if I woke up one day with some sort of revelation."

"But did you come to regret it fairly quickly?" John asked, ignoring Sherlock's faintly sarcastic tone.

"'Regret.' What's the point of that? If I've acted it's because I've considered the various probable outcomes, and even if my actions seem brash or ill-advised, they're in service of a larger plan. And I'm bound miscalculate at some point, so what's the point in wasting time feeling bad about it? I learn from the mistake and move forward."

"Yeah that's all well and good, but you definitely didn't answer me," John said, fastening his inescapable blue gaze on Sherlock again.

Sherlock looked back at him in some defiance, but then sighed.

"...All right, in this case yes," he admitted quietly. "But not only for the reason you might think. I regretted how my own emotions governed my reactions and dictated my actions. I understood that for whatever reason I'd gone too far."

In fact, his actions and the cold cruelty of them were those of his brother when he acted as judge, jury, and executioner. It was a poor imitation though; while Mycroft's actions were always rational and calculated, Sherlock's motivations were irrational to the extreme. He had been so inundated with confusion, hurt, and betrayal that he'd felt the need to 'correct' in the opposite direction, but in his attempt to emulate Mycroft he had overcompensated and condemned her, as if killing her could kill all the feelings that she evoked as well.

He could tell John wanted to pry into what he meant by 'whatever reasons' and was relieved when instead he asked, "So what did you do?"

He had never talked about this part, not even to Irene, but now that he had resolved to be open with John it was as if the cork of a bottle had been unstopped.

"I visited her house," he said softly. "I knew I wouldn't find her since over a week had passed and she'd likely fled before it was even daylight the following morning, but I wanted to see if there were any signs of where she'd gone."

Part of him had hoped that she would still be in residence at Eton Square, defiantly accepting clients and continuing to live her life as if nothing had happened—with the exception of multiple armed guards and additional booby-traps set up around her home. He knew that in part this was his conscience talking since that would lessen what he had done, but that didn't stop him from visualising it and almost coming to believe he would find it as he'd walked towards Number 44. But no one had answered the doorbell, and when he'd picked his way into the pristine but clearly abandoned home the full consequences of his actions had punched him in gut. For almost half a minute he had remained just inside the doorway, leaning against the console table and trying to moderate his breathing.

"Were there? Any signs, I mean."

"No. Apart from the dead flowers in the vases and a light layer of dust it looked exactly as it had when we visited."

There weren't even any visible gaps in her extensive closet, and for some reason that more than anything else had driven home for Sherlock the tremendous cost of what he had done. However
Irene Adler was faring, "The Woman" was already dead, and he had killed her.

"I found out the surname of her assistant and tracked her down, and she showed me a letter Irene had left for her saying that she would never see her again but that she'd deposited £50,000 into her account as severance and compensation. I asked to see the transaction note, and since she was distressed about Irene's disappearance and knew I was a detective she agreed. After that I was able to track Irene's account number for any activity."

"And?"

"There wasn't any, but I knew she must've had at least one other, less traceable account, though I wasn't able to find it. But there wasn't any sign of her through other means either, and after a month or so I began to think that the timeline had been shorter than we'd both estimated, and that she was already dead."

He said it as if reporting some objective fact, but the truth was that had been a very dark time for him, worse even than when he had believed her faked death shortly after they'd met, because this time he was complicit in it.

The first time he'd grieved for Irene was somewhat of a selfish indulgence; he'd pitied himself the loss of someone so simultaneously familiar and unknowable, but at that point he hadn't known her well enough to grieve for the woman herself. The second time was an all-encompassing, staggering bereavement that seemed to translate into physical pain, and no amount of composing elegies or forsaking things like food and drink could ease the circumstances, so through sheer strength of will he had forced himself to go on as if life were unchanged – and he unchanged. He knew that if he allowed himself to consider the loss of her and his own role in it, it could very possibly lead down a path of his own destruction.

He had been to rock-bottom before, and it had taken remoulding himself into a new man – a man who was above vices of the body and invulnerable to the weakness of any sort of need – to overcome it. Yet since his feelings for Irene directly undermined that persona, it could not be and would not be his saviour again. And so he went on, but he carried around his grief in everything he did like a stone around his neck, concealed beneath his clothing.

Then small hints of her survival began to emerge, though at first he hadn't accepted them; he'd been convinced that he was skewing his analysis of the data due to confirmation bias.

When he had been performing due diligence in his preparation to first meet Irene Adler, he had accessed her investment portfolio with the help of his brother. At the time he'd noted the diversity of her options, one of which was her significant share of a winery in Casablanca Valley, Chile. After her disappearance following the SHER debacle he'd begun to follow those investments, and when the London Stock Exchange's tracker app indicated that there had been a slight drop in the value of the publicly-traded company he discovered that the devaluation was due to a number of shares being released at once. Without allowing himself to become optimistic he attempted to access her account again, and found to his surprise that the username and password had not been changed. There he discovered that her entire portfolio had been dissolved through a third-party broker, converting her assets into American currency. It had been a month since their final confrontation, and Sherlock figured that she had allowed enough time to pass to feel comfortable liquidating her stocks—or perhaps she'd just exhausted her version of petty cash. He followed the money to a bank account in the Cayman Islands, but he wasn't willing to accept that as a dead-end.

Determined, he'd proactively identified the most enduring and impervious American tax evaders, and had then handed them – and the forensic accounting to convict them – on a platter to the Department of Justice, ingratiating himself in particular to the Assistant Attorney General.
Sherlock had wasted no time with the quid pro quo, and he'd managed to convince her to release to him the information that had been reported on the account through FATCA, under the condition that it would be used privately.

Irene Adler's then-alias wasn't part of the information he received, but a hotel address in Puerto Rico was, and though he knew that it was unlikely she would place herself in the same location as a listed address, it was a starting point. But when he called the hotel reception and posed as a husband looking for his runaway wife and the mother of his children to a sympathetic misogynist, he was stunned to hear that a woman matching Irene's description was staying there. When the man told him her alias, Kate Asquith, it was the final proof of life he needed. He hadn't even considered how her survival assuaged his guilt then; his feeling of relief had been one of the most palpable, intense emotions he'd ever experienced.

In retrospect he supposed that was his answer to John's question; that was when he realised that he considered her life worth the risk of his own.

At the time he'd considered it a very lucky break, but now he knew that it was intentional on her part. She'd left him breadcrumbs that she knew he, but none of her pursuers, would be clever enough to interpret so that when she needed him, he would be there. The trail had never gone cold in the five months he continued to track her movements across the globe, until she was captured by the defunct Lakshar e Taiba terrorist organisation, though even then he'd known her exact location.

"When you told me that you'd be out of town for your cousin's wedding, I knew that it was my chance to leave the country unnoticed," he continued to John. "I was cutting it very fine because she had already been a prisoner for three weeks by that point, but I needed to ensure that the ex-fil wouldn't be for naught and so I had to balance your schedule with her safety." He made a sound of frustration at the memory. "I thought you would never leave for the train."

"I assume you were hectoring me out of the door, but I don't even remember because it just blends together with all the other times you've acted like that," John said with a indulgent smirk.

Sherlock didn't answer, too caught up in the memory of the adrenaline, fear, steely resolve, and anticipation of his day of departure. He hadn't been thinking beyond the tactical details of the exfiltration, but in retrospect Sherlock thought that on some level the prospect of something even more foreign and intimate than his willingness to kill and die for her had fuelled all those emotions as well…

"Are you worried?" John asked, and Sherlock was pulled back into the present, and reminded that in many ways he and Irene were facing the same situation they had in Karachi.

"No. Even if we don't arrive before them I have every confidence that The Woman can stall or even scrap the plan if she needs to," Sherlock said, but his confidence was a lie.

Besides his brother and Moriarty Irene was the most perceptive and ingenious person Sherlock knew, but Moran was her perfect foil. He had no interest in bragging of his accomplishments, which would buy them some time, nor was he susceptible to her physical charms or emotional manipulations. The only lust Moran knew was bloodlust, and as Sherlock had mentioned, he was likely elated that he could finally kill his prey after merely toying with it for so long.

"I'm sure it will be fine."

"Yes, that's what I just said," Sherlock snapped, although the testiness in his voice revealed that he wasn't as confident as he wished to appear.
John lapsed into a thoughtful silence at that, and then took in a small, bracing breath.

"Sherlock… Do you love her?"

Sherlock hesitated for only a moment then answered, his voice low, "Yes."

In his peripheral vision he saw John give a slight start, and he knew that John hadn't expected for him to answer at all, let alone in the affirmative and so readily. Sherlock had to admit that he hadn't quite expected to say it so openly himself – his accelerated heart-rate spoke to that – but if he could admit such a thing to anyone, it was to his emotionally-stable, and relatively conventional and uncomplicated friend.

"Wait, what? Did you say yes?"

"I'm not going to repeat myself, John," he said evenly, although his heart continued to pound.

John was speechless for several moments, before managing, "Sorry. Sorry, it's not that I don't believe you, though it is a bit of a—never mind. I just… I can't believe you actually said it."

"Haven't you gone on about how this is the sort of thing friends talk about?"

"Yeah but it's not like you've ever listened!"

"I've had nothing to contribute before now."

"Well since you've been involved with Irene Adler in one way or another for almost two years, I'm betting that's not quite the case."

Sherlock pursed his lips thoughtfully, and made a soft noise of acknowledgement. He couldn't pinpoint the moment that he had identified the precise nature of what he was feeling, and even more ambiguous was when those feelings had first started to take hold of him, though he suspected that it was sometime before he'd cracked her passcode, or else he wouldn't have reacted so extremely. It was emotion for emotion, love for hate.

"So. You-you love her. Have you told her?"

"Not in the way you tell Mary, but… she knows." She must, he added to himself with a note of self-assurance. She was The Woman, she always knew such things – usually even before he did himself.

"Yes, God forbid you ever bear any resemblance to a 'normal' couple like us," John said, and his teasing tone was somewhat forced but Sherlock appreciated the effort. "Never mind that you two are the ones with a kid."

Sherlock gave a huff of bemused agreement and looked into the rear-view mirror at his son, who was alert and looking around, blinking, in the backseat.

"And er, speaking of Nero…" John continued. "Maybe I'm asking the obvious, but it's not obvious to me: what exactly are you going to do with him? Planning on getting him started in the field early, or…?"

"No," Sherlock replied, ignoring John's ironic tone. "He'll be put in the care of people I trust – it's on the way."

"Ah, so I'm the last one to know – again."
"Not this time."

That caught John's interest, and he looked over with a raised brow.

"What do you mean, who doesn't know yet that you trust so much?"

"My parents."

John goggled at Sherlock again, but this time he was aghast. "What—really?"

"Yes, really. I told you I've only just found out myself and—what?" Sherlock asked, taking his eyes off the road for a moment.

"You mean to tell me that you're just going to hand them the grandchild they don't even know exists, without any warning, and then you're just going to—pop off again?"

"I don't intend on telling them who he is," Sherlock said with a frown at what he considered an overreaction. "Just that I need people I trust implicitly to watch a child for a case. The car ahead will stay with them and re-escort them back to their home. Oh— that's where we've just come from, by the way."

John let out a high-pitched bark of laughter and continued to stare at him incredulously. "Jesus, Sherlock, I think they might pick up on who he is. I mean, the kid is practically a clone of you, and no one knows better what you liked like at that age than your mum and dad!"

Sherlock's grip on the wheel tightened as the realisation struck him that it was possible he might not have given that as much thought as it warranted. Sherlock had initially suggested that Kate come to care for the child, but to his surprise Irene had rejected that and had asked that Nero stay with Sherlock until his parents could take over. He had agreed that that was acceptable, but he had been too focused on the tactical aspects of the plan to consider the personal. He couldn't do that now, either.

"It'll be a happy surprise for them, then," he said, shoving it in his Pending mental file. "They've always wanted grandchildren and by this point thought they'd never get them, so they'll be ecstatic."

John made a choking noise and Sherlock could tell that he wanted to say something more to that, but he changed tactics. "And what about Nero, did you think about how he might react to being handed off to yet another set of strangers?"

"Well yes, it might be confusing at first," he conceded. "But he should get to know his grandparents anyway. Especially since I have my doubts he'll ever meet the ones on his mother's side."

John's eyebrows drew together in indignation. "I wasn't suggesting that he not—!"

"Well what do you suggest, John, that I strap Nero into a BabyBjörn and take off?"

"No of course not, but—" John stopped and stared at him, speechless.

"Oh what is it now?"

"You—you know the name of those things…"

"Of course I do, it's my job to know all sorts of things," he snapped, although his mild annoyance
quickly turned to thoughtfulness. Now that was doubly true; it was his job to know about such
tings for reasons he had never before imagined, and he was finding that this new role was fast
becoming as inherent and essential to his identity as was being a consulting detective.

"Fine. Fine, just one more thing," John said. "If the guards are staying with your parents, how the
hell are we going to cut through all the traffic around the city and make sure we get there in time?

A smug half-smile flickered onto Sherlock's face.

"Oh that's easy – Andrea's meeting us at the hospital in Guildford with the helicopter. It'll be the
middle of rush-hour, John, you didn't honestly think we'd be fighting cars on the A3 when there's
an international crime syndicate to take on instead, did you?"

In a grim parallel to his calculations of John's arrival that afternoon he had computed how long it
would take Thomson to transport Irene by car from where she was being held in remand at HMP
Bronzefield to Kensal Green, and even the twenty-three minutes that Sherlock and the others
would arrive ahead of them was an uncomfortably narrow margin. But even if the helicopter had
come directly to Oxfordshire the benefit would've been minimal; it would've had to land and then
restart after picking up his parents and he'd had a police escort on open road – and had been rather
done waiting.

His smile vanished as he considered how precious little room they had for error. A miscalculation
that skewed their timing late could be fatal for Irene, and he couldn't even entertain that possibility
—not only for his own sake, but for their son's. Every time the thought intruded into his head he
started like a skittish horse, and deliberately set his mind on something else, some detail of the
mission before him that would ensure that that would – not – happen. Because the part he actually
detested about her plan wasn't the waiting, much less that he'd had to care for Nero. It was the
introduction of even the slimmest possibility that he could lose The Woman again, just when they
had rediscovered one another. This time the loss would be real and irrevocable, and he didn't know
how or even if he would recover from that.
In this fic the name of Sherlock’s mother is Mycroft Lydia Holmes, and she goes by her second name. We know that in BBC Sherlock Mrs Holmes’s initials are ML, and so I’m proceeding as if her side of the family went by the tradition of giving children the maternal maiden name. Girls were usually known by their second names in this case, but boys often did go by them. I’m going with ‘Mycroft Lydia’ in particular because in one of the better-known pastiches her name is Lydia Mycroft, which are the same initials but reversed.

Sherlock’s apprehension for The Woman shifted to a different dread the closer he and John drew to Guildford. Visions of his brother, wan, pale, and diminished, pushed through his mind, but since he was still irate over Mycroft’s egregious deception Sherlock’s feelings towards him were decidedly mixed.

Again he glanced in the rearview mirror at his son. He needed the sight of Nero’s fresh vitality to banish the bleakness of the memento mori, so that he could move forward with the engine of his focus fixed solely on his mission, and not pulled awry by personal matters.

When they pulled around the curve that led to the hospital’s reception he saw that Andrea had collected his parents, who were standing just outside of the main entrance looking disconcerted. He felt momentarily relieved that he wouldn’t have to see Mycroft again, but then his nerves took yet another turn and his pulse-rate quickened as he recalled what John had said about his parents seeing in an instant that Nero was their grandchild. Sherlock’s elite powers of observation meant that on occasion he didn’t know when something was also obvious to others, and now was one of those times. But the extraordinary circumstances of Nero’s conception, birth, and life to this point aside, there was no denying the basic fact of his paternity.

Sherlock couldn’t deceive his parents about who Nero was, but neither did he have the ability at this time – practically or emotionally – to delve into a detailed conversation with them about it. It would have to wait.

He put the car into park and experienced a flashback to the previous day, to when Irene had been the one sitting by his side rather than John. That moment had been fraught with a different weight and tension, and now it seemed as if no time had passed, and yet everything between he and Irene had changed. They had reached a pinnacle of transparency, understanding, and indivisibility in their relationship that he could not have anticipated twenty-four hours before.

With a chastising shake of his head he stepped out of the car, glancing down through the tinted rear windows to where he could just make out his son’s small but robust outline. Then he drew in a fortifying inhale, buttoned his jacket, and strode towards his parents.

He accepted the kiss from his mother and the distracted half-hearted hug from his father, before stepping back and raising himself to his full height.

No words came.
“Andrea’s brought us out here but she won’t say what this is about,” his mother said after a length of uneasy silence. “Says it’s for you to tell?”

Sherlock glanced at his brother’s PA but her face was impassive, and then he gave his mother a terse nod.

“Have you found them, the ones who did this to Myc?” his father asked, his voice hoarse.

Sherlock was aware of three faces turned to his, riveted but wary, although of course John had a different reason for his nervous expectation.

He let out a soft, low cough. “Yes, although they’re still at-large. But we expect to have made a significant breakthrough by tonight. Which is why I’m here, I…”

Again his mind went blank.

He opened his mouth, shut it, reopened it, and then clamped it shut again, as if the physical mechanism of preparing to speak would prompt his mind to supply words. It didn’t; instead he felt his face begin to flush as his parents looked more and more bemused.

“Sherlock?” his mother said, her expression edging into concern, just as his father asked, “Are you all right?”

“Yes. Yes, I…”

Again he came to a stuttering halt, and he compensated by swearing vividly in his mind.

As he had pointed out earlier to John, it wasn’t as if he were a stranger to delivering life-altering news. Although he considered it a tedious formality that served as the conclusion to many cases, it was nonetheless effortless to give verdicts to clients, be they ostensibly good or bad. Above all he was an ally to the facts, and he was merely the vector through which they passed from one party to another.

However he wasn’t ‘merely a vector’ in this instance, and though he was fairly skilled at governing his own emotions, with Nero that was impossible. The information being relayed now was of a deeply personal, meaningful, and revealing nature, and he felt paralysed.

Telling his mother and father about Nero ought to be much easier than it had been to notify John. He was far less concerned with managing their perceptions of him, or how the news of his fatherhood would compromise those perceptions. They had known him for his entire life, of course – had raised him through the formative years that he went by ‘Billy’, had seen him through addiction, relapse, and recovery despite his own hostility and distance at that time, and had been there for his climb, rung by laborious rung, towards finally coming into his own as a consulting detective – so he had no apprehensions about reputation with them. Moreover, the news that he’d fathered a child would come as just as much of a life-altering shock as it had for John, but his parents would rejoice rather than worry about its implications.

The words themselves were simple and he’d already uttered them once today, so why, as he looked into the wide eyes of his mother and father, did they remain so wedged and intractable in his throat?

“Sherlock has someone to introduce you to,” John said, and Sherlock turned his own wide eyes on his friend, who prompted him with a firm, encouraging nod.

Sherlock’s mind stalled for another moment before he lifted up a stiff, formal hand toward John.
“Yes. This is Dr John Watson,” he said to his parents, and John let out a huff of air, but gamely reached out to shake hands with his mother and father, who both still looked nonplussed, but as if certain ideas were starting to form.

Then his mother exclaimed, “Oh – John!” and shook her head as whatever it was that she’d been starting to think was replaced by the realisation of whom he was.

“Yes, John is the one who’s been assisting in and documenting the work I do; you might have heard me mention him.”

“Maybe once or twice,” she said with some irony. “Of course, hello. It’s been a hell of a day – a week – but it’s a pleasure to meet you after all of this time.”

She shook John’s hand with warmth, though she still looked disconcerted by the odd lead-up to the introduction.

“My parents, Siger and Lydia Holmes,” Sherlock continued.

“Even our eldest has mentioned you Dr Watson, so it’s very good to finally put a face to a name,” Siger added, though he also looked uncertain.

“'John,' please. And it’s wonderful to meet you as well,” John said, and Sherlock noticed that beneath the geniality his friend was bemused himself as he took in Sherlock’s parents. Sherlock had said next to nothing about them through the years, and he could read in John’s expression and his body language that whatever he had been expecting of the people who had raised the Holmes Brothers, this was not it.

In another time, other circumstances, introducing John to his mother and father would’ve been a monumental step in lifting the curtain on his past, and would’ve been a significant concession in privacy because in its own way it also threatened John’s perception of him. Introducing them was nothing to what learning of Irene and Nero had done, though, so it mattered very little now.

“I’m so sorry we aren’t meeting you under better circumstances,” his mother was saying. “The two of us must look a dreadful mess.”

“No, I’m the one who’s sorry for intruding. This is a family moment and—”

“Oh now that we’ve all met we’re all family,” she said bracingly though there was a small catch in her voice, and Sherlock saw John give her a small but genuine smile. “Mycroft might be in hospital, but we know that it’s thanks to you that our youngest is still well and safe, and we—”

“All right,” Sherlock interrupted sharply before they could proceed further with this embarrassing and time-consuming tangent, and John gave a nod and stepped back, crossing his arms behind him. Nonetheless, the exchange had provided Sherlock with a way into this at last, and he took a deep breath.

“John didn’t mean himself—although yes, he warrants introduction too. But if you’re going to call this a ‘family’ moment, he’s not the only one who should be included.”

Three pairs of eyes fixed onto him once again, and after a moment even Andrea looked up from her phone to watch things unfold.

“Before I proceed, though, I’d like to make it clear that this is very new information for me as well. I didn’t wilfully withhold anything from the two of you, and you’re finding out almost as soon as I—”
“Oh heavens Sherlock, out with it!” his mother interrupted, and John gave a small, humourless chuckle.

Sherlock shot him a glare that John absorbed with a slow, impenitent blink, and it occurred to Sherlock that he was using this as just another delaying tactic.

He swallowed and gave a resolute mental nod, deciding that he was unable to tell he had better show.

Pivoting, he circled the car, opened the door, unbuckled Nero and pulled him from his carseat, then re-joined the group. He kept his eyes fastened on the top of his son’s head until the last moment, when with great effort he raised them back up to his parents.

He found them both staring at Nero with identical blank, uncomprehending expressions, though Sherlock could see emotions start to churn in the depths of their eyes as notions of his identity began to materialise.

“Is he… yours?” Sherlock’s father asked John with a distracted air of polite inquiry, but his voice was flat from doubt and confusion, and when he peered at the baby and then back at Sherlock his expression became even more clouded.

Without tearing her eyes from Nero’s face Sherlock’s mother reached out a groping hand for her husband’s arm, then grasped onto it hard, her chest beginning to rise and fall with rapid, unsteady breaths.

For a time it seemed that his parents were caught up in suspended animation, forming a frozen tableau of shock and disbelief.

“Sherlock, this child…” his mother started, finally breaking the spell. “Good Lord, he looks just like—oh, but that’s – he can’t be… can he…? Is – Is he…”

Sherlock had never seen his mother so at a loss for words – she could talk the hind legs off of a donkey, as his colourful uncle used to say – and Sherlock summoned up all the force of his will to complete the thought for her.

“Your grandson? Yes. This is Nero. ”

For some reason he found it easier to introduce Nero like that, rather than as my son. He had found his way to acceptance in his fatherhood, but incorporating into his life such casual references to Nero like that would take much more time.

“Well it’s obvious, isn’t it?” he said, finding in all this foreignness some comfort in condescension. “I know my powers of observation are a bit above the norm but surely it’s not hard to—”

“Well yes, but… Darling, it isn’t the resemblance that we’re finding so…!” his mother interrupted with a choked, incredulous laugh, and then with a look of combined infatuation and greed, she released her husband and moved forward.

Sherlock readied himself for her embrace but she ignored him and gathered up Nero into her arms. To his surprise he felt a mild pulse of jealousy, though it was quickly allayed by the new look on his mother’s face. He recognised it: it was an expression of the anticipation, fascination, and elation that Sherlock always felt at the discovery of a new and compelling case.

Nero had gone good-naturedly, and was now resting one hand on her shoulder for balance as he swivelled at his waist to look around the circle of people. He cracked a slow, shy smile, clearly
enjoying being the focus of so much unwavering attention, and the discovery of yet another familial trait unnerved Sherlock. He saw the chain of Holmes, extending from the past into the future, connecting him to his family in a way he never had been before, at least not beyond his brother. Now what was ‘obvious’ was the way in which Sherlock’s mother was in him, and in turn how Sherlock was in his son.

He looked at his mother and father, people he’d taken for granted at best, and whom he’d viewed as antagonists and embodiments of willful mediocrity at worst, people to whom he’d set himself up in opposition for so long as the embodiment of the conventional and mundane, and felt a new inkling of kinship and understanding with them. The prospect of parenthood daunted him in a way that nothing else ever had, not even taking on his recovery those years ago, and it gave him a faint appreciation for the attempt they’d made to provide children such as he and his brother with structure and loving stability, even at the most trying of times.

His parents huddled around the baby, their expressions both awed and ravenous as they looked over every inch of him, and for the first time since learning of Nero he witnessed first-hand how the infant affected someone beyond himself.

In his work Sherlock had seen first-hand how the loss of a child could devastate or even destroy a community, but he had never paused to consider that the inverse might be true – that the addition of a child could build and strengthen it.

His father lifted a finger and put it into Nero’s hand and Nero obliged to hold of it, his smile widening to reveal half a dozen new white teeth, and in unison they both broke out into great smiles themselves, tears springing into their eyes.

“How?” Lydia asked as she stroked the back of Nero’s head, just where his hair curled into fine tendrils.

“We never thought…” his father started but trailed off, too engrossed with his grandchild to finish the thought.

“Never,” his mother repeated fervently.

“Don’t think any of us did,” John put in, deadpan, and Sherlock’s parents looked up slightly taken aback, but then their lips twitched in appreciation.

“He’s so like Sherlock was…” Siger marvelled after returning his attention to Nero, and Lydia nodded, her eyes glazing as she was transported by memory.

“He really was the sweetest thing. Could be fussy, but what a charmer. The only time he ever gave us any real trouble was when we laid him down to sleep…” She gave an indulgent chuckle. “Then he raised holy hell.”

“Never wanted to miss a thing,” Siger added with a soft smile.

Sherlock mentally flinched and glanced over at John, expecting to see him working hard to suppress a smirk and not to make a comment. Instead he found that his friend looked interested and slightly touched.

His mother’s eyes suddenly cleared as her look of nostalgia was replaced by one of suspicion.

“But what about his mother, Sherlock? Who is she? Where is she?”

At the mention of The Woman his heart gave a hard, urgent thud, though he managed to keep his
“You’ve met her,” he said cryptically, and Lydia cocked her head to study him through narrowed eyes.

After only a moment her expression honed into one of realisation and triumph.

“It’s the woman, that woman – yesterday, here – yes?”

“Yes, ‘The Woman.’”

In his peripheral vision he saw John’s chin jerk Sherlock’s direction as he heard the salutation in the way Sherlock repeated his mother’s words.

“Her name is Irene Adler.”

“Irene Adler… I knew she wasn’t just a client!”

“No, as it turns out, she isn’t…” he said, although more to himself, as he recalled how they’d found their way to an uneasy rapprochement at Baker Street, back when they had both still been on the defensive and trying to discern where the other stood.

Warmth filled the chilled hollows in his chest at the fact that they’d been able to dispense with all of that. The circumstances they now faced were perilous in the extreme, but he far preferred the black and white nature of their situation to that ambiguous hell. He knew precisely who he was and how to behave during what came next.

“We– we didn’t think you liked women,” his father said quietly, still transfixed by his grandson’s face. Nero lifted both arms to give an excited, flailing wave, as if he were conducting an invisible orchestra. “Not like Mycroft per sé, just… not interested.”

“Yes, well,” Sherlock said curtly as his face heated, “what’s the ‘exceptional objects’ rule in maths? You should remember, Mother.”

She clicked her tongue with impatience and repeated in the authoritative voice he recollected all too well from his own childhood that meant that she was serious, “But who is she, Sherlock?”

He opened his mouth but for the third time in almost as many minutes found himself in the unfamiliar position of having no words ready to speak. Really, though, how could he answer that, such a paradoxically simple yet impossible question?

Less than 24 hours had passed since the second time he had asked Irene that same question but in reverse, when he knew she would answer him without pretence or deflection.

Who am I to you?

She had replied in the only way they ever had framed their meaning to one another, and the only way they ever could. To attempt to describe it in any other manner would only minimise and undermine what they meant to each other.

My exception.

Perhaps it was all of his chance reflections on family, but again he thought of his uncle. The man had been a person of deep faith, active in their local CoE parish and somewhat evangelical about it, albeit progressive. When Sherlock was a young adolescent he rejected any concept that couldn’t be
described using observable terms and descriptions, saving his most fervent disdain for anything pertaining to God or the spiritual. His uncle had attempted to convey the concept that while (his) God was infinite, language was a human construct and therefore could never accurately convey the reality of something so immeasurable. Lacking the proper vocabulary for something did not mean that it didn’t exist, just that people were limited and therefore inadequate to the task.

Sherlock had been equally dogmatic, but his religion was logical empiricism, and his patron saints were Neurath, Hempel, Hume, and Ayer. He had dismissed his uncle’s premise with the absolute certainty and contempt that only a freshly-minted intellectual can muster.

In retrospect, one reason he had resisted Irene’s pull for so long was because he’d still been of that same mind-set, and he hadn’t been able to define how or why he was drawn to her.

After their meeting he’d wracked his mind for labels, though even that was difficult in the context of such an unfamiliar situation. Was it simple intrigue? Admiration? Some sort of recognition? Was he intimidated by her? Did she only superficially appeal to him because he liked the way she reflected him? Was he physically attracted to her? If yes, did he want to act on that in any way? And how was the equation of answers to those questions different every time he thought about her?

The very process of considering the matter had become as nebulous, overwhelming, and confusing to him as the feelings themselves, because he simply did not possess the tools or systems with which to frame them, and that was unprecedented for him. Without vocabulary to describe it he could not then explain it, and that meant that there was no function by which he could compartmentalise and subvert it, which made it dangerous.

Having no notion how to react to her he’d ignored her as best he could, although he had never attempted to dismiss her from his mind. Aside from the fact that he’d suspected it would be something easier said than done, she was far too interesting for that.

It was only when he had been driven by her loss to express himself through the language of music, with its altogether different yet no less valid rules of expression, that he’d connected what his uncle had been attempting to convey more than twenty years before with what he was experiencing.

Whatever Sherlock felt, it might not be quantifiable but it was unequivocally real, and unless he intended to actively ignore its existence in perpetuity he had no choice but to accept the irrational into his life.

…Though he still considered organised religion a load of tosh.

He realised that he hadn’t answered his mother and judging by the raised eyebrows on everyone’s faces, quite a bit of time had passed.

“Technically at one point she was a client. We’ve known each other for several years, actually—”

“I think we can all gather that,” his mother said with a pointed look at Nero.

“But… you said you just found out?” she went on, apparently recalling how he’d prefaced the introduction. “She kept this from you, kept your child from you?”

She tightened her hold on Nero as her fair complexion began to flush and her blue eyes sparked dangerously. From us, they said.

“She had reason, Mother.”

“Look, I’m not condoning anything.” John stepped in as Lydia opened to mouth to argue, her frame
swelling. “But it appears she was in danger and felt that it would be safest for the baby if she was in hiding.

“And our son couldn’t have helped? He’s Sherlock, for God’s sake! No one else in the world is better equipped to make sure Nero would be safe.”

Siger put a calming hand on Lydia’s back but John made a noise of reluctant agreement in his throat at that, and she whirled around to fix her gaze, as bright as her son’s and just as unrelenting, onto him.

“So, you know her.”

“We’ve met several times, she, er…”

John shifted his weight and glanced towards Sherlock, but Sherlock remained silent and straight-backed. His outward appearance gave every indication that he was uninterested in and perhaps even irritated by the conversation, but in fact he was keen to hear how his friend might describe Irene when required to be politic, and he didn’t want to influence John’s words in any way.

“She must be extraordinary…” Siger said in faint speculation, leaving the rest of his thought – to capture our son’s interest - unspoken.

“Yes—yes, she is that,” John answered, seizing on the morally-neutral descriptor with obvious relief.

Yes, she is, Sherlock repeated with silent vehemence, and then a flare of apprehension and anticipation seized him, tearing him from the topic and setting his thoughts on the work to come.

“Andrea, is the helicopter ready?”

“Not quite, but we should make our way up there now.”

“Helicopter?” Siger asked, his brows creasing again, and in a different situation Sherlock would’ve laughed at his perpetual look of confusion.

Instead he faced his parents and pulled a quiet breath into his lungs. He could never give his mother an adequate answer about The Woman (although apparently his confession in the car had made some impression on John), but he could feed them some information, at least.

“You said you knew I’d make sure to keep Nero safe, and you’re right. That’s what I’m doing. What we – Irene and I – are doing, with John’s help. But if we don’t go at once, everything will be compromised. I won’t, I can’t, risk that.”

“Is she responsible for – for whatever this is?” his mother demanded, her voice still formidable but sounding close to breaking.

“No,” he said, and the quiet intensity of his conviction made his mother relax her posture ever so slightly.

“And you’ll be leaving Nero with us…”

“With protection obviously, and only for the short-term, a couple of hours – the night at most. But yes, you’re the only ones I trust. You’re to go home directly, and there the security system will be armed at full capacity.”
Lydia nodded at that, but Siger’s confusion was clearing at last, replaced by the gleam of emotional perceptiveness he occasionally showed.

“Would you have told us if you didn’t need our help?” he asked softly.

Sherlock’s lips pressed into a colourless seam, and he let out a sigh through his nose.

“…Eventually.”

His parents exchanged a glance, but then his mother shifted Nero to the side and gave Sherlock a hug that was no less fervent for being one-armed.

“Come back safe, darling. For this little one, and because I don’t think your father and I could bear it if anything should happen to you too, now that Mycroft—” She stopped short and then gave him a hard kiss on the cheek, but it was too late; every one of his vital responses had switched onto high-alert.

He pulled away. “What about Mycroft?”

“Just that he’s so hurt, as you know,” his father said quickly, but Sherlock didn’t relinquish eye contact with his mother.

“No. There’s more.”

“Mr Holmes, we’ve got to go,” Andrea interrupted.

“Mother.”

She broke the connection to look at her husband with a sigh of dismay.

“We weren’t going to say anything until we knew more, we didn’t want to worry you… But darling, Mycroft isn’t doing well. As you’re aware he has a living will, and doctors tell us…” she pressed her lips together, shaking her head.

“He’s approaching the baseline for executing his will,” Sherlock said, his voice flat.

The image of his elder brother surged once more into his mind, short-circuiting all other thought. Sherlock’s compromised state when he’d seen Mycroft rendered it imprecise, but carried all the dread he’d felt in that moment, making it like the lingering spectre from a childhood nightmare.

“So we need you to be all right,” she answered, and this time her voice did break.

Sherlock gave a nod of combined acknowledgement and dismissal, though it was at odds with how he really felt. He hated to admit it, even within the privacy of his own mind, but he resented his mother for her slip of the tongue, and he was even more furious with Mycroft for causing him such distress when he could only cope with the simple emotion of hating him. Now he would have to work to subsume this burden of knowledge, and with everything else that was going on his efforts were wearing thin, and diverting energy and mental space required by the mission ahead.

“You be careful too, John,” he heard his mother add after a period of tense silence, and from the corner of his eyes he saw her reach out to grasp John’s arm. “Now that we’ve finally met I intend to hold onto all of you and never let go.”

John reached up to squeeze her arm back with his other hand, and he gave her an earnest nod.

“Andrea, please lead the way. John?”
John nodded, but Sherlock hesitated as his eyes landed on his infant son. Finding that he needed one last touch to sustain him through the upcoming operation he touched a hand to Nero’s face, and Nero looked up into his eyes, his own round blue ones radiating an innocent trust that daunted and challenged Sherlock in equal measure.

Then he directed a terse final nod to his parents, and turned on his heel, unsurprised but gratified to hear John fall into step behind him a moment later.

“So, those were your parents,” John said as they exited the lift on the top floor and moved towards the roof access door.

“Yes.”

“They’re—”

“Shut up.”

“I wasn’t going to say anyth—!”

“Not now,” Sherlock growled, and he was taken aback by the anger in his voice.

Clearly he hadn’t managed to clear his head the news that Mycroft’s prognosis had taken a turn for the worse, but he would have to ensure that that was dealt with well before they arrived on-site in London.

John had pushed out a sigh through his nose but didn’t seem offended, and that almost made Sherlock want to say something to soothe the sharpness of his words. But then they were on the helipad and the aircraft waiting for them momentarily pushed any other thought from his mind.

In spite of his bitterly divided feelings towards his brother, he couldn’t help but be impressed with the reach Mycroft commanded even in his comatose, near-death condition. They were to travel in London in a Sikorsky UH-60 Blackhawk, one of the stealthiest helicopters ever made.

He gave private thanks that Andrea was so competent. Thomson wouldn’t beat them to the location in London but Moran very well could, and Sherlock and company would require every advantage that surprise could afford them.

Still, the air pounded with an infrasonic pulse that set Sherlock’s teeth on edge, and the vibrating bass that he felt more than heard corresponded with the adrenaline drumming through him, doing nothing to ease his sense of agitation.

The four people in the helicopter were given headsets for communication, but aside from a short safety briefing by the pilot the ride was silent. Sherlock and Andrea had already agreed on both primary logistics and additional contingencies and there were no additional developments to discuss, and John sat unmoving and blank-faced. The events of the day had apparently caught up with him and put him into temporary stasis.

Sherlock noted then dismissed John’s state, and used the time to prepare himself; he had left the interaction with his parents compromised in a variety of ways and he couldn’t carry those things with him now. He didn’t go over anything pertaining to the task ahead because he was already duly familiar with its variables and his options, and he didn’t want to overcommit to any specific course because maintaining the ability to remain flexible and improvise was essential. Instead he focussed on the streets, cars, and landmarks streaking beneath them, using them as a kind of meditative tool.
Once he let go of the thought that one of the cars contained Irene, the sight scrolling below calmed him in some deep and fundamental way. At first he assumed that it was simply the comfort of the familiar, though he realised some time later that there was more to it than that.

For every three or four shops, schools, off-licenses or blocks of flats that he recognised in the grid of lights below, there was something that stood out as new and unfamiliar, and yet it didn’t affect his perception that this was still unquestionably his city and home. Even though its neighbourhoods were constantly changing to reflect and accommodate new demographics, various investments or defaults, or differing land-use needs, it remained overall its essential self, London. It was simultaneously the most beautiful and most hideous place he had ever known, but above all it was a living and evolving thing.

It was a multilayered metaphor he perceived intuitively far before he grasped it in any cognitive way.

He too could adapt, could evolve certain aspects of himself without sacrificing the whole of who he was, and who he had always been.

…He, too, could also be hideous.

The first thought calmed and reassured him and then the second one set him ablaze again, but in a new and necessary way.

He had not forgotten the pact that he and Irene had made for the sake of their child. Really, it had only legitimised the vow he had already made with himself during the darkest days of his exile, when he had believed that only his bullet in Moran’s head would enable his return, and he had become almost obsessed with pulling that trigger.

That lurking, impatient violence that was more visceral feeling than memory returned with a vengeance now, and only grew stronger the closer they drew to their destination. This time it wasn’t his return to his figurative life that he would be buying with his bullet, but something far more important: the literal lives of two people he would do anything to protect.

The helicopter began its descent just over Ealing, several miles from their final destination. Below, brick terraced houses stood out like streaks of drying blood across the darkening grey cityscape, and rail lines traversed the land like stitches on a medical student’s cadaver. They followed one track eastward, altitude steadily decreasing until the single line merged with a large hub. Just south of this interchange in a common called Little Wormwood Scrubs they set down, the muffled but still powerful whuff-whuff-whuff of the rotors concealed by the sound of passing trains and a thick verge of trees.

He exited the helicopter with his teeth bared in a half-subconscious snarl, and John leapt out nimbly after him, colour back in his face and vigour returning to his muscles at the promise of impending action.

Sherlock cut a straight line to the western edge of the common where a van bearing the insignia of a nearby storage facility was parked, then threw open its rear doors.

Lined up on benches spanning either side of the vehicle was a company of men in full tactical uniform: the members of Special Forces that Andrea had insisted upon, and were her condition for the use of the helicopter. Sherlock had been forced to agree – the helicopter had been essential to ensure beating Thomson to London – but he had convinced her to allow him (and now John) to approach first.
He turned to the ranking officer who was sitting in the first seat on the sight – *obviously in charge: slightly deferential posturing from the men around him, greater wear on his com button from issuing orders, several newer-grade items amongst his gear, positioned as the first man to exit the vehicle* – and drew himself to his full height, holding his tensed arms slightly from his body to make him look larger and more imposing.

“Captain, you understand that you are only to engage if absolutely necessary,” he asked in his most commanding baritone. “You’re here as a concession and a last resort.”

“Sherlock Holmes, I presume,” the other man said drily through his tactical headgear. “Yes. We’ve been briefed.”

Sherlock acknowledged that with a sharp nod then turned away, only to face him once more, though he didn’t quite resume eye contact.

“Thank you.”

From a strategic standpoint he shouldn’t put off a potential ally. The stakes were too high for him not to cover all his bases, and although he did think he and John, and then Irene, could handle things on their own, there was no room for the luxury of arrogance here.

Sherlock glanced at his watch to confirm that they were still slightly ahead of schedule, then pulled out his phone to check on the traffic conditions between the westernmost suburbs of London and this industrial but central point, and after a moment of calculation he determined that Thomson and Irene were arriving when expected. That done, he pulled out the weapon, and heard John making a sound of amused recognition when he spotted his gun.

Sherlock ignored him, double-checking that all its parts were clear and functional to his satisfaction, before replacing the safety and concealing it again. Only when all these tasks were completed did he allow his eyes to move towards the northern line of trees and study the low grey structure he could just glimpse through them, beyond the unseen canal.

It suddenly occurred to him that he wasn’t certain what caused his blood to rise in anticipation more: striking Moran from existence after years of a blood-lust that had first unnerved and then sustained him, or being reunited with The Woman through this high-pressure collaboration.

His lips bent into a grim, predatory smile as he surveyed the buildings he was about to infiltrate. Tonight he might be on the side of the angels, but his intentions themselves had never been further from grace.
It's time.

Sherlock thought he'd expressed the thought to himself, but he saw John give a sharp, affirmative nod at his side. He moved to stride forward but then felt an obstruction, and when he glanced down he saw that Andrea's hand was clamped around his forearm.

He shot her an impatient glare and tried to draw back his arm, but she tightened her hold, her eyes drilling into his.

"Do not tactically engage with Moran unless necessary. You're not objective in this and I understand why, but don't lose sight of why you did this in the first place: to get to Moriarty. We need all the help we can get with that, which includes Moran."

In the course of planning Sherlock had succeeded in convincing Andrea that Moriarty was still alive and the architect behind everything that had happened, though due to her loyalty to his brother he stopped short of breaking it to her that Mycroft was the one behind the man's resurrection. He'd needed her resources in order to move forward, and he didn't want to test her willingness to cooperate. Instead he'd pointed out that Irene Adler had already set a precedent for Mycroft being deceived about someone faking their own death, and that there were tactics and information at play that only Moriarty could do or know.

He'd also not mentioned his brother's involvement to gauge whether Andrea was complicit, but she hadn't shown any micro-expressions of relief, deceit, or guilt, and he'd concluded that Mycroft had kept her out of the plot as well. This hadn't surprise him; he'd already suspected that all official knowledge was restricted to Mycroft. If he'd had any help with logistics it would've been from low-level employees whom he'd assign to different aspects of the cover-up so that no one could piece together the bigger picture.

That also meant that any knowledge of Moriarty's survival would die with Mycroft ergo why he was shot. The fact that his brother had managed to survive (so far) the assassination attempt was the only mistake Moriarty, Moran, and Thomson had made—until now.

At Andrea's caution Sherlock's first instinct had been to bristle, but an instant later he realised that there was more to her words than an attempt to command the situation.

Andrea had cooperated with Sherlock at every step of the way, risking internal investigation and even criminal charges in order to equip him with resources, and facilitate the charade for Thomson and the police officers that morning in his parents' house.

It occurred to Sherlock that she was almost as invested in defeating Moriarty as he and Irene were, and for the first time he contemplated what Mycroft meant to her on a personal level. It was clear to him that they weren't romantically let alone physically involved, but what they did share was more complex than that of employer and employee. There was an understanding between them, and as
much of a symbiotic relationship as either of them were capable—and based on the risks Andrea was taking to get what she considered justice for Mycroft, there was unexpected sentiment there as well.

He looked into her eyes and saw confirmation of his thoughts in the way they pierced his. For only the second or third time in their entire acquaintance, she was allowing him a glimpse beneath the assiduous poker face, and though it was still faint he saw her distress and anxiety.

Nonetheless he knew things that she didn't, and he also knew that Moran would never talk. He might not be overly bright but he was Moriarty's man through and through, and that meant he would've learned a thing or two about withstanding interrogation from him.

In another situation, Sherlock might've taken this as a challenge and made sure to take the man alive, if only to see if he could manipulate him into revealing something. But this wasn't like any situation he'd faced before, and at that thought, the same primal feeling he'd had in the helicopter, the one that had nothing to do with the adrenaline-rush he got from the work, roiled through him like magma. In part Andrea's motive for participating in this operation was to get justice for Moran's past sins, and his and Irene's motivation were the largely the same.

"I take your point, but don't forget that we had an agreement," he said. "Thomson is yours – Moran is ours. Don't interfere."

She studied him for the length of two heartbeats before she gave him a wary and reluctant nod.

At that he straightened his coat in one jerking motion, turned, and strode towards the far edge of the commons to a small gap in the hedgerow.

"You're going to kill him anyway, aren't you?" John said matter-of-factly from off to his right as they crossed the grass.

"I don't go into something like this with my course already decided, John, not when so many variables might come into play. …Though it is a potential outcome, yes."

John didn't say anything to that, and in silence they exited the common and made their way past vacant gas silos and lots filled with scrap metal, though just as they approached the wide rail interchange Sherlock pivoted to their left and took them up a side staircase to the bridge that spanned the railway and canal.

"A bit anticlimactic…" John's dry voice came from his right as they began to cross.

The helicopter had to be set down on Wormwood Scrubs both because it was the most viable landing site and to prevent the sound of the rotors from tipping off Moran, but unfortunately this meant that Sherlock and John had no choice but to cross the canal, and there was no way to do that but by bridge. Evening commuters and lorry drivers streamed by them, oblivious to the imminent, potentially deadly mission of the two lone pedestrians, and though Sherlock knew Thomson would be approaching from a different direction it still made him anxious to be so exposed. So he couldn't agree with John; he would've been far more comfortable risking a game of chicken with freight trains to race across the swath of track, but the canal was far too wide to jump at this point. Crossing the bridge might be more mundane, but it was also the far most dangerous portion of the approach.

Fortunately they made it to the other side of the bridge without incident, and Sherlock peeled off to the right and took the side-stairs two at a time back down, which accessed the walkway bordering the north side of the canal. He let out a breath he wasn't aware he'd been holding as they passed
under the bridge and then moved into the cover provided by the large trees that lined the water. Yet the nervous energy he'd felt didn't abate – it increased.

No matter how clear he and Irene were on the plan they'd concocted, as well as an array of contingencies, things could always go awry. As he'd remarked to John when they'd first met, there was always something. But never had so much relied upon the strengths of his mind prevailing. The hardship and tolls of his time in exile would be nothing compared with what he'd lose now if this gambit of theirs went wrong, and the guilt of deceiving John would be nothing to the guilt of his role in getting Irene killed.

He gave into that powerful, raw feeling one last time just to bleed some of his tension, and then reined it in for good and cleared his mind. He didn't go over the various strategies either though; if things became too rehearsed he would lose a bit of the mental litheness that enabled him to improvise, and he had to be ready for that.

He led John off the walkway and through the low vegetation between the path and the buildings set on a low rise, to a point where a corrugated aluminium fence topped with razor wire joined the corner of a large warehouse. John eyed it warily but Sherlock threw himself up the vertical face without hesitation. In his time away he'd faced so-called obstacles like this on a regular basis, and now a bit of barbed wire could barely slow him. If the wiring had been electrified they'd have more of a challenge, but luck was on their side with that. As the sharpened edges of the fencing bit into his gloved hands he carefully slid his right leg under the razor wire, and then placed it on the interior lateral slat of fence and let it bear most of his weight. Then leaning away from the wiring by bracing his back against the building, he reached into his pocket for wirecutters, and balancing carefully, managed to get a portion cut away. He shoved it away along with the wirecutters themselves, then then swung his other leg over to stand on the slat, and gestured at John to follow.

John made a valiant go of it, running start and all, but he needed a long reach by Sherlock to grab the back of his belt to haul him the rest of the way over. On the other side Sherlock could tell that his friend wanted a moment to catch his breath, but there was no time for that; Thomson and Irene would be arriving in moments.

As soon as they both had their feet on the ground he was moving again, and facing his next minor challenge in the form of the warehouse door's Kaba brand magnetic-sensor lock. With one glance he saw that it wasn't the most recent upgraded model and grinned in satisfaction, then pulled a small but powerful neodymium magnet from the inside pocket of his jacket. It took less than three seconds of pressing the magnet against the console for the console's light to turn green and the lock to click open.

John gaped, then turned his face towards Sherlock.

"That's all it takes?" he asked, and Sherlock smirked in answer.

The game might have unprecedented stakes, but that didn't mean he couldn't still enjoy this element of it.

He pulled the door open, and the two men stepped inside.

To Sherlock's relief he saw that between the very last dusky rays of the day's light filtering in from high, narrow windows lining the top of the corridor that stretched before them, and the heavy strand of utility lights in caged metal sconces, Sherlock and John could move forward without the aid of a torch, which might've been a tip-off.

He stopped abruptly when they reached a point of intersecting corridors, eyes scanning the area,
resting on and then moving past joists, beams, and bolted-down brackets before landing on the joint of column and diagonal braces above his head, just within his reach. He strode towards it, scooped a small black object out of another inner pocket, checked the object, then stretched up his arm to wedge it into the recess.

Turning around, he found the demanding eyes of John.

"It's one of my burner phones. I recorded Nero's crying this morning, set it as a ringtone, and disabled voicemail so that it can go on for as long as we need."

"Will they actually fall for that? No offense but it seems a bit obvious…"

Sherlock let out a soft, wry huff. Really, how long had John known him now? Surely long enough to know that anything that seemed obvious was superficial and misleading, and the appearance of obviousness was often rather the point.

"Let's see, shall we?"

He checked his watch – Thomson and Irene should just be arriving on the other side of the building now – then resumed his pace, his strides long but his footfalls silent.

"You know where to go…?" John whispered behind him.

"I've memorised the floorplans, obviously."

"But how do you know where they—"

"Process of elimination based on a variety of factors I can't get into right now – now shut up."

Several moments later Sherlock put out an arm that caught John across the chest, wordlessly setting a much slower and more cautious pace, and in another dozen metres they arrived at the entrance of a cavernous loading bay. With intense focus Sherlock searched for a sensor or wiring that would trip some sort of alarm and alert Thomson and Moran to their presence, but not seeing anything suspicious he lead them behind towering stacked pallets of tyres along the perimeter of the wall. They came to a stop approximately 160° away from the interior entrance, with the two-storey articulated steel doors that was partly open to a back lot not far to their left.

When they did stop Sherlock heard John utter the gasp that he himself had tightened his lips against, though he'd felt in the way his lungs had seized and his abdominal muscles had clenched as if preparing for a punch to the gut.

Standing near the loading door, casually flicking his fingers across the screen of his phone as if he were on some game app, was Moran. Next to him Thomson was staring with wary concentration at Irene, his gun fixed at her chest. She was staring back just as intently, but her expression was the predatory look of a cat waiting for its moment to attack.

Sherlock took a moment to assess the scene, not allowing himself to dwell on any thought (or anyone), only gauging if conditions were suitable to set their plan into motion. He saw nothing that indicated they weren't, so with a brief pursing of his lips he touched his own phone's screen and after a brief pause the distant sound of a distraught infant came rolling down the cement and steel corridors towards them.

Sherlock caught a glimpse of three heads, two dark and one a pale blond, snapping up towards the sound, then Moran gave Thomson narrow-eyed look of appraisal before jerking his chin in the direction of the sound.
"Go see what's going on."

"Are you mad?" the other man spluttered. "There's no way in hell my people would involve the kid in this operation, it's obviously a trick. We need to get out of here now."

"Your people?" Moran asked with a sharp, dangerous edge beneath the smooth baritone. "Look, you know what I meant—"

"But it's not 'your people' who have come for us, is it?"

"Holmes is unconventional, I'll grant you, but not even he—"

"Don't make me repeat myself, Neil," he continued in that same voice, which sent a pulse of repugnance and hatred through Sherlock, so that his hand tightened around the grip of the gun. "Despite all your so-called precautions you've lead them straight here, and now you'll deal with it. Go."

Thomson stared at Moran for a moment, and Sherlock saw the realisation click into place for him that Moran was well aware that it was a diversion. Sherlock had foreseen this, and the trick with Nero's crying on the phone was intentionally obvious so that even Moran would be able to gather that it was a ruse, and use it as a way to get rid of Thomson. Thomson's utility for Moran had ended, and having 'his people' deal with Thomson was an easier – if far less enjoyable – means of disposal. As for 'enjoyment' Moran thought he had Irene for that—thought being the operative word.

"All right…" Thomson said, his own voice soft and resigned, and he raised his gun and headed towards the remote but still-piercing sound, where – as he knew full-well – Andrea's strike team would now be waiting.

Thomson's utility to Sherlock had ended as well; Moran couldn't have told the man anything Sherlock would want to know or else he'd be lying dead – permanently silenced – on the cracked cement floor. Thomson had lead Sherlock to Irene, but he was irrelevant in what came next. That was strictly between Sherlock, Irene, and Moran.

"I know you're here, Sherlock," Moran said moments later in a raised voice which held a trace of breathlessness – was it excitement? Yes, as well as anticipation. "Come, let's talk… Or I start putting bullets into different body parts."

Sherlock's lip curled with distaste as he saw the SIG Sauer P226 now trained on Irene – so John wasn't the only one with an illicit military souvenir – but beneath his coat and shirt his heart began to pound as his own basest, most savage instincts roused in response to Moran's.

Moriarty and Irene both incited parts of him he hadn't really known before meeting them, but whereas with them the traits they evoked were complex and difficult to name and in some ways the flip side of one coin, with Moran they were terribly simple. He brought out violence in Sherlock, and made the desire to hurt and to kill sing in his blood and thrum through his muscles. It had been that way from the beginning of his awareness of the other man, starting with when he'd realised Moran had been the one to strap John in Semtex and point sniper rifle at them.

For the first time since the small group had come into view Sherlock rested his eyes on Irene, allowing himself a moment to assess her general state of being. Female prisoners weren't required to wear uniforms but she had only been wearing a dressing gown at her arrest, and in the dull grey pullover and matching sweats she had on she looked impossibly small.
That was good; Irene Adler's perceived weaknesses were actually strengths. They drew the unworthy and over-assured into her trap and by the time they realised their mistake, it was too late—Sherlock knew this from personal experience, several times over. Irene looking vulnerable would only make Moran more vulnerable, especially since he was the sort of man that preyed upon perceived defencelessness. In the haze and adrenaline of the prospect of violence he'd overlook nuances even more than usual.

Sherlock was having his own, if quite different, instinctive reaction to how small and pale Irene looked. Although this entire scenario was manufactured on their parts he couldn't help but seethe at seeing Irene held captive like this again. The way the other man casually jerked Irene in one way or the other as he shifted impatiently made the bloodlust singing in Sherlock's veins escalate into a roar.

Moran wasn't looking directly at her and so when she met Sherlock's eyes Irene took the opportunity to give him a faint but sharp and laconic smile. At that, what he felt emotionally synced with what he knew cognitively: that they had designed this, that they were in control.

Fortified by the thought he stepped neatly from behind the stacks of tyres, only leaving his hand holding the gun concealed, interrupting a five-second countdown from Moran.

For a moment the two men stared intently at each other from across the ten-metre space between them. They were two prizefighters sizing up one another, although the sort of calculations each was making could not have been more different—to Moran's distinct disadvantage, Sherlock thought with ferocity.

Moran made several slow, mock genteel claps, gun still in hand, then gave a quick bow of his head.

"Well-done on finally tracking me down Sherlock, but I have to say that I never took you for the sort to bring along back-up," he said, the first to break the silence just as Sherlock had wanted. "Jim did have me expecting more from you."

His voice still sounded urbane and charming, and betrayed no trace of the monster he really was. That told Sherlock that he was confident and felt in-control, which was even more to Sherlock's advantage.

"What, John? He's in Croatia, or doesn't your master keep you up on things?"

Moran made a soft, derisive sound, but to Sherlock's relief it didn't seem to be because he knew Sherlock was lying. "I don't give a toss about John Watson. If you're here it's because Thomson led you here, and it's obviously his people who are getting ready to intercept whoever goes to check on that noise. But I can appreciate you removing the people who don't matter here."

"Oh don't flatter yourself, Sebastian, you're just something to cross off my to-do list. One more thing standing in the way of what I'm really after."

Sherlock could tell that Moran hadn't liked that, and in fact it had been designed to bring out the brute from behind the façade of civility, but Moran managed to hold onto his mask, barely.

"You're not the only one with backup." Moran bluff, still sounding relatively smooth and amiable. "You being here for the transfer isn't going to stop it."

Sherlock made a contemptuous sound. "Please, there's no one else here. We both know that you're the only disposable backup in this situation."
In the low halogen light Sherlock saw the vein in Moran's forehead pulse and his eyes take on a sudden darkness, and Sherlock threw himself sideways behind the pallets a fraction of a second before a shot rang out in the vast room, the explosion reverberating from all sides in a deafening tumult of noise. He could certainly see one thing the footsoldier had in common with his master – extreme volatility, although whereas with Moriarty it was a calculated loss of control, with Moran it was just unchecked indulgence.

John made a convulsive movement towards him, but Sherlock put out a quelling hand and he stilled.

The room was silent for several moments, the only sounds the echoes of the gunshot ringing in Sherlock's ears, his heartbeat pounding against his eardrums, and his and John's rapid breathing.

He took a moment to slow his breath and heart then peered around the edge of his makeshift shelter again.

He saw at once that there was no longer a trace of that flash of he'd seen a moment before, but Moran's demeanour hadn't returned to the farce of civility either. There was a new swagger in his powerful frame and his lips were pulled back over his teeth in a half-snarl, half grin.

Firing his gun had done something to centre the man and release his tension, and Sherlock saw that he now had a long, muscular arm wrapped around Irene's torso, and the SIG Sauer was pressed to her temple. She was stiff and composed, but her eyes burned into his in silent command. They told him that he only had a hair's breadth of room to manoeuvre, and that he'd better he not blow it.

That simultaneously set his heart pounding again and cleared his mind; for him her look was the equivalent of Moran firing his gun.

Pulling his head back in he reached into the pocket of his coat again, and this time the phone he withdrew was his own, which he held out to John. John looked at it with total incomprehension, before raising his eyes to meet Sherlock's.

"I'm expecting two texts in the next few moments, the first from an unknown number and the second from Andrea, so give me some sign when you see them," he instructed, his voice low and terse, and John's uncertain expression didn't change but he reached out to take the phone with a nod.

That done Sherlock re-emerged, though once more he kept gun-arm concealed.

"Is that out of your system? Good, now maybe we can talk."

Moran's lips drew into a deeper sneer. "Yes, I think you were just telling me about how I'm just standing in the way of what it is you really want," he said, tightening his arm around Irene and shoving the barrel harder under her cheekbone, causing her to wince.

"What? No, I wasn't referring to the woman," Sherlock asked, managing to sound dismissive despite the involuntary racing of his heart at the sight. "You're the ones who brought her into this, but Moriarty and I had already been at this ages before I even met her."

It was almost the identical play as the one Irene had used in the mountains outside of Karachi, when she had convinced their captor that she didn't care about Sherlock. The real difference was that this time the denigrated party was fully involved in the deception, and really that was the only way it could work with the tables turned, since Sherlock could never fool Irene about how much he cared about her. He'd already tried that recently, and failed.
"Oh? Then you wouldn't mind if I shot her in the head..."

Sherlock could see Moran's finger stroking the trigger like he was caressing a lover, with all of the excitement that came with that, and to Sherlock's disgust he supposed that to a man like Moran, in a sense he was.

For her part Irene tensed, but she didn't move. They were still multiple steps ahead of him, and she knew it.

"Well I'd rather you didn't," he said drily. "But it's an empty threat because you do that and you're as good as dead yourself."

He hated to admit it but there was very little about Moriarty of which Sherlock could be certain. Still he was fairly confident that he had ordered Moran not to harm Sherlock himself. After all the trouble the other man had gone to, that would be his privilege alone.

He thought Irene had a temporary stay for the same reason. Why else would Moriarty facilitate a fraudulent prison transfer to get a hold of her when an assassination like the attempt on Mycroft's life would be so much simpler?

Sherlock saw a flicker of acknowledgment and thwarted desire in Moran's eyes at Sherlock's statement, confirming his theory.

They had to proceed carefully, though. Moran clearly hadn't been prepared for this, they really had surprised him, and he didn't have anything prepared for contingencies such as this. As educated as he sounded he had little ability to improvise, so in a chaotic situation he could very easily revert to instinct, as the shot he'd already taken had shown. Granted, that had only been a venting-off of agitation and a warning shot, but Sherlock could see the man's desire for actual blood warring with his orders. He had to antagonise Moran just enough for his natural savagery to cloud what little judgment he had without pushing him over the edge.

He shook his head a little, resetting his thoughts.

"You aren't wrong about her having value to me," he said. "As bait. I'm the one who tipped off my brother's people about her. I engineered her arrest because then I knew that you'd come for her."

Moran seemed to digest this for a moment, then said, "That kid of hers is yours..."

Spoken by anyone else the words would've sounded sceptical or appalled or both, but Moran said them as if assessing the type of person Sherlock really was.

"So?" Sherlock asked in his flattest, most mechanical voice. "Besides the fact that I didn't even know it existed prior to a few days ago, based on what Moriarty has told you about me, do I really seem like the sort to care? My own parents and brother weren't on the list of people he deemed worthy of a bullet, so what does that tell you of my attachment to family? As I've told Moriarty: I may be on the side of the angels, but never mistake me for one."

Sherlock saw that Moran believed him, and why shouldn't he? After all, the best lies were those that resembled the truth as much as possible, and this was a hybrid of the actual truth, and what Moriarty believed to be Sherlock's truth.

In his peripheral vision he saw John give a jolt and for a split second he was thought it was in reaction to what he was saying, but then he realised that John was holding up his phone to indicate that the first text had arrived.
He tamped down his burgeoning excitement with effort, and refocused on Moran.

"Of the two of us you're the one who has more riding on her staying alive," Sherlock said, playing to the other man's innate cowardice, which he was starting to deduce could be just as powerful a motivator as his desire to inflict cruelty.

Moran paused, and then shoved Irene away from him with a grunt as if suddenly repulsed by the feel of her. Since his hold on her no longer served to terrorise or potentially murder her, it was very possible that he was. But considering that there was no longer a gun jutting into her face, Sherlock didn't much care.

Irene's pulse was visible at her throat even from his distance, but he knew that it wasn't because of fear for her life, but from the same rush of avid expectation and adrenaline that he was experiencing. The two of them versus Moran was never going to be the fairest of matches, but so far things had gone more perfectly to plan than he could've hoped.

The strategy devised in their early morning tactical session was that Sherlock would incite Moran into putting a gun to Irene's head, and then whilst distracted by Sherlock Irene would use the proximity to slip his phone off of him. She had assured Sherlock that she would be able to get into it, and from there she would use her unique talent to forward Andrea Moran's contact list from behind her back. She would then replace the phone whilst still in his grip, and Sherlock would de-escalate the situation so that she'd only have to tolerate a gun to her head for the duration of the plan.

Meanwhile, Andrea would have a phone prepared to clone the number that they determined was Moriarty's, and then link it to Sherlock's, so that any text or call he made would appear to be from Moriarty.

*One step down, one to go*, he thought.

The only variable was how long it might take Andrea and her people to discern which, if any (and there was the danger), of the numbers in Moran's contacts or call logs belonged to Moriarty. If anyone could figure it out, it was his brother's understatedly brilliant PA, but Moriarty was both brilliant and savvy, and may have insisted on Moran only memorising and never storing his number, as well as deleting the records after every call or text. But then, just as he was considering how to prolong to his conversation with Moran, John gave another start, and held the phone up to Sherlock's line of sight. Sherlock strained his eyes to the side and was just able to make out the second text.

*Number detected. Clone and intermobile link complete in 30 seconds.*

At that Sherlock felt a burst of complicated and powerful emotion, and at once he turned his head to Irene and allowed his eyes to broadcast a trace of the intensity he felt. She saw and understood it, and her chest rose and fell in rapid succession as they drew one step closer to an objective towards which they'd both been moving for years – both separately and together.

Oblivious, Moran grabbed a handful of the material at the back of Irene's neck, causing her to wince as strands of her hair got caught up in his fist, and the man started to back out towards the loading bay door, his guncocked and aimed towards Sherlock.

Sherlock ignored him for the moment. *Phone call or text? Text, obviously.* With a call Moran could answer without glancing down; a text he would have to read.

Sherlock quickly typed up a message long and complex enough to create a proper diversion, then
pressed Send.

Moran's phone gave a complicated chime, obviously Moriarty's signature alert, and Moran's face showed a mixed expression of surprise, annoyance, and apprehension. He kept the gun raised and his eyes trained on Sherlock, but released Irene's jumper and dug into his pocket.

The moment he darted a glance downward Irene was in motion, a blur of feline-like ferocity and grace.

Moran's weakness was his subordinacy to Moriarty, and although he was physically much larger and stronger than The Woman, a moment of Moran's concession to that weakness was all she needed.

She jabbed him in the solar plexus with her elbow with all her strength, and his hands flew open as all the air was forced from his body, which sent the gun clattering to the warehouse floor.

He recovered from the hit faster than Sherlock would've expected, and was only a half-second behind Irene as she dove forward for the weapon.

Sherlock saw that Moran stood a chance of overpowering her for it and that he would need to be proactive. With one smooth motion he stepped out all the way from behind the pallets, swung up his arm, and fired.

John lurched forward again, but Sherlock gave a violent shake of his head, and his friend made a frustrated, angry sound in his throat, but stayed put.

Sherlock's bullet whistled just over Moran's head, but to his frustration it didn't deter the other man at all; instead, face contorted, he pulled his arm back, his ropey muscles bunched under the fine percale of his shirt, and he sank a powerful punch into the side of Irene's face.

A surge of almost blinding rage exploded through Sherlock, and his eyes went to slits as he trained the gun on Moran's forehead. For a moment he too hovered on the threshold between pragmatism and desire, his trigger finger twitching as months and years of waiting finally led to this moment. After vacillating half a dozen times in the length of a heartbeat he relaxed his finger – but only because he wasn't nearly a good enough shot to risk it with Irene's dark head so close to his target.

The punch had been vicious yet it hadn't managed to slow Irene down; she was grimacing but it was more in determination than pain as she army-crawled towards the weapon. Moran threw himself on top of her, his body eclipsing hers by half again, and it was brute strength versus fierce instinct. For several heart-stopping moments it seemed that they were evenly matched, with Irene's resolve making up for her physical disadvantages, but when her hands closed around the butt of the gun, Moran's long arm matched her reach, and his fingers clamped around her wrist like a vice and slammed her hand hard against the cement floor.

Irene let out a hoarse cry and her fingers went slack, and after a few scrabbles at it, Moran managed to wrench it away from her.

Every one of Sherlock's vitals froze for the space of one eternal second, but instead of firing at either Sherlock or Irene Moran threw himself to his feet and made a break for the loading bay door.

At that Sherlock gave into instinct and squeezed the trigger of John's gun, but the bullet missed by several inches, and before he could take better aim the man was lost in the darkness.

Despite being unarmed Irene was up and after him not a full second later, and swearing vividly in his mind, he whirled towards John.
"Go fetch the backup."

"But—"

"GO!"

Sherlock didn't wait to see if John were complying, he was already sprinting after Moran and Irene. Once he was out of the warehouse and in open air he reeled about, scanning his surroundings for signs of movement. Night had fallen and although the canal was well-lit the building stood in between him and the water, and it cast a hulking shadow. He couldn't see or hear anything, and was about to calculate Moran's most probable escape route when several gunshots tore through the air.

He launched himself in that direction, away from the canal and towards the motorway, and as he rounded the waste management company's fence he caught a glimpse of Moran disappearing into a narrow slip road opposite, as well as Irene dodging cars and lorries in pursuit.

Sherlock began to let out a breath when she made it across, but then it seized in his lungs again when he heard three more shots fire off in succession. Grimacing, he sped up and sprinted headlong through a break in the traffic to close the gap between them.

Moran wasn't aiming to kill for fear of violating his orders, but Sherlock was still aware that there was only so far Moran could be pushed before his restraint broke.

Once on the other side of the road Sherlock ran full-out, pumping his arms and legs and feeling cold wind lash against his cheeks, and in several moments he was within a few paces of Irene.

Moran must have noticed him gaining; he jerked to a stop then hared off to his left, scaling over a shoulder-height brick wall.

Displaying the lithe and graceful athleticism that Sherlock had mostly seen in more intimate situations, Irene was over the side in the blink of an eye as well. He felt a pulse of vicarious pleasure at that, and one base instinct mingled unexpectedly with another: the savage, manic feeling pounding through him over Moran's imminent defeat.

He threw himself over the wall and landed on both feet in the nineteenth-century graveyard on the other side, then used the momentum to take off again without breaking his stride.

Moran spun around then went very still and aimed, and Sherlock could just make out his expression. Sherlock's giddy, predatory feeling receded like the tide before a tsunami as he saw that Moran was now no longer shooting to deter them, but to kill. Fortunately Irene had seen it too, and she dropped down to one knee behind a headstone the shape of an Egyptian obelisk just as Moran fired.

With The Woman temporarily out of range Sherlock took several shots of his own, and though he missed again – he never was the best marksman – Moran did stop shooting, and disappeared amongst the headstones.

How many rounds had Moran fired? Eight, he thought after a split second's recall. The SIG Sauer was a .357, so erring on the side of caution with the assumption that he'd started with a full clip, that meant there were seven remaining – though of course Moran was sure to have at least one additional clip on his person.

The thought that he still had so many shots remaining dosed Sherlock with fresh adrenaline and he picked up more speed. He almost lost his balance on the uneven ground, but he managed to stay on
his feet as he continued to close the distance between Irene and Moran and himself.

On they ran, through cracked slabs and worn stone figures of angels, lambs, and garlanded crosses, and Sherlock's lungs began to burn from their relentless pace and the frigid air. He didn't let himself slow, though; instead he gave into the feeling and used it to hone his fury and prepare himself for what was to come next.

Ahead of them he saw another brick wall suddenly materialise out of the darkness – the opposite perimeter of the graveyard – and in the next instant Moran was over that as well.

Several more gunshots rent the night as he used the wall as cover to fire on them, and this time Irene let out low, guttural cry and crumpled to the ground.

At first Sherlock thought he had been shot as well. His sight blurred out everything except Irene, whom he saw in hyper-focused clarity, and all he could hear was high-pitched humming, but after the first heart-stopping second everything came rushing back with unprecedented lucidity.

It only him took two or three seconds to reach her, but he wasn't aware of time, only of the white-hot blankness of fear.

Her face was twisted into a grimace and she was gasping hard, and perspiration was rapidly beading up around her hairline.

"Are you all right," he breathed, roving his hands over her torso as he desperately took in as much of her as he could to ascertain the seriousness of her injury.

"I'm fine, Sherlock – go! We can't let him get away, we need to finish this."

"Where are you——"

"It's just my arm," she panted, and he saw the gash of grey fabric and the sheered-away section of flesh just before she pressed a hand to it. She hissed through her teeth as blood squeezed through her fingers, and he wrestled between fury that she'd been shot and relief that it wasn't worse.

"GO!" she cried, her voice hoarse, and her eyes met with a blend of silent plea and command. The sheen in her eyes had much more to do with frustration than pain, and after only a second or two he compressed his mouth, his teeth biting into his lips, and gave her a sharp nod.

He swivelled and sprang into another sprint, and though at first the sound of her breathing erratically against the pain carried through the night air, he forced himself to ignore it.

How many rounds did Moran have left now?

The emotions of seeing Irene shot impaired his recall, but as he channelled his physical energy into the pure exertion of running he was able replay the incident.

Four, he thought. That means the conservative estimate of three remaining.

On the other side of the cemetery wall he had to kick his way through a verge of low vegetation and scrub, before he burst out onto the canal pathway. He had only a second to take in the moored longboats and orient himself before three bright flashes ahead nearly blinded him.

The air next to his right cheekbone whistled as the bullets ripped through it, but he wasn't concerned with the near misses, only the sound of unproductive clicking coming from Moran's weapon.
He knew of people who could replace cartridges in as little as four seconds, and he had no doubt that Moran could match if not beat that time. He shoved John's gun into the back of his waistband and launched himself forward, grabbing at Moran's wrists and digging his finger into the taut tendons there, but Moran rotated the hand not holding the gun and yanked it free, then aimed a hard strike at Sherlock's throat.

Sherlock jerked his head out of the way and dug in his fingers harder, but the other man jabbed his elbow just below Sherlock's third and fourth knuckle, and with a grunt of pain Sherlock was forced to let go. Without missing a beat he closed the same hand around the gun's barrel, and the men began a vicious game of tug-of-war. They stared unflinchingly into each other's eyes throughout, their nostrils flaring as they both panted like thoroughbreds, and there was no sound except their breathing and an occasional grunt of effort or pain. Moran's face was bleached of all colour by the harsh industrial lights that lined the canal, but his eyes were like hot coals as the two men continued to grapple at the weapon, their fighting getting dirtier by the second.

After stomping down hard with the edge of his heel into Moran's right instep, causing the other man's knee to buckle, Sherlock finally got his hands around the gun and relaxed for a fraction of a second – not long enough that Moran could get it away from him but long enough for Moran to unconsciously lower his guard – before yanking it away with all his strength. In the same continuous motion he hurled it off into the canal, where it disappeared with an almost inaudible *plop*.

Moran didn't let the loss of his weapon deter him, and didn't pause as it sailed into the water. The moment it was out of his hand he switched his focus to the gun tucked at the back of Sherlock's trouser band, pinning Sherlock's right arm to his side with a bear-hug as he reached around the other side to snatch the gun. Sherlock summoned all his strength and in one spasm of effort he managed to free his arm and deal a punishing blow to Moran's exposed lower back.

It landed square on his left kidney and Moran let out a choking sound and hunched sideways, and Sherlock used the opportunity of his weakness to sink a punch of his own across Moran's face.

The strike landed just under the man's cheekbones and snapped his head like a tetherball, causing him to stagger backwards as if drunk. By the time he found his feet again Sherlock had moved back and was training the Browning on the centre of the other man's body mass.

Once again they faced each other, both breathing hard, sweat trickling in rivulets down the sides of their faces, and though Moran was clearly at a disadvantage, he gave himself a shake then raised himself to his full and considerable height and slowly flexed his hands.

Sherlock saw Moran spinning out plans of attack in his head as he looked down at Sherlock; he wasn't clever like Sherlock, Irene, or Moriarty but he did possess the amoral, animal-like instinct to survive by whatever means necessary.

Not releasing eye contact with Sherlock he subtly shifted his weight, first to one foot and then the other, taking an unobtrusive step backwards.

"I wouldn't do that," he said, twitching the gun a little. "It will take you almost two seconds to make it into the water but at this distance it would take less than a tenth of a second to shoot you."

Moran didn't say anything but stilled, continuing to glare at him in a mixture of contempt and speculation.

*It's time,* Sherlock thought again, and drew in a breath that didn't feel like it filled his lungs.
Though their brief but intense brawl had his blood singing in his ears and his heart heaving in his chest, he found it difficult to recognise that the moment of judgment and execution had finally arrived.

He rubbed away the sweat trickling with an impatient swipe of his forearm, took in another deep breath, and honed his aim.

Moran only looked on, his lip curling.

Do it, a voice inside his head commanded. Now.

All he had to do was compress the trigger, something he'd been fantasizing about for so long. He bent his finger, but didn't squeeze.

This time it wasn't his own voice he heard in his head, but Irene's, echoing what she'd said to him minutes before.

We need to finish this.

The thought of The Woman unleashed once more the rage he felt over her being shot; it was ready and immediate, and flooded through him. He embraced the burning, overwhelming feeling then agitated it further, summoning to mind every sin Moran had committed against Sherlock and those he loved.

Lestrade and Mrs Hudson in the crosshairs.

John, strapped into a coat of enough SemTex to level not just the pool-house but the entire surrounding block, red laser-sights dancing across his face and torso.

Irene, pale and grimacing in pain as blood oozed between the fingertips as she pressed a hand to her gunshot wound.

Nero.

Moran's expression flickered as he saw the resolve in Sherlock's eyes growing – the light and the dark not conflicting with one another but uniting towards a deadly purpose – and this time the half-step he took back was involuntary.

But when his face went pale Sherlock saw that he was no longer looking at Sherlock but at somewhere behind his shoulder, and after tightening his grip on the gun he allowed himself a quick backwards glance.

Irene was emerging out of darkness onto the path, and every aspect of Sherlock's being reached out to her in riotous response to the sight.

The fraying material around her upper right bicep was saturated in blood, but she had managed to tear off the strip of material from the bottom of her jumper and use it as a makeshift tourniquet. No mean feat with the use of only one arm, although it wasn't her dominant right arm that had been injured, and judging by the blood smeared on her face and mouth he deduced she'd used her teeth as well.

She looked grotesque, but Sherlock had never seen anyone more beautiful.

"Sherlock," she said. She looked feverish with her colour high and her eyes shining, but her voice was low.
He understood her perfectly, and put John's gun into her outstretched hand, then faced Moran again. His eyes were cold and unmarred by guilt as he handed off what he knew would be the means of the other man's death.

When Irene took ahold of the Browning all remaining insolence drained from Moran's face and there was a brief flash of panic, though he quickly schooled his features into patronising amusement.

"Ohhh," he murmured at Irene, "Yes, I know that expression - know it on an intimate level."

He bent his lips into a tight smile, though his eyes remained flat and reptilian.

"You're dying to pull that trigger – to know how good it would feel to watch me fall and see all awareness and life fade from my eyes… I know it because I know what I've put you through – this game we've played for the past year – but I also know it because I've been on the other side of the muzzle more times than I can count.

"And I also know you won't."

Irene's eyebrow gave a minute flick.

"I've gotten to know you and you might seem like you're all about impulse and vice, but we all know there's a lot more going on in that gorgeous head of yours, don't we?" he said in his most magnetic tone. "Killing me won't change a thing, it's an indulgence that won't let you win, and you know it. But put down the gun, and I'll tell you all about Moriarty – Jim. I can tell you everything, and then you can win. And I know that's what you really want."

At that unsolicited and very unexpected offer Sherlock's heart began to hammer as his mind reeled with sudden possibilities, slightly tempering his determination to see Moran dead. Irene's hand only tightened on the handle of the gun.

"You won't pull the trigger," Moran said, the faintest hint of sneer in his voice. "You have that kid of yours to think about."

Her face tightened and the blue fire he'd seen in her eyes the night they'd spent at his parent's flared.

"You're right," she said, her voice dead-calm. There was deep emotion in her, but that wasn't what made up her mind. Her decision was cold, rational, and calculated and had been made long ago, and Sherlock saw what was going to happen a fraction of a second before it did. There was only enough time to understand, not enough to suggest a stay of execution – just a stay, not a reprieve – to mine Moran for information.

Moran saw it too, and saw that there was no final appeal to be made to her, either logically or emotionally. For just an instant the mask of contempt and self-assurance slipped, and Sherlock glimpsed mortal terror.

He jerked as if to throw himself backwards into the canal but a shot rang out before he had the chance, and a blot of singed fabric and blood materialized on the left side of his chest.

He used his final instant of life to stare down at it, then his knees buckled and his tall figure collapsed before pitching back in a cumbersome arc, and splashing heavily into the water. There was no grace to his death and fall; it was as harsh and ugly as the life that the man had lived.

After the suspense of such a drawn-out ordeal the end was jarring and abrupt, and for a time there
were only the sounds of distant traffic, the quiet lapping of canal water, and his and Irene's heavy breathing.

Irene remained fixed on the spot, but after a minute Sherlock took several steps towards the edge and peered over the stone bank at the body. It was still cradled by the black water, though Moran's head was tipped back, submerging his wide, unseeing eyes and magnifying their final expression.

In a distant part of his mind Sherlock noted that Moran hadn't achieved the look of peace or stillness that many corpses did. He also noted that he didn't feel any resolution himself. Looking at the body didn't bring him the measure of satisfaction he had wanted and expected, and instead he found himself frowning.

Why?

Behind them Sherlock heard a running set of footfalls burst out from between the bridge piers and come to an abrupt stop, and the breathless voice of John exclaim, "I followed the sound of gunshots—are you—"

Sherlock blinked then turned to face him, just in time to see John's mouth snap shut as he took in the tableau before him and put things together.

"We're fine," Sherlock said after a short, strangely tense pause, and a fraction of a moment later it occurred to him that that wasn't quite the case. Yes, he and Irene had survived with no more than a flesh wound between them, but in the aftermath of achieving something he'd been not just working towards but anticipating for such a long time, something was off. Where was that sense of righteous purpose he had felt earlier, where was the triumph in this mission fulfilled, the sense of justice? He was certainly gratified that Moran would never threaten The Woman, their child, or anyone else again but his overall feeling in the wake of this was an odd sense of disquiet.

"Oh I'd say I'm better than fine," Irene said in that tone of mixed detachment and satisfaction that always slightly unnerved Sherlock.

Her expression was superficially composed, but her eyes burned with vindication and she radiated self-righteousness.

"But, your arm—what…" John started, but he trailed off when she turned away from him.

She lifted her face up to Sherlock's, her eyes seeking out his to share in this mutual, hard-won victory and the thrill of vindication that came with it, but when she saw his expression something in her eyes went blank and then chilled, reflecting the blackness of the canal. She had expected and sought something in him in the aftermath of this and he had somehow failed her, and whatever she had been extending towards him was snapped back in an instant.

"Good shot," he said, but it didn't cause the burning, expectant look she'd first sent his way to reignite.

He also couldn't shake the idea that something was off, though as his mind cleared from the immediate shock of the shooting, he dismissed the notion that he had any second-thoughts on Moran's death itself.

Because really, he had no reservations or doubts about the point-blank execution. As infuriating as it was that Moran had shot Irene, it sealed the case for self-defence (and in a critical way, that's exactly what it had been), but he didn't personally care about that.

To the other extreme, it wasn't as if he were envious of Irene's chance to pull the trigger either.
Before Irene's reappearance in his life Sherlock was convinced that he would be the one to bring down Moran, and it had perversely consoled him during his darkest times in exile. Much in the same way that people fatalistically considered one of the German bombs 'their' bomb during the London Blitz, Sherlock had considered the bullets in the chamber of his respective guns as 'Moran's.'

But ultimately the honours belonged to The Woman, and in the moment it had even given him a sick sort of thrill to watch her take out the man he'd wanted dead for so long.

So what then, in the aftermath of something that should have him euphoric with triumph, made him feel as if this achievement was actually a step backwards? Instead of triumph, why did he feel the same trickle of unease in his spine that had started when he'd realised that Moriarty was back?

Irene cast one last look on the body, which was now being buffeted against the edge of the canal like a water-logged tangle of rubbish bags, and for a brief moment her expression blazed up again. Then she moved towards him and he reached for her hand, but without breaking her stride she thrust the gun into his outstretched palm, brushing by his shoulder as she walked away.

He couldn't help but dart his eyes towards John to see if he'd witnessed the exchange, and immediately met his eyes. John pursed his lips and raised his brows but said nothing, and then averted his eyes to look at the canal, before returning his gaze to Sherlock and the weapon in his other hand – John's gun.

"Maybe you'd like to give that back now?" he said lightly, holding out his hand, but Sherlock pocketed it.

"Not yet."

He turned abruptly, his coat flying out in a circle around him, and followed The Woman just as Special Forces began to arrive on-site, streaming past him on either side like the dark currents of the water. For a time, he lost sight of her.

When Andrea passed by him she paused to give him a look almost as penetrating and perceptive as Irene's.

"I directed her to command," she said, and Sherlock gave a terse nod and made his way back towards the bridge.

He caught up with Irene halfway across its span, and without glancing in his direction or slowing her pace she said, "Take me back to my son."

"Irene, I—"

"Maybe it was a mistake to involve you, Sherlock," she said sounding distant, and he felt as if she had sucker-punched him in the gut. The sensation was immediate and intense, and for a moment he forgot how to breathe. Years of practice allowed his appearance to remain impassive, but he was sure that if she had been looking at him in that moment she wouldn't have missed the flash of hurt her words had caused.

Just at that moment, her eyes snapped onto his again, and then she stopped to face him fully.

"You thought you could do what it took to protect Nero, but we're really not the same, are we? I was wrong about that." Her voice was soft with disappointment and a trace of resentment.

"That isn't it—"
"Oh?" she interrupted in that faux-aloof, airy voice that always cut through his defences. "So the disappointment and judgment that I see when you look at me is what exactly?"

"There's no…” he started, but he paused and hardened his voice to show his sincerity. "It is a very good thing that Moran is dead. I'm not reneging on what we discussed."

She raised an eyebrow and then turned and continued to walk.

"Only we might've been able to learn something from him first," he said, striding after her. "He offered us information, and as Moriarty's pawn he—"

"He was more than just a pawn, Sherlock. He was a weapon, one that's been a threat to my child for almost his entire life. That ended today, and I won't apologise."

"I don't expect—!"

She made a derisive noise. "And please, he would never give Jim up – he was telling me what he thought would buy him more time. Don't underestimate Moran; he was intuitive in a way I recognise first-hand, and it's one reason he was so dangerous and so good at what he did."

He understood what she meant; Irene could infer people's secret desires, and Moran had been able to do the opposite and discern what people most feared. And they were also equally skilled at bringing those respective fantasies and nightmares to life.

"I never said we could've gotten him to talk," Sherlock said, and Irene pursed her lips but didn't interrupt him.

"Above all else the man's a coward, and once he understood what you meant to do he'd do or say whatever he could in order to survive and so the difference is - he offered."

"Obviously he's a coward," Irene shot back. "But that only further substantiates what I said because nothing we could ever threaten him with would compare with what Moriarty would do if he betrayed him, not even death. At least by our hand it would be quick and clean. So yes, he would say anything, and make all sorts of promises in the moment. But actually do anything? No."

She stopped again and looked up to meet Sherlock's eyes dead-on.

"His usual tactic of intimidating or physically overcoming the opposition failed, and so he was testing out my version of the game: trying to guess what it was I most wanted and then trying to offer it to me. But he failed because what he thought I wanted was Moriarty when what I really wanted was him dead."

She looked at him, her face a rigid as ice and her eyes just as cold, then turned on her heel and continued across the bridge, and he let her go.

Of course Irene was right, Moran would've never actually talked. No matter what the man had said in his final moments, Sherlock had been correct when he'd thought that the other man would never give up Moriarty. Unfortunately, accepting that premise meant ruling out another viable explanation for his unease.

Now alone on the same bridge he and John had crossed less than hour before, his friend's words came back to him.

"A bit anticlimactic…"
Was that all it was, then? he thought with a flicker of hope. Was his disquiet as simple as that?

That the reality of the incident had been unable to live up to long-term (borderline fanatical at times) expectation?

But no, that wasn't quite the right diagnosis either. For him his main concern had been stopping Moran, and though he may have injected some pathos into how that would happen, his primary objective had been met.

So what was it? he thought with an audible growl of frustration.

Too easy, something suddenly whispered in his mind, and he went very still, although his heart started to hammer in his chest.

He wanted to deny the words and reject the thought out-of-hand. Of course it had been easy, how could Moran stand a chance against the united force of Sherlock Holmes, Irene Adler, and the office and resources of Mycroft Holmes – especially when they'd had the advantage of surprise? Obviously it would be easy.

Nonetheless…

He dug into his phone and quickly dialled his mother's number, and some of his nameless fears were allayed when she answered and gave him assurances that Nero was fine. A picture of his baby would've done even more to set his mind at ease, but despite Mycroft's efforts both of their parents were hopelessly stuck in the twentieth century, so he would have to content himself with her word.

After giving him the short run-down of their evening she yawned and sighed, "I'm suddenly dead tired though – somehow I'd forgotten how exhausting it can be caring for a baby. God knows how that's possible, what with you and Mycroft, but…" She trailed off with another yawn.

"Fine. We should be there shortly anyway."

She murmured a goodbye and he disconnected, then continued to cross the bridge and make his way towards the temporary command post.

When he found Irene again she was sitting in the back of an ambulance. A paramedic had snipped off her jumper at the shoulder and cleaned her arm, and was now injecting her with what Sherlock supposed were antibiotics.

"My mother says Nero is well, they've fed him and put him to bed."

Irene gave a curt nod but he saw some of the steel go out of her spine, and a moment later she let out a slow breath, then raised her face up to Sherlock's.

When she met his eyes he saw that whatever misgivings she'd had for him in the immediate aftermath of the shooting had faded. Once again she was allowing him to see beyond any mask or pretence, and he met and returned the look. It was an anchor in the chaos of all that had just happened, and it both calmed him and set his heart racing, though for a different reason.

"I could never have done this on my own," she admitted by way of a peace offering.

"Likewise."

"Obviously," she agreed, and this time when she met his eyes there was a subtle gleam of humour in hers.
His breath stuttered at that, and he was reminded of her ability to turn the mood between them. She could manipulate him with the greatest ease, but now he had much more than professional appreciation for it - he liked it. The feeling escalated when he felt her fingers of her right hand entwine though his.

"Am I interrupting?"

"Yes," Sherlock snapped, before turning to face John.

"No," Irene replied at the same time, the teasing still in her voice, and John looked between the two of them, uncertain and bemused.

"Hello again," Irene prompted after a protracted pause, and John nodded.

"Yeah, hello."

There was another period of silence, before he added, sounding stilted, "I didn't get a chance to say back there – for obvious reasons – but… congratulations on the not-being-dead. And on, er, Nero." He shook his head, clearly suppressing a smart-arse comment about the baby's name. "He's… well yeah he is, he's lovely."

John also swallowed the remark "somehow," and Sherlock mentally smirked. Perhaps John could hold his own against The Woman – or come to.

The fact that he had so casually included Irene in his future should have thrown him, but it didn't.

"Thank you," Irene answered, and her predatory, watchful smile became more sincere.

"Still can't quite believe it, but…"

"Might it help if I filled you in a bit more on his conception?" Irene asked in perfect mock concern.

Sherlock shot her a slantwise look and felt heat colour his cheeks, and he saw a corresponding flush rise in John's face.

"Ah, no. No thanks. No."

But before John was even finished speaking Irene was turning away from him and towards Sherlock, apparently already done with that temporary diversion. Instead her expression was now one of legitimate concern.

"Speaking of our son, I do need to see him."

"As soon as you're done here, we'll go."

She nodded, and lifted their clasped hands to her lips to press them against his bruised knuckles.

His sense of disquiet didn't recede, but for the first time since Moran had been shot, Sherlock felt that elusive sense of triumph.
John excused himself to go phone Mary, and apart from the occasional faint hiss from Irene as she received a series of stitches in her arm, she and Sherlock passed the next few moments in silence together. Despite their confrontation on the bridge earlier there was now a sense of accomplishment and connection between the two of them, and it felt like a both a stolen moment and a gift.

_Nothing like a nice murder to bring people together_, Sherlock thought with wry appreciation, not for the first time. It wasn’t even the first time he was referring to a murder committed by one of said people – even including John, he added, looking over at his friend who was twenty metres away and still on the phone.

When Sherlock glanced back at Irene the paramedic was putting the final knot in her sutures and neatly snipping the thread. Then she gave Irene a few care instructions and explained the follow-up protocol, and left them.

When they were alone tension rolled up between them again, but this was different from the tension they’d experienced on the bridge. It was heavy, expectant, and not at all unpleasant, though it made him feel the need to say something to fill the silence.

“Better?” he asked.

“I told you before,” she said, but her voice was light rather than reprimanding. “I’m fine.”

“Yes. I can see that.”

It was true; despite her various wounds and bruises she looked self-assured and radiant – her old self.

“And what else can you see?” she asked, looking into his eyes and tilting her chin.

At first he didn’t know what she meant so he did what he always did, and he leaned back to rake his eyes over her. The first thing he noticed was a spray of fine crimson droplets across her face and throat, and without thinking he reached up to swipe a fingertip through them. The blood had already dried on her skin and didn’t smear though some of the specks flaked off, but she pressed her face into his touch, her eyes still on his and glinting. At that he reflected on her challenging – flirtatious? – tone, and a thought occurred to him.

…Oh. That hadn’t been an invitation to make observations about her, it had been an invitation to kiss her. This category of information was new and relatively untested but now that he saw it, it was as obvious as any other deduction he might make, and his breath quickened in automatic response.

His initial thought was _Now? Here?_ but it was only rote and he immediately shunted it aside. He understood what she was feeling, and wasn’t shocked to find that he felt the same way.

They had worked up a tremendous amount of energy to confront Moran, and although it was over there was still quite a bit of pent-up energy that hadn’t found release. Combine that with a sense of euphoric achievement, the relief of having survived the ordeal, the large doses of adrenaline still
working through their systems, and the intense attraction to the person with whom they’d shared the experience, and the results were potent.

And after all, hadn’t a situation very much like this one been the spark that had finally ignited the two of them in Karachi?

With tenuous control Sherlock dragged his fingertips down the side of her neck over the rest of the blood spray, and his heart began to hammer as if he were in the heat of action again. Their eye contact was absolute so he felt more than saw her give a slight shiver under his touch, but that small movement shattered any remaining reserve of his.

He tightened his cradling hold under the curve of her jaw and bent to her in one swift motion, pulling on the back of her head and catching her lips with his.

As soon as their mouths joined she curved up into him, her uninjured arm wrapping around his shoulder and her fingers threading into his hair, her nails digging semi-circles into his scalp. He made an indistinct sound at that, and all the seething momentum he hadn’t quite expended at the canal continued to drive him as he fastened his other hand around her waist and yanked her towards him so that their torsos pressed together and the mingled warmth of their bodies heated them even more in the cold night air.

She gave a wince as his jaw knocked into hers, which was starting to bruise, and he drew back with a low ragged breath, but she made a sound of her own and pulled him to her again. Apparently now that she expected it she relished the pain and it stoked whatever she was feeling, or at least helped to channel it. They both turned their heads and parted their mouths to get closer, to press deeper, and their tongues mimicked their embrace as they entwined. Through each other they worked off their residual adrenaline and excitement, and though his vague uneasiness didn’t dissipate, it quieted and faded along with the rest of his mental processes.

It had been so long since he’d felt this way with her, and he let himself surrender to the touch and taste of her and the sense of rightness that came with it. He hadn’t even felt this connected to her the night before, when they’d done much more than kiss, though in certain moments it had come close, and it had confirmed to him that he was as in love with her as he’d ever been – perhaps even moreso. But since her return he’d had to share her with her (justified) fixation on Moran, and in about an hour he would share her once more with their child. Now he had her all to himself, and despite being surrounded by people it felt as it had in their private ship berth nearly two years before, where it was only them, and no one else existed in the world.

For the time-being she was as much as The Woman could ever be anyone’s, and that knowledge soothed and validated a deep part of him that had always suffered self-doubt and self-loathing. In turn he was wholly hers, in a way he hadn’t thought possible until Karachi, and he didn’t know what would come next for them but for this snatched instant he wasn’t concerned with any of that.

It was combustive and intense, and it didn’t last long. It was like exorcising venom from a wound and the process left them flushed and breathless, but lucid again. One moment he didn’t think he could ever relinquish the moment or her, and then the next he felt as close to sated as he could under the conditions.

After they drew apart he couldn’t look into her eyes for very long without feeling overwhelmed in a different way, so as he recovered his breath he cast his gaze over the commons, then settled it on the trickle of Special Forces officers making their way back.

A minute later his eyes caught a familiar figure appearing at the far edge of the hedgerow –
Andrea. He was reluctant to leave The Woman and let go of this small yet important moment between them, but he needed to give Andrea a brief (and anodyne) statement about what had transpired. Moreover he wanted to speak with her about using the helicopter to return to his parents’. He left Irene with a murmured word and made his way towards the other woman with his lips still burning, but when he was halfway across the commons Andrea stopped mid-stride as something on her tablet drew her attention.

At the exact same time a message chimed on his phone, and he glanced away from Andrea for just a moment to check who had texted him.

The number was blocked, but the instant he saw the words he knew it would match the one his own phone had cloned shortly before.

*You have my number.*

He came to such an abrupt halt that his body jerked, but his mind raced on, before all his thoughts culminated with one word: *Moriarty*.

These were the first words Jim had ever spoken to Sherlock as his true self when he revealed that self at the pool, just as he was now revealing himself to have survived their confrontation on St Barts. The text had the mad sort of elegance and symmetry that was his nemesis’s signature, and if Sherlock hadn’t already been certain that the other man was still alive, this would’ve convinced him.

Obviously Moriarty must have security protocols that alerted him to any system intrusions, but did it matter that he knew they had done that? Sherlock let out a small breath, *No*, but then caught it again when another text appeared.

*And since someone wants to hear from you, I thought I should get in touch.*

A split second later – just long enough for Sherlock’s abdomen to flood with dread and his mind to produce a single, terrible image at the implications of the text – that image materialised in crystal brilliance on his phone.

It was Nero. He was looking off-camera, his face ruddy from crying and his brows tensed, and his normally intrepid and curious expression was one of confusion and fear. A single tear rolled over his round cheek.

The message *I miss Mummy and Daddy :’(* popped up below it.

Minutes before, Sherlock had been wanting to see a picture of Nero, but this was the real-life version of ‘be careful what you wished for’ from the fairy tales—which given who had sent it was perversely appropriate. Sherlock had wanted to see a photograph of his child as proof Nero was safe. Now he had a photo, but it only proved the opposite.

In a moment of sudden and terrible clarity Sherlock understood everything that had happened, and how grievously he and Irene had miscalculated – how their shared hubris had cost their child.

*Too easy*, a voice had whispered in his mind, and that voice had been right.

A half an hour earlier Sherlock had intentionally provoked Moran by telling him he was expendable. Sherlock had been right about that, but rather than being mere backup Moran had been *diversion*.

He had also been every bit the pawn that Sherlock had called him, and as such he had been
sacrificed in this ongoing game of chess, but he hadn’t been the only pawn in this particular play.

Sherlock and Irene had thought they were dictating the terms of the game for the first time in this years-long ordeal, but they had merely been conforming to the exact behaviour Moriarty had expected, and for which he’d planned accordingly. Sherlock felt a suffocating, claustrophobic sensation in his chest, like Moriarty had not only out-strategised him, but had stolen his very free will.

Just as Moriarty had manipulated circumstances to impel Mycroft into a position where he was exposed and could therefore be shot, so too had Sherlock and Irene gone exactly where he wanted them – out of the way.

But how had he gotten to Nero?

At once Sherlock recalled his exchange with his mother minutes before, and the way she had yawned several times throughout their brief conversation.

She’d thought that the care of an energetic and strong-willed infant had exhausted her; in retrospect he understand that in fact she and his father were suffering oxygen depletion, probably caused by their very own gas line. Andrea had integrated the house’s utilities with her security system, but if someone had hacked it then the very measures put in place to protect them would be the means of subduing, and maybe even killing them.

Were his mother and father even still alive? Or at this very moment were his parents lying dead in the home that was supposed to be an impenetrable fortress?

His fear morphed into rage and then back into terror, then to rage again, and with fingers trembling so much he could barely type he replied:

What do you want?

The answer came immediately, and it was short and pithy yet could not have been more calculated to underscore the reality of Sherlock’s position.

Wait and see.

‘Wait.’ Sherlock and Irene were now subject to the timetable and whims of Jim Moriarty.

‘See.’ As in, witness - passively. Powerlessly.

He turned his head to look over at The Woman, who still looked radiant and flushed with her righteous kill – as well as perhaps their stolen moment together.

A wave of intense dizziness and nausea swept over him like he was the one depleted of oxygen, as what felt like every emotion he’d every felt clamoured within him at once. The apparently un-paradoxical tenderness and limitless admiration for Irene contrasted with the corrosive hatred and dread that burned him like battery acid at the horror of their powerlessness. Underpinning all of it was self-loathing and terrible, crippling guilt. They were complicit in this. They were just as responsible as Moriarty himself for Nero’s situation.

He had never even considered the possibility of children and therefore he’d never mentally compiled a list of why it would be a bad idea; it had been so inherently out of the realm of possibility for him that such an exercise would’ve seemed futile and pointless to the extreme. But if he had done it, if he had pinpointed all the reasons it would never work for him to become a parent, he might’ve cited things like how the child would limit Sherlock’s ability to take off whenever the
work demanded it of him, or how he would have to restrict his in-home experimentation, thereby jeopardising the quality of his investigation, or how he would have to ensure that even his best hiding spots for his emergency stashes were emptied, but he would’ve left off the most important reason of all. The most compelling reason not to have a child wasn’t for any of his own selfish and self-absorbed reasons; it was because he, Sherlock, was a liability to whoever made the mistake of including him in their lives, but a child had no agency and no choice, and therefore no chance.

*I am so sorry*, he thought with unprecedented anguish.

He swallowed hard, pricks of agony jabbing him behind the eyes, then he whirled around, ignoring Andrea’s shouts, and put one foot in front of the other to make his way back towards the ambulance.

Unnoticed by him, John had been cutting a beeline in his direction, and they almost collided with each other before he reached his destination.

“What is it? What’s just happened?” John asked, putting a steadying hand on Sherlock’s arm.

Sherlock just tried to move aside, but his body felt heavy and weighed-down like he was bound by the logic of a nightmare. If only it were that… If only the solution to this was just waking up.

“Tell me what’s happened? You look—”

Sherlock turned on John and tried to fix him with a quelling stare, though he knew he just looked shell-shocked and haunted.

“I look what,” he said, but his throat was a clenched fist and there was no heft to his voice.

John opened and closed his mouth, his eyes wide, then answered, “I dunno. But I can tell it’s bad.”

Sherlock couldn’t even muster up the ability to let out a cynical huff; he felt too hollow.

Instead of trying to explain, Sherlock thrust his phones into John’s hand, then turned away again.

He didn’t—couldn’t—watch the transformation of confusion into horror on John’s face, but he heard the choked-off sounds and could still visualise it.

“How?” John finally managed.

“Andrea just received an alert that the guards at my parents’ house missed a check-in.”

“She’s told you this?”

“No, but it’s obvious. Although if he’s as good as I think – I know – she didn’t even realise her system has been compromised until now.”

“Jesus Christ Sherlock… And oh god, your parents! Are they…?”

“I don’t know.”

“Oh god, I’m... He really is back, then? Moriarty, he really is alive—”

But Sherlock wasn’t listening; his eyes were fixed on Irene once more, and his mind was on the unimaginable burden of having to show Nero’s mother the photograph and text on his phone. It was going to cost him something terrible, something even worse than what it had to see the texts himself.
He felt no vindication or satisfaction at being right in the brief altercation they’d had; in this one circumstance he would’ve given almost anything to be wrong.

“What are we going to do?” he heard John say.

“Unless by ‘we’ you mean The Woman and myself, the answer is nothing.”

“The – Irene? But she’s injured, Sherlock. She needs to rest, to heal.”

“The hell she does,” Sherlock shot back. “You heard her – she’s fine.”

“Look, I know she’s Nero’s mother and she’s incredibly capable and all that, but you can’t just let her—”

“Let her? When was the last time you ‘let’ Mary do something or other? For God’s sake, John.”

John flushed, and a twinge of regret penetrated through all the brown noise of Sherlock’s mental and emotional upheaval.

“John. You are my closest friend. You’re essential to the work in almost every other situation. But this is between The Woman, me, and Moriarty.”

John let out an agonised sigh but then hardened his expression and looked determined again.

“Please. Let me help. How can you not want to have every possible resource at your disposal with this?”

Sherlock realised John was right – as usual – but then another, far worse realisation came to him.

“It’s not up to me now,” he ground out, every word venom on his tongue. “It’s up to Moriarty.”

“But this - this is madness! I’ve never heard you talk this way. You’ve always had at least a dozen contingency plans and—”

“Yes and this operation went according to all of that, but look what happened. We did exactly what Moriarty wanted us to do; we put our best efforts and resources into this, only to discover too late that it was all a diversion.”

“So that’s it – you’re just going to give up.”

“Who said anything about giving up?” Sherlock said, his eyes blazing, and some new resolve searing through the icy numbness. “But you cannot make bricks without clay, and we have no data, therefore no way to formulate any theory or plan! We never really did…”

Wretchedness and a devastating sense of inadequacy beat through him, causing his knees to nearly buckle, but he couldn’t give in. This was far larger than himself, and he didn’t even need to pause for analysis to understand that; it was primal, instinctual. He needed to see this ended, not for himself or his own ego or sense of self-worth or need to beat Moriarty, but for his child.

He went very still, his heart beating very fast, as the revelation came to him that it wasn’t only that he would he kill for Nero – because as difficult as it had been to stare down the barrel of that gun and exhort himself into pulling the trigger, nothing had come closer to making him shoot than the thought of his child. He would also die for him.

And so if he needed to submit to some perverse and sadistic sacrificial ritual concocted by Moriarty in exchange for even the slightest chance that it would mean Nero’s survival, he would do
it. It wouldn’t be ‘giving up’ or ‘giving in,’ it would be deliberate, rational sacrifice. He would only
resort to it if there were no other resource, of course, just like the Lazarus Plan, but if it came to it
he would not hesitate.

Because of Lazarus, he was familiar with sacrificing himself for those he loved, even if in that
moment of falling he hadn’t been aware of how much he that sacrifice would cost him. Throughout
the months he had become aware. But this time he was clear-eyed about what he might be facing,
and what he was potentially going to do, and although it was ultimate and final in a way that
Lazarus hadn’t been, he was willing to pay that price.

For as long as he could remember he had been seeking meaning to his life, fighting existential
demons about what if any purpose he served, and where he fit in the world. He could accept
meaning in this, if it came to it. Besides, it wouldn’t even be sacrifice, per sé, but atonement – a
correcting of wrongs.

With this new understanding and the certainty that Irene would be in absolute accord with him, and
this, he made his way back to her, leaving John white-faced and breathing hard.

As he drew close Irene looked up at him, and for the second time in half an hour the triumphant
and conspiratorial look she sent him froze when she saw his face, although this time rather than
contempt it was stricken by horror.

As white as she was from blood-loss her face went even paler, so that her complexion took on the
pallor of death. It reminded him all too vividly of how the woman on the slab had looked that early
Christmas morning over three years back – the one he had believed for several disorienting and
painful months was The Woman.

“Tell me,” Irene said, and her voice came out a hoarse, grating whisper. In it was a note of
pleading he only ever heard That Night, as if she were begging him to tell her that what she already
knew wasn’t true.

He couldn’t give her that, in fact once again he couldn’t find any words at all, and so he passed her
the phone.

For one full second after she looked down at the image of her son nothing changed, then, though
her spine stayed straight and she didn’t move, something inside her crumpled and collapsed. She
remained outwardly composed but her exterior transformed into a mausoleum: white, cold, still,
and hard, and housing something that was turning to dust.

In the next moment she wasn’t there at all and for a moment Sherlock thought she was going to
pass out, but then she returned from the nothingness where she had gone, and it was like she was
coming back to life after drowning. She took in a deep, wracking breath in several juddering gasps,
swayed forward then backward, and then slowly handed Sherlock back his phone without meeting
his eyes.

He wanted to say something or touch her, but he found her terrible demeanour unnerving, even a
bit frightening.

“He’s still alive, I’m certain of that,” Sherlock said, finding his voice, although it sounded overloud
in his ears.

She finally turned eyes onto him. They barely betrayed the fathoms-deep pain, terror, and fury
within her, but he saw it all.
“But for how long.”

The answer materialised at once in his mind, *For as long as it takes to reel us in and kill us*, but he didn’t answer her. Her question was rhetorical, anyway; she would be just as aware of the situation as he was.

Irene had been false bait; Nero was the real thing.

Chapter End Notes

Here is an image of the text Sherlock received: http://francesca-wayland.tumblr.com/post/138622549063/from-chapter-31-of-sui-generis-you-have-my
Sherlock’s first rational thought was that he needed to phone his brother, but then he remembered two things.

One, for the first time in Sherlock’s life Mycroft was unavailable to him. He couldn’t assist Sherlock with a hint in the right direction or urge him on using his elusive approval as a carrot because at this very moment he was lying comatose in hospital, and his prognosis was looking ever more grim. Soon his living will could dictate that he be removed from the feeding tubes and assisted breathing apparatus that kept him alive, and then he would be lost to Sherlock forever.

Confronted with that again, Sherlock found that something he had wanted so desperately when he was younger – the chance to get out from under Mycroft’s infinite shadow, the opportunity to discover who he was independent of Mycroft as the yardstick against which he could never measure up – was terrifying. Vertigo struck him at the very thought, like he was standing on the edge of another five-storey building but this time without the safety net of his and Mycroft’s provisions.

Mycroft had always been there for him, even when Sherlock hadn’t wanted him there, and so Sherlock had foolishly let himself think that he always would be. He had come to take his brother for granted, and although in recent days he had realised how instrumental Mycroft had been in shaping Sherlock into the man he had become, he saw now how vital he had also been to Sherlock’s work and to him personally, as a big brother. Mycroft had been an anchor and a constant in Sherlock’s otherwise tumultuous world.

But then there was the second thing he’d remembered.

Mycroft was responsible for this. The same man who had shaped him and supported him had also betrayed him beyond the chance of redemption, and had created the greatest crisis Sherlock had ever faced.

It was true that Mycroft hadn’t known that Irene Adler was still alive, and so when he’d been calculating all the potential outcomes of his plan it had been without that data point (that pressure point), but between the two transgressions of what the brothers hadn’t told one another, Mycroft’s took the cake.

Given all the evidence, Sherlock had already concluded that Moriarty lived ergo Mycroft had lied about seeing him cremated. Moran was incapable of this level of organisational complexity, and no one else could’ve known that Irene was alive.

But the text was proof. It had been a signature as blatant as a fingerprint. Moriarty was alive – with Mycroft’s knowledge at the very least, but more likely because his brother had engineered it as part of some greater plan – so instead of the man being buried in Sherlock’s past he was in his present and future, wreaking havoc.

That thought turned all Sherlock’s dread about losing his brother into the acidic burn of betrayal. He no longer wanted Mycroft to wake up for his own sake, but so that Sherlock extract all the information from him that he’d been withholding, by any means necessary – the more violent the better. (And, a small desperate voice piped up, so that Mycroft could fix this, what he started.)
The transformation of his fear into wrath was good – was a relief, even. Although it had never been quite this justified, anger and resentment towards his brother had also been a familiar constant in his life, and it was far easier to let this consume him than the vacuum of fear and guilt waiting at every periphery.

But in the end, his anger at Mycroft was just a distraction. In real terms it didn't matter what his brother had done. All that mattered now was Nero.

Besides, even with his brother lost to him in more ways than one Sherlock wasn't entirely alone. As John had pointed out moments before, he had him. John was all of those things – consistent, a confidant, one fixed point in a changing age – and he had never and would never betray Sherlock the way Mycroft had. There was the fact that John would never be able to fool him since he wasn't even a passable liar with ordinary people, but moreover it would never occur to him. Mycroft was loyal only to his agenda, and Sherlock used to think that he was the one emotional indulgence Mycroft permitted himself. Perhaps it had only ever seemed that way because Sherlock had had utility in Mycroft's agenda, and like everyone else in Mycroft's life he was a tool – brought into the fold when useful and discarded when not. Because it was now clear that Mycroft was so loyal to those little scribbles in his notebook and whatever long-game he had in play that he would deceive and break faith with his own brother. But John - John was loyal to people, to Sherlock.

The Woman was another story. Like Mycroft, Irene was loyal to what she considered beneficial to her own interests – whatever or whoever those might be at a given time. Sometimes when Sherlock was very fortunate they included him, but it was abundantly clear that in this moment they did not.

Once upon a time his response might have been to take it upon himself to go after Moriarty, alone, but now his impulse was to reach outward in order to secure allies and resources – anything that might help him to get to Nero. Irene's reaction was the opposite. The doors and windows in her façade were all slamming and bolting closed as she retreated inward both emotionally and intellectually, and a new chasm yawned open between them. The hairline crack in their solidarity after Moran's shooting was nothing to this, and Sherlock hadn't a clue how to resolve it, and felt all the more impotent for that. But Irene had always had herself alone to depend on and, with one exception, herself alone to lift her out of any crisis, and now she was reverting to instinct.

The throbbing in his chest intensified into a deep, overwhelming ache. He'd thought that with Karachi he'd proven to her that she could rely on him in times of true disaster, and he had believed – naively or arrogantly or both – that he had become the one person she might let in.

Instead they now existed as two parallel galaxies, each being sucked inexorably into the same supermassive black hole. They were side-by-side, both struggling against the same shredding destruction to maintain their centres of gravity and not spin off into nothingness, but they were light-years apart.

Irene was having a hard time remembering how to breathe. Her years of expert breath-play in her former profession did nothing to get her respiratory system to take in oxygen now. She couldn't even manage the most basic vital functions, let alone anything of a higher order, so that she also found herself unable to form any coherent thought. Her mind was just the white-hot blank of a nuclear bomb's afterburn.

When she had first seen the image of her baby on Sherlock's phone she had come closer to fainting than she ever had before. Her entire field of vision had drained of colour and light so that the mat of green on which they stood took on the appearance of a post-apocalyptic wasteland. An instant later a grey sandstorm had swept over her, enveloping all of her senses in a grainy fog. She was in nothingness, and for a moment she was nothingness. Not even when she'd faced the blade on her
knees had she detached in mind and body the way she had in those moments.

But that detachment was a mercy compared to the feeling that was replacing it. A fissure had cracked open in the core of her, and there was a sucking, rushing breach where her heart had been, as if it were plummeting away from her at terminal velocity while the rest of her was stuck in place, paralysed.

She finally drew in a gasp, then another one, and dug the heel of her palm hard into her fresh gunshot just so that the injury to her flesh would pull focus from the deep, excruciating wound inside her chest. It barely registered. Something that had grown and blossomed within her for the past year and a half had been brutally excised, maiming her almost beyond endurance. She had experienced loss in her life, but she had only felt this way once before – before Nero's birth, when she'd finally accepted that Sherlock Holmes had really died.

She barely noticed him standing beside her now, though.

Years ago in her previous life she'd accepted a client who, it turned out, had come to her as part of his grieving process after he'd lost a child. Part of him had wanted to be punished for his imagined role in the death, and part of him had wanted physical pain to distract from his emotional anguish, but one thing that she recalled was how he mentioned that it had destroyed his relationship with his wife. The loss had left them both such husks of their formal selves that any trace of happiness or peace they felt, they needed to hoard for themselves just to go on, to exist. They never had anything left for one another. Irene had taken note of this as she did whenever her clients shared anything that shed insight into human behaviour; she catalogued and studied them like a collector, but she hadn't particularly internalised what he'd said.

She understood it now, because even though Sherlock was exceptional in every way to her, Nero was her child and the love her life in a pure and primal way that Sherlock couldn't be, and she was too caught up in her own agony and desperation over his abduction to try to take on what Sherlock must be feeling as well. It was far too much.

Besides, she was Nero's mother. She had carried him through a rocky and high-risk pregnancy, endured a harrowing childbirth to deliver him, nursed him, and subjected herself to suburban purgatory for him, whereas Sherlock hadn't even known he existed until several days before. She had no desire or ability to consider these thoughts uncharitable or selfish; she couldn't see outside of her own personal hell.

Moriarty was alive and he had Nero.

Learning this wasn't just a sucker-punch that nearly KO'd her, but from which she could then slowly recuperate and move forward in some rational way. Instead it was like relentless and undiminishing waves on a beach; the reality of their situation would recede as denial and automatic self-equalising took over, but then she would recall what had happened and the awareness would crash over her all over again and hold her under, nearly drowning her and leaving her gasping, weak, and dazed.

I knew it, she thought with eerie calmness, even while the rest of her mind was unravelling. Sherlock had only just come around to the notion that Moriarty was alive, but she had known it from the start. She'd sensed it with the prescience she'd developed and fined-tuned as a survival mechanism in her years of a high-risks/high-rewards life.

But she felt nothing at being right. If anything it made things worse, because she had suspected that Moriarty was alive for ages, and even without having the advantage of the cover of death he'd still managed to take from her what was most precious, what would most destroy her to lose. As for her
vindication at shooting Moran and forever removing him as a threat to her son, it was a distant dream. It felt even further in her past than that bereaved client.

It almost shattered her to know that the very measures they'd taken to protect their child were what had enabled Jim to get to him – the one thing that she would do literally anything to protect. Taking Moran's life had felt like such a victory for her in the moment, but all it really was was the shiny penny Moriarty had tossed her whilst making off with the contents of the vault. It wasn't their superior abilities that had caused everything to go so smoothly with Moran, it was by design, and she and Sherlock had fallen for it with unforgiveable guilelessness.

She'd thought that the night that Sherlock had so cruelly punched out her passcode and then left her to her fate would be her most humbling experience, and that her hubris could never be punished to such an extreme again, but the panic and horror of that experience and its fallout was nothing – nothing – to this.

Her mind started to semi-function again, only to reel in panic and conjure up every worst possible scenario of what her child could be going through in that moment – far away and unreachable and alone. At that she had to clutch onto the metal railing of the ambulance gurney on which she sat, so that she could somehow anchor herself to the real world.

Of all the people to snatch her child, it was the person she feared most in the world.

Unlike Sherlock, Irene had had many day-to-day interactions with Moriarty, and she had been subjected to every facet of his mercurial personality. She'd seen far more than the showmanship and almost flirtatious antagonism he'd presented to Sherlock, and she found him all the terrifying more for it. In part it was because it wasn't entirely an act; it was merely one of the many faces of Jim Moriarty, all of which were as authentic as the next.

It would be easy to dismiss the persona he'd shown Sherlock as a showy façade, something that he put aside when it actually came down to doing business. And the elasticene structure and sheer power of his brain would seem to belie his chaotic personality. But in fact that personality enabled him to approach things in nonlinear and incredibly innovative ways, and his brain then had the power and flexibility to provide all his notions with logical underpinnings and structure, no matter how outrageous-seeming. Instead of these vastly different aspects coming into conflict, they elevated each other. Moriarty was a true chimera and every bit the monster that word evoked.

That also meant that there was no circumstance or scenario he could imagine, no play he could conceive, upon which he would not follow-through. He was limited neither by imagination nor willingness, whereas Sherlock and Irene were at least handicapped with the latter.

However there was one thing far beyond the scope of convention that she was willing to do, and that was give up her life in exchange for Nero's. Even if that was Moriarty's plan all along and it meant his victory, she would submit without hesitation.

That thought was horrifying – in part for the personal reason that she truly loved herself and her death would be a tragedy, and in part because it meant that Nero would grow up without a mother – but it also meant that at least he could grow up, and that refortified her. She wasn't as helpless or powerless as she'd originally felt; she had currency to spend, currency that she thought Moriarty would consider valuable, and she would spend it.

It didn't matter that Moriarty knew exactly what he was doing, and he was the one manipulating this 'sale.' She had learned in the hardest possible way that she could no longer trade on ego or hubris in this situation.
She vaguely noticed Mycroft Holmes's assistant – Anthea? Andrea? – approach them and start speaking to Sherlock in a low, urgent tone. She heard the other woman as if she were underwater and couldn't make out the words, but she let herself be ushered out of the ambulance and towards the helicopter.

But before they got too close within range of the spinning rotors, a desperate thought occurred to Irene, and with swiftness she hadn't shown since getting the news she snatched Sherlock's phone from out of his loose grip. She quickly located the number it had cloned and dialled it, her heart racing and her blood beginning to boil in her veins. Once again she felt detached from her physical self, but this time it was a burning, incandescent sensation that made her feel like her body was afloat on the rising heat of her fury.

At once she got a recorded message informing her that the number she was trying to reach had been disconnected. She let out a shriek of frustration and redialled, but got the same response. She went to the text app and typed in *i will kill you*, but the message failed to deliver, and with no outlet to vent her rage she could only growl in disgust and shove the phone hard into Sherlock's abdomen.

Andrea took in all of this, then said to Sherlock, "So the good news is that I've just heard from the guards, they've just regained consciousness. Apparently the proportion of gas to oxygen was just enough to knock everyone unconscious but not cause any permanent damage as long as they were found in enough time. Your parents are awake too, but they're still quite disoriented. I'm being told that they don't really understand what's happened yet."

Sherlock blinked several times, but he gave no other reaction to the news that his parents had survived the storming of their home.

"But," the other woman said, pursing her lips briefly, "We also haven't made any progress regarding how anyone was able to get past our security systems, nor have we been able to trace the phone we cloned, which as you see has been disconnected now. With the security we're in the process of reverse-engineering the thing, but the swath of data they left behind is incredibly dense, and if there *is* any signature it's concealed within millions of extraneous parts. Unfortunately it's going to take a long time just to interpret and extrapolate everything and even then there's no guarantee we'll be able to trace the hack from there. This might be only the first level of security out of many.

"With the phone, even though we can clearly see – and we obviously know – that we successfully cloned it, from a technical standpoint it's like we never did. Somehow he's gone into our system and wiped out the log of the transfer and all its data, and even though we have the number, it's like it never existed."

"He permitted the clone because it was all part of the plan," Sherlock said, monotone.

"I thought Mycroft's people were supposed to be some of the best in the world at this," Irene spoke over him, her voice full of accusation.

"We *are*. But whoever this is, whoever's doing it - they're better."

Her face was ashen; the notion that anyone could outperform her or her people had obviously shaken the other woman to her core.

"So far," she went on, squaring her shoulders. "This is not over, and I'll do everything I can, Mr Holmes. I'll bring in whomever I have to, security clearances be damned – in fact, I might already have someone in mind."
Sherlock gave a terse nod, and for the first time since Irene had learned about Nero she took a moment to look at him. He held himself erect with his shoulders pushed back, but she saw how hard he was gripping his hands together behind his back, and his eyes looked dark and feral, like he was a wild animal hopelessly caught in a snare. In the part of his throat she could see above his scarf his pulse was pounding hard, and he kept swallowing convulsively, while around his hairline beads of perspiration were gathering in spite of the chilled air.

She observed all this without any additional emotion though; that part of her was past saturation.

And then they were walking towards the helicopter again, and John Watson had re-joined them. She found herself fervently wishing that he would disappear –frankly he felt like an intruder in this moment and she resented him getting to see her like this – but she supposed that Sherlock needed him, and she supposed that she shouldn't begrudge him the support of John Watson, especially since she felt so fundamentally incapable of offering him any herself.

Mechanically Irene climbed into the aircraft behind Sherlock, accepting his extended arm since she couldn't pull herself up due to her injury. Once the four of them were seated and buckled in with their headsets on and the pilot was satisfied the rotors were sufficiently warmed up they lifted off of the ground, turning in slow wide circles before they climbed above the trees, before dipping forward slightly as they swooped back towards London.

"Where are we going?" Sherlock asked flatly, his face averted towards the window and his voice crackly and tinny over the radio.

"Where do you want to go?" Andrea asked.


Andrea left them in front of the empty building – Mrs Hudson was still with her sister – with the promise that she would keep them constantly updated, as well as with another cohort of guards, who were set up in front and back of the terraced house, in addition to the light-wells and rooftop.

Once inside the three of them trudged up the stairs, and for Sherlock it felt bizarre and disquieting to be home again. So much had happened since he had last stood here, but there was more to it than that. He had never been filled with so much turmoil and uncertainty, and standing in such a soothing and familiar environment threw that into even sharper relief.

Usually he sat in this parlour facing clients secure in his awareness that whatever work they brought him was no match for his talent and skill-set. He often felt much like a benevolent god, so much greater than their small little problems – and more often than not, them.

Today he stood on his well-worn carpet a very different, and much more damaged man. There was so much work to be done and yet for the first time in his life he didn't feel equal to it. He felt daunted and inadequate from the outset, and closer to broken than he'd been since the worst of his addiction.

Again the concept of loneliness came to him, and he realised that despite John's steady and steadfast presence to his right, he felt almost as alone now as he had during that bleak time. Even though Irene was with him physically he felt more lonely for her than he had when she had been thousands of miles away in an unknown location. There had been an intangible connection between them that had still connected them then, which was broken or at least severely damaged now.
He needed a moment with her, because before they could get anywhere he needed for them to reconnect somehow, to find just a morsel of common ground and connection in going forward. He needed her.

"John, will you please—" He cleared his throat. "Can you give us just a moment?"

John's eyes darted back and forth between Sherlock and Irene, his brows drawn in concern and suspicion, but whatever he saw softened his expression and he gave a nod, then turned and headed up the stairs.

Irene and Sherlock were left alone, two figures close yet entirely solitary, and he had no idea how to begin.

Before he came up with anything, Irene spoke.

"We're puppets on a string," she said hollowly. "Jim can get us to do whatever he wants now—"

"We've been his puppets this whole time. It's only that it's explicit now."

"—have us assassinate the Prime Minister, taint the water supply with ricin, have you disconnect Mycroft..."

"That last one wouldn't be much of an imposition," Sherlock snarled, the thought of his Judas of a brother injecting him with a fresh dose of venom.

"Whatever he asks, I'll do it," Irene went on, her voice flat and matter-of-fact. "And if you stop me—"

"I won't."

Her eyes finally darted up to meet and hold his, and heart felt as if it had stopped in his chest, but he meant his words more than he'd ever meant anything. He not only wouldn't stop her, but he would go to any lengths with her. He would burn the entire city down and sacrifice the two of them in the immolation if it meant Nero emerging out of the ashes.

With timing that made Sherlock suspect Moriarty had bugged his flat again, his phone made the sound he had customised for receiving messages from blocked numbers.

In one motion Sherlock and Irene broke eye contact to move shoulder-to-shoulder and look down at his screen, at what they both knew would be Moriarty's version of a ransom note.

I suppose it's about time you got my terms :)

Next to him Sherlock heard Irene let out a slow, erratic exhale through her nose, but they didn't move as they waited for the next message to arrive. Seconds later, it did.

I'd intended to have an awful lot of fun and test just how far you two would be willing to go, but frankly I'm bored with having your brat, so let's cut to the chase, shall we? This is where we would've ended up anyway.

Again they had to wait, and this time it felt interminable. Moriarty was about to reveal the final piece of the puzzle, his coup de grâce, and then Sherlock could finally grasp Moriarty's game plan, and begin to work on rescuing his child.

If I'd wanted the entire Holmes family dead you'd all be dead, but I'm feeling gracious. Mummy
and Daddy Holmes and your dear brother aren't of any interest to me any more, it's just you three. And out of the three of you, two will be allowed to live! See? I really have come over all generous. As an *added* bonus you get to choose which two stay alive - and you'll get to take care of it too! You won't fake it this time, that card's been overplayed, don't you think? If you do try to cheat you forfeit, then you all go, and by 'all' I don't just mean you three, I mean everyone. EVERYONE. I think we've shown after today that you're not nearly good enough to risk that, haven't we?

Sherlock's eyes darted over the messages again and again, trying to take in all the information, but then another message appeared.

If I don't get a decision by tomorrow at noon, I'll assume you two chose to use the two free passes for yourselves. It's understandable, the kid is so much more annoying than I'd expected. Besides you're both healthy functioning adults, you can always just make another one. In fact you've been practicing at it already, haven't you?

At the reference to something so personal and private Sherlock felt an even deeper chill go through him. It wasn't just the gross invasion of privacy by the last person he'd want seeing any sort of vulnerability that did it, but the additional sign of Moriarty's omniscience – unless that was just a well-educated guess meant to further rattle them. Either way, it had its effect.

Then a final text arrived, before his phone went silent.

Tomorrow, noon. Knowing the two of you I think I have it figured what you'll decide, but who knows, maybe you'll surprise me (I doubt it). Good luck!

It was the sacrifice Moriarty had wanted to force on the rooftop of St Barts during the confrontation Sherlock had thought he and his brother had engineered, though it turned out that he had been the one out of the loop. But this time it was so much more insidious and inescapable. This time he was every bit as vulnerable as he had given the pretence of being then. Yet there was one consistency: he was as willing to meet the terms of the sacrifice as he had been then – and at least this time he wouldn't have to live with the regret of his decision, as he had before.

It took a long time for Sherlock and Irene to look away from the words on the phone's screen, but when they did they found each other's eyes, and the exchange they'd had moments before resonated in both their minds. Now it was layered with much different and more awful implications.

Whatever he asks, I'll do it. And if you stop me—

I won't.

"I won't–I won't stop you," Sherlock said again, his voice barely above a bass rasp. "If there's no other way."

Tears sprung into Irene's eyes, then slipped down her cheeks, but she didn't flinch away from his words, and she didn't decline what he was offering. He had known she wouldn't.

"I'm sorry," she said, her voice hoarse with deep pain but unwavering as she looked back into his eyes again. "If there's no other way, I'll do it."

He wasn't sure who reached out first, and he even wasn't aware of any transition. One moment they were just looking at one another, and the next moment they were clinging to each other in the centre of his sitting room, pouring all the desperation and determination and horror they felt into their embrace.

It was so cruelly ironic that it was almost perverse; he had needed to feel connected with her in
going forwards with this, and now they were and he savoured it - even though it was rooted in a course that could mean the irrevocable destruction of everything they had ever been to one another, and ever could be.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading, and comments are always loved and appreciated!
It would've been easy for the embrace to devolve into something else, and for a few mindless moments it did. They were both so desperate for distraction and to escape the prison of their own heads, that when Irene raised her face from where it had been pressed into Sherlock's chest at the same moment he looked down, it happened. Suddenly they were kissing each other like the other person was oxygen, and they had been asphyxiating.

As their lips pressed and moved together, a distant part of Sherlock's mind marvelled at the way powerful feelings of all kinds could manifest through the physical. In his work he'd seen first-hand the way outside factors could taint and corrupt romantic love, but he'd never considered how such things could affect sex as well. At one point sentiment and attraction had been all that drove his desire for Irene, and as convoluted as their relationship had been up to that point that had been very simple, and very pure. Granted, adrenaline and the thrill of surviving their ordeal had been what sparked their first time, but his admiration and appreciation of The Woman had already been smouldering for ages, and that's what actually fuelled it. Now in the space of not just one day but one hour they'd used one another to vent their lingering adrenaline not as a gateway to reach deeper intimacy but for it own sake, and – this.

Something much darker was pushing them now, and it had nothing to do with sentiment, attraction, desire, or – despite how much he'd wanted to reconnect with her earlier – even the other person at all. This was impersonal and selfish, but that didn't bother him enough for him to stop. And despite this precise situation being foreign, it still felt so familiar to a former addict such as himself. It offered temporary oblivion, the allure of a physical outlet for everything that he was holding in, and the promise of pleasure amidst this pain.

But before it could escalate beyond hands grasping at clothing and the desperate joining and re-joining of their mouths Sherlock pulled back, breathing hard through his nose. In another minute he might have had her on the sofa, but John was just up the stairs and could decide to return at any moment. Remembering that was probably the only thing that could have stopped him, but it did, and he reached behind himself to still her hands as they were yanking the hem of his shirt from his trousers. He brought them around, then raised her clenched fists to his lips to give them a chaste kiss.

For a moment Irene just looked at him with a wild stare, as if she didn't recognise him, but then that terrible awareness returned and once again something shut down behind her eyes, and she pulled away and turned towards the window. He could see her shoulders heaving as she struggled to catch her breath, but the motions weren't smooth. Her breathing caught on each inhale and for a moment he thought she was going to break down and start sobbing. He felt close to that himself; he could feel the pressure of it welling up inside of his chest and pounding for release. With the help of his years of practice he carved out a small part of himself, shoved the emotions into that space, and then buried it again. It cost him something to do it and he hadn't been entirely successful, but he knew it would've cost him much more if he had given into it.

Now that they were apart he missed the anchoring, warm weight of her, but as he returned to himself he became profoundly relieved that they hadn't given in to their misbegotten lust. Just like opiates, it would've soothed something in the moment, but the pain of the aftermath would've
eclipsed whatever fleeting pleasure and mindlessness they'd felt. If they used each other like that, rather than bringing them closer it would've driven even more of a wedge between them, because then something that was so personal and intimate would've been tainted by this as well.

Eventually her breathing evened as well, and when she turned back to him her eyes were edged with pink, but he saw that just like him she needed to work.

When Sherlock had pulled away and broken the spell that had stolen over them Irene's response had been a surge of hot, immediate anger. She hadn't wanted kindness or gentleness from him; that would bring everything she was trying to suppress too close to the surface. Instead she'd wanted bruising kisses and grasping hands, and the numbing relief of that brand of oblivion.

Her knee-jerk reaction when he'd stopped was that he was being weak and cowardly, but when her mind cleared a bit she knew he was right to stop them (*damn him*). *She* was the one being cowardly and avoiding her current reality; they couldn't afford to lose themselves, as much as she might want to. There was still hope, as much as it didn't feel like it in the moments following those texts.

Irene turned to the window, her mind now racing as fast as her pulse.

Such a lapse was not who she was and it was inexcusable – especially when their time was so finite, and every second needed to be budgeted like the precious resource it was.

She'd have never permitted it if she weren't so impaired. Much like Sherlock she was first and foremost a mind, and aside from a few notable exceptions she used her body and sexuality as a tool to advance whatever agenda her mind had set. Whatever had just happened was the opposite of all that. It had been pure physical abandon with no thought involved, base in every meaning of the word. In fact, that had been rather the point.

She did still need distraction from the sickening, overwhelming fear she felt for her child, but it didn't have to manifest as something so warped – and far more unforgiveable, unproductive.

Work, *work* would be her saviour and safety net now as it had in so many other times in her life. She must collect and reassemble all the parts of her that had been scattered afield by the explosive news of her son's abduction, and piece them together again. She would be scarred and fragile like a shattered bowl reconstituted with glue, but by necessity, just complete enough to function. Only the return of her son could truly make her whole again, but at what cost, and what new scars would she endure?

Sherlock's earnest words of sacrifice had made Irene fall in deeper in love with him than she'd ever thought possible, which made what he was offering all the more heart-wrenching.

And he meant them. For the first time since she'd known him he was offering to pay the ultimate price; it wasn't just bravado.

They would do their best to prevent it, but they still had to prepare themselves for it (to the extent that anyone could prepare for such a thing).

…Perhaps that had been the real reason she'd kissed him with such ferocity and desperation moments before. It wasn't just a coping mechanism, or a way to vent an overload of emotions. It was because they might not ever have the chance to do that again. In what could be their very last private moment, they'd had to seize the opportunity to pour into every touch all the fear, sentiment, regret, and need they felt. All that they couldn't say out loud, they could still express while they had the chance.
At that the ocean of sorrow and injustice within her swelled, but she managed to uphold her façade, if barely.

She wanted to scream at the top of her lungs, *It isn't FAIR*. She wanted to rage around the flat, and throw the mantelpiece skull through the window, and tear the books from their shelves then rend them to pieces with her bare hands.

At this point she had so little, *cared* for so little.

Nero – Sherlock – her own ongoing survival.

These were the three pillars in her life that supported her and allowed her to go on despite all that she had lost. It wasn't much, but she cherished and depended on each of them with a ferocity and intensity that more than compensated for that.

Even when she and Sherlock hadn't been speaking it had diminished the ache of her loneliness to know that there was someone like her – someone with whom she had shared something precious and made something even more precious – simply living his life on the other side of the world.

But now she was being forced to sacrifice one of these things in order to save the other two, though without the support one of the three essential pillars everything else could collapse anyway.

She had experienced the loss of Sherlock once before, and she didn't know how she would endure it again, though if they couldn't find a way out of this, she must. Because at least there was a precedent with surviving Sherlock's apparent death, and as minimal and colourless as her life had been in the wake of it, she had gone on. Nero had been part of that recovery, and he would be again if it came to it.

The inverse would not, could not, be true. If she lost Nero her love for Sherlock and his for her wouldn't be enough to sustain her. In that event she even didn't think she could ever see Sherlock again. It would be far too painful to look into his face and see the man her son would never grow up to become.

She had already vowed to herself that if it came to laying down her life for her son if it came to it, she would do it – in a heartbeat she would. But this brutal dilemma was a Hobson's choice: there really was no choice at all. For the sake of their son, it had to be Sherlock.

Which of course Moriarty had known.

She turned back towards Sherlock and met his eyes.

She didn't say anything, she didn't have to, but he gave her a curt nod, though she saw the effort of suppressing strong emotions in his face.

Her focus on Sherlock was pulled by the creak of stairs, and moments later John appeared in the doorway, his expression apprehensive but set, like he expected to be thrown out again and he was ready to fight them on it.

At that all the vulnerability she allowed Sherlock to see retracted inward like she was a threatened anemone, and she felt her defences snap back into place and refortify as her spine straightened and her expression became cold and impassive.

Sherlock eyed John as he made his way back into the front room, apparently having decided that he'd allowed Sherlock and Irene enough time alone, then asked without preamble, "How's Mary?"
Sherlock had mostly meant the question as deflection from whatever John had opened his mouth to say, but he was also curious - and a bit wary. He had a great deal of respect for John's spouse, and he was almost more concerned with her reaction to all that had been recently revealed than he was John's. John might be left shaken by the realignment of his understanding of Sherlock and the implications for his own life, but ultimately he would accept and support Sherlock no matter what. For some reason, Mary's regard seemed rather more conditional and he couldn't help feel a bit apprehensive over it, even amidst everything else that was unfolding.

At Sherlock's question John closed his mouth. His expression became puzzled and a bit perturbed, but it wasn't because Sherlock had known that John had been speaking with Mary again; he had become inured that long ago.

"We didn't talk long – she had to go – but it's strange… She wasn't too fazed about all of it, or at least not all that concerned? Seems to have faith that things will all work out."

Sherlock's brow knitted together as well over that. That was odd. The future Mrs Watson respected him in turn, but she certainly didn't have the same blind faith in him that John often exhibited. Moreover, she was clever and inquisitive (some might say to the point of aggressiveness even, though not Sherlock), and she always liked to be kept in the loops to whatever extent it was possible. Which is why he expected that John had been constantly updating her on what they were doing.

"Have you told her everything?" he asked sharply. "You said you weren't going to lie to her, but have you updated on her what's happened? About Mycroft? Moriarty?"

"Er – I have, yeah. And I asked her if she wanted to come home but she said she didn't want to get in the way. 'Course I agreed because the farther away she is in all this, the better.

"But wait, never mind all of that," he said, his eyes jumping between Sherlock and Irene. "What've I missed? And don't tell me it's nothing."

There was a drawn-out silence before Sherlock let out a low sigh. As Irene was currently behaving as if no one else were in the room he supposed he ought to answer - though he really should be the one anyway.

"It's Moriarty. He's contacted us with his ransom demands."

"Ransom," John repeated, his brow denting into creases then smoothing. "That seems tame, given who we're talking about. But… can you get your hands on the kind of money he'd want? I mean, with Mycroft…"

"No," Sherlock said, his voice very subdued. "He isn't demanding money, John. Moriarty would never ask for something he didn't think I'd be able to give."

"Right. Okay. What is it, then?"

Sherlock looked at John's earnest and care-worn face and felt another weary sigh build in his chest, though he clamped his lips against it.

"Me."

"... 'You' what."

"That's the ransom. Me. My life in exchange for my son's."
He didn't tell John about the sadistic terms Moriarty had set. It would've been pointless because really there wasn't any choice at all, and he didn't want John to think there was.

John looked at him for one long moment, his faded denim blue eyes drilling into Sherlock's lighter ones. Then he scoffed, recovering a bit.

"Yeah, okay, but it's not like that's what he actually expects you to do, right? It's a bluff meant to push you into the next phase of his game."

He continued to watch Sherlock expectantly, but Sherlock's grim expression didn't change, and so John looked to Irene, but she didn't even blink.

At that his breath left him, low and sharp.

"You said you weren't going to give up," he said, turning back on Sherlock. His voice was steady but underpinned with fear and accusation.

"I'm not. But you know me, you know my methods – I try to anticipate every possible outcome and plan accordingly. Yes, perhaps it's just an instigating move, but we're rather far into the game for that now. I need to accept that this—" Sherlock finally faltered, his voice breaking. He took in a breath through his nose, twitched his shoulder straight, and continued. "I need to be prepared for every eventuality."

"Yes, but—" John started. He stopped, then shook his head like he was clearing water from his ears. "You can't."

"I—"

"NO," John shouted, his voice suddenly at full volume. "You don't get to do this again, you don't get to leave us – leave your kid. He needs you, Sherlock!"

"I KNOW he does," Sherlock roared back, sounding strangled as his emotions got the better of him once more. "Don't you see, that's why I have to—"

"And you," John interrupted, wheeling around towards Irene, his sides heaving. "You'll let this happen, will you? Fine with it, are you?"

Irene slowly turned her face towards John, as sphinx-like as ever. "I accept Sherlock's decision."

"Right, it's perfectly fine as long as it's not you who has to make any sacrifice, isn't it?" John spat. "Still the same as ever I see."

At that Irene finally stirred to life; for an instant she recoiled as if she had been slapped, and then colour flooded her cheeks and her focus fixed on John like an artillery sight.

"Don't talk to me about sacrifice," she hissed. "You are not the only one who loves Sherlock."

The two faced off each other, both breathing heavily, their eyes hard and glinting, and in some other scenario Sherlock might have privately enjoyed it, but not now. They didn't have time for this.

He'd registered Irene's words and his heart had given an anaemic lift at their implications, but in truth it wasn't a revelation to him. He didn't need to hear 'the L word' to know how she felt about him. In the past he had thrown up all sorts of excuses and doubts so that he didn't have to face it, but at this point there was no denying the truth. She had expressed it in every possible way aside
from verbal.

There was also no denying that Irene loved Nero even more, and as traumatic as she would find it, she'd pull the trigger on Sherlock herself if it meant saving their child. In fact, he wouldn't be surprised if Jim did have that planned for his final staging of this play…

But if sacrificing Sherlock for what she wanted most in the world meant that John was right that she was 'still the same as ever,' then perhaps she was, but so be it – since this time what she wanted most in the world was the safe return of their son. Anyway, that had been The Woman who had first captured his attention and earned his enduring fascination and sentiment.

Suddenly all the fight went out of John, and he made his way in a dream-like haze to his old chair, put his hand out behind him to feel for the arm, and then collapsed into it without looking.

"God, at least – just swear to me, Sherlock… it will be your very last resort." He attempted a smile, though he didn't succeed. "I've just started to get used to having you around again." 

"Yes," he said. 

"Because if you commit suicide or get yourself murdered, I will kill you."

"Well since you bring it up, if it does come to it I'd prefer someone with medical training to—" 

John put up his hand, his face contorting into a grimace. "Stop, no, I can't actually joke about this. Just… don't die, Sherlock."

Then he brought the hand to his face and sunk into an anguished silence.

Sherlock hadn't really been joking, but upon just a moment's reflection he grasped that that was something he could never ask John to do.

He pressed his lips together – an involuntary tic – then made his way over to Irene's side and angled his phone screen towards her as he typed their response to Moriarty.

*We've made our decision.*

The response was immediate.

*Humour me*

*Irene and Nero live.*

He had almost typed *You can have me*, but that wasn't right at all.

Moriarty would never 'have' him, even if Sherlock did die at his hands within the next 24 hours. Ultimately the other man's victory would be hollow, and he would be left with nothing but the remnants of past machinations and intrigues. After all, their antagonism had long-since stopped being about Sherlock interfering in his business, and had grown into something deeply personal.

Sherlock, on the other hand, would've made a clear-eyed choice to protect the people he loved – who loved him – and if they survived this, that was more of a victory than Moriarty would ever know.

There was a long pause, and Sherlock thought that that might conclude their exchange for the time being. Then just as the three of them let out low exhalles both of relief and to steel themselves for the night ahead, one final text arrived.
Moriarty's next communication came the following morning, promptly at nine o'clock.

The time between messages constituted both the longest and shortest hours of Sherlock's life. John had fallen asleep in what Sherlock still considered his chair at one point, and though Irene fought against exhaustion with her usual tenacity, she nodded off several times. She repeatedly woke with fitful starts as if from a nightmare, although this time it was sleep that was the temporary haven.

Meanwhile Sherlock worked with a fervour and tunnel-vision he hadn't experienced since his days of experimenting with amphetamines. It had taken him years to naturally harness anything close to such focus but he had never managed to quite this degree of intensity. He'd never had the proper incentive.

He was only drawn back into his physical self when his body started to break down under stress and exhaustion and he began to feel light-headed and nauseated from hunger. He eyed a packet of stale biscuits that Mrs Hudson had left for him with tea several days before, but then refocused on the work with renewed commitment. On the balance between feeling mild discomfort and digestion slowing his mental processes, he would take the discomfort. Anyway, one way or another this would all be over before his hunger and tiredness became real impediments.

He and Irene were speaking in hushed but vehement voices when Sherlock's phone chimed, and John jerked awake as if the alert had been a gunshot.

Sherlock pulled the device from his pocket and glanced down, his face impassive but his heart pounding high in his throat as he read the message.

Make excuses, come up a story. Just get to the SW corner of Ivor Place and Glentworth St.

Sherlock had expected this, and fortunately no 'story' would be necessary. Escaping his flat without alerting their security would be least of their worries today.

"The southwest corner …" John said after Sherlock read the text aloud to the room. "Isn't there some great big church there? Do you think they've been this close all along?"

Sherlock didn't know, and didn't answer.

He didn't think Moriarty would select a gothic revival church as the setting for this final confrontation – religious allegory didn't seem quite his style – but he couldn't rule it out. Aside from his distinctive élan and other recognisable characteristics, Moriarty seemed to have developed some rather unfamiliar and inscrutable traits as well since he'd last interacted with the man.

"But how are we going to get there?" John went on. "They're not just going to let us waltz out of here, and they're not exactly run-of-the-mill idiots who'll fall for some line of yours. They're probably under orders to keep us as much as they are to keep people out."

Sherlock made a dismissive hum. "Not a problem."

"Not a problem?"

"No. We'll get there by underground."
"By Underground—?"

Sherlock turned to Irene, who looked stoic and determined, her posture impeccable but rigid with tension.

"Are you ready?" he asked gently, and she gave him a single nod. She looked beautiful and deadly, and he felt a rush of perverse satisfaction at the thought of the release of her simmering, bridled rage.

Because that was another thing – even if Moriarty 'won' today, Irene would never let him get away with what he'd put Nero through.

Leaving behind his coat and everything else apart from his phone and a small torch, he buttoned his jacket, and led them out of Flat B and took the stairs towards the ground floor. He passed the front door, then made his way down another staircase to the garden flats level.

Next to Flat C stood another door, this one unmarked, and he swung it open to reveal a utility closet containing gas metres and electrical switchboxes with the letter of each flat written on their fronts with black marker.

Sherlock turned to John, narrating his process out of habit rather than any real interest.

"John, you know the circumstances surrounding Mr Hudson's execution, yes?"

"Yes—?"

Sherlock nodded. "Well then…"

John's face creased in confusion at that, but instead of explaining, Sherlock sidled into the shallow opening to face John and Irene. He then extended both arms above his head and ran his fingertips along the interior of the lintel, feeling for the set of releases he had discovered shortly after accepting Martha Hudson as a client.

His lips tightened in satisfaction and then there was a series of clicks, and with a pneumatic hissing sound a vertical panel to the left of the switchboxes swung inward. Its external wiring was a decoy; the real wiring passed from the electrical boxes through the false wall and then ran behind it to the right.

John's stared at the dark space with round eyes and a lax mouth, his face the picture of blank shock as Sherlock squeezed through the narrow gap into darkness, but when Irene followed him his eyes cleared and he crowded in after them.

"By underground," Sherlock heard him mutter in a mix of annoyance and reluctant amusement.

Sherlock switched on the torch then reached around John to pull the door firmly behind them, entombing them in a narrow passageway that was framed in splinterly, rough-hewn wood.

"Mr Hudson didn't just catch the attention of that cartel for his natty dressing; he was an integral part of the heroin trade in London that helped fuel the 'Swinging 60s.' He was very much a part of that scene, which is how he met Martha, who was a well-known dancer on the Wardour Street clubs circuit. It was only when the market here started drying up in the 70s that he went to where business was growing – Florida. But before that he was able to buy this building in cash, and he had this tunnel constructed as both a way to run products if necessary, and as a security measure. …Besides location, it's actually one of the main reasons I let 221B."
His delivery was flat and monotone, and listening to himself speak was like overhearing a stranger on a train talk about something just beyond his notice or concern. It was as if part of his mind were maintaining homeostasis as an automatic self-defence mechanism, whilst the rest of him quietly went to pieces.

He edged around John and Irene and headed down the tunnel, striding over hard-packed dirt, his shoulders occasionally brushing the coarse walls on either side of him. He kept the beam of light pointed at the low ceiling so that Irene and John could see ahead as well, and it illuminated a canopy of cobwebs, both ancient and diaphanous, and new and unbroken.

"So where does this come up, Speedy's storeroom…?" he heard John ask.

Instead of scoffing at the idea of someone going to all the effort of constructing a tunnel like this only for it come up right next-door, he let it pass with just a shake of his head.

"I can't believe this was here all along and I never had a clue," John murmured a bit later.

"But that's all of London, John. Every step treads upon hundreds, even thousands, of years of people carrying out their lives here. Generation after generation, layer by layer, the old becomes sediment for the foundation of the new in an endless ascension. Abandoned sewers, forgotten crypts, ancient buildings, disused train tunnels, buried rivers… It's like everything else – it's never enough to just take things at surface-value, you have to go deep."

John didn't say anything to that and they walked another few minutes in silence, before arriving at the end of the tunnel where a quick-acting watertight door faced them, standing out a rusty but incongruous beige against the dark walls. Sherlock had passed through here on a number of occasions, and didn't hesitate to place his hands on the wheel at the centre of the hatch and turn it to the left. After an initial high-pitched screech of protest the door opened inward to reveal a brick-constructed sewer tunnel beyond.

A steamy fug and the faint whiff of methane and sulphur came rushing into the narrow passageway to meet them, and both John and Irene let out involuntary coughs.

Sherlock braced himself against the hatch and tilted his head to direct them through, and when he stepped away to follow them it swung shut and became all but invisible; it was disguised as a section of the yellow sandstone brick wall and could not be opened from this side.

The three of them were now standing on a narrow sloping walkway inside a dark Late Regency-era tunnel, where a fetid stream headed south in a channel down the centre. Weak shafts of light filtered through grating from the street above, dimly illuminating the space and casting bars of light across the effluvia below.

"Welcome to King's Scholars' Pond Sewer… Or as most people know it, The Tyburn," he said dryly, eyeing the milky grey water of the culverted river.

Then Sherlock headed upstream, walking alongside the waterway as it veered at an angle to enter a disused District Line bore, the other two in step behind him.

Here the walkway came to an abrupt end and there was no avoiding the water, and behind him John made an involuntary noise of disgust as their feet were submerged in cold and filthy liquid up past their ankles. Still they slogged on, Sherlock, Irene, then John, through the conduit reinforced with cast-iron arches, ropes of red and green wiring threaded along the wall at shoulder-height.

A few moments later Sherlock heard and felt the juddering rumble of a Jubilee train as it passed
below, and it helped him pinpoint precisely where they were below the streets of London. It wouldn't be much farther, now…

Sure enough, a moment later they reached a junction where a tunnel carrying overflow converged with the one they'd been using, but he stayed with the buried river and headed into the tunnel on their right, which narrowed significantly into an oblong egg shape as it headed towards the exit shaft at Park Road.

The noxious air in this tight passageway pressed thick and close around them, causing Sherlock's eyes to water and his stomach to clench, and if not for the beam of light from Sherlock's torch they would have been enclosed in total darkness at this point as well.

The only sounds were the small splashes of their progress and the short breaths as they tried not to breathe in the miasma too deeply, but they echoed loudly around them and pressed into Sherlock's eardrums, making him feel even more claustrophobic than he already did in the confined space. Normally he didn't have a problem with this trip, but his nerves were frayed and close to the surface.

Compounding his unsettled feeling, a bit of fresh graffiti jumped out at him in the beam of his light: an ominously manic Mad Hatter-like character with the caption "The Happy Flusher" scrawled next to it, done in a sunny yellow at odds with its unnerving nature.

With a jolt of paranoia he recalled the graffiti Moriarty had once left for him, I O U, and wondered if this was part – and indicative – of a greater plan: an escalating campaign of subversion meant to undermine Sherlock's emotional state, leading up to Moriarty's final coup de grâce. After only a few seconds he dismissed the notion as idiotic and walked on, marshalling his thoughts.

Still it was with palpable relief that he spotted where the tunnel opened up ahead into a small chamber with a ladder covered in rust and various other deposits, which lead up through a manhole shaft. The sewer was navigable all the way to the original river's source in Hampstead, but this exit was closest to where Moriarty had instructed them to go, and far enough from their host of guards that they could make a clean escape. It wouldn't be until shift-change in several hours that the guards would even realise that the three of them had gone, and quite a long time after that that they would discover how they had managed it. It wasn't as if Mr Hudson's tunnel were on any maps or permit plans on file.

After Sherlock assisted Irene up the ladder with her injured arm, which took almost as much time as their entire journey underground had and which Sherlock knew Irene resented John witnessing, the three of them emerged through a bifurcated manhole cover at Ivor Place where it met with Park Road.

Sherlock had always made this exit under the cover of darkness in the past, but there was no helping the fact that it was mid-morning now, and Park Road would be bustling with traffic and pedestrians. As expected, they drew a number of surprised and revolted stares as they clambered out of the sewer shaft onto the pavement, slick with perspiration and smelling of fresh, but being Londoners they quickly hustled on.

John looked disgusted with the experience but Irene may as well have been emerging from a business appointment, and as soon as she glanced around to find her bearings she made a direct line for St Cyprian's Clarence Gate.

When all three of them stood in the shadow of the hulking Anglican church John leaned back to assess it with a calculating look, but Sherlock and Irene ignored the building entirely.
Their attention was drawn to the strange-looking motorbike that was parked in front of the church, two helmets with reflective visors perched on its seat. Sherlock passed his eyes over its frame, noting far more wires and parts than a conventional bike required, and though Sherlock was well-versed in the mechanics of motorbikes, he couldn't discern what purpose the unfamiliar engineering served, which added to his ever-mounting discomfort. He mentally scrolled through charts of every bike on the market going back to the 70s, and although something niggled at his mind he couldn't locate anything that had additional engineering like this. However he did know without a doubt that the bike was intended for them.

As he continued to eye the strange bike, tracing the wiring through the machinery and trying to bully his brain into comprehension, another text sounded.

*Only room for two so who's it going to be, the woman or the doctor? Who gets hear your final words?*

Sherlock didn't even hesitate.

"I'm sorry, John."

John wheeled around, perplexed but instantly on-guard.

"The bike. It's for us."

"Us…" John repeated, but Sherlock could see that he already understood that for once, 'us' didn't refer to 'John and Sherlock.'

"Okay," John breathed. "Okay - I get why Irene has to go, but why don't I—"

"You must not under any circumstances follow. Is that clear?"

John eyes darted unseeing as he tried to conceive of some loophole.

"If I have *any* chance of surviving this, we need to treat it like a finely calibrated mechanism, balanced and weighted to the most infinitesimal value – because that's what it is."

John still said nothing, so Sherlock crossed the pavement to him in two strides then took ahold of him by the upper arms. He pressed a piercing look into his friend's eyes, letting him read the urgency and sincerity in his face. "Swear to me you won't."

John mulishly avoided his gaze, and Sherlock tightened his grip.

"Sometimes… Sometimes the best course of action is inaction," he went on, all too aware of how fitting the words were for himself as well, given what he and Irene had decided in the course of the night. "Swear, John."

John remained stiff for another long moment, but then his shoulders slumped as he gave in. He finally met Sherlock's eyes, and nodded.

"And if we *do* all survive this it will be thanks to you."

At that last cryptic and enigmatic statement, Sherlock released him, then held his hand out to John, who glanced down, then ignored it and pulled Sherlock into a hug.

"It's not good-bye," John said, his voice fierce and hoarse, and tightened his hold. Then he let go and stepped back, his face devoid of all colour and his eyes glossy. "I still believe in Sherlock
Holmes."

Sherlock gave a stiff, closed-lip smile, his throat feeling raw and tight as he considered the elegant irony of John's words, given where he himself had placed his faith.

Then with effort he tore his eyes away from John, and typed with slightly shaking fingers, Where to?

*Get on the bike, put on the helmets. In that order or you forfeit.*

He showed the text to Irene, then pushed and rolled the bike off its stand, kicked down the rear footrests, and swung his leg over the frame to sit astride the seat. Irene followed, her face as pale as John's, but set in sharp chiaroscuro under the midday sun.

After exchanging one last searing look with John Sherlock pulled the helmet down over his head – and was plunged into utter darkness and silence.

Before he could react, he heard two clicks and felt something under his chin lock into place, and with a feeling of dread he understood that he would be unable to remove the helmet. When he took one hand off the bike to lift the visor his other suspicion was confirmed. It was sealed.

He felt Irene go rigid behind him as she was also robbed of two major senses, but he was jolted from that observation when the engine rumbled to life beneath him, and he suddenly understood the functions of all the additional machinery.

*Quid pro quo,* he thought with heavy irony. The plane involved in the Air Bond plot meant to deceive Moriarty's clients was to be remote-piloted, and in keeping with the tech savvy Moriarty had shown recently, this motorcycle was operated in the same way. Several years ago a series of prototypes had been developed in California and it shouldn't surprise him that Moriarty was able to get his hands on a model of them. Besides, it fit the man's signature panache – a blend of perverse absurdity and hyper-rationality – perfectly.

Then pure mortal panic ripped through him as the bike went into first gear and began to move them forward, and his hands tightened on the handles as his eyes alternated between squeezing shut and darting across his field of vision, desperate to see something, anything. Swirls and geometric patterns danced in front of him, but aside from a seam of light at the bottom of his vision the artificial darkness was absolute. He had been unprepared for how alarming it would be to surrender so much control like this, but there was nothing he could do but try to hone his other senses as the machine shifted into second gear and picked up its pace.

Irene's arms were vices around him, and he could only imagine how much her glancing gunshot wound must be paining her, but her strength was iron, and her fingers dug into him so tightly that he thought he might be able to see each digit in bruising when this was all over.

*When,* not if – they had bet it all for that.

Now his heart was all that he could hear in the vacuum-like silence of the helmet, and it was a thunderous roar in his ears as they picked up speed. His only consolation was that he was such an experienced rider, because he didn't think he would've managed to keep any semblance of calm otherwise. It was bizarre to feel the shifting up and down of gears below him whilst his hands remained clutched around the handles and his foot remained still, but at least his familiarity with the sensations and cues of the machine allowed him balance its two passengers accordingly.

Nothing *he* did would cause the bike to topple, but as they blindly hurtled through London he still half-expected them to crash into a building or career down a set of stairs into the Thames where
their modified helmets would conspire to drown them—still couldn't help but think that perhaps this was Moriarty's actual endgame, and all the torment through which he'd put them prior to this was just the equivalent of a cat toying with its prey.

And then what would happen to Nero, their child who so innocent in all of this?

His mind coldly pointed out that if their plans were creditable the plans could survive even if Sherlock and Irene didn't, and that offered him genuine comfort.

Sherlock had been so unsettled by the lack of sight and sound and distracted by the fear that he and Irene could meet violent deaths at any moment that for several minutes he lost track of his bearings, meaning that he was unable to map their progress through the city. The chilling air blowing across his hands from the forward thrust of the bike obscured the natural wind patterns that might help him orient himself, and the hermetic lack of sounds deprived him of clues as well. His mind darted as frenetically as his eyes had moments before, trying to find order and meaning in the chaos. He didn't have his senses of sight or hearing but he had his sense of touch, and perceiving the London roads that rumbled beneath them should be all he needed. Through sheer force of will he contained his panic and stopped fighting against the loss of some senses to hone his perception through the others. After another moment of struggle he felt his body respond and transform into a sensitive instrument distinct from his mind – a seismometer that detected the slightest change in grade, or surface change such as a metal grating that would indicate a bridge, or the evenly spaced notches of embedded rails - anything to which he could then compare to the roads within about a mile radius from their starting point. It was a sensuous experience, though not at all sexual; it was the integration of his mind and his body in singular united purpose, which was an ability that Irene had inspired him to explore and develop.

For several minutes his intense physical focus didn’t yield anything; there was nothing distinctive enough about the roads to be useful. They were travelling in a straight line at just below the speed limit, and though they did stop and start at what he could presume were red lights, the stops came at unremarkable intervals that matched well over a dozen stretches of road within the mile radius. But then they made a very sharp left, followed by distinctive three-angled turns first to the right, and then to the left, which told him at once that they were navigating from Southampton Row onto High Holborn, and he felt a surge of affection for London and its idiosyncratic, medieval streets. Relief at the return of some awareness and therefore control restored more clear-headedness, but he was still all too aware that even if he could now plot their route on his mental map of the city, it wouldn’t stop them from going through a wall if that’s what Moriarty had planned.

Just before Farringdon Street they slowed and made another series of complex turns, and then the handlebars angled downward under Sherlock's hands. He leaned back slightly to compensate, and as they descended the ramp into the subterranean carpark the darkness inside his helmet became denser and the air grew colder.

For the first time in twenty minutes Sherlock felt his grip on the handles ease and some of the tension of unbearable uncertainty leech out of his body. Then a fresh injection of adrenaline swept through him at what he and Irene would face in mere moments: a ghost from both their pasts, in all meanings of the word.

Chapter End Notes

This resource was indispensible for writing a section of this chapter, and if you'd like
to see how their path through underground London looked, check it out!
http://www.28dayslater.co.uk/king-scholars-pond-sewer-river-tyburn-london-2014.t92072

Thanks for all your patience in waiting for this chapter! Technically it was difficult to write because it's so transitional and I needed to have everything plotted out for the rest of the story in order to publish this one. But I hope you enjoyed, and feedback is always greatly appreciated!!
The Spectre at the Feast

The downward grade of the pavement evened and several moments later Sherlock and Irene came to a rolling stop. In front of her she felt Sherlock put his legs down to stabilise the motorbike, but the stand descended into place on its own, and then dual clicks in her helmet told her she was released of confinement.

The journey here had been one of the most harrowing ordeals of her life, but it was over now, and she would relegate it to the part of herself where she kept the rest of her traumatising and angering memories, to be accessed when she needed to channel her darker side. She hoped that she would be doing that very soon.

With a grimace she yanked the helmet from her head and threw it to the ground, just as Sherlock did the same, and she saw that he looked more gaunt and angular than ever. The compression of the helmet combined with sweat had plastered his hair against the sides of his face and his complexion was waxy, but something inside her reached out for him in desperation and longing. More than any other point in the past day, it was now real and immediate to her that she could lose him.

All of the moisture from their slog through the buried River Tyburn had evaporated, leaving a hoary residue on the joggers she’d been given back in the women’s prison, and she too felt the clammy trickle of perspiration at her temples and the nape of her neck. After a lifetime crafting her appearance down to the finest detail she now couldn’t care less about any of that. She only used her looks as a yet another weapon in her arsenal, and she had no qualms about abandoning the aesthetic when it didn’t serve a purpose. Vanity – at least about her appearance - had never been one of her flaws.

She and Sherlock didn’t speak, they only looked around them to take stock of their situation as they caught their breaths. Despite the dimness of the cavernous space, Irene’s eyes took a moment to adjust, but when they did she saw a sprawling subterranean carpark.

She had been locked in such a state of constant stress and heightened alertness for what felt like days now that it felt like a new status quo, but her blood pressure leapt even higher at the sight of this (deceptively?) empty garage.

In her mind’s eye she saw a scene plucked from the gangster films her father had watched when she was a girl back in New Jersey: a pair of assassins pivoting out from behind a column and gunning Sherlock down right in front of her, with her utterly powerless to stop it. The rational part of her mind assured her that Moriarty wouldn’t resort to such tactics – not when he could prolong this and savour his perceived victory over them. But a small voice countered that perhaps Moriarty had learned not to permit Sherlock any room for manoeuvring after he had managed to survive their last confrontation.

Suddenly a mechanical hum surged somewhere to their left, and bars of fluorescent lighting flickered on then brightened, illuminating a square patch of oil-stained asphalt.

Both their heads whipped in that direction, but nothing else happened, and the garage was silent and still except for the faint buzzing of the lights.

After exchanging a weighted look Irene and Sherlock made their way towards the area, but as soon as they came to a stop they were plunged into darkness once more. Seconds later the lights in another section came on in the same manner, and this time they made their way for it without
hesitation. They were led across the vast space, square by square, and Irene couldn’t help but feel like a lab-rat being put through its paces in some research facility – for reasons incomprehensible to the rat.

It was choreographed yet clinical, and flooded her with that sense of dread she uniquely associated with Moriarty.

Even discounting the vivid image of a gangland-style hit, Irene did not feel confident or good about their plan; she was not going into it thinking that they had any edge or advantage.

In an ironic way, that was heartening considering how spectacularly they had failed after they’d gone into their last endeavour with such self-assurance. And Sherlock had argued passionately and persuasively for this – had beseeched her to trust him with a desperation in his eyes that didn’t permit her to say no. Despite what Moriarty had ordered they had devised secondary and tertiary plans, and then some – of course they had – and in turn she was certain that he would expect that they had, and had made contingency plans of his own based on what he thought they would do. Still, so much rested on what for her was an entirely unknown and untested variable…

After they had traversed what felt like the length of a city block and had reached the opposite perimeter of the garage, it wasn’t another pitted path of floor they were shown. Instead the doors of a lift chimed, then opened to reveal an illuminated interior, and in unison Sherlock and Irene moved towards it and entered.

They turned to stand side-by-side, and stared straight ahead in silence as the metal doors closed again.

When it began its ascent some impulse made Irene reach for Sherlock’s hand and entwine her fingers with his. He gave a small start as she pulled him out of his mind and back into the physical, but then he tightened his hold in response. His palm was slightly moist, but his grip was warm and strong, and she felt his pulse racing along with hers where their fingers interlocked.

He was so alive and vital beside her, and immeasurably vital to her, that it was impossible for her to accept the fact that if they’d miscalculated he would be dead within the hour.

They continued to grip hands as the seconds ticked by and they rose through the building floor by floor, ever closer to the next phase of this trial. It seemed both an eternity and an instant to Irene.

When it came to a final stop on the 14th floor they wrenched their hands apart in an unconscious effort not to show vulnerability to anyone waiting on the other side, and took in identical low breaths.

The doors slid apart with a soft whoosh and they found themselves facing a long rectangular space. Irene lurched to the threshold of the lift and her eyes darted across every surface and into every niche in the room, frantic to see Nero. But the space seemed as still and vacant as the garage had been and she felt a stab of bitter disappointment, followed by a resurgence of the same rage she’d felt when she’d first learned that Moriarty had her child. After letting it flare bright and overwhelming for a moment she bridled it, then surveyed the room with a more clinical gaze, though she was still breathing hard.

It was a dim office space, lined on either side by large flat windows covered with blinds, and the long rows of tables that stretched out from either side of a central line were broken and uneven – some even partially collapsed, their rusted legs bent and splayed across dusty industrial carpeting. Fragments of ceiling tile littered the floor, and when she glanced up she saw copious patches of
bare ceiling and large brown blots of water damage.

Neither of them made a move to leave the artificial sanctuary of the lift; they both stood just inside looking out, and the lift doors made no attempt to close again.

It was a moment of stillness, the last inhale before a sprint.

“Where are we…” she murmured, her voice hoarse as she broke the silence.

She had been thinking aloud somewhat, but she wasn’t surprised when Sherlock’s response came, immediate but flat.

“The City.”

Before it occurred to her to ask him to be more specific, he went on. She knew that he needed this, and his explanation would be mantra-like in its ability to centre and focus him.

“We’re a bit west of St Barts – an ambulance’s just gone by, it was headed there. There’s also the church bells, distinctive to St Sepulchre, and the fact that in the carpark there was audible traffic not just immediately above us but at first story level too. That’s the Holborn Viaduct. Then there are the construction sounds, which are coming from 60 Holborn Viaduct, just northwest of here. Even if I’d never gotten my bearings on the ride over, there’s only one abandoned building of this size in the location that fits all that criteria – the Fleet Building. When it was built after World War II it was the largest telecommunications and post building in Europe, but it’s slated for demolition in a few months, and as you can see it’s been vacant for years.”

Irene nodded, and though Sherlock’s pinpointing of their location made her feel faintly better, there was still a gut-churning nausea that wouldn’t ease. Not even when she’d felt the blade of the executioner’s sword against the back of her neck had she felt so afraid. She had accepted death then, but every part of her rebelled against this, even if it probably wasn’t her own death they faced. Was Nero even here? Or was he with someone else and there was a relay system in place that depended on Moriarty being satisfied with Sherlock’s death? Every worse scenario she’d considered over the past 24-hours replayed in her mind in rapid fast-forward.

“Spot on, Sherlock – well done,” a disembodied but familiar lilting voice came from their left, and at the sound Irene’s heart began to drum in triple-time, and a chill wracked her frame.

A second later a man sauntered into their field of vision, and for a moment Irene’s vision went white as she felt herself dissociate at the sight.

It was Moriarty.

Sherlock had gone rigid beside her. She felt the rise of small hairs against her arms as his skin erupted in gooseflesh, felt his knuckles graze the back of her hands as they unconsciously clenched and flexed.

His breath stopped for one almost imperceptible second then came out hard and laboured, and she could only imagine what he must be feeling. All the time he had sacrificed being ‘dead’ in order to finish what he thought he’d started on that hospital rooftop – as well as his reputation and nearly the friendship of his closest companion – it was for nought.

It was one thing to see signs suggesting that Moriarty had survived and was more of a threat than ever before – but quite yet another to see him standing before her, as unrepentant and smirking as ever. She was vindicated in every one of her long-held suspicions, and yet she had never so abhorred being right.
“You don’t seem to have grasped why, though,” Moriarty went on.

“O-bvious,” Sherlock said in a not-quite stammer.

“I agree!”

“You’ve created and manage one of the most extensive criminal networks in the world, so it’s fitting that you’d use the Fleet Building as your London bolthole. I applaud your decision to use this instead of the church – that would’ve been a bit heavy-handed even for you.”

“Quite right,” the other man said. “About the church, I mean. You’ve rather missed the mark with the other part, though… But not to worry – we’ll get to that. ‘Incomplete data’ and so on—”

"Where is my child?" Irene shouted, cutting off the inane banter that had nothing to do with anything she cared about – nothing to do with why she was there – and two dark heads turned in her direction.

Sherlock looked chagrined with himself but Moriarty made an ironic startled motion, as if he’d forgotten she was there. He met her eyes with mocking in his, but in the next moment they went cold and flat.

“As if I’d just tell. But I am a man of my word; as soon as Sherlock Holmes dies, you’ll get him back. Can’t believe that’s what you really want, but then” – he gave a unconcerned shrug – “I never did put much stock in ‘blood ties’.”

Moriarty looked at her for another moment, his dark eyes drilling into hers and giving her the same feelings of free-fall that she’d felt on the ride over.

She’d fallen in love with Sherlock in part for the thrill of recognition that they found in each other, and she had come to accept and even embrace all the vulnerability that came with being so transparent to someone else. But as he was in so many ways with Sherlock, Moriarty was the dark reflection of that; not only could Moriarty see the exploitable weaknesses in her armour, but all exploitable data of the woman beneath.

Irene quelled the urge to jab at one of the lift’s buttons and escape that all-seeing malignant gaze, and instead she set her mouth and lifted her chin as she stared back. Her look of defiance was partly an act, but she refused to allow Moriarty the satisfaction of glimpsing her fear. Anyhow, it wasn’t as if the lift would obey her now.

Moriarty smirked at that (she hadn’t fooled him at all), and it was another long moment before he released her gaze. Then he made a mechanical three-point turn and began to move away from them.

After exchanging a glance Sherlock and Irene finally crossed over the threshold of the lift and followed.

As they made their way down the aisle Irene noticed that some of the blinds had collapsed into heaps on the floor, their plastic slats splayed like the sun-bleached ribs of animal carcasses, and others were askew on snapped cords, which gave her triangular glimpses of the city below through grime-coated windows. She could see that the lift had taken them up into a central tower that rose above the rest of the office block, and it was surreal to view so many familiar London landmarks whilst imprisoned in this citadel.

She could even pick out the turrets and finials of Whitehall Court in the distance, as well as the adjacent building that housed Mycroft Holmes’s office. But Mycroft Holmes – and all of his horses
and all of his men – were even more distant to them than anything else their eyes could see.

She turned her eyes forward to see that Moriarty was leading towards a towering set of wooden doors, which faced the long rectangular space.

“Isn’t this nice, the three of us all together at last?” he said over his shoulder, as if sensing her eyes on him again. “Er, you’re welcome, by the way. If not for that whole AirBond debacle – ‘debacle’ for you two, of course – you’d have never met! Let alone procreated…”

“So you ‘giveth and you taketh away,’ is that it?” Sherlock ground out, unable to keep disdain and anger from his words.

Moriarty didn’t react, but after a beat he continued.

“Does it ever bother you, Sherlock?” His voice dropped in pitch and became insinuating, then he stopped and turned, so that Sherlock had to jerk back to avoid walking into the other man.

He looked up into Sherlock’s face and a small, unpleasant smile played on his lips.

“Do you ever wonder… whom else she might have fucked to advance her agenda? Before she tried to do it to you, I mean.”

The first implication was, of course, that it had been he, Moriarty. The second was that she was only with Sherlock for selfish ulterior motives. Both would be palpable hits if Sherlock let them.

He didn’t answer, but from the corner of her eye Irene saw him narrow his eyes and a flush go into his cheeks, and his jaw clenched at the unexpected vulgarity.

“Did she tell you that you were her exception?” Moriarty went on, as if she’d said the same thing to him and he were comparing notes – as if everything that Sherlock had experienced with Irene, Jim had done it with her already.

Then Moriarty adopted a dopey, pseudo-lovestruck voice. “Did it make you feel special.”

Sherlock remained upright and still, but his eyes almost imperceptibly slid in Irene’s direction. She could read his uncertainty and see him fighting the hurt and distrust that were the constant spectres in their relationship, as one after another Moriarty touched on his worst insecurities with her.

Would hearing the other man expose these issues with such surgeon-like precision make Sherlock think that they were blatant to everyone else? Would he think that once again he was missing the obvious because he was blinded by his sentiment and deluding himself about how she felt for him?

Moriarty couldn’t possibly know the weight and importance of the word ‘exception’ for Sherlock and Irene, but it was a viciously good guess – based in part on how Jim advised her to play Sherlock. But Sherlock couldn’t be drawing the conclusion that it was because she had ever expressed that sentiment for Moriarty, could he? She didn’t think so, but she also knew that whatever doubts he had were the direct legacy of what she had once done, so that in a way she was complicit in all of this now.

She wouldn’t touch Moriarty for all the gold in the Bank of England– and she didn’t think he had any genuine sexual interest in her or anyone else – but of course that was all beside the point for him.

It wasn’t enough for him to simply kill Sherlock, he had to taunt and humiliate him in the process. And because Sherlock was as vulnerable to Moriarty’s brutal insight as she was – if not more so –
Moriarty saw that Sherlock’s relationship with Irene was the best way to achieve that.

Still, she wouldn’t dignify his implications and their attempt to hurt Sherlock with any denials. This was a test, not only of Sherlock’s emotional endurance, but of their strength as one united force against Moriarty, and she didn’t intend for them to fail at this any more than the life-threatening challenges they faced.

Sherlock’s jaw flexed but he was silent, still not rising to the other man’s bait, and she felt a spike of pride that felt close and intrinsic; Sherlock’s strength here was their strength. There was also a deep sense of relief that the cracks she had laid into the foundation of their relationship were not so egregious that they caused everything they had built upon it to collapse under external pressure.

For a moment Moriarty looked put-out and sullen that sowing discord between the two of them wasn’t as easy as he might’ve hoped, and Irene felt savage pleasure at his disappointment, but then his face dropped back into its mask of boredom and apathy, and he turned around again.

He reached the large doorway and moved aside, then raised his hand to direct them through it.

She made a move towards the door, but Sherlock hesitated, uncharacteristically balking, and she looked back at him with a flash of alarm she couldn’t disguise.

Moriarty rolled his eyes.

“She’s right, don’t be ridiculous; I’ve got your baby. I won’t force you – I’m not even armed, am I – but I will take any deviation or resistance as a forfeit.”

Moriarty had misinterpreted her expression – she had been concerned at the genuine vulnerability and fear Sherlock had shown – but it didn’t make what Moriarty had said any less true, and Sherlock knew it. He didn’t answer, but he did move in front of her to reach for the door handles, his face a rigid mask but something burning in his eyes.

The other man only smirked back at him, and the smirk widened into a grin after they stepped through and he grabbed the doors by their handles and slammed them shut, sealing Sherlock and Irene inside the room they had just entered.

Sherlock took a step back, then clasped his hands in a death-grip behind his back as he stared at the closed doors with an intensity that suggested he was trying to melt the steel of the handles and lock with his eyes, but Irene instinctively reached out to open them. They were locked, of course, and her heart leapt into a sprint and she tried and failed to swallow down a swell of panic.

This time it was her turn to let irrational emotion get the better of her. She tightened her grip and shook the handles hard, knowing it was futile and even counter-productive, but unable to keep from losing herself to all the frustration, fear, and rage of their situation.

All the while Sherlock remained completely motionless. It was the stillness of a prey-animal that sensed mortal danger, but she knew that as frozen as he appeared, it was only that he had withdrawn from the physical world once more. His body might look motionless but his mind was hurtling forward like a bullet train to determine how unfolding developments stacked up against what they had expected.

A shriek of audio feedback pierced the air, followed by static, and then Moriarty’s voice came into the room over a pair of mid-century era speakers mounted above the doors.

The sound jerked Irene out of her momentary loss of control and she let go of the door handles and stepped back, glaring at the speakers as if they were the man himself, her mouth slightly open in a
“Remove all your clothing and put it in the rubbish bags,” he said, his voice now detached and clinical.

Neither Sherlock nor Irene moved.

“Suddenly so puritanical about nudity!” he crowed. “That’s not like either of you, is it? Besides it’s not as if you’re seeing anything new.”

Irene knew that technically this was a precaution against any hidden weapons or transmitters, but she could also spot recreational degradation a mile away. She was a foremost expert on the subject, and this reeked of a power play.

And yet they didn’t have a choice.

Sherlock and Irene looked at each other and she gave him a small nod, and they began to undress, Sherlock having to help Irene at times due to her injured arm.

When they were down to their underwear the voice on the speaker drawled, “All of it,” and Irene saw a murderous gleam flash in Sherlock eyes as he slipped out of his pants and tossed them onto the pile of clothing beside him.

“Now lift your arms and turn around.”

They both did as he asked, performing for some hidden camera.

“Now. Kiss.”

Irene felt her stomach drop in shock and revulsion as entirely new possibilities of humiliation and degradation occurred to her, and her horror was compounded by the fact that they would both do it, whatever terrible thing ‘it’ might be. Their will to protect Nero was more powerful than anything Moriarty might subject her to. Of course Moriarty understood that as well, which made them all the more subject to his volatile whims.

But a moment later when Moriarty added “Just kidding,” in a mock-resentful voice – like he was being forced to state the obvious to people who didn’t get the joke – it morphed into scalding hatred.

When he spoke again the detached, monotone voice had returned. “Your clothing goes in the disposal bags on the table in front of you. When you’re done open its top drawer. There are scrubs in there, put them on.”

As Irene and Sherlock moved towards the table she felt as if she had left her body and risen to a new plane of existence; she was no longer a woman but a Fury, and her hands didn’t end in finger but talons, and she would use them to shred Jim apart. Every one of her senses were honed and abuzz with adrenaline-fuelled hatred, and her movements as she followed his orders were jerky and uncoordinated. In the distant part of her mind that was still somewhat functional, she noticed that Sherlock was the same.
Sherlock prided himself on his ability to partition any emotions that could affect the quality of his work, but he’d never found it necessary to take such precautions with anger, because that emotion had never detracted from brainwork. Until now, possibly – he didn’t think he had ever been so irate in his life. That stunt with acting as if he would sexually coerce them had destroyed the final semblances of a gentleman’s duel – already in tatters after Moriarty had stooped to holding Nero hostage – and any trace admiration he’d felt for Moriarty after his reappearance had evaporated, leaving behind only a blistering scorch-mark.

When Sherlock had first laid eyes on the resurrected Moriarty he’d felt a riot of different responses, but the basic instinct to freeze beat out fight and flight, and it was compounded by his awe at being so thoroughly deceived.

All that time ago atop a building just a stone’s throw away from here Sherlock had watched Moriarty pull the trigger from inches away, had felt the shock waves of the bullet exploding from the weapon, experienced the ringing of his ears at the roar of the gunshot, had seen with his own eyes the blood and brain matter that had torn out of the back of the other man’s head and spattered the hospital’s roof.

And yet there Moriarty had stood, looking a bit shabby in slouchy khaki trousers, a vest, and a hoodie – similar to how he had first met the man when he’d been playing ‘Jim from IT’ – rather than his signature bespoke. But his eyes had burned with the same intensity and malevolence as they’d pierced his, and his mouth had been set into the ironic, vaguely amused smirk that had haunted Sherlock long after the other man’s alleged death.

That such a spectre from his past should be standing in front of him now was impossible and therefore incredible, and so despite their situation Sherlock had felt horrified and exhilarated in equal measure.

Those conflicted feelings were now long-gone, engulfed by a black hole of hatred. Sherlock had looked into the mirror darkly many times during his time abroad, and had often used the idea Moran’s death as the impetus to keep him going even whilst every fibre of his being had craved rest and home, but never had he so anticipated someone’s demise as he did now.

During those times abroad he’d felt as he had in Karachi: that he was living in another, entirely separate life, and that nothing he did would or could have any real implications or consequences in his ‘real’ life back in London. It had been the compartmentalisation of his mind extended to reality, and it was the only way he’d been able to do things and behave in ways that ‘Sherlock Holmes’ never could have.

The distinction was that he had gone to Pakistan out of love, and during his time hunting down the remainder of Moriarty’s network he had been fuelled by a need for revenge and annihilating victory. Yet as converse as those emotions might seem, giving in to such powerful desires had been necessary for his survival and sanity in both cases.

It was only in retrospect that he saw how utterly naïve of him it had been to think that there would be no consequences – emotional or otherwise – in his ‘real life.’ Nero was the literal embodiment of his time in Pakistan, and the ordeal they faced now was the direct cost of Sherlock’s actions against Moriarty’s network. He himself had been fundamentally affected by those experiences as well.

He had started to understand that even before he’d learned of Nero or before Moriarty had resurfaced: when John had commented after his return that he could be ‘Sherlock Holmes’ again his knee-jerk reaction had been to question what that meant.
Despite their closeness and all that they’d experienced together, John had really only seen the curated version of himself that he’d wanted him to; John hadn’t been present in Karachi or during Sherlock’s time dismantling Moriarty’s network, and so he probably believed the same fallacy about Sherlock acting out of necessity that Sherlock had initially believed himself. (At least in terms of the latter – God knew what John was thinking about the former).

But now that the consequences of Karachi and his time abroad were both converging on his life in London, so too were the three personas he’d had those previously distinct contexts, and he found that he now had the strength to accept the total sum of who he was – who he had always been, really.

When he and Irene had changed into their sets of mint green scrubs the speakers squawked again, and Sherlock felt himself tense in anticipation of hearing Moriarty’s voice, but instead the other man just let the static go on and fill the room with harsh, dissonant buzzing.

At first it was manageable, even preferable to hearing him, but it became steadily less tolerable until it began to set his teeth on edge and fill his entire head with inescapable, patternless noise that blared out any semblance of thought. As it was surely intended to, it amplified the anxiety of waiting for Moriarty to pronounce Sherlock’s cause of death – since surely they had now arrived at that part of the afternoon’s program.

By that token, it also prolonged the agony of suspense on whether or not Sherlock had a chance to live, or Moriarty would be Winner Takes All.

“Oh, is this on?” Moriarty finally said, before clearing his throat with a small, pseudo-embarrassed giggle.

Then his voice changed again, losing all warmth and inflection.

“Go to the opposite end of the room, Sherlock. You’ll find something waiting there for you…”

Sherlock and Irene exchanged a look of thinly-veiled panic, and he knew that the same, horrifying thought had blazed into both their minds: Bomb?

Like Irene, incendiaries were very ‘Moriarty.’ After all, it had been his weapon of choice in his carefully-produced debut to Sherlock all those years ago, and would make a symmetrical, awful, sense to end their game for good the same way.

Besides, he had once promised to make him burn.

“I’m waiting…” Moriarty said, his sing-song tone back.

There would be no defence against fire, no clever escape against a bomb that detonated inches from his all-too-human body, and no avenging angel to go after any burgeoning segments of Moriarty’s network this time, but Sherlock conjured up the image of his child and with brute determination he forced himself to move towards the rear of what looked like the largest room in this condemned building.

Every muscle braced as if preparing to resist being blown apart, and his legs felt heavy with dread, but still he put one foot in front of another, his thoughts – perhaps the last he would ever have – on Nero and Irene, then joined by other faces of loved ones. They flashed through his mind like they made up a flip-book: John – Mary – Lestrade - his parents – Molly …even Mycroft.

It seemed to take forever to cross the ten-metre long room; every metre seemed like a mile as he made his way through the purgatory of endless dusty industrial carpet between Irene and his
destination, but he finally made it to the other side. The blood roaring in his ears and the sweat dripping from his temples were testaments to that fact that he had survived the journey across, but the threat wasn’t over, and he swallowed hard and scanned the area for any potential incendiary devices.

His eyes immediately landed on a black metal box with reinforced corners that was sitting on a generic metal chair, and he once more forced himself to move, and approach it.

“Open it.”

Sherlock’s heart pounded a tattoo in his throat and he felt lightheaded from adrenaline, but his face betrayed none of this inner turmoil as reached his hands out and unfastened the clasps on the metal case with simultaneous flicks.

It didn’t look like a bomb, it looked like a gun lockbox, and when he lifted the lid it revealed dense black foam cut into the shape of the weapon inside.

But instead of a firearm, three glass syringes nestled in the lining.

“That?” Sherlock snarled, jerking around towards the speakers and fear making his heart-rate spike even higher. Three people held hostage – three syringes.

“Oh relax. The other two are just precautionary back-ups, in case someone gets butterfingers. I told you, I’ll keep my word – if you keep yours.”

Sherlock reached out and touched the smooth glass that contained yellow-tinged liquid.

At least it wasn’t a bomb. It was ridiculous to feel any relief in a situation like this, but he did.

“So Sherlock, what’s your poison?”

Moriarty’s question was literal yet ironic; Sherlock answered anyway. Since the syringes obviously contained some type of toxin, there was only one conclusion that made sense.

“Spider venom.”

There was a silence and in his mind’s eye Sherlock saw Moriarty’s face betray the briefest micro-expression of anger that Sherlock had spoiled his revelation.

Then a burst of static sounded again and his voice came back on, the artificial approval in it just audible through the noise of the transmission.

“Very good – yes. But if you’re really keen to impress, you’ll tell me what kind.”

“Black Widow is most likely. It isn’t native to the British Isles, but unlike any other type of spiders its venom is a neurotoxin, so it will attack my entire nerve network, causing catastrophic, systemic damage.

“As systemic and widespread as the network you once had,” he couldn’t help but add with scorn.

Moriarty didn’t answer for a moment, then said at a much louder volume, “Ms Adler!”

Even from across the room Sherlock saw Irene’s expression tighten at the sound of him saying her name.

“Since you’re so handy with needles why don’t you do the honours?”
She didn’t react except for her breath to quicken to so that her chest began to pitch unevenly, and her eyes found Sherlock’s.

It was his turn to give her a brief nod, to silently urge her to trust him, and trust in him.

It was a very difficult thing for them, trust. At one point it had been impossible to fathom that any could ever exist between them, but now that a small measure of it had been so hard-won he was fiercely protective of it.

Still, this request of his would test that nascent trust far more than Moriarty’s transparent attempt had… Sherlock was asking her to make a leap of faith based only on his word, whereas he’d had the chance to learn the relevant lessons through the privilege of experience. She was solitary and self-sufficient in a way that he no longer was, and moreover she had never had any opportunity to be otherwise. And whilst there was a greater level of trust between them than ever before, how far did her faith in him go? Far enough to risk the life of her son with the minimal chance of the payoff of Sherlock’s survival - on the strength of his faith alone?

For a moment he thought he saw her eyes shine, but it could have been a trick of the light because in the next moment her face was impassive, and she was crossing over to him, then reaching into the case and withdrawing one of the syringes.

There was only the slightest tremor in her fingers as she flicked the side to dissipate any air pockets, but he understood that it wasn’t indicative of a lack of fear or concern but of her immense courage. Questions of trust or morality aside, Irene Adler was one of the bravest people he knew.

“Flex,” she said, her voice low and hoarse.

“Wait.”

Irene’s hand drew back with a jerk and she held the syringe aloft behind her, her eyes round and quizzical as she looked into his.

“There’s no point in delaying…” chided Moriarty’s disembodied voice.

Sherlock fixed his eyes on the speakers above the door, even though there must be cameras everywhere.

“One thing, one last thing… If I’m going to die—”

“If?”

“I want to know.”

He trusted that Moriarty would understand what he meant, but after a ringing silence Sherlock went on.

“We’re alike, you’ve said it yourself… We’re both show-offs, so indulge me – indulge yourself. How did you do it? Tell me, how are you alive?”

The silence went on for another beat, then the white noise of the speakers came on again.

“Tempting, but nahhh. I think I’d rather just watch you die. Anyway you are getting your son back, plus the guaranteed immunity of everyone else you care about. Isn’t that enough…?”

Sherlock just tightened his lips, waiting, and in his mind’s eye he could picture Moriarty looking at
him on a monitor with that chilling, x-raying stare of his.

Then, after another silence that went on long enough to make Sherlock second-guess himself, a heavy, put-upon sigh came over the intercom.

It was pure performance – otherwise why would he have pressed the transmit button? – and Sherlock felt a very small dose of triumph.

“Grant a man his dying wish? I suppose. But the key word is ‘dying,’ Sherlock. I’m not saying a word until that needle goes in your arm.”

He added in mock-thoughtfulness “…The fifteen minutes it will take you to die should be long enough to tell you what you want to know…”

Sherlock and Irene’s eyes found each other again, and he took in a short breath and held it. Her blue eyes searched his for any sign of doubt or a change in plan, but he met her gaze with unflinching certainty. There was no failsafe, now – they must go forward.

But first, and perhaps last…

He took hold of her wrist and angled the tip of the needle away from them. Irene’s brow creased in confusion, but then he used his other arm to pull them together and she let herself relax by one degree.

This was very different from their kiss good-bye at his parents’ home, when they’d orchestrated a separation to flush out Moran. There had been some risk then, but they had been confident that their calculations were sound and that they would emerge from the other side having put an end to everything once and for all. He had applied his best brainwork to this situation too, but now he had none of the confidence or swagger that he’d had then. Now he only had faith – an unprecedented thing for him.

This kiss was intense but almost chaste, not because they weren’t alone, but because it was the expression of pure sentiment. There was no adrenaline-fuelled passion or pent-up energy pushing them to deepen the connection, there was only a tenderness and softness that they seldom expressed, as well as the longing that always simmered beneath their kisses.

More than anything else it was a kiss goodbye, and so the sense of longing was even keener than usual; it amplified the ache he felt even whilst her lips on his soothed it.

He didn’t care that Moriarty was watching them on his monitors; they were beyond that now, and he lost himself in one last moment of grace.

After some immeasurable time he drew away from her by just an inch and they shared a closed, intimate space where they drew in the same oxygen, and their exhales intermingled. It created a sliver of privacy where they could share something Moriarty could never see – not on his screens or even in his vivid imagination – and despite the circumstances a small smile quirked Sherlock’s lips, and hers bent in answer. Their eyes were half open but their stares were locked together as one, and he was very conscious of his breathing, his heart-rate, how alive he felt.

She caused that; being with her made him feel more connected with and gratified by his physical self than even the most exhilarating race after a suspect or most euphoric opiates-induced high ever could. But now he faced the destruction of the body he’d so casually relegated to ‘transportation’ before meeting Irene. It was an irony he never could’ve anticipated, but was no less bitter for that.

A sarcastic throat-clearing sound echoed around the room from the speakers, and Sherlock closed
his eyes lightly, then stepped back, gave her a terse nod, and clenched his fist several times to enlarge his median cubital vein.

When he was done Irene angled in the tip of the needle into the hollow of his arm, punctured his skin, and then without any hesitation pushed the plunger home, emptying 3mL of pure venom into his bloodstream.

There was infinitely more gentleness and care in how she gave him this jab compared with the one she’d given him the day they’d first met, and despite everything, he was struck by how perversely romantic that felt to him.
Deus Ex Machina

Chapter Notes

The following plot development – pretty much in its entirety – is based on canon ACD Sherlock Holmes. Just keep that in mind as you're reading ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Irene withdrew the needle from Sherlock's arm she threw the syringe across the room, then grabbed his hands up in hers and looked into his eyes in a blend of clinical watchfulness and deep apprehension.

At first Sherlock felt nothing amiss. Since it wasn't a bite, there was no epidermal irritation beyond the minor prick of the needle, and when did a quick scan of his body from the crown of his head to his feet nothing else registered. Then a slight spasm rock his frame and he pulled in a small breath through his nose, and Irene's face tightened along with her grip.

It was minor but it was a foreshock, warning of the things to come.

Behind them the double doors burst apart and Moriarty stepped in, then threw his arms out.

"The venom…! You win a gold star for that too. It is from a black widow. Fitting isn't it? You destroyed my entire network, and now the toxin that's coursing through your veins is going to destroy yours…" he said with a careless gesture towards Sherlock. "Tit for tat and all that.

"But that's not the only reason I chose it. There's also the fact that you mentioned, Sherlock, which is that it isn't a native…"

He lowered his arms and tilted his head, one side of his mouth drawing up. "But then, you see, neither am I."

Then other side of his of his mouth curled as well so that he was smiling coldly at Sherlock, as if he had just let slip a profound clue, but one which he was confident that Sherlock wouldn't be able to decipher.

Sherlock's brain stuttered in confusion as what he knew as fact from the data he had on Moriarty clashed with what Moriarty had just said. Sherlock had said 'The British Isles' when referring to the venom, and unlike England or the UK, that label encompassed Ireland, which was where everything in his and Mycroft's research indicated was Moriarty's birthplace, and his home country until he received a scholarship to Charterhouse Boarding School. Moriarty's Dublin accent supported that as well, so what did his statement mean?

Irene was silent beside him yet something about her drew his attention, and when he looked at her he saw that she had caught her breath and her entire body had gone taut. Her face was blazing with sudden understanding – as if instead of throwing everything into further obstruction, that had been the final puzzle piece she had needed – and she turned her face slowly to his, meeting his eyes.

"What—" he began, but he was cut off as another chilling shudder worked its way through him, and he felt sweat start to collect at his temples.
"Sherlock…" Irene started, her voice hoarse.

He wasn't sure if it was in reaction to what she'd just realised or his deteriorating state, but he narrowed his eyes and shook his head, urging her to go on.

She held his eye for another moment, then slowly let out the breath she was holding.

"Sherlock, your brother never lied about seeing Moriarty cremated. He didn't betray you."

"Irene, wh—"

"Oh hush, Sherlock – let the woman speak! Irene, you were saying…"

Irene didn't react to Moriarty; her eyes remained trained on Sherlock's.

"Mycroft wasn't lying, because Jim Moriarty really did commit suicide."

"But how can that be," Moriarty responded to Irene in an exaggerated Irish lilt, as if she were a child just figuring out how object permanence worked, and he the parent humouring her.

"What," Sherlock barked as he looked from Irene to Moriarty, incredulous and a bit angry at finding himself in the position of being the last person in the room to arrive at the solution to one of the greatest puzzles he'd ever faced.

Moriarty just smirked at him, and Sherlock tried to swallow but found that he was starting to have difficulty with that, and that his vision was beginning to blur around the edges like a tilt-shift photograph. He rallied his waning energy, and he broke eye contact with Moriarty to scan him as if he were an unknown quantity.

The shock of recognition, of seeing this revenant, had stunned him and his powers of observation at first, but when he discarded all of his preconceived notions and let his eyes sweep over the other man as if he had never encountered him before, as if they had no history, he saw it.

It was like a flash of lightning breaking over a dark wilderness. It sliced through rain and fog to illuminate the night, and yet nothing it revealed was familiar, and he had no map to navigate this new territory.

He sucked in and held another low gasp that had nothing to do with the tightening sensation in his chest or the clammy chills that raced across his skin.

Impossible.

And yet…

Realisation, shock, vindication, and horror hit him in swift succession, and Moriarty's eyes lit with anticipation.

"I think Encyclopedia Brown's finally cracked the case," he said conspiratorially to Irene.

"Go on..." He continued, his black eyes flicking back to Sherlock's and then drilling into them.

"It – it's the only explanation for all the evidence. But it's so..."

Moriarty's smirk broke into a grin.

"The-the way you can be alive when I saw you put a gun in your mouth and pull the trigger. The
reason you were so willing to use Moran, to sacrifice him like a literal pawn... You have no attachment to him whatsoever."

"Very good, and that's because..."

Sherlock made a mental-double take at hearing that line from this man, and at last all the disparate parts came together in one unbelievable, yet undeniable, solution.

Simultaneously a deep pain knifed into his abdomen, and he doubled over. He pulled in oxygen, struggling to remain on his feet, and after a moment the claws retracted and he could straighten again.

He slowly squared his shoulders, breathing hard, and looked Moriarty dead in the eye.

"Because as much as you sound, look, and talk like James Moriarty, you're not him."

The other man stared back, malevolent and amused, every aspect of him a statement of direct contradiction to what Sherlock had just said.

"Just say it," he said, his grin widening even more to show his pointed teeth – teeth which Sherlock now saw were a shade or two whiter than when he'd last interacted with Moriarty. "And really try to savour it, because I promise, this is a once-in-a-life-time solution. Even if you weren't going to be dead in ten minutes..."

Sherlock's voice came out a rasp, disbelief and pain conspiring to rob him of it.

"Twins."

The other man let a dramatic silence follow Sherlock's declaration for several moments.

"We talked about flipping a coin for who got to be the 'evil' one..." he finally said in a distracted sort of way, and Sherlock didn't know if he was being serious or not. Either was possible.

"Anyway you were only half right, because I am James Moriarty."

At Sherlock's blank look, he said in a put-on voice meant to be Sherlock: "Then who did I see kill himself? Don't get me wrong, that was James Moriarty as well, well – Jim," he said with air quotes. "Jim is the one who instigated everything with you and the only one you've interacted with – before recently, of course. As much as I've enjoyed getting acquainted with you, this is the first time I've had the privilege of meeting you face-to-face."

"Twins - twins with the same name..." Sherlock said almost to himself, as if saying it aloud could make it less preposterous or unbelievable.

"Chalk that up to a mix-up at the foster agency," James said with a careless shrug. "We weren't raised together. Jim stayed in foster care and so he kept the original family name, but I was adopted by a couple who took me with them to the US. They did that back then if it suited – separated siblings. Even twins."

"Or it's just that your birthparents were also insane," Sherlock shot back. "It seems to run in the family."

"After all I've seen I'm certainly Team Nature, but 'insane'?" He pouted his lips thoughtfully, then gave a shake of his head. "I do know that I've been different than everyone else – better – all my life. Even where I had my career in Silicon Valley, which is supposedly full of the world's 'best and
"When my brother found me he opened up my eyes about what that was. Then you, Sherlock, you put an end to all of that, didn't you?"

He asked it in a calm and conversational tone that contrasted with the burning anger in his eyes.

"James…" The name felt strange and stilted on his lips; it was oddly formal compared with how he had interacted with the other Moriarty. "You need to know tha—"

"At first I bought into the version of the fall you wanted everyone to believe, and I thought you were dead," James went on, as if he hadn't heard Sherlock. "So when things started to collapse the only explanation that fit the facts of what was happening was that Irene Adler was behind it, getting revenge on behalf of the both of you. (Jim told me all about you two, and about how you saved her – you should know that you didn't fool him for a second; he knew what his clients look like, and that wasn't them in your little movie.) At first I was going to just have her killed, but then I put together a picture from what was coming back to me from my people you'd had imprisoned.

Oh, you were careful that none of them ever saw you when you planted your damning evidence or tracked them down and reported them to the police, but you didn't know how much you were dealing with someone who can discern patterns better than anyone else. Anyone else. Maybe you could've fooled my brother, who knows, but you couldn't fool me, not for long.

"But I was fooling you, wasn't I? You didn't know that a 'Moriarty' was still alive, let alone anything about me – you thought Moran had assumed leadership."

James took a moment to making a tsking sound and look into Sherlock's face with pitying derision.

"Anyway, I manufactured his 'death' to make you think that your work was done and you could return to England, and I had my people threaten Irene and her child just enough that she'd feel the need to seek out protection here in England as well, using the kid as her literal 'get-out-of-jail-free' card."

He smiled and let out a contented sigh. "And now here we are, all back together again."

"Your accent…" Irene said beside Sherlock; it had slowly morphed.

"Just playing someone from the British Isles," he drawled, but this time in a west coast American accent. "Well, you'd know a bit about that wouldn't you… Renée Wolfe. And we all know a bit about how important names are to identity as well. For me it involved embracing my birth name – for you two it was rejecting yours respectively, but for all of us it was about discovering our true selves, who we're meant to be.

"Jim showed me who that was, and you took that all away from me, Sherlock."

"Listen to me," Sherlock cut in again, his voice low with urgency and the effort of pushing through the iron vice beginning to compress his lungs. "Your brother took his own life. It's what he wanted. He knew the rules of the game, and when he thought that the cost of winning was his own life, he still killed himself."

"Hm?" Moriarty feigned looking confused, then made an entertained, incredulous sound that
Sherlock didn't understand.

"Oh… him… You think I care about that?" He pulled a face like Sherlock was making an awkward mistake. "No… No, you rather did me a favour when you got him to kill himself. Not all of us are sentimental about our brothers, you know. I told you – I don't put much stock in blood ties."

"But the…" Sherlock started, momentarily at a loss. "Talking about how you'd been separated all this time – going after people connected to me, shooting my brother…"

"Yes," James hissed, transforming from relaxed to terrifying, stepping forward as if about to lash out. "Because those are the things you care about."

Sherlock closed his eyes lightly and shook his head, willing away his distracting, cramping pain. "But you said that I took it all away. If not your brother, then—"

"Projecting again, Sherlock…!"

"It not his brother he cared about, it's Jim's network – his criminal organisation," Irene murmured, before turning to James. "Sherlock actually cleared your way when he caused Jim to commit suicide."

"And at first I was thrilled! I might've even attended your funeral if not for…" he gestured at his face ironically. "But just killing my brother wasn't enough - you had to go and really do the thing. That network would've been my legacy—my baby," he said with deliberate heavy-handedness. "You tore it all down."

Sherlock fought down a sudden swell of nausea with an ugly cough, and grit his teeth.

"It's obvious why Jim would want to track you down – not sentiment, never that, it's just that every empire needs an heir," Sherlock said. "And as his twin it would only grow his mythology. Knock him down, witness him put a bullet through his brain, but he comes surging back. Unstoppable. Unkillable. His name, his brand becomes impervious, immortal. But what was in it for you? Why piggy-back on Jim?"

Sherlock was intentionally goading him, but James didn't take the bait; he just rolled his eyes. "Don't you listen? Software programming, coding, the money—none of it was good enough, none of it was real. Oh I could do whatever I wanted and translate it into real-world consequences – hack into any system, manipulate any network – but it was too easy, too banal, too… limiting? I was bored, but my brother showed me how I could translate all of that into the real world, where instead of 0s and 1s I'd be controlling actual people, and the way I manipulated them would play out as actual events.

"Human networks are just a proxy for digital and electronic ones," he murmured, apparently to himself. "Or maybe it's the other way around… Doesn't really matter…"

He suddenly became re-animated, gesturing around the large room.

"But look where we're standing! This was England's Central Telegraph Room – once a premiere communications hub in the world, with the largest telephone and Telex interchange in Europe. When it was built in the sixties it was at the forefront of modern technology and the centre of international communication. Now just a half-century later it's obsolete, abandoned, condemned. Technology is fleeting and ephemeral – it's an essential tool, but it's not true power. True, sustainable power is controlling people."
"So that's where Moriarty got the idea for a code to unlock any door," he murmured, battling through the intensifying nausea to speak. "You two had met by that point."

"This is the code," James hissed, pointing to his temple, his eyes twin braziers that burned into Sherlock's. "My mind."

"Did anyone know about you – did Moran?"

"Soldier-boy?" Moriarty snorted. "Please. When I appeared he thought it was just another one of Jim's tricks. Probably wouldn't have cared if he did, though. All he wanted was someone to point him in the way of a target and he was happy to get to it. He had his use though…"

"No, no one knew. Jim designed it to be seamless in case I ever needed to step in and take over. You said it yourself – it would grow the myth, take him from being a man to a legend and make him immortal. He even left me all sorts of instructions on how to 'be' him, and through it all I played the meek IT guy, acting like I couldn't possibly take on something like this." He chuckled. "So funny, don't you think, Sherlock? He fell for that act just as much as you did." He clicked his tongue in derision. "Apparently even a person like Jim had a blind spot for family, in the end. I don't share that weakness."

"My brother is likewise afflicted," Sherlock grumbled back. "And he'll—"

"Mycroft Holmes is done," James said flatly. "He's getting awfully close to the baseline for his living will to come into effect – they could pull the plug on him at any moment now, really. Maybe they're doing it as we speak!"

At this he looked deep into Sherlock's eyes, and a small flicker pulled the corner of his mouth upward.

Abruptly Sherlock's knees buckled beneath him, and he crumpled to the ground, putting out his hands so that he wouldn't collapse entirely, and bracing against them breathing hard. He dug his fingertips hard into the dusty, abrasive fibres of the carpet to anchor himself in consciousness.

Moriarty just looked down on him impassively, then gave a bored sigh and glanced at his watch. "Not the finest day for the Holmes Boys, is it? My condolences to your mom and dad. Any final questions?"

"Nero…" Sherlock choked out. "Where is he? I've kept my end of the bargain, James – it's time to keep yours."

"Not quite yet, you haven't. Very soon, I think, but not quite yet. But as a sign of good faith and one final favour to a dying man…"

James pulled a small iPad from his rear pocket then turned it around to show them the image on the screen. It was a streaming feed of Nero, either asleep or unconscious, and Sherlock heard Irene give an involuntary gasp as she lurched towards the tablet.

Jim drew it behind him with a tsk and then placed it back in his pocket, before watching them with a cocked head and a trace of amusement in his black eyes.

Sherlock became conscious of tears stinging his eyes, and powerful waves of cramps sent nausea and shards of agony through his abdomen. He hunched into himself again in an unconscious reflex against the pain, as his breathing became jagged and sweat poured down his face, but through the debilitating feeling he felt something like triumph as well.
Irene took another step forward, an aura of lethal energy looking for a vector crackling around her. "Who knows about Mycroft Holmes, but for you and me this doesn't end here, I will—"

"Yes, I'm sure you'd love to get your hands on me," Jim cut her off in an unimpressed drawl. "I heard about your handiwork with Moran over the scanner. Neatly done."

"It won't be neat with you, that I promise," Irene said, her voice low and trembling with fury, but each word enunciated with resolve.

"Oh Irene. I might've been lenient with little Nero this time, but next time I won't be. If I so much as catch a whiff of that cloying perfume of yours, the kid is dead."

Unadulterated hatred sent what felt like acid through Sherlock, amplifying the pain wracking his body tenfold but also galvanizing him through it, and in slow, laboured movements he struggled back to his feet.

"...What are you doing?" Moriarty said, sounding just as annoyed and patronising as his brother had when he'd commanded Sherlock just kill himself already – and equally unaware of the impending danger. "Do you really want your last act on earth to be this pathetic?"

"You're wrong."

"Uh, no, this is most definitely pathetic."

"People and machines are not the same." He clenched his teeth then spat out in one harsh breath, "Not even close. James was smarter than you – he understood people so much better than you ever could – and not even he got this."

His eyes flicked through the open doors behind him, and his grimace became a pain-strained but vindicated smile.

Moriarty didn't even have time to turn in place before two shots rang out and he lurched, then crumpled to the floor.

---

221 B Baker Street
The day before

John tried to follow Sherlock and Irene’s exchange as they cut each other off, finished each other’s sentences, and otherwise seemed to communicate half-telepathically as they created plans and counter plans. He tried to offer opinions or cautions, too, but at a certain point he accepted that he was out of his depth and not a thing he was saying was being noticed let alone absorbed by the two other people in the room. He decided to take a walk to give them privacy, and try to regulate his own anxiety over all that had unfolded over the past few days.

Sherlock let him go without any acknowledgment. John was Sherlock’s closest friend, but there were places he and Irene could go that John simply couldn’t follow. Nor could John truly understand the depth of the stakes and the lengths they were willing to go, since he wasn’t a parent himself. Sherlock had been a father for almost a year but a parent for fewer than 48 hours, and yet he already grasped what a fundamental and irrevocable transformation that was.

When John tried to leave through the downstairs door Sherlock heard the sound of raised voices, as John and a guard had words about him going, but John ended the debate with, "I'm no one, just let
me go." After that there was silence, though Sherlock knew that someone would trail him wherever he went.

Sherlock felt a minor pang about it, but John was partially right. He wasn't 'no one,' but neither he was he in Sherlock's very top pressure points anymore. There were now more fertile fields for Moriarty to sow in that respect.

Somehow that thought made something click in his mind. It was the prelude to a breakthrough, and it sent chills through him and flooded his body with adrenaline and dopamine, as everything seemed to shimmer with a new clarity. This was the odd sensory perception that sometimes preceded a breakthrough, like the electric charge in the air before a lightning strike, and though he wasn't there yet he was at the edges of some monumental understanding. Now he only had to let it come.

He did already grasp one thing, and somehow that one thing would be the key to everything. It was only a matter of how.

"Simple," he murmured to himself, and Irene raised her head, her gaze sharpening in hope and her breath catching.

"No, I haven't got it – I just keep coming back to that. The way we get Nero back, the way we beat Moriarty this time, for good; it has got to be simple.

"The last time Moriarty and I faced off he told me I always wanted everything to be clever. He thought the solution to defeating me was presenting me with a remarkably simple choice: those I cared about - or myself. And despite what he says about what he 'expects,' that's how he thinks it will go again. He thinks that I still managed to bypass that choice through cleverness, and must believe that I'll do it again – but that this time he really has me facing the impossible dilemma.

"So the solution is obvious: we need to confound his expectations, it's the only way. Thinking we're cleverer than him now has already cost us, and we can't make that same mistake again."

"All right... but how?" Irene asked. "The problem is that he's not wrong; he does know what you're like. From the time he took John Watson and strapped him in semtex he's known about your weakness for the few people you care about. So the only 'simple solution' I see is the one thing I'll refuse to accept."

She added in a low murmur a moment later, "Until I have no other choice."

But he barely heard those words. It was the words she had spoken earlier that were echoing in his head – words she hadn't even said to him, but to John.

You're not the only one who loves Sherlock.

Why were they so important, those words that hadn't seemed like anything more than a statement of the obvious? Why was his mind telling him that they were the key to the cipher?

And then, all at once, he knew why.

He clapped his hands to his mouth and staggered back from the force of his realisations.

With a simple switch in perspective, a number of apparently disparate items resolved themselves into one clear constellation, each star moving into alignment to create a greater, illuminating whole. Andrea's parting words at the site of Moran's death about how she'd get help, his own vague but unexamined inklings in the past ten months back at home, the defining difference between him and
Moriarty… they all coalesced into one shocking yet obvious revelation.

Dear God, how had he been so blind? he thought, his mind and heart racing apace. All this time, he had only seen what he was being shown – that is to say, he hadn't really seen at all. He had been complicit – he hadn't looked too closely out of restraint and respect – but now he saw everything, including their path to salvation.

Without thinking or hesitating he stepped forward and took Irene's face into his hands, and kissed her hard. Before she had a chance to react he broke away and laughed, with more than a small amount of mania and relief in it.

She looked at him aghast, like he'd actually lost his mind and she was now on her own with this, and his laughter subsided but he continued to smile.

"Yes, that's the key difference between the two of us Moriarty and me: the people around him are expendable, while to me they're important but 'weaknesses'. And he thinks that that difference is to his advantage, that he can manipulate the people in my life in a way that works against me. To him the people in my life are just as much chess pieces as his own people are."

"Sherlock, what are you saying? You sound like—"

"I sound like you."

She continued to stare at him, her eyes searching his and the two lines between her brows deepening. But she wasn't operating with the same dataset that he had, and so he went on.

"You grasped this concept long ago – as usual I'm struggling along in your wake when it comes to this sort of thing." He gave her a sidelong look of admiration, then turned his head a bit to hold her eye and impress upon her weight of what he meant.

"My attachment served as a strength for you; a secret weapon," he said matter-of-factly. "You left a trail of breadcrumbs for me to track, so that I could intervene if it ever came to it. I was exactly where you wanted me, and when – because of how I felt about you. And you knew that I would be."

Irene gave a short nod, then hesitated, and Sherlock watched her try to understand what he was coming to, and being unable to.

"What am I missing?" she asked, her frustration palpable.

"When you said to John 'You're not the only one who loves Sherlock,' you were right. More right than you knew, and that's the key to all of this."

Some other time she might've mocked him for sounding so arrogant, but her expression remained tense and demanding now.

"Moriarty made one big mistake the first time around. It wasn't just that he disregarded Molly Hooper. It was also that he never stopped to consider how my friends' sentiment might be a strength for me; he only saw the reverse: that my sentiment for them was a weakness to exploit.

"I saw first-hand that such a thing was possible because of you, but he's never had anything like that in his life and so the concept never occurred to him. And so he's going to make that same mistake all over again."

"Sherlock, tell me."
He turned to her, and he aside from her confusion and frustration he saw hope begin to blaze in her eyes.

Despite his ongoing fear for their child, his smile spread into an exultant grin.

"Deus ex machina."

"Deus ex machina…" Sherlock repeated weakly as Mary Morstan appeared in the doorway of the Telegraph Room, a gun dangling from her hand. "You're late… I almost had to improvise."

At that his last vestige of strength left him so that he collapsed back onto his knees then fell backwards, and from his unclenched fist the two remaining syringes rolled onto the dusty carpeting. Irene kicked them away and they went spinning into dim shadows.

"Oh my god," Mary said, before shaking herself and snapping into alertness and striding towards them without even a glance at the slumped body of James Moriarty between them. "What's he been given?"

"300 mg of black widow venom," Irene answered as Sherlock closed his eyes against the grey storm cover gathering at the edges of his vision and the deafening white noise pushing against his eardrums. "Fifteen minutes ago."

"Laxotoxin?" She cursed under her breath. "We don't have enough time – help me get him up."

"But we anticipated that one way Moriarty might try to kill Sherlock would be with black widow venom. It's one of the contingencies Sherlock prepared for and he's taken the antivenin…" Irene's voice held a trace of uncharacteristic uncertainty and fear.

Mary looked away, her eyes on the middle-distance as they darted back and forth, before they focused again. "This is anaphylaxis, then, from the antivenin. It has some similar symptoms—not quite as deadly, but still very serious; it's not even available in America because of the risk. We have to get him to hospital immediately."

Sherlock jerked and he heaved himself over onto his side so that the weight of his own body didn't compress his chest, his complexion florid and beads of sweat joining into rivulets which trickled down his face. "Nero…" he said, struggling to push oxygen up from his lungs and through his lips. He suddenly turned his head towards the floor and vomited with shocking violence, and for a blinding, mortally-panicked moment he didn't think he would be able to stop, wouldn't be able to breathe. After an excruciating, endless time, in which it felt that his insides had liquefied and were now being excreted through his mouth, it ended, and his head flopped back on the floor as he gasped in lungfuls of air.

"Sherlock did you know that you'd respond this way?" Irene demanded, and in his barely-lucid state she sounded like the dominatrix he had never seen in action first-hand, though he had frequently imagined it. But beneath her sharp tone he heard raw fear.

He looked at her but his eyes couldn't focus, and blurred doubles of her parted and merged, making him even more nauseated.

"I'm—" he stopped, still gasping low for air "—allergic to horses, which are the subjects used to derive the antibodies in the antivenin. The venom triggered the antivenin response, which
triggered the anaphylaxis, and made Moriarty think he had…” but he'd depleted his oxygen, and
his eyes pressed closed as swirling darkness reached up around him.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he heard from a great distance, and he clenched his teeth.

"He had to believe. So – you had to believe. I'm sorry."

"Do you have an epi pen at least?" Mary cut in.

He shook his head just a little (Moriarty would've found it), but in answer it pounded in agony and
he felt unconsciousness threaten to overtake him again.

"Oh my god Sherlock, this was so stupid. You had no way to know you were right about me – or
that I was coming, let alone that I'd be here in time—!"

"I believe in you, Mary," he said, expressing what he'd wanted to voice out loud to John earlier,
forcing his eyes open to look into hers.

In his blurred and dimming vision he could see that she still looked upset, but touched as well, and
then he willed his head to turn in an increment towards Irene. There was something of vital
importance he had to tell her before he lost consciousness entirely.

"Nero…” he forced out, using his last reserve of strength. "Irene – I know where our son is. He's
close– he's——"

The excruciating band around his chest tightened, and the overwhelming pressure in his head of
what felt like a dozen bursting blood vessels intensified, but he could still see her beautiful face–
tensed, pale, and even angry – looking down on his. A single drop of moisture fell from her eye
onto his cheek just under his own eye, but he couldn't wipe it away; his muscles were seizing and
he couldn't get any more words out, couldn't tell her.

"Where? Where, Sherlock?" she asked, her voice getting more desperate but also more distant, and
he was physically incapable of forming the words. Every part of him fought against the darkness to
tell her this last vital piece of information, but then dunes of pixelated sand swept over his vision,
and the void closed around him, and all went dark.

Irene let out a sound of fury and frustration, and she didn't know if she was more enraged at the
situation or at Sherlock, and she shook him violently but no avail.

She was only jarred from her actions by a low gurgling, desperate, and faint scrabbling sounds, like
fingers trying to get purchase on synthetic carpet.

She and Mary both whipped around their head and saw that that was exactly what was happening.
Moriarty had somehow survived the assassination attempt, though his wounds were clearly mortal.

Blood pooled around him, the carpet too thin to absorb it all, thin strands of red saliva trickled from
the corners of his mouth, and his eyes stared blankly at the ceiling, though every few moments his
lashes blinked furiously a few times in a row.

"Oh, damn. Can't even count on one hand this happening," Mary said with casual annoyance,
almost as if she were talking about getting a parking citation. "Sorry…"

Mary retrieved her gun and in a fraction of a second her body language went from faintly sheepish
to lethally poised in preparation to deliver the kill-shot.
Irene felt a frisson of exhilaration at both the woman and what she was about to do, but she reached out and grabbed Mary's forearm just as she was beginning to pull the trigger.

At first Mary looked startled and vaguely put-out to be broken from her protocol, but after a glance at Irene's face her gaze softened, and she nodded.

She offered the weapon to Irene, but Irene gave one short, sharp shake of her head. Instead she scanned her eyes across the carpet, and her eyes caught a glimpse of glinting steel.

All the anger she had irrationally felt towards Sherlock was redirected to its rightful place, and a deep, wild excitement welled up within her chest, but she also felt an overwhelming sense of purpose and calm. This was nothing for which the other woman should apologise; this was a gift.

"Mmm yes, isn't it remarkable what we allow to happen when we become emotionally involved…" she answered Mary, her words wry but her voice hoarse, as she made her way towards the discarded syringes.

From the corner of her eye she saw the other woman open her mouth as if she were going to reject what Irene had said, but then she paused, and said nothing, which was as good as an admission. Irene knew that Sherlock cared for and respected this woman, and now that she'd met her, she could certainly see why.

Irene picked up the syringes, flicked at one of them thoughtfully, then went to the man sprawled on the carpet and stood over him, looking down him with her face impassive but her eyes hard with intent.

She couldn't read his expression, but she hoped that enough of his mind was intact to understand exactly what was happening. He opened his mouth, and although only short, laboured noises emerged, his attempt to talk gratified that hope. She wanted him to be conscious of every moment of this.

Irene was perversely reminded of when she had dosed Sherlock with ketamine over three years before, though there was one key distinction. They'd still had an untold number of chapters left in their story – more than she could've ever known at the time – but this was his final one.

"Shhhh," she said in the same purring croon, then pressed down on his lips with the toe of her shoe with more force than necessary to quiet him. She felt his teeth slice into the soft flesh inside his lips, and it pleased her. "I made a promise to you, do allow me to keep it…"

"But then," she said over her shoulder to Mary, "it's also remarkable how it all seems to work out for the better, in the end."

At that Mary made a slightly incredulous sound, then said, "You call this 'working out'?"

Irene's face remained impassive for one more moment, then it twisted savagely, and with all of her strength she stabbed down with both fists around the syringes.

She felt skin and muscle resist for a millisecond and then yield to the needles, and when she'd pushed them to their hilts and the side of her hand was pressed into the fabric of his jumper she plunged the lethal contents home, just as she had done for Sherlock only twenty minutes before.

His body gave a small but deeply satisfying jolt, and he let out a guttural gasp as his pallor blanched further.

Irene's expression relaxed again, except for a gleam of avid pleasure in her eyes. They fastened
onto his face with a greedy hunger as his body began to spasm and a pink froth of blood and saliva bubbled up from his mouth.

All the horror, fear, and worst of all, the sense of powerlessness this man had made her feel for the past two years slowly leached from her body as the light faded from James's eyes.

His fingers, bent into claws, continued to scrabble against the carpet as if trying to grab hold of something, perhaps his fleeting life, but their movements became slower until they just gave the occasional spasm.

"Good-bye, James," she murmured. "This really *was* a pleasure; I'm so glad you arranged it."

*I'd say let's do it again, but…* she added with silent but intense satisfaction.

This man's brother had once fashioned himself as the villain needed in every fairy tale, and Irene was happy to cast James in that same role – because every villain died a gruesome death at the end of the story.

The point of fairy tales was to assure children that evil could be conquered, the more violently and decisively the better, though of course in the real world it never happened that way. In the real world there was rarely unambiguous evil, and Irene herself had always dealt in the almost infinite spectrum of greys.

But now, as she observed the ever feebler twitches of his fingers, his punctuated, shuddering drags of air, heard the sounds of intense but futile effort coming from the back of his throat – as she watched someone she had helped murder die a difficult and protracted death – she felt pure and even righteous in contrast to him.

She bent down so that her face was less than a foot from his as she took in his final moments, and everything else in her world faded away. She had felt a grim sense of accomplishment when she had shot Moran, but this… this was intimate and, for her, a moment of joy.

The villain had been vanquished. More to the point – she had won.

When James Moriarty's body finally went inert and his black eyes went flat and lifeless, she stared into them for a long, breathless moment, and then enormous feelings of relief and triumph rolled through her like a powerful wave.

It brought to mind the sense of freedom and exhilaration she'd felt in her childhood, when she'd swim out to the surf break in the Atlantic. She had revelled in the sensation of waves that had travelled thousands of miles breaking and rolling their immense power through her, and she wanted her child to experience those feelings as well.

Only several seconds of pleasure had passed before that pleasure drained from her body along with the blood from her face.

*Nero.*

The threat wasn't over; the threat wouldn't be over until her son was in her arms, whole and unhurt. For a moment she thought of how she'd feel if Nero showed any signs of harm, and slightly regretted killing Moriarty so quickly; he would've deserved an even harder death if her son suffered so much as a contusion.

But things weren't hopeless, despite Sherlock's state of unconsciousness. He had determined Nero's location based on what he had seen on Moriarty's iPad, and she would do the same.
Without qualm she nudged the dead man over with her foot, then bent down to withdraw the small tablet from his rear pocket. At a glance she saw that it was locked, so she grabbed a finger and pressed it against the home key.

To Irene's profound relief the screen immediately brightened, and as soon as the high-definition feed of her son appeared she dropped the man's finger, and it fell with a hard thump back against his body.

Nero was still, and her heart stopped, but she found her breath again when she saw the gentle, rhythmic rise and fall of his small chest, and she recalled that Mary had asked her a question, what felt like ages ago.

"Ask me again after I get back my son."

Chapter End Notes

"It's never twins"

...Just like "It's never Lupus," on House, MD – until it is ;)

But believe it or not, whether due to a continuity error or carelessness, or intentionally, ACD gave Moriarty a brother of the exact same name.

Check it out:

"In his first appearance in The Final Problem, Moriarty is referred to as "Professor Moriarty" — no forename is mentioned. Watson does, however, refer to the name of another family member when he writes of "the recent letters in which Colonel James Moriarty defends the memory of his brother". In The Adventure of the Empty House, Holmes refers to Moriarty on one occasion as "Professor James Moriarty". This is the only time Moriarty is given a first name, and oddly, it is the same as that of his purported brother." –Source.

I don't necessarily think BBC Sherlock will take the same route, and I think that the helicopter scene on the beach in the teaser is likely a flashback, but who knows? Anyway this is my ACD-canon based version ;)

PS Encyclopedia Brown is a series of books I enjoyed as a kid and they're an American reference that was meant to hint at this Moriarty's background.

So a personal note on why I feel like within the context of this story it's possible for one brother to pick up after another one, even after years of not knowing each other and being raised in an entirely different way. After some personal experiences I've become 100% Team Nature…

Just like James Moriarty, I too recently found out that I have a brother, and he's been looking for us for many years. And just like these fictional siblings, we had very different upbringings and yet are incredibly similar. We have the same obscure interests, have the same facial expressions, like the same foods, wear the same brands, have identical pet peeves, lived within a mile of each other in the same neighbourhood in London, both lived in Europe for 8+ years, majored in the same things in college,
and he even intended to do the same program that I did for my MS at the London School of Economics (before his job offered to pay for another one). And before meeting my brother I also found out that my good friend from my tiny undergrad in London, also an American doing university in the UK, was my second cousin (our grandfathers were brothers but had been estranged due to family drama back when they were young), which in retrospect explained to me why we had everything in common and became such good friends.

Fortunately, I don't think the same type of criminal insanity runs in our family – but who's to know, it's still early days…

Comments and feedback are cherished as always!
Mary’s voice on the line with 999 dimmed to a distant drone as Irene’s eyes darted across the screen of the tablet, desperate to process the feed with Sherlock’s eyes. Somehow he had identified which unremarkable aspect of the image revealed Nero’s location, and she must now do the same.

Empathy was something that had always come to Irene easily; it had been a critical factor in her success. It was equally easy for her not to confuse someone else’s emotions for her own, and so the compassion that most people felt alongside empathy never marred or complicated her work. She was able to compartmentalise, and extract the useful data from someone else’s emotions without allowing those emotions to affect her personally.

But her attempt to get into Sherlock’s head now and study the image as if she were him was something different. It was cerebral, and though her native intellect matched his and her emotional intelligence surpassed it, these were skills that he had honed and developed for years.

Her eyes scanned every part of the picture for information or clues, but the background was dim, and though there seemed to be some faint pattern on the wall behind her son, she couldn’t make it out. Was it graffiti? A window or doorway into another, equally dim room? She increased the brightness of the screen to capacity but she still couldn’t tell, and she vented a sound of frustrated outrage. To be able to see her son but not reach him, to be safe whilst Nero still faced uncertain dangers and an unknown future, was unendurable.

She could physically feel his absence again, in that place that had cracked open and broken away from her centre when she’d learned he’d had been taken. It was like a phantom limb, and the ache of it was even more acute than what she’d felt for his father at the loneliest and most uncertain of times of her pregnancy, when the distance between Irene and Sherlock had been in more than mere miles.

At the thought of Sherlock, Irene’s eyes darted over to him again, willing him to wake up and tell them where James had put their child. When he didn’t rouse under her demanding, expectant eyes she became furious that he would let something so trivial and weak as an injury keep them apart from Nero.

But when her gaze fell on him the sharp sensation in her chest morphed from anger back to pain and the fear of terrible loss. Sherlock looked worse than dead, because at least in death his face wouldn’t bear the wrenched, anguished expression that mere unconsciousness hadn’t smoothed.

Mary was kneeling over him to examine him, a deep furrow between her brows and her mouth drawn into a frown.
“No choice, there’s no time,” she muttered, and then her eyes snapped up and onto Irene’s.

“Look, I know you’re desperate to start looking for your son and I get it, but I just need your help for one – just one more minute. It could mean the difference between life and death for Sherlock.”

A roar like a stadium full of irate football fans surged in Irene’s ears at what the other woman was asking, and she thought of the words she had spoken to Sherlock the day before. If it came down to choosing between Nero and Sherlock, she would choose their child – always.

For a moment she felt a flare of irrational hatred for this woman who was effectively binding her to the same cruel dilemma as James Moriarty had. At any moment something could go wrong with Nero; the person keeping watch over him could grow suspicious and try to contact James, or a missed check-in could trigger her son coming to harm.

But the truth of the matter was that she didn’t know where to find her child, and Sherlock did. Save Sherlock, save Nero…

After a torturous moment of hesitation she nodded, and Mary let out a gust of breath, and gave her a short nod in return.

“I need to perform an emergency field tracheotomy or else he will asphyxiate. I’ll start assisted breathing, but I need you to find something I can use to intubate once I make the incision. We’re in an office building, there’s got to be a pen left behind somewhere.”

“And if we can’t find one?”

Mary shook her head slowly, holding eye contact, and Irene’s imagination filled in the rest.

It was all the impetus she needed. With hesitating she spun on her feet and went to the nearest bank of desks, then began to pull out drawers one after another, only sparing a moment to glance into them before shoving them back in or letting them crash to the floor.

Behind her she heard Mary start to administer mouth-to-mouth, and as Irene continued to search the sounds alternated between that and quiet grunts of exertion as Mary did chest compressions.

In a matter of moments Irene had made her way through all of the desks and cabinets, but every drawer had been empty and she made to leave the room to expand her search.

“Irene—!”

Irene turned, her heart arresting for a moment at Mary’s urgent tone – at what it might imply about Sherlock’s condition.

But it resumed its previous elevated level when she saw that Mary was holding out her weapon, and Irene grabbed it up from the other woman’s hands then made her way to the next room.

She ignored the open doors of the lift – she still didn’t trust it, and she knew that it would cost the last of her sanity to become trapped there now – and she scanned the area for a side-door that would take her down the emergency staircase.

She spotted an unlit Exit sign after only a moment and cut a line towards it, and to her profound relief it was unlocked from the inside. She threw it outward and grabbed the back of a nearby chair to prop it open in case it did lock from the stairwell.

She held the rail with a light but even grip as she descended into a well of darkness, adrenaline
sharpening all her senses and making her steps quick and sure.

When she reached the next level down she threw all her weight into the door, and for one heart-

arresting moment it wouldn’t budge before she recalled that these doors opened outwards from the

offices. She hauled the door hard in her direction, but it still didn’t move. Locked.

She spared just a moment to give raw cry of frustration at that before turning on the spot and

hurting herself down the next staircase. She wasn’t a mind capable of any higher thought or

function now; she was just a physical form – acting and reacting to the environment and stimulus

around her.

She could make out just enough of the stairs’ edges by the thin line of light from the around the

exit doors on every other landing, and as her eyes adjusted she was able to make out a bit more.

Floor after floor she pounded down rust-spotted metal stairs, kicking up dust that swirled around

her in the dark and narrow space, but door after door she tried was locked, and with every flight

down she became more desperate, ever-aware of the passing of time and the diminishing chances

of finding the one commonplace object that could save Sherlock’s life – or at least his mind, and

everything about him that made her love him. With every floor down she became ever more

conscious of the chances of their child’s location being locked away inside that mind forever.

The doors wouldn’t have stood a chance against her lock-picking abilities, but she didn’t even have

a pen, let alone anything that could get her through them. The only tools Sherlock and Irene had

been able to bring with them were their wits and their willingness to do anything to save their son.

She finally reached what looked like the second-to-last exit, and she let out a near-sob of relief

when the emergency access door opened when she pulled on it. It swung inward with a groan of

protest, and she spilled out onto a mid-century modern parquet stone floor covered with a thick

layer of dust and detritus.

For a moment the light blinded her, weak and grey though it was as filtered through the grime-

coated plate glass around her periphery.

She blinked several times as her eyes adjusted again, and then saw that she was in the long open-

plan lobby of the Fleet Building. Through the floor-to-ceiling windows and the industrial plastic-
draped scaffolding just outside she could make out the street, but even if she’d wanted to leave, all

the door handles were strung-through with heavy chains and padlocked.

She tore her eyes from the traffic and pedestrians on the busy London street that were effectively as

distant to her as the sun, and scanned the area for anything that might hold a pen. They

immediately fell on a large synthetic-wood and stone-panelled reception desk that stretched along

ten metres of the back wall in the centre of the hall, and she took off towards it.

When she rounded the massive piece of furniture she saw that drawers spanned the length of its

interior, but each one bore a small lock, and her heart fell again. This time fortunate was on her

side, and when she pulled open the first drawer with more force than necessary, it shot out and

almost caused her to lose her balance. Her flare of luck had been short-lived – it was empty of

everything but clumped particles of dust.

She didn’t make a sound or react in any way; she quickly abandoned it to move on to the next

drawer.

Two thirds of the way down, just as she began to feel the sickening sensation of panic fill her

stomach with lead, she opened one of the last remaining drawers, but it wouldn’t pull out farther
than several inches. It seemed that something was wedged in its sliding mechanism, preventing it from opening all the way, and so Irene thrust her hand through the opening, and groped along its interior.

Her hand moved over twisted, expended staples, a dried-out rubber band that crumbled apart when she made contact, and motes of gritty dust, but nothing else.

Then Irene’s searching, scrabbling fingertips hit something small and smooth that jutted out at an odd angle from the back of the drawer. When she made to grasp it it shifted away from her, but on the second try her hands closed around it and jerked it hard from the crevice where it had been jammed, pulling the drawer out with it.

A pen.

She resisted the instinct to crumple from the pure surge of relief she felt at finding this priceless object – time was a luxury she couldn’t afford. Instead she clenched the pen in her fist and made her way back towards the staircase.

When she finally staggered into the Telegraph Room after an utterly exhausting climb back up the emergency stairwell, Mary’s head snapped up from giving Sherlock’s assisted breathing. For a moment there was a tense, calculating look in it, before she recognised Irene and it shifted into a different kind of tension.

“Did you—?”

Irene held out the hand that enclosed the biro, too winded from her journey to answer with words, and Mary’s tense face smoothed into one of intense relief.

“Oh thank God, bring it here.”

Irene made her way on weak legs, her eyes glued to Sherlock, whose appearance had taken a turn for the worse. Mary had undone his shirt and splayed it open, showing a chest slicked with sweat and beginning to bruise and mottle from the palpitations Mary had been giving him, but most of all, it was still.

Still feeling slightly dazed Irene reached out to pass Mary the pen, who inspected it briefly, then uncapped both sides and tapped out the desiccated ink tube, leaving just a hard plastic tube the width of her smallest finger.

“Ready?” she asked, and Irene nodded back.

Mary pressed her fingertips downward along the column of Sherlock’s throat, then poised the knife over the place where they’d come to a stop, her brow tensed into severe lines of concentration, but her hands steady.

“How careful do you want me to be to avoid the vocal cords…” she asked in an attempt to inject some levity into the tense situation. She added, “You can take a moment, but not too long.”

Without actually waiting for an answer, she made a short but deep horizontal incision, and a small amount of blood began to trickle from the parting tissue.

The knife was nimble and precise in Mary’s hands, and Irene couldn’t help but raise an eyebrow, impressed.

“Did they teach you to handle a blade like that in your nursing course?” she asked with a large dose
of rhetorical irony.

“Nurses don’t trach,” Mary said, putting the knife aside. The answer was intentionally indirect, and confirmed what Irene had suspected. This was a field procedure that had been learned and honed in quite a different ‘field’.

Mary probed one finger into the opening she had made and a barely audible sigh came from the incision. She made a grimly satisfied expression, then fixed her pale blue eyes on Irene’s.

“Now I’m going to need your help. You’ll need to keep the incision open as I position and insert the tube.”

Irene knelt to next to Sherlock, and after a moment of intense inner-turmoil and effort she was able to find a way to compartmentalise this as well, and separate the act from what it would cost her and her child if they failed.

She reached carefully into the fissure in Sherlock’s throat, past thin layers of pink, waxy yellow, and red strata, to pinch at the upper and lower ends of the cut Mary had made into Sherlock’s trachea, and then posed her arms in an awkward wide angle so that she didn’t block the other woman’s access. When Mary was satisfied that the incision was sufficiently open she began to insert the pen’s casing, and the motion was slow but steady.

When it was in place, Mary gave a sharp nod in Irene’s directions and Irene withdrew her fingers, then looked down onto the shining, florid face of Sherlock.

Now that it was done, the levy holding back her emotional response to it collapsed, and a flood of sentiment consumed her.

Even unconscious Sherlock’s face was a study of suffering, with lines etched deeply in his forehead, and his dry lips drawn back enough to show glints of teeth. How was it that there was now a black object protruding from the place where she’d been pressing kisses only two nights before?

Idiot, she thought, cradling his head in her arms and resisting the fresh onslaught of tears that stung her eyes, but in actuality he had never been more precious to her. He had done this for their child, a child whose existence he hadn’t even known of until the past week. His promises to her hadn’t been grandstanding to seem impressive or courageous; there had been absolute commitment and follow-through. For the second time since that fateful first meeting in her letted house in Belgravia his sentiment for her had lead him to knowingly put his life on the line, and this time it included their son as well.

Her thoughts of Nero hadn’t faded from her mind – they were a constant, excruciating migraine – but she could not ignore what seeing Sherlock this way was making her feel and think. The first time he had proven he was willing to die for her there had been a small but undeniable part of her that had been gratified in a purely selfish way. She had made him care, and she had made him come, and so she had won. This sacrifice spoke to something so much deeper, and extended to a place well beyond either of their egos.

Mary caused a welcome distraction when she ducked her head and blew two short breaths into the tube, then rocked back on her heels. They both watched him intently then, and to Irene the moment felt interminable.

Finally Sherlock’s chest shuddered and then began to rise and fall. At first the motion was erratic, but it soon settled into a steady rhythm, and Irene felt like she was coming back to life along with
him. For the first time since he had lapsed into unconsciousness she felt hope, and something that had been clenched hard in her chest relaxed by one degree.

Mary jerked up her wrist to peer at her watch and then let out a breath in a controlled stream, but Irene read the deep relief in her expression and body as she sagged back heavily onto her forearms.

When the other woman looked up at her, both sets of eyes were faintly glossed over.

“I can’t say this with absolute certainty, but he shouldn’t have been deprived of oxygen long enough to suffer any permanent brain damage. Also he should regain consciousness soon,” she added with a significant look at Irene.

Irene nodded, and couldn’t help but bring her hand to Sherlock’s forehead and card her fingertips through his damp hair, the motion serving to calm her more than it could Sherlock.

She knew that even when Sherlock regained consciousness he would be unable to speak for quite a while, but she had faith that he would have the wherewithal to communicate Nero’s location in some other way, and so her eyes constantly scanned him for signs of returning awareness.

But minute after minute passed by, and Sherlock showed no signs of rousing. He continued to breathe in shallow but even breaths, and the blotchy flush was fading from his face, but his lids were heavy and the eyes behind them still.

Irene was just as motionless, but in her mind chaos was mounting again. Being passive was constitutionally alien and agonising for her, and so every quiet tick of Mary’s watch ratcheted up her agitation. Irene’s fear for Sherlock for his own sake was compounded by the fact that any chance she had of finding Nero was dependent upon him waking and sharing his breakthrough with her (a situation which in and of itself was detestable). Meanwhile every passing second increased the odds of something happening to the baby, and all of this was exacerbated by her just sitting there, waiting, doing nothing, until the internal dialogue in her head was little more than screaming.

That was when it happened.

Just when she thought she was reaching her breaking point something cut through all the noise and hit Irene with the voltage of a live jumper cable, and she drew in a sharp gasp then sat back stunned as her mind raced to confirm what she’d just realised.

Nothing had precipitated it, nothing had jolted it, aside from the thought that she couldn’t tolerate waiting passively for any longer, and the intensifying panic for her son. The information was just there, complete, fully-formed, and available in her mind. Was this how Sherlock experienced his revelations as well?

Mary was just lowering her head to blow into the tube again when Irene shot to her feet.

“Irene? Oi, Adler!”

But Irene wasn’t listening, and her eyes weren’t seeing – at least not the sight before her. She was back downstairs again.

“Nero,” she gasped, and she scooped up the gun again and reeled away from Sherlock and Mary, leaving the other woman looking wide-eyed and nonplussed.

She knew where her son was. She may even have been within a dozen yards of him just fifteen minutes before.
Writing Mary in this and future chapters was a little bittersweet, but at least here she lives on...
Seconds later Irene was hurling herself down the dark, seemingly endless series of stairs once more. It was the opposite of how it had been when she’d made this desperate trip minutes before; this time her physical responsiveness was dulled and lagging behind the sprint of her mind, and so she almost stumbled forward several times, though she always caught the bannister just in time with the hand not holding the gun.

Her footfalls were hard and jarring against the metal stairs, and each step sent shockwaves up through her body, but the thuds were almost in sync with her pounding heart and her harsh, staccato exhales as she made her way ever downward.

She’d thought it had taken ages to reach the ground floor before, but that had been nothing compared with the eternity it felt like now that she knew that her baby waited for her there.

…As most certainly did the fight of, and perhaps also for, her life.

She was ready, even eager, to face whatever awaited her at the bottom, and she cursed the never-ending interval of flights of stairs and nondescripts metal doors.

Then finally, with a cry she immediately stifled, she reached the ground floor exit, and even though she was desperate to confront whatever was on the other side of the door, she took one final moment to compose herself, slow her breathing, and clench and unclench each hand several times.

When she had been downstairs before, she had assessed the expansive reception area with a quick sweep of her eyes, and anything that didn’t have the potential to yield the prize she sought had been dismissed in a millisecond.

But now she remembered the long corridor that had stretched out from the opposite corner of the lobby, on the western side of the building. In the blink of an eye she had seen then written off the banks of lifts on the right of the hall, as well as the series of Modern murals that spanned the left-hand wall facing them.

The images themselves were a blur in her mind, but that was all right, because so were the indistinct shapes she’d seen behind Nero. The pattern she’d seen in the background of the camera feed on James’s tablet now had context. Her child was here in this lobby.

Were the murals what Sherlock had seen as well? Had he been aware of the fact that this building contained these installations, and he had recognised them when he’d looked at the tablet? She didn’t know why he would have stored such a bit of arcana in his head, but he must have. It was the things that would likely not bear fruit for his work, like astronomy or politics according to an old blog entry John had written, that he deleted or of which he only had the scantest awareness; almost everything else had the potential to serve as a clue and was therefore noted and archived in the vast palace of his mind.

Irene narrowed her gaze, and took in the expansive space new eyes. The lobby that had seemed so barren and forgettable save for what she could mine from it now struck her as being full of hidden menace. The silence wasn’t neutral to her ears anymore but foreboding, like the held breath of a
concealed assailant. That could literally be the case, and not for the first time that day she was grateful for the rubber-soled trainers she still wore from her time in custody, instead of the heels she usually favoured. She had to employ every bit of grace and stealth in her arsenal now.

She made her way across the dusty floor, inspecting it for disturbances that might give her any foresight into what she would face in moments, but the grey film was even and untouched here. She raised her head and peered through the murky light to focus on her destination, and every sense was on such high alert that it felt as if her entire body were vibrating.

As she made her way towards the corridor she began to see that the murals were actually comprised of ceramic panels, and each of them depicted what had been cutting-edge telecommunication technology of the early ’60s. Their colours and shapes were distinct, which is why even though she hadn’t initially been able to discern the individual designs, and could barely make out the one in the background of Nero’s feed, she had been able to make the correlation.

With the hand not gripping the gun Irene pulled the tablet from the joggers’ deep left pocket and looked at the screen again. It was still active and Nero was still there on the screen, and looking as afraid and forlorn as he had when she’d first seen him. Something in her chest squeezed painfully as she took in his red and pale face; he looked like he had cried himself out to the point of exhaustion, but was too distressed to actually sleep. She tore her eyes from her child and strained to see the background, and confirmed what she had already realised: the blurry shapes behind him did corresponded with the style of the murals stretching out to her right for the length of the building.

There wasn’t anyone in sight of the camera, but Irene was under no illusion that it would be as easy as simply finding Nero and taking him away from all of this – even if it deceptively seemed that way. There would be one final show-down before she could have her son back.

The rage that had pounded through her before began to heat her blood again as she prepared to face whoever it was that would stand as the last barrier between her and Nero, and she thought ‘3’ was a nice rounded number for lives taken in ransom for her child’s suffering.

She reached the entrance to the long corridor and flattened herself against the wall just on the other side of it, then slid her face out by a fraction to scope the area for any visible sensors, cameras, or sentries.

She didn’t see anything, and she also couldn’t see Nero, but the corridor was arranged gallery-style, and although she could make out the murals stretching down the flat wall on the left, from her angle she could not see into the series of four lift alcoves that branched off to the right.

She glanced down again to inspect the mural behind Nero and thought she could discern stylised aerials in it. Bold black lines cut at angles bisecting black curlcues, over a fragmented mosaic of muddy blues, brown, greys, and greens. She glanced up and spotted the mural at once, and it sent her heart-rate skyrocketing. It was the last mural in the hall, which meant that her son was there too, just out of sight.

Her desire to sprint to Nero warred against her knowledge that she must be cautious; it was her strategic and impetuous natures at war. The fact that she was acting on behalf of her child instead of herself meant that restraint won.

She slipped the tablet back into her pocket and crept around the entryway into the first alcove, expecting at any moment to be ambushed.

She wasn’t, but she didn’t let down her guard in the slightest, and all of her muscles were tensed to spring to action at a heartbeat’s notice.
She glanced around and saw that the lift in this first bank served Floors 1 - 5, which suggested that last alcove, where Nero was being held, corresponded with the top floor. She and Sherlock had bypassed the ground floor on their ride from the basement to the highest level, meaning that they had passed right by Nero, and had been oblivious.

That added to her wrath, but she let it fuel her purpose rather than derail her. She set her jaw and steeled herself to make her next move, and after another quick glance around the corner she made a swift and smooth motion into the next alcove. When she reached it she let out a low breath of relief, but didn’t pause before she repeated the action and then slipped into the third out of four spaces when she saw that it, too, was empty.

Now that both her son and the final threat lay just on the other side of this thin, mildew-stained wall, she allowed herself a moment to prepare for what came next. She was experiencing a paradoxical mixture of giddy anticipation and powerful, almost paralysing fear - each of which represented the two possible outcomes that would put a final end to this extended nightmare.

She also felt both dizzy and more lucid than she ever had before, and so she focused on the tangible. The gun was cool and heavy in her grasp, but her palm was slick against the handle, so she clenched her hand around it, then clamped her other one beneath, steadying fingers trembling from the adrenaline coursing through her.

At the same time she worked to regulate her breath and then held it to ensure that whoever might be standing guard on the other side of the wall wouldn’t hear her. Since they had been out of sight in the feed and there hadn’t been any physical clues to interpret, she had no idea what sort of person or people she’d be facing.

As she took this final pause, she spared a moment to appreciate how her thought of “Save Sherlock; save Nero” had actually borne its fruit. Instead of Sherlock regaining consciousness and telling her where to find their son, her sentiment for him and her bid to help save his life had given her the means to have the breakthrough herself.

Nonetheless, Sherlock’s absence was palpable. She found herself longing for him to be here with her and for the two of them end this together, for so many reasons beside the tactical advantage it would afford. That thought made her realise how much loving someone else had changed her, since her younger self would have relished the opportunity to win single-handedly. But what it had not changed was that she was still The Woman, and no matter her personal feelings her instincts and abilities remained as potent as ever. She was still the woman who had ultimately beaten Sherlock Holmes on her terms, and no person on the other side of this wall could hold a patch on him. She could do this on her own – she just would rather have Sherlock by her side…

And so bracing herself, she slid her face an inch from the edge of the dividing wall to gauge what waited for her with one eye.

What she saw nearly caused her to drop both the gun and the tablet, as everything in both her body and mind went slack with horror.

The feed on the tablet hadn’t been deceptive; Nero really was alone.

Of course he was, and she ought to have anticipated this, but it surpassed even the worst of her imaginings.

There was no guard, because this Moriarty had never relied on people except to perpetuate his charade of being Jim, and even then they had all been expendable.
There was no guard because as much as this Moriarty paid lip service to true power being derived from controlling people, his strength hadn’t been in controlling them through direct manipulation the way that Jim had; he’d achieved power through his mastery of technology and engineering.

And so instead of a fallible, human guard standing in between Irene and Nero, her baby was inside a clear glass chamber of approximately three by three metres, which was set in the middle of the space. Connected to the chamber were cables, wires, and display monitors that she could not process in her current state.

It was Irene versus the machine.

For one hysterical moment Irene thought that as much as Sherlock would’ve considered that phrase an apt metaphor for when the two of them had first met, at least at the time, he had never been that. Not in general, but especially not with her.

Besides, she had felt in-control since before he’d even rung her doorbell, and she hadn’t lost any semblance of it until it became clear how dangerously sincere her feelings for him were.

But now… this… she felt entirely out of her depth for perhaps only the second time in her life, and the notion that she might fail Nero after coming this far was almost too much to bear. As frustrating as it had been when she’d been unable to tell where Nero’s was through the tablet’s feed, it was nothing to the impotence she felt now. After all of her efforts they were no better off than when she had watched through the tablet feed; he was still separated from her by a panel of impenetrable glass, and he was just as unreachable.

Her legs, which had already been weakened by their earlier sprint up twenty storeys, threatened to give out now, but she managed to remain upright by throwing out an arm and bracing herself against the wall.

In her mind she heard Sherlock make an exasperated sound, then tell her in his most imperious tone, *The machine didn’t spring into existence from nothingness – someone made it. Read the man – the way I read you in a similar situation.*

*Obvious,* she snarled back at him, at herself. She had taught Sherlock the the value of being able to read people better than any he had ever taught himself. The problem was that she didn’t know this James Moriarty, not really. Back then she, for better or for worse, had allowed Sherlock to see a glimpse of her.

She moved closer to the glass and saw that it was as thick as her wrist; a bullet wouldn’t even crack it; she’d had have to find another way in.

Breathing in low, tight gasps, she skimmed her gaze over the rest of the chamber and saw that there were only two points of entry. One was a steel mesh-encased vent with a circumference the length of her hand, which passed into the chamber from a short grate-covered protrusion outside, where it connected to a pump-like mechanism, which was in turn attached to the electronic equipment inside. She figured its purpose was to provide ventilation and oxygen in an otherwise sealed chamber, and she dismissed it as a means to get inside.

The other was a glass door with a metal handle.

She reached towards the door automatically, but a moment before wrapping her hand around the knob she jerked it back, coming out of her trance-like state as she recalled who had built this. She might not know much about the man, but it was likely that sensors in the handle would trigger something or set off an alarm, and she must avoid setting anything like that into motion.
I can wait… she thought, partially in an attempt to convince herself, and partially resolute.

One thing she had learned from all of this was that Sherlock was right about the benefits of ‘outsourcing’ in certain ways, and not bearing something all on one’s own. It was an extension of what she’d shown him about sentiment potentially being an advantage, but it was something she had never considered given her intentionally solitary lifestyle. Nonetheless, they had gambled everything on a plan that had depended on both these things being true, and Mary had delivered; they were both still alive. So perhaps Mycroft Holmes’s associate Andrea, with all her expertise on electrical engineering and computers, could do the same for Nero. It would be torture to passively wait on help again, but the alternative of setting off some deadly sequence of events was far worse.

The movement of reaching for the handle must have registered with Nero, because her baby roused from his numbed state and caught sight of her. The breath lodged in her throat as his small brows rose in surprise, and he started to smile that smile that both soothed her fear and exacerbated it, but then it faltered and his face crumpled. He drew in a deep breath, and then the sound of his crying was muffled but audible through the glass, and it went into Irene’s chest like a dagger. Nero had been through an unimaginable ordeal, and he had never been apart from his mother for so long in his short life, so that seeing her must have unleashed a torrent of overwhelmed feelings and exhaustion that he was too young to understand. He shakily made his way out of the makeshift cot set on the floor, and crawled towards her, his movements sluggish since his energy was being spent crying.

When he reached the barrier he braced himself against it and got unsteadily to his feet, first leaning against the glass and then slapping at it with both palms, his crying intensifying at not being able to reach her. He pinched at it with his little fingers and tried to climb up against it, lifting one chubby knee and the other, but when each knee just slid down he collapsed onto his bottom, letting out shrieks of frustration. Every few moments he would swing out a small arm to smack his hand against the glass with a shriek of emphasis, his eyes clenched and his cheeks red and wet with tears. Every time his hand hit the barrier again, it sent him into a new, harder crying jag.

Irene had a difficult time holding herself together as she murmured at him through a clenched throat that she was there now, that he was all right, that he was such a good boy, and she was so proud of him.

Without thinking she made a move she had made hundreds or thousands of times before since becoming a mother – she bent down to him. She pressed her hands to where he was sitting on the other side of the glass, hating the feel of the cold, intractable barrier instead of his soft, warm hands.

Suddenly an alarm began to sound in quick, measured beeps, and Irene let out a hoarse sound of her own and wheeled away from the glass with her hands held aloft, but the beeps continued. The door she had anticipated being rigged with sensors – but the exterior of the glass as well??

Then a different noise started, and over her own ragged breaths she could hear another breathing sound, like giant bellows opening and closing.

For the space of a single second she felt nothing but bemusement, because it was such an unexpected and organic noise in a room full of glass, metal, and digital equipment, but then the truth of what was happening hit her, and a scream of raw horror and anguish ripped from her throat.

The pump that she had thought was there to supply oxygen was now actually drawing air out of the glass cube.

Tears burned her eyes as she raised the gun to take aim and empty its cartridge at the vent, the
pump, the glass door’s locking mechanism, a new image on the interior monitor of a scuba-tank icon – already past any green levels and dipping into yellow. But although she was a good shot even with shaking hands, the bullets were unable to stop or even impede the pump’s work. The metal casing around the vent and pump and the strength of the reinforced glass made them impervious, just as she had suspected. Brute force would not save her child, would not stop him from suffocating to death right before her eyes, just as his father had been, many storeys above.

Even though Nero was the one trapped in the chamber Irene felt like a caged, feral animal, and as she paced around the perimeter of the glass, her new dominating thought was that she’d granted James far too kind a death. If she had known what she would find this… her child trapped inside this sadistic machinery… he would not have died for a very, very long time, and his suffering would have been enormous. Violent fantasies filled her mind, but they were a distracting indulgence, and she shook her head to clear it, and refocus.

Could she shut down the power at its source? – no, this was operating on an independent generator, which along with everything else that powered and operated this machine was inside the glass room with her child.

If only Nero were older, she could talk him through disabling the generator from the inside. But while her boy was smart, he wasn’t even a year old yet, so that wasn’t an option. Besides, Irene was sure that if Nero were more than just a toddler, James would’ve enclosed the generator inside a locked case, so either way that track of thinking was irrelevant and a waste of precious time. If she wanted Nero to have the chance grow into that older child, she needed to come up with something else.

She had never been so acutely aware of the passing of seconds. In a more general way she had been aware of the concept of time as her ‘six months’ ticked by, but seconds were infinitely smaller measurements, and the pending consequences infinitely more unthinkable than even her own death.

This time it was her child’s frantic crying that drew her out of her mind, and she took a moment to try to calm Nero so that he would stop taking in such gasping lungfuls of air, to preserve what oxygen he had. But he wasn’t listening to her; he had been pushed too far, well beyond breaking point, and along with the incessant beeping his cries added to the clamouring din in her head.

She had been pushed beyond that point as well, but being selfless for Nero didn’t just mean in action or through sacrifice. It also meant denying herself any thought or feeling that wasn’t in service of saving her child. She had always been capable of repressing her own emotional impulses for the sake of some greater plan – with absolute success apart from one exception – but never had she been so compromised. Even counting that dreadful night in Mycroft Holmes’s house just over two years before, never had her own emotions so threatened to annihilate her as they did now.

She looked into the face of the child she had conceived and carried to term against all odds, the physical proof of an unprecedented connection, who was yet also so much greater than the sum of his parts. She saw past the tears and feverish skin of her baby to the mouth and eyes he’d inherited Sherlock, the set, stubborn chin he’d inherited from her, and the locks that would continue to darken as he grew up, and at last something clicked.

The haze of panic cleared, and with a new sense of vivid clarity her mind revved into top speed. She closed her eyes lightly as she sensed thoughts like filaments unspool to every corner of her consciousness, where they would curl around anything relevant and draw it back for closer consideration.

The first thing she seized upon was all the ways she had accessed locked spaces before. From the
simple latch on Sherlock’s kitchen window, to a safe-room which had been connected to an electric piano that unlocked the room when you played *Three Blind Mice* on it, to a computer system that only granted access when you arranged the pieces of the screensaver’s chessboard in a certain way. She dismissed there being a cypher here; although this James clearly liked codes, he had struck her as being too pragmatic for that kind of game.

But there was still something of value in this line of thought… what was it…

*Ah.*

She opened her eyes, and breath quickened, but this time it was in excitement rather than fear.

That last one had been effortless; the person had been a grandmaster who’d invented a move and named it after herself, and so Irene had simply set up the move and the computer had booted to life. Irene always found the narcissistic ones the easiest to beat, including Sherlock – until her sentiment had gotten the best of her…

At the thought of Sherlock, *Unlock the man*… echoed in her head again, and she resumed her pacing.

*Had* James Moriarty been a narcissist? It certainly appeared so from that speech he had given, but it wasn’t enough to identify that aspect of his character alone. She had to pinpoint in what way it manifested.

When they had been preparing for all of this, Sherlock had told her that Jim accused Sherlock of always wanting everything to be so clever, and that that would be his downfall, but Irene mustn’t make the mistake of thinking James would approach this in that same way. It was impossible to know nature versus nurture had manifested in the twins, and she couldn’t make the mistake of thinking that because they were so alike in some crucial ways they were essentially the same person. The very different ways in which they’d respectively found power proved that they weren’t.

She let out another growl of frustration at her inability to break down the psyche of the most dangerous adversary of her life, regardless of how little time she’d had to interact with him. She was on the verge of something, her skin tingled with the certainty of it, but what was it?

James had had the mind of an engineer, and his wealth, status in Silicon Valley, and construction of this nightmare machine certainly told her that he had been a global elite in his field. All of this spoke to a brain of infinite complexity and cleverness, and yet… in its design and murderous work, this machine wasn’t needlessly complex; its design was efficient, neat, and effective. *Simple.*

Irene froze mid-step, and her heart began to pound as every hair on her body rose and a chill went through her.

Intricate, complex machinery, and yet governed by simplicity. That was a description of the death trap itself, but for some reason it resonated with her as if it were a revelation.

*Why…?!*

She gasped like a drowning victim sputtering back to life, as the answer came to her. Yes, there were ways in which the brothers were utterly different, but there again were the ways in which they were as alike as clones, and appreciating a simple, elegant solution was potentially one of them.

*Intricate, complex machinery, and yet governed by simplicity.*
Maybe… Oh god, maybe.

Her ears began to ring as she fished her hand into her pocket. She yanked out James Moriarty’s tablet.

Its screen was dark and when she jabbed at the home button only a prompt to ‘press home’ appeared; she had let too much time pass without interaction, and the device had locked.

Irene didn’t even hesitate in her next move.

As she flung herself back up the endless stairs, thoughts both intrusive and inane cycled round and round in her head. What if the authorities were already there? What if Moriarty had been taken away?? She knew that she had only been downstairs for moments and that she was being irrational, but vicious fear pervaded every part of her.

When she dragged herself up the final flight of stairs for the second time in half an hour she was close to vomiting both from the stress and the physical hardship of climbing so many flights again more swiftly than she would’ve thought possible, and the muscles in her legs were shaking in violent spasms. She wouldn’t have been capable of it under normally circumstances, but the determination of her mind had overcome the limitations of her matter.

Once again Mary looked up at her with wide eyes and started to say something, but when she saw Irene’s face she stopped.

“What is it, what’s happened??”

Irene ignored her, as well as Sherlock’s still-unconscious form, to scan the room for James’s body.

When she spotted the corpse she made her way unsteadily to it and collapsed, panting, then caught up James’s finger in her grasp and pressed it once more to his tablet’s home button.

Nothing happened. She pulled it back and then applied it again but the lock-screen didn’t even display, and she almost screamed again before it occurred to her that James’s skin felt cold to her touch. The last of his living warmth had already faded from his extremities.

Without hesitation Irene stuck the finger into her mouth and sucked hard, drawing any blood she could to the surface, and warming it as much as she could.

“Jesus,” she heard Mary say to her right, but she continued to ignore her.

As nausea and dizziness so intense threatened to black out her vision, she pressed James’s index finger once more to the tablet’s button, and to her unutterable relief the screen brightened to life again.

There was Nero, still in hysterics – even moreso, since Irene had vanished again – and there was the oxygen monitor, now glowing an ominous red. An icon showing the same information flashed in the upper right-hand corner of the screen, and seeing it gave Irene a powerful bolt of hope.

She swept her eyes over the screen and saw a shallow circle graphic on the left-hand side. Her heart pounding so hard that she could feel her pulse in her fingertips where they pressed against the screen, she dragged the circle to the right, and a new panel slid out. A control panel.

This time she did let out an involuntary exhale that almost sounded like a sob, and as Mary looked on, looking stricken and anxious, she swept her eyes over the display with a new, desperate hope.
The interface was incredibly simple and user-friendly, just as she’d expected. Text prompts were laid out on one side, with corresponding switches to their immediate right. On the far right were check boxes under the icon of a power button. All the switches were green, indicating ‘engaged,’ and all of the boxes were checked.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Engaged</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LTE Hotspot</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locking mechanism</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panel sensor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zirox VAK</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What was it she’d read in the transcripts of Jim’s trial – that Sherlock had claimed it had taken him three minutes to understand Moriarty? Well it was a different Moriarty, but introduce Irene to the proper stimulus and it had taken her even less time…

She held her breath as she moved to disengage everything except for the data link, all the while dreading that a pop-up would display at any moment with a prompt for an administrator’s password, but the indicators slid along with the movement of her finger.

As she watched with the tension of a violin string poised to snap, the graphic of the oxygen reserve went grey, and in the feed she saw the glass door swing open by pneumatic release.

She had done it; she had saved her son.

Suddenly nerveless fingers dropped the iPad to the floor, and her eyes glazed as her mind frantically looked for flaws in the belief that this was finally over, and she had achieved what she’d been working towards for the entirety of her son’s life. Before she let down her guard and collapsed in relief, she had to be absolutely certain that there wasn’t yet another threat lurking, as there had always been before.

But no: both Jim and James Moriarty were dead, as was their network, her son was no longer trapped in an airless prison, and she had seen for herself that there had been no one else here with them.

Irene let out a long, shaky sigh, and with her eyes still unfocussed she crawled over to Sherlock and gently pushed her fingers into his sweat-drench locks, then pressed her lips against his clammy hairline. She rested her forehead against his, and found her voice enough to whisper hoarsely against his cheek that Nero was safe now; their son would be all right.

If Nero weren’t waiting for her down in the vacant lobby of this condemned building Irene would’ve finally broken down then. Instead she pressed her lips to Sherlock’s forehead in one last kiss and rose to her feet, with Mary’s quick hand steadying her when she nearly collapsed to her knees again.

She barely remembered this third and final flight down from the tower except for flashes of leaning heavily on a handrail in near-darkness, but when she came upon Nero again her world exploded back into full colour. Viewing things through a screen hadn’t made it real enough for her, but seeing him now finally drove it home that he was safe, for the first time in his life.

Her son had found his way out of the chamber and was now standing on shaking legs in the open corridor, and despite the gloom, to Irene his tiny but sturdy silhouette stood out brilliantly against the light of the open space around him.
A final insidious mental image pressed into her brain of a hulking figure darkening that bright space and then snatching Nero out of it, and with the very last shred of physical energy in her utterly depleted reserve she let out a choked sound, dropped the tablet to the floor, and ran full-pelt towards her child.

When he saw her coming he let out a hoarse, exhausted cry of his own and raised his hands towards her, then considered taking a step - his first step - but dropped to his knees so that he could crawl as fast as his limbs could move him. He didn’t get very far before he was overcome by more tears, and he just waited for her to reach him, his fists pressed into his eyes and his mouth propped open in a now-silent wail.

Irene got to her child in less than three seconds and collapsed in front of him, grabbing him up into her arms.

She clutched at Nero with a hunger and neediness that she had never known, and feeling the compact heft of his weight, the rapid beating of his heart, and the wetness of his tears as he pressed his face into her shoulder and wound his fists into her hair was the only balm that could possibly soothe the ravaging horror of what she had experienced in the past minutes, and the hardship of the past year of her life.

Again she found herself repeating over and over again that Nero was all right, that she was there and he was safe, but this time she let the words devolve into nonsensical murmurs, and then she found herself finally letting go and sobbing right alongside her child. She had never abandoned control like this, not even with Sherlock, but it was like the bleeding of poison from a wound, and in recovering from all of this it felt just as vital as the cleanse of literal toxins from Sherlock’s blood would be.

In a distant corner of consciousness she grew aware of sirens approaching and then slowing to a stop somewhere nearby. If she could find the strength to break from this moment with her child in the next minutes, perhaps the two of them could ride with Sherlock to hospital. If not, she and Nero would be waiting for him when he regained consciousness.

This had changed her, and it would stay with her for the rest of her life, but it was over.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading, and comments and reviews are absolutely loved!
Chapter Notes

There's lots of Sherlock and Irene being introspective in this chapter. I did want to combine it with more action, which happens after this part, but it was just getting too long for one chapter – AND I actually wanted to get something published since it's been so long!

The first half of this chapter will be the one and only nod to Series 4...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He couldn’t breathe. It was black as pitch around him, and Sherlock couldn’t breathe.

He wasn’t sure when nothingness had coalesced into some sort of consciousness – it could’ve been in the space of an instant or across days or years – but even in his nascent awareness he felt a desperate clenching sensation as he struggled to inhale. Pain arrived with awareness so closely that it almost felt like the pain preceded it – as if the pain had always been there.

His usual practice of running a body scan after returning to consciousness wasn’t possible now; he felt nothing but the excruciating tightness in the region of where his chest ought to be and the desperate need for oxygen. His impression of the rest of his physical self – his lower torso, his limbs – was all vague fog and numbness, as if it hadn’t materialised along with his consciousness. It might have worried him if he weren’t so preoccupied with pulling in air.

But why couldn’t he breathe? What had happened? He felt distilled down to two components, pain and confusion, but he channelled all of his limited mental acuity into understanding the situation. Maybe if he understood it, he could find a way to relieve the agony of it.

His throat felt flayed and raw, and even as he concentrated he could feel what seemed like individual particulates searing and prickling their way down his oesophagus. He tried to cough, but the feeling didn’t subside, as if he didn’t actually have a throat to clear.

As he considered that with the agitated bafflement of a confused toddler, scent became the first major sense to return, and suddenly the desperate lack of oxygen and the pain that scorched his throat and his lungs made sense.

Smoke.

Smoke?

At that he felt his eyes prick with tears as well, and all at once, he could open them.

His vision was blurred then went double, but even when it merged and focused the sight ahead him didn’t make sense, although he accepted it with the acquiescence of a dreamer. He only questioned where it was he had come to find himself and why he felt as if he were asphyxiating, not the logic or plausibility of it.

Stretching out ahead of him until it thinned then vanished into the focal point of distance was a corridor. With its warm-grained wood panelling and its diffuse recessed lighting, it seemed
familiar in some deeply fundamental and personal way, but he couldn’t place how. It bore a resemblance to the halls of Mycroft’s home, but it wasn’t that…

As his mind continued to puzzle over this, clarity improved, and he found that he could now move as well.

He staggered a few steps on legs that felt like they were still materialising, and the burning, suffocating sensation eased. The source of the smoke must be behind him, and if he moved forward he could find clearer air.

As the tightness in his throat and chest eased he was able to take better notice of the panelled walls on either side of him again, and he reached out and pressed his hand against the smooth grain. At that sense memory flooded through him, bringing with it a feeling of intense nostalgia and awareness. For a moment he experienced what seemed like double-vision again, but the images transposed over one another vertically, not horizontally. He was seeing the corridor from two angles – from his current height and about from hip-height.

He hesitated, squinting his eyes and furrowing his brows as he sensed that there was something just out of his grasp in his distant memory.

At that a waft of smoke billowed out behind him and he braced harder against the wall, then felt his diaphragm spasm painfully. After a moment he doubled over, trying desperately to suck in oxygen as his eyes bulged in their sockets behind his clenched lids.

The acrid scent and the feel of this warm wood under his palm were kindling something in the farthest, deepest depths of his mind, but the fire seemed to be gaining on him, and he had to keep moving.

He turned his head forward, and suddenly a faint breeze buffeted against his face from some source ahead of him. The air around him cleared but he still felt the catch in his breath as he straightened, and he cracked his eyes open to peer through the shadowy hall.

He forced himself to stagger on, his fingertips tracing along the panelling as he moved instinctively towards that fresh air. He wasn’t suffocating anymore, but in this liminal place the air between the drifts of smoke and the clear air ahead was tepid and heavy. Staying still meant suffocation, and eventual incineration, but with each step forward the air moved a little more, smelled a little bit sweeter. He couldn’t linger; he had to keep moving on.

A cry echoed off the corridor in the distance and he jerked to a halt, his heart hammering hard in his chest as he strained to listen. The sound of it had sparked something powerful and instinctive in him, and he felt the need to pick up the pace. His legs seemed like they had gained strength, and with resolve he began to stride forward.

In moments the hall ahead changed, and Sherlock saw a series of doors to both the left and right, all shut and all identical.

As he stared at them, his head moving back and forth as he tried to discern if there was anything at all distinctive about them, no matter how minor, the sound came again.

This time he heard that it was a small child, not a woman as he had initially thought – not The Woman. It came rolling down the hall, bouncing off the angles and grooves of the wood panelling, until it sounded like it was coming from all directions ahead. It was impossible to tell the sex of the child, and again a sense of something deeply familiar but unknown swept over him. But was it a distant memory being triggered, or recent?
Sherlock picked up his pace, his breathing laboured from anxiety rather than smoke now, and came
to the first pair of doors.

*Left or right?* he thought, facing first one and then the other.

He strained hard to listen but there was only silence now, apart from the faint crackling and
swooping sound of fire behind him – more distant now.

He sucked in a breath and wrenched the handle hard on the door to the right, and through it he saw
a familiar and dingy basement flat. Well, he had called this place on Montague Street a flat – it was
really nothing more than a glorified bedsit that Mycroft had found for him, and for which Mycroft
had paid the rent. Still, even though Sherlock had acted simultaneously entitled and resentful
towards his brother about it at the time (a trend, he realised, with a pulse of remorse), the stability
the room provided had been critical in turning around his life; he understood that now. It had been
the one thing not subject to chaos and uncertainty, and even though it was a cave Sherlock had been
barely aware of the passage of day into night at that time. At first it had been the drugs to blame for
that, but then it was the all-consuming nature of The Work. The darkness and grubbiness of it had
never bothered him – the dependence on his brother it represented was what had so grated.

His eyes swept over the room with its narrow single bed, battered wardrobe, ancient Argos recliner,
and sink with a small boiler attached, and he could now appreciate the duality of the place. It had
been a half-step above a hovel, but it had also been a true home and refuge to him – regardless who
paid the bills. At the time it had been the first time he’d felt that way since… when? Perhaps not
since he had been a very small boy. It had been the first time he had felt that he might have a
physical place in the world, and shortly thereafter, that had expanded to also finding an existential
place in the world as well. The latter might not have been possible without the former.

And still it had been a mark of pride and a true turning point for Sherlock when he had gained
enough stability and independence to afford his own rent for the flat on Baker Street, albeit at a
discounted price and with a flatmate. Severing that financial tie with his older brother had been
exhilarating and essential to his core self-esteem, but it had also contributed to his resentment
whenever his brother still tried to exert any type of authority. Sherlock had demonstrated that he
didn’t need Mycroft’s help anymore, and Mycroft still could not recognise that his, Sherlock’s,
autonomy was legitimate.

For such a smart man Sherlock had been unforgivably stupid; it was so obvious in retrospect. He’d
only been using one set of indices – tangible indicators such as financial reliance – to measure his
dependence on his elder brother, but those weren’t nearly sufficient. Mycroft had been right and
Sherlock had been wrong about all the ways in which Sherlock still depended upon his elder
brother and took him for granted. Sherlock’s needs might have changed, but his brother had
somehow always intuited what those needs were and had provided support accordingly. Sherlock
no longer required him to pay the rent, but he did expect resources, get-out-of-jail-free passes,
high-level access, a one-man expert panel, and so much more – all of which Mycroft provided
readily and with only the occasional exasperated sigh and/or raised eyebrow.

No, it was Sherlock who had proved the faithless brother.

He had thought the very worst of Mycroft, had refused to give him the benefit of the doubt, and –
perhaps most egregious – had lacked the imagination to conceive of the way in which Mycroft was
blameless. Nothing could be more of an affront to Mycroft’s legacy than that, and now it was
perhaps too late to make amends.

If so then it would be Sherlock, not Mycroft, who would bear the long burden of underestimating
his brother.
He pulled the door shut hard, and leaned his back against it, closing his eyes tightly.

Back in the corridor the tendrils of smoke thickened around him and by necessity, not readiness, he opened his eyes again after only a few moments.

He regarded the door opposite him, and with a masochistic and reckless sense of curiosity he stepped forward, turned the handle, and gave it a push.

It was the living room of 221B, looking as if Sherlock himself had just stepped out. Golden late-afternoon light slanted in through the window to illuminate a smorgasbord of papers and photos spread out on the carpet in the middle of the room, and an 18th century Romani-English dictionary lay open to a page halfway through. He recollected the case to which this research belonged at once; it had been the end of August, of 2010. Two years, seven months, one week and three days in the past.

He took a few more steps towards the idyllic scene, idly wondering what would happen if he resumed his spot on the carpet. Would it still be warm? If he closed the door behind him, would John step through it shortly afterwards, sans moustache, sans fiancée, still bearing some of that residual awe and gratitude towards Sherlock?

The notion was tempting, almost intoxicating. That time – after John and before The Woman – had been so simple and, at the time, fulfilling. For the first time that he could recall all his most basic and fundamental needs had been met, and he’d even felt the warmth of contentment and satisfaction – feelings that had always seemed to come to easily for everyone else but had been ever-elusive to him.

His heart pounding, he lifted his foot to move fully into the room, but froze mid-step as his own thoughts came back to him.


He hadn’t realised it then, but back in 2010 he had been so starved for external validation of the new life he had created for himself and for stability of his own making, that the meeting of these simple needs had seemed incredibly nourishing at the time. They wouldn’t be enough to sustain him any longer.

He could not stay. Not only that; he didn’t want to stay. To stay unmoving and complacent was to stagnate, and he abhorred that over all else.

With that in mind, he backed out of the door and strode into the hallway to face off the next door to his right.

He turned the knob and pushed, and was met with another empty room. This one jarred after the easy familiarity of what the previous two doors had revealed, and it took him a moment to grasp how he knew it.

Ah. Bogotá.

It hadn’t been one of his first stops post-fall by any means, but it had been a significant one, and his work there had permanently crippled Moriarty’s network. In his and Mycroft’s research into the hundreds of entities that comprised the syndicate, they’d discovered one of particular power and effectiveness – a massive neck supporting much of the hydra, so-to-speak. The well-respected international consulting firm, with dozens of offices in 20 counties, created the perfect pretext for Jim’s operatives to cross borders and make key international contacts, and Moriarty had managed
to infiltrate and recruit pre-existing senior staff. He had also installed a number of sleepers in each of the countries in which the firm operated. The majority of the firm’s work was above-board, which cloaked the illegal actions in legitimacy, but the relationships it facilitated had been critical to the success and influence of Moriarty’s network.

At that time the firm’s newest office was being set up in Colombia’s capitol due to the rapid improvement of the country’s economy and development, and the Holmes brothers knew that some of Moriarty’s savviest and most high-ranking power brokers would be on hand to make critical connections and in-roads ‘on the ground floor.’

They had been correct in that, and it had been a very fruitful stop in the course of Sherlock’s mission, but the flat in the anonymous modern apartment block where he’d holed up in the La 93 neighbourhood meant nothing to him now. He didn’t understand why it was being shown to him, and so after only an expressionless, cursory scan he moved on.

Next he opened a door to reveal a flat in Newark, New Jersey.

Then Serbia.

He slammed the door hard against the image of last room moments after opening it, and despite the ravenous onslaught of flame preceded by smoke that was now licking along the first pair of doors, he took a moment to let his rapid heartbeat calm.

As it did, something clicked into place. The latter three doors had showcased more than his movements across the globe to dismantle Moriarty’s network. They were the places where his morale had been at its lowest, when he had been most desperate for home or for, as was more often the case, The Woman.

Guessing Irene’s passcode had been the first time his triumph from a professional victory had ever conflicted with his personal feelings – the first time personal feelings had ever entered into the equation at all, apart from the thrill he got out of it, and this paradox had continued into his time abroad.

In fact, during his hiatus his successes often exacerbated his feelings of isolation and loneliness. There had been no one with whom to share victories (his brother wasn’t interested in post-mortems, only with what they must do next), and whenever he completed one leg of the operation, he and Mycroft assessed how much there was still left to achieve. These were the times he’d resurface from his gruelling and all-encompassing work, only to be reminded again of how long it would be before he could return to London, or… elsewhere. But moreover, each achievement highlighted how many resources, both personal and professional, the job demanded – resources that could not under any circumstances go towards tracking down someone unrelated to his mission.

What’s the point of this? he thought, not out of some realisation that none of it actually made sense but because the emotional toll of it was starting to weigh on him, and he couldn’t discern any reason for it.

He stumbled on when the fire behind him grew close enough to flush his skin and send him into another painful coughing fit.

What, he wondered as he faltered and fell forward against the next doorframe, would happen if he lingered in one room for too long, and the fire caught up while he remained inside?

The idea was unappealing, mostly for the way he sensed it would finalise some sort of choice in this already limited palette of options before him.
But what was ahead for him, either? The only recourse he had was to keep trying doors, and hope that one of them held answers, but that seemed so passive and desperate.

And who was it that had cried out? Every room behind him had been empty.

He stood indecisive for another few seconds before the oncoming fire forced a decision, and sheer curiosity and the need to be aware of all options caused him to turn the handle. What he saw stopped him short in a way that none of the other rooms had.

It opened to reveal the living room of 221 B once more, but where there had previously been warmth and familiarity there was coldness and a sense of desolation. In fact, it felt even more abandoned and impersonal than all those safe-houses and boltholes he’d revisited moments before. Unlike before, there was no impression that someone had stepped out only the moment before, or that someone might walk in at any moment.

Sherlock scanned the room for the possible cause of his plummeted heart, and his eyes fell on his bookshelf. The postcard, a talisman and warning against sentiment, and a symbol of his intentional estrangement from Irene, was in place. It had only been a matter of days since Sherlock had been so foolishly proud of his ability to look at that postcard and continue to function as Sherlock Holmes™, but seeing it now made him wince.

The flat was dark, the hearth bare, and Sherlock would’ve ridiculed this ersatz Mind Palace for being so heavy-handed in its imagery if he hadn’t been so affected by it. The overall sight shook him and left him feeling as cold as the room appeared.

_Before The Woman. Without The Woman against his will, and then Without the Woman by sheer bloody-mindedness._

Where was the door that opened onto a small, unadorned berth on a cargo ship on the Arabian Sea? Was that still ahead of him in this continuum? Or, since these rooms seemed to appear to him in chronological order, had he somehow missed it in the confusion of the smoke and the doors’ identical features?

…Did it matter? As he’d already noted all the rooms were empty, and it wasn’t the room itself that had been so meaningful to him. It was the woman in that room, and the quiet and almost effortless intimacy they’d crafted between them within those walls. It had been the richness and sweetness of seeing and being seen on their own terms, of having not only his baseline needs met but hitting stratospheric benchmarks he’d never imagined for himself. It had been falling in love.

Apparently alone again, though through no choice of his own, the reminder of how he had wilfully scorned Irene’s place in his life was agonising. The decision had still been an emotional, not rational, one, but it had been fear instead of love that had guided it. He’d recognised the potentially all-consuming power of his feelings for her, and had been terrified that he would experience the same loss of self that had happened the last time he’d let need and lust (albeit of a different, more chemical nature) reign his life. But surely there was some middle ground to be found?

Seeing these spaces also reminded him how infrequent and rare time spent with The Woman had been in the scheme of his life. It was almost impossible to reconcile the impact she’d had on him with how little time they’d actually been able to be together - either by circumstance or his refusal to integrate these two parts of his life, of himself. Perhaps that explained why when he was with her he experienced every moment, every sense, every emotion so intensely, but he could not continue in that same binary fashion in which he was either rapacious glutton or ascetic. There had to be another way.
He turned his back on the room and all but fled from it into the hall, where he saw at once that the fire had caught up to him once again. The doors behind him charred and blistered under blue-tinged flames, and he felt the searing heat roll against his face and the fire-created draught tousle his hair.

Part of him was tempted to stand still and let immolation come.

But as he remained rooted to the spot, swaying back and forth slightly with his eyes closed as the heat intensified against his skin and the acrid smell of burning wood singed the inside of his nostrils and throat, another cry echoed down the corridor.

His eyes flew open and he spun towards the sound, to see that for the first time since he had regained this dubious consciousness there was something other than a brown corridor tapering into a vague, distant grey point.

Instead there was light ahead, and he let out a harsh laugh, made all the more guttural by the smoke swirling around him, bringing tears to his eyes.

The eponymous light at the end of a tunnel – of course.

As he made his way towards that light fingers of smoke began to rise from between the floorboards underfoot as well, curling around woodwork and then wreathing and obscuring what looked like human figures ahead. They had appeared with the light and looked like filaments in bright bulbs – so bright that he had to look away as they flared like the final, intense glow of lamps about to burn out.

They were the first signs of life beyond the disembodied cries he’d heard, and he disregarded the threat of the smoke ahead of him as he moved forward in a dream-like trance.

But as he continued to risk glances into the light, desperate to make out the identities of the figures, he saw that, no – his first assumption about what was happening hadn’t been right. It wasn’t that smoke was filling the space; it was that the corridor itself, and the flickering figures in it, were dissipating as quickly as they’d appeared. The rooms branching off of the hall behind him, all vignettes from his past, had disappeared into the smoke one by one, and now so too were his surroundings, but they disappeared into smoke itself.

Finally he understood something of all of this. While the past was tangible and consumed by the passage of time, what lay ahead was his future which was ephemeral – it was yet to be. It hadn’t been decided, and there laid true choice.

Sherlock came awake with start, as if he’d fallen at speed from a great height.

“Did we have a house fire when Mycroft and I were children?” he shot off to his mother who was sitting beside him, wherever he was. Meant to ask her, at least, before the pain like countless splinters gouging their way through the lining of his throat made him reflexively swallow, which magnified the pain ten-fold.

It made him suck in a deep gasp and press the back of his head into his hospital pillow as tears jabbed his eyes and stars exploded behind his lids.

“Shh-shh, don’t try to talk!” he heard his mother exclaim, as he squeezed his eyes shut and let out a shaky, whimpering breath through his nose. He felt her grab his hand and squeeze. “You’re terribly — oh Sherlock, you’re terribly hurt. You had some sort of allergic reaction, and then there’s your poor throat – someone’s gone and cut it open…”
“Someone did it for his own good, they said,” Sherlock heard his father comment from out of sight, but he didn’t see his mother’s reaction to that.

The pain and the reminder cleared his mind, and everything that he and Irene had experienced came back to him in a headlong rush. The grotesque game James had played with them, the bluff that Sherlock had called, Irene’s expression when she plunged the syringe into the other man’s heart… but no one had cut his throat – so…? Ah. Mary. Mary had saved them. Twice over, from the sound of it, because she must’ve given him an emergency field tracheotomy, although he didn’t remember that bit.

But as those memories and thoughts filled his mind they seemed to supplant something else, something that had just been there. What was it he had meant to ask his mother? He’d had it moments ago, and it had seemed vast and urgent… He strained his mind to remember, but whatever it was it was already gone, with the swiftness of any other forgotten dream.

Still, he felt as if he had woken up with a subtly altered sense of self, and he turned to his mother again and summoned enough energy to lift his hand and wave it in the universal sign that he wanted to write something down.

As the hours spent seated in the cheap foam-padded hospital chair passed, Irene felt her exhaustion billow and thicken around her like fog, enshrouding her and muffling her perception of everything around her. Either the chair was exceptionally comfortable, or she was so tired that it only seemed that way – she wagered on the latter.

She had repeatedly surfaced from and then relapsed into a trance-like state, but for some reason on this occasion she came out of it with a surge of adrenaline that set her on high-alert, but didn’t do much to offset her bone-deep weariness.

Her fatigue had been dulling her awareness and slowing her reflexes, which made her feel sluggish and vulnerable. For her, being at anything less than peak form had always set off alarms, and now the feeling made her want to run. It had always been that if she couldn’t fight, she’d flee, and though that had also always been her second resort, oftentimes it had been her only resort.

She noticed that she’d gone rigid and all her muscles had tensed, and she forced herself to relax again for Nero’s sake. Her baby was passed out across her lap with the exhaustion of a child whose long fever had finally broken; his hot and clammy face was pressed against her arm, his mouth hung partly open, and lank curls were plastered against his forehead.

Looking down at him, she envied him his ability to sleep, as well as his absolute certainty that his safety in his mother’s arms was unassailable, in spite of having just suffered such a traumatizing ordeal.

Even as a child she’d had difficulty falling asleep, as she’d rarely able to let her guard drop enough or her thoughts slow enough to relax. When her parents had still been together she’d driven them spare by repeatedly calling for them after her bedtime, or crawling into bed with them in the early morning; in their eyes these were further symptoms of their daughter’s pathological need for attention and the monopolisation their time.
Throughout her twenties and into her early thirties her survival instincts, coupled with a racing mind that always formulating new ways to do mischief, had conspired to make sleep the one luxury she wasn’t able to obtain. Melatonin capsules she’d bring back to the UK from travels abroad, as well as stronger measures when necessary (which had been often enough), had been crutches.

After Nero’s birth, the sleeplessness of motherhood and the anxiety of protecting Nero, in addition to the concern any new parent would feel for their child, ensured that she’d have to continue to survive on very little sleep.

But she could remember very few times in her life when she had been this utterly depleted and exhausted. Every part of her was spent beyond endurance.

This was partly due to the fact that she’d only managed a handful of hours of sleep in the past few days, but it was also the knowledge that her child was safe, and to some degree – for the first time in perhaps a decade or more – so was she. For the first time in ages, she could relax her vigilance, and let down the guard that had become her exoskeleton. If she fell asleep sitting up right now, with her child splayed across her lap, here in public, nothing would happen to her, no one would touch her, nor even care that she was so vulnerable.

So why was her heart pounding? Why, instead of feeling uncomplicated relief and satisfaction over being safe, was she experiencing a dismaying array of emotions? There was some relief – for her child – but a sense of plummeting dread for herself. It was instinctual and existential, and she couldn’t immediately place why she was feeling it.

Then it hit her with the resounding weight of an unassailable truth.

Irene didn’t want to be safe.

In the past the perception of safety meant either stagnation and complacency, or that she had missed something and she was in danger. Usually it was the latter, but this time she didn’t think it meant either.

Her identity and her sense of self-worth had always been tied to how effective her calculated antagonism was proving at any given time, and how much of a threat her marks found her. These could be been measured by her state of peril, which she’d constantly test and reassess. It had been all about finding the edge of the knife and teetering there – pressing the challenge just up to the point before where she might get herself in over her head. (With the Air Bond matter, she’d finally tumbled over that edge and into the abyss – or at least so it had felt at the time).

But up until that point it had been a twin thrill – knowing she was constantly challenging power and accruing it for herself, whilst always remaining ahead of those were after her, even in spite of all their superior financial and social resources.

Now, for the first time in perhaps over a decade, no one cared, no one found her to be a threat.

At that thought a feral panic took hold of her, and it superseded whatever sense of accomplishment she’d felt at finally beating the threat that had been after her and her child for so long.

She felt her arms tighten around Nero again, but this time it was in preparation to lift him and escape this place. She didn’t know where she would go, but she couldn’t stay in this godforsaken hospital corridor another moment.

This time she wouldn’t be fleeing some menace she couldn’t outmaneuver, but something even worse: her own irrelevancy.
If no one felt threatened by her and there wasn’t a single soul who wanted her dead or beaten, then what did she matter? Who was she, now?

“Irene Adler,” a voice said, and Irene blinked rapidly as she looked up at the person who had interrupted her thoughts.

“—Mary…” she replied, and her voice sounded more even than she would’ve expected.

“Morstan. Mary Morstan,” Mary said, as she fell heavily into the chair next to Irene. “You haven’t left.”

Irene didn’t answer.

“Oh – do you not have anywhere to—?”

How prescient that question was.

“I do,” she said, forcing herself to relax again, as best she could. “I’m just going to wait until he’s out of surgery. Then I…”

Then she could… what? Run? But first, she would sleep. Not that she would ever admit needing something so basic to anyone, let alone this woman.

But this was Mary – she had saved all of their lives. And if she were honest with herself, Irene found that speaking to her was having a welcome distracting effect.

“How did you find us?” Irene asked.

At that Mary gave Irene a sly grin, and Irene noticed how attractive it made her.

“That watch John wears? It was a gift from me. Thanks to his preference for the oversized kind it wasn’t even a challenge to add a tracker.”

“GPS and audio transmission I assume?” she asked, feeling slightly more alert.

“Of course.”

Irene hummed, then asked, “Do you normally track your fiancé…?”

“Only when it’s for his own good. He and Sherlock get into a lot of trouble, you might have noticed. Actually – do you want one too?”

She turned dancing eyes onto Irene, but Irene wasn’t so diverted yet that she could parry in the playful, acerbic way she might under other circumstances. Vague thoughts about this being the digital equivalent of having Sherlock on a leash slid in and out of her mind without consequence.

“Anyway one of Mycroft’s people, Andrea, phoned me to fill me in on what was really happening, though at that point I was already on my way back from Croatia – I left shortly after John did. Oh - Mycroft has known about me since I first started working at John’s practice,” she added as an aside, anticipating Irene’s question.

“When the three of you left the flat I got an alert and turned on the infrared on John’s watch. With the motorbike it was just a matter of hacking into the correct frequency, since it was controlled remotely.”

“You work for Mycroft?” Irene asked with a raised brow. It seemed unlikely, somehow – and
diminishing.

Mary snorted. “God no. He wishes. No, and anyway I’m retired. But some things are worth bringing out the old skill-set for.”

“I know just what you mean…”

“It’s not as easy to leave it behind as you’d think, is it?”

Irene made a sound of agreement, but her thoughts swirled. Was Mary’s tone a little too knowing? Had she sensed Irene’s moment of agonised dilemma…? Had there been a slight edge of knowing that hadn’t been related to what they’d experienced together earlier that day?

To deflect, Irene said, “You know, before you showed up it occurred to me that Mycroft’s men couldn’t possibly reach us – but you’re neither, are you?” Not Mycroft’s, certainly not a man.

Mary answered her with an enigmatic, eye-crinkling smile, and to her slight dismay Irene felt another spark of attraction.

This woman, Sherlock… One thing she could say for John Watson was that he seemed to have a keen ability to attract very special people. Frankly, Irene couldn’t see it.

“Sherlock insisted we trust you,” Irene said. “Said you were the secret weapon.”

Mary’s expression went thoughtful, and Irene saw that she was taking the comment in the spirit in which it was meant: Irene had made an enormous leap of faith, and Mary had lived up to expectations, and Irene was grateful. Women such as them spoke of matters of vulnerability and trust almost exclusively in subtext.

Then Mary made an amused huff.

“So… finally got there, did he? Took him long enough, I was starting to think he’d never figure it out.”

“Your ‘skill-set’? I don’t think he wanted to look too closely, he respects John Watson enough not to pry.”

“I’ll have a word with Sherlock later. In the meantime, don’t tell John.”

“Don’t tell John how exceptional his fiancée is?” Irene rarely meted out praise, but with this woman she found herself unable to help it.

“Oh, he already knows that bit,” Mary said breezily with a flick of her fingers. “But swear you won’t tell him about my involvement, who I a– used to be.”

“I know how to keep a secret.”

“Oh yes, I’ve heard all about the way you keep secrets. But I don’t have anything to offer you, so there’s nothing in it for you if you do. So let’s just keep it between us girls, what d’you say?” The words were flippant, but there was steel in her voice that hadn’t been there before, and that had been when everything was a life-or-death situation.

Speaking of that…

“Oh I don’t know, you came in rather useful earlier today,” Irene said, sounding equally glib.
They met each other’s eyes, appraising gaze to appraising gaze, but then they broke into smiles of mutual understanding, edged with the slightest trace of wariness. Mary turned to leave again, but this time Irene’s words stopped her.

“Fine. But then you don’t tell Sherlock that… I stayed.”

“All right…” She paused to look at Irene speculatively, then said, “You two really are alike, aren’t you?”

At that Mary did leave, leaving Irene with a poignant, heavy feeling in her chest, and questions swirling in her mind.

At one point she almost called after Mary, to ask her how she had done it – how she had seemed to leave her demons and compulsions in the past and find fulfilment in her new mundane life, but she let the other woman walk away.

She sensed she already knew what Mary’s answer would be, and she knew that as potent and intense as they were, her feelings for Sherlock weren’t enough to sustain her through whatever crisis she was experiencing. The women had their similarities, but only to an extent; Irene had seen that three-stone engagement ring on Mary’s finger, and knew that she could never wear such a token, let alone participate in the institution it symbolised. She had become a mother, yes, but people could get accidentally pregnant. They couldn’t get accidentally engaged.

Mary had been an immeasurable help in the past day, but she couldn’t help with this.

Yes, Irene had stayed – so far. But for how long could she? What was here for her in London beyond Sherlock? Where was it Irene belonged?

Nero’s eyes cracked open then, and they swivelled until they found hers, and when they did he let out a deep, world-weary sigh that sounded far too heavy for a child that wasn’t yet a year old, and it pained her.

It also reminded her that it wasn’t only her interests that she had to consider now. Before all of this had ended her role had been, if not easy, at least clearly defined: protect Nero and ensure his survival at any cost. It had been a natural evolution for her since she had been so accustomed to protecting her own interests and safety at all times.

Now she had to consider vastly new territory: she had to consider not just what it would take for her child to merely survive, but to thrive. She would have to try to be selfless in a way that she had never been before. She didn’t think she would be able to achieve that if it were just for Sherlock Holmes, in large part because ceding that level of control would actually undermine their delicate but perfectly-balanced dynamic.

But for her child? For Nero? Perhaps… She had to try. But first, she had to figure out what that even meant.

For the second time in ten minutes Irene’s thoughts were interrupted by another woman’s voice, and when she looked up she saw Sherlock’s mother standing over her.

Lydia Holmes’s face was haggard and her complexion pale, but her eyes were warm and her voice trembling with suppressed relief when she said, “He’s asking for you.”

Chapter End Notes
To be continued... Thank you so much for reading, and comments and reviews are cherished by this author <3
The words of Newton’s Third Law appeared in his head: "For every reaction there is an equal and inverse reaction… Forces always come in pairs - equal and opposite action-reaction force pairs."

He and Irene seemed destined and doomed to be such force pairs, harmonious in their perfect antagonism.

Feeling slightly dazed Irene pressed a kiss to Nero's head and placed him into Lydia Holmes's outstretched arms. The moment Irene moved away his face began to crumple, but then it went blank again and her heart sank. She'd prefer he thrash about and scream his lungs out to the complacent look of defeat she saw in his eyes now.

Her first thought was that she couldn't leave her child in such a state, but then realised that it wasn't only that she didn't want to leave Nero – she also didn't want to face Sherlock.

With practiced resolve she forced herself to walk towards his room, but stopped short just before the closed door.

The primal instinct to turn and run overtook her again, and in part it was because she knew how Sherlock would make her feel when she laid eyes on him, and she was afraid of how those feelings might paralyse her.

She wasn't someone who had ever let fear dictate her actions, but she had never felt quite this type of fear before. Fear for Sherlock's or her survival, fear for the safety of Nero, those things had made her tremble at moments – but in fury. They had certainly never stayed her hand or intimidated her. If anything they'd been incitements to action.

She'd also always been attuned to the pain and weaknesses of others, but in the way of a predator, and those feelings never affected her own emotional state. Sherlock was different in this way as in countless others; seeing him injured and weak now, and as a direct result of what he had risked for the sake of their child, would be difficult for her.

She'd either feel wracked with guilt over the ever-intensifying need to seek a way to feel relevant again – or else seeing him would create a moment of weakness in which she'd acquiesce to things she wasn't actually equipped to offer. In the long run she wasn't sure which would be worse for them, but she thought it was the latter.

In the short-term it would be so much easier to never cross this literal and metaphorical threshold, never deal with the lifelong consequences of cementing sentiment into something much more enduring.

She had more than enough self-awareness to scoff at that. As if that ship hadn't sailed long ago,
perhaps literally – one named the Independent Venture.

She began moving towards the door again, and used the last few seconds to find some composure.

When she entered the private room Sherlock's back straightened slightly at the sight of her, and his expression softened as colour seeped into his waxy cheeks. His reaction gratified the part of her that always felt elevated by his attention and admiration, but it also made her feel so much worse about her thoughts in the waiting room. There was the guilt, just as expected…

After a long moment he broke eye contact to look her up and down in his characteristic scan, then picked up his phone and typed something into it. When he set it down again he met her eyes with a new intensity, and a moment later her own phone vibrated in her pocket.

Nero? he had texted.

Mary's joking aside she'd been diligent in avoiding Sherlock's vocal cords, but his throat had sustained too much damage in the procedure for speaking and he seemed to be minding medical advice. As much as it must irritate him it was probably too painful to do otherwise.

"He's with your mother," she said. A moment later she grasped his actual meaning. "He's safe, Sherlock. It's over."

Nero was safe, but the heavy, roiling sensation in her stomach told her that this wasn't over.

Sherlock nodded at her response, and though he couldn't speak he expressed all his relief and sentiment in the way he continued to look at her. They had been able to communicate nonverbally since the moment they'd met, and now he was exuding certainty and self-assurance. It was the continuation of the new confidence he had shown several nights before when they'd slept together for the first (and only) time since Karachi. It had exhilarated her then, but now she felt a lurking sense of dread.

Also consistent with how it had often been since that first day, he was having difficulty reading her. She must be betraying her apprehension in some flick of the first index joint of her right finger, or tightness around her mouth, or any other number of tells, but Sherlock was failing to detect them. He was so confident in his own certainty of their indivisibility that he was oblivious to the dangers that lurked just ahead – just as he had when they'd first met. She hadn't felt any sense of guilt about that until towards the very end, but now she felt wretched. She didn't want to feel this way, didn't want this compulsion to run, to inevitably hurt him and sow discord and distrust in him yet again, but as much as she had changed in many ways, her intrinsic nature had not.

Yet in that moment his certainty was like a drug to her and she felt drawn in by it. She wanted it to numb her against the ache of her unwanted thoughts and feelings, if only for a few minutes.

She moved the edge of his bed where she took a seat and scanned him in turn. He looked pale, skinny, and vulnerable with his throat bandaged and cannulae in both nostrils, but he was alive. He'd survived. James Moriarty and Sebastian Moran were dead, but she and Sherlock had survived, only due to their cooperation and collaboration. And more importantly, they had protected their son against all odds.

She felt her eyes sting and her throat tighten, and swallowed. Her exhaustion and the ordeal of the past several days – months – had brought her emotions to the surface, and this time Sherlock seemed able (willing?) to understand how she was feeling.

He let out a small sigh through his nose then took Irene's hand, and she shouldn't have been
surprised at the lack of an impulse to flinch away. After all, it would be the easiest thing in the world for her to stay with him, at first…

Sherlock looked weak but his grasp was sure, and it felt comfortable and natural to let their fingers intertwine; it was a token of the physical intimacy and unity they’d been able to experience so rarely, and yet at which they were so very good.

Their eyes met again and she felt her heart throb in her chest as he lifted her hand to his lips. Gravity seemed to shift to a horizontal plane and she slid her other hand into the hair at the base of his neck, then leaned down to press her mouth to his forehead. His skin was clammy but she could hear his breathing, deep and steady, though accelerated.

They remained that way for a moment, until their breaths fell into sync, and then she risked a glance down at him. She caught a glimpse of dark lashes against white cheeks, but then his eyes opened to meet hers, and he raised his other hand to pull her face to his.

There was a moment when she felt like she was on the edge of the precipice, and then their mouths met and she fell. It was chaste, but the contact triggered an outpouring of relief and release in both of them, and his grip on the back of her head tightened as he raised his chin as if to deepen the kiss. Instead he grimaced and made a sound pain through his teeth, which she felt against her mouth rather than heard.

She pulled away but their eyes remained fastened in mutual thrall, and tenderness warred with the animal imperative to run.

She hadn't felt this at war with herself since she'd first realised the depths of her feelings for him, and was all too aware of how her ambitions would burn him. The dramatic irony of knowing that she was running all sorts of games that not even the great Sherlock Holmes could detect, and the prospect of bringing him to his knees when she finally did reveal everything, had lost all pleasure at that point. Standing there and faking relish as she got everything she wanted but was breaking her own heart had been one of the best (and worst) performances of her life.

There was no enjoyment in the information disparity now, either. The key difference was, this time the painful cut she was inflicting wasn't only in her interest, but in both of theirs.

After a moment of silence between them, in which Sherlock looked impossibly lovesick and caused Irene to feel even sicker herself, he asked, **When can I see him?**

Irene straightened and gently pulled her hand from his under the guise of shifting her weight.

"As soon as you're out of the ICU. He's been asking for you."

Irene would interpret the word "Shook" Nero had said intermittently whilst looking around with a tired but vaguely concerned expression to be that. Had Sherlock repeated his name to their son again and again while she’d been in prison? The endearing thought threw her into even deeper emotional turmoil.

Sherlock's face was set and stern in a sign Irene recognised as him dealing with strong emotion, and he nodded curtly.

"How long before your doctor think you'll be able to speak again?"

*At least a week for proper conversation, though I'll begin speech therapy in 2 days,* he texted, his fingers flying across the screen. Then he gestured with a flick of his hand towards the bedside table where Irene saw a print-out titled "Care After Surgery."
After she met his eyes again he rolled his, and she couldn't help the indulgent, fond smile. Just as it formed she felt coldness steal into her chest again – a reflexive pulling-away and defensiveness. She worked hard to remain impassive and it seemed to go unnoticed, because he changed the subject, asking: *Tell me what I've missed.* 

Or perhaps he had noticed, and was providing her the structure of their work in which she could plant her feet. Perhaps he needed that base too, before they stepped out into thin air.

"What did your parents tell you?"

*Only that Nero is safe,* he texted, then looked up at her. His eyes said, *It's not for them to tell me...*

So he wasn't aware yet of how she had found their child in that sealed glass chamber, a pump inexorably drawing out oxygen. Or how at a certain point in the apparently impossible attempt to free him she'd been forced to confront the fact that she might watch her child be asphyxiated right in front of her – how the sense of helplessness had been so sharp and intense she thought it might destroy her.

A new kind of panic took ahold of her as she realised that she would have to relive those moments yet again, and re-experience the horror afresh through Sherlock – which would be a much more raw experience than it had been with his parents, Andrea, and John. But he was right, it was for her to tell him.

She took in a quiet breath, then recounted her desperate search for a pen for Mary's emergency tracheotomy on Sherlock, which had taken her from the crown of the building downward, and ultimately to the lobby and its murals. At the mention of them a look of recognition sparked in eyes, and then palpable relief and admiration filled them.

It was torturous for *her* to recall that moment, and Sherlock was the one whose superhuman attempts at communicating Nero's location had failed, and he'd succumbed to the fragilities of his all-too-human body. His intellect had triumphed, but no matter how desperate or willing the mind, he was bound by the physical – and damned by it just then. He would have been all too aware that that failure could lead to the death or the permanent disappearance of Nero and to make matter infinitely worse, the injury he'd suffered had been self-inflicted and intentional. Of course Sherlock couldn't have known that that epiphany would strike at the very moment his body gave way, but what would that have mattered?

Compounding the agony would've been the fact that he was so accustomed to being the only one who could make those connections and tremendous leaps, ergo the only one who could notice and correctly interpret the information to save the life of their child.

Sherlock was at least fortunate in that he was hearing about all of this with the benefit of knowing his son had survived what he must've viewed as an unforgivable failing – and now he was also learning that Irene had independently discovered what he'd been unable to communicate. Sherlock's failing had not lead to the unthinkable; he had a partner who saved him from that, who was just as capable and resourceful as he was.

And so as she explained how she and Mary had initially thought that saving Sherlock would also save Nero, but then he'd remained unconscious, his expression didn't waver in self-recrimination or anguish. Instead he just looked at her with even more open and unguarded awe and appreciation.
She used the warmth of his expression to inoculate her against the moment she'd have to tell him about what awaited her in the elevator bays of the ground floor. When that didn't work she tried to disassociate from the emotion of the experience and only narrate the facts. She had managed it when she'd spoken to the others in the immediate aftermath of everything, but she was finding it next to impossible with Sherlock, and her voice shook and even caught at the back of her throat at several points.

Seeing Sherlock's reaction to her words made it even harder to remain impartial-sounding. Gone at once was the soft, radiating warmth in his face from moments before. Now he was profoundly still, but his eyes burned into the middle-distance with a fire of escalating intensity, so that they stood out like braziers in his paper-white face. In those eyes could see his mind racing, reconstructing the scene in his head and putting himself in her position to determine how to free their son, and ever so often he shot off questions via text to clarify some detail or draw attention to an aspect of the machine she hadn't described. She answered them to the best of her recollection, although whilst some details were seared in her mind, others were elusive and dreamlike, and fading quickly. Then, as if he couldn't contain the force of his emotions anymore he squeezed his eyes shut, but his suffering was still evident in his clenched jaw and the tendons that stood out in harsh relief in his neck as he continued to listen. It must've been excruciating but he didn't seem to register it; the torment was psychic more than physical in that moment.

It was like watching a silent film, and a small part of her was able to observe in detached fascination at the display. His mind had clearly been merciless and meticulous in its recreation of the scenario, and his face was wrenched with emotion as if he were experiencing it live, as she had.

She managed to go on, and Sherlock's eyes remained closed but his body language told her that he was still processing every word in rapt attention.

But when she told him of how she had deduced that the machine was controlled by an app, and that she had disabled it and saved their child by sucking warmth into James's fingertip and pressing it to the iPad home button – how Sherlock's assertion that simplicity would govern the solution had been validated in yet another, albeit unexpected way, his eyes flew open and snapped onto hers. The feeling was the same as when they were in the throes of the most intimate of embraces, and her breath caught in her throat.

For a moment all thoughts of the ordeal she and Nero had experienced vanished. No other space existed but the feet between them, and even that small distance felt like nothing in the clutches of their connection. Powerful emotions played across his features again, though this time they were of a far different nature. There was gratification, pride, certainty, and a hunger she recognised as transcending anything physical. His pupils began to dilate as he continued to look at her, and the two points were magnets she was powerless to resist.

It was the feeling of being one, but manifesting on a purely emotional and intellectual plane rather than physical, and it was a repudiation of all the thoughts that had been racing through her mind before she'd come into this room. Who else would ever see her the way he did, to whom was it so important that she find such so-called relevancy? She was running away from her own perceived obsoleteness, but what did she think she was running towards?

But the instant those thoughts materialised, that instinctive pulling-away jerked her back, and she severed eye contact and broke the moment, as her heart began to race in fear rather than something she didn't want to put into words, even to herself.

She straightened her posture and raised her chin slightly. "Do you have any other questions?"

He looked thrown by her abrupt return to a business-like demeanour, but he blinked and his eyes
lost that fathoms-deep look, and then he nodded and reached for his phone again.

The week that followed put their relationship into stasis, and for the first time since they'd met, they didn't find themselves at one extreme emotional pole or another with each other. There weren't any more soul-melding looks, but neither was there conflict. For once Irene didn't feel the impulse to agitate the status quo; she was too reluctant to upset Sherlock while he was still healing from physical trauma. For her part Sherlock was – perhaps intentionally, perhaps unconsciously – preserving the state of grace for as long as possible, and didn't broach the matter either.

Instead they focused on Nero, Sherlock's return to some semblance of work, and the progress of his recovery in hospital. Several days into his stay they even went to see Mycroft, who had physically stabilised but was still failing to respond to tests of cognitive function, and although Irene walked beside Sherlock's pushchair as they made their way to Mycroft's wing of the facility, she didn't enter with him. Twenty minutes later Sherlock had emerged pale and even more drawn-looking, and his stony expression and set jaw told Irene that he wouldn't want to discuss it, even if he'd been able to speak. He had cast Mycroft as the most traitorous of villains, and he may never have the opportunity to return them to the status quo – let alone forge the new peace between them that Irene could tell Sherlock wanted.

But not acknowledging the situation between Sherlock and Irene didn't stop Irene from thinking about it constantly. She was all too conscious that this was an artificial armistice and a short-term reprieve from a conversation they had to have.

In the first few days she hadn't yet sorted out precisely how that conversation would go. She saw how easy it would be to fall into some sort of rhythm here in London, and she'd tolerate that easy monotony for the duration of his recovery but she couldn't let it become her life.

Sometimes when Sherlock was resting or working with the speech therapist Irene and Nero would go to the park near the hospital with Sherlock's parents. There they would order coffees and teas from the teashop that had reopened for the spring, and watch the ducks, geese, and swans with Nero. It wasn't long before Lydia's iciness towards Irene thawed, in part due to the fact that her feelings for Sherlock and Lydia's grandson were evident to Sherlock's parents, but she could also tell that the things that drew Sherlock to her also charmed his mother and father. In turn she saw traits in his parents that were the similar to those which had endeared him to her, and in (very) small doses she began to not just tolerate but appreciate their company, though they also only stuck to the topics of Nero, Sherlock's healing, and other non-sensitive subjects.

She also made stilted small talk about Sherlock's recovery with John in the moments when their visits overlapped, and for the first time she felt twinges of something other than annoyance or apathy towards him. He was clearly just wary of her doing the exact thing that she was so apprehensive of doing herself – hurting Sherlock.

Part of her was an active participant in all of these moments of civility, but there was the ever-present part of her was charting out her next movements; she was only able to bear them because she knew it was for a limited time before she could resume her 'real' life, whatever that might be. The alternative was to be lulled into complacency, but that would only lead to stagnation and entropy – far worse poisons to her relationship with Sherlock in the long-run than mere distance.

As the days passed, Sherlock adapted to his temporary muteness. He returned to his work, solving cases from his hospital bed by ordering his clients, and sometimes John, to navigate locations via smartphone, and holding interviews on Skype or Facetime. He would text his questions then have the clients answer them aloud, and for a time this new process was fascinating for Irene to watch.
But when the minutiae of a case eventually outweighed the novelty of watching Sherlock's new methodology, and she was able to give Lydia and Siger the slip, she'd take long walks through the city with Nero slung to her.

On the first day she was euphoric and almost giddy at having the freedom to make her way through London once again, although she was always trailed by someone for equal parts protection and monitoring.

She would go for miles, oblivious to Nero's weight as she walked past the major landmarks, beside the Thames, through parks and through squares, along the high streets she used to frequent, and down the roads of her old neighbourhood. She even made a point to visit the home she'd let in Eaton Square, where she saw that the new residents had added planters and climbing wisteria to the terrace above the entryway. It gave the building a softer and more welcoming look than it'd had during her tenancy, and despite its familiarity it made it clear that the home was no longer hers.

Her memory of the day she and Sherlock met here was the same - it was both acute and as if it had happened to someone else, which in a way it had.

All the while she kept a streaming line of commentary to Nero, not simplifying her language for the sake of his age, although she found that when she spoke to him her voice tended to be softer, warmer. One day he might know this city as well as she did, perhaps even as well as his father. Or perhaps not. Perhaps there would be a different city that Nero would grow to know as well as his parents knew this one. Given the trajectory of her thoughts, that seemed more likely....

Because while it was certainly gratifying to be back in London, that gratification stemmed from the fact that she'd regained free rein in a place that had been so long deprived to her. It was satisfaction borne of the fact she'd finally prevailed, rather than of truly being 'home.'

During her time in exile she had built a mythos around London, so that the place had grown into so much more than a city and into a representation of all that she'd had, and all that she'd lost. While she had toiled in lower midmarket retail hell she'd yearned for the streets through which she'd been chauffeured in her Bentley, never questioning that she would always have that status and quality of life, or better. But now that she was here it had lost its glamour and mysticism, and was no more than a city once more. It was a wonderful city, but just a city: beautiful, terrible, flawed, and variable like many others. Some time in the years she had been gone, without being aware of it, she had let go of this place – had let go of that life. It was liberating and empowering to realise that, even though it had certain implications for Sherlock...

Her walks had also given her much cause to consider the words that had materialised in her mind as she and Sherlock had shared that moment of intense emotional intimacy back in the ICU that first day.

*She was running away from her own perceived obsoleteness, but what did she think she was running towards?*

In that moment Irene had thought that question almost rhetorically, but it had became less so in the days that followed.

It became more and more evident, the more time she spent navigating the once-familiar streets of the capital, that she was running towards her future, and that London represented her past – one that she somehow, finally, had let go.

She could not stay out of inertia for reasons she'd already considered, but also because the ghosts of that life were too powerful and varied. There were the tangible threats of the powerful men and
women she’d once exploited, but also her own personal ghost, *The Woman*, and all that that woman had been and all that she had coveted and strived for. Irene no longer needed this place enough to fight and possibly lose to those ghosts.

The people – one person in particular – were another story. London and Sherlock had been inextricably linked to her for so long, two great loves that were equally forbidden her, but whereas London was fading into her past, Sherlock was her present and her future. She didn’t see that changing, no matter where in the world she happened to be. She only hoped he could understand that their connection transcended borders, and that he not take the departure that she was coming to see as inevitable as rejection.

In turn she knew she had him, in all the ways one lover could have another, and more even than that. In a way it was a rush; it was everything she’d wanted from Sherlock. On the other hand, with that power came responsibility; not just their painful past but also her understanding of Sherlock told Irene that she had an nearly unlimited capacity to hurt him. That power gave her no satisfaction, only concern.

Sherlock invariably texted her during the deepest moments of these thoughts, to ask where she was. It seemed to upset him to find her absent after he resurfaced from work but he mustn't get accustomed to her being so accessible to him – for many reasons.

Being injured and unable to speak seemed to exacerbate and amplify his more childish personality traits, and although something about being needed by him in that way excited her, she was already mother to one Holmes and she couldn't allow such a precedent to take root and change their relationship. *Her* form of 'mothering' adults and 'aftercare' had never been applicable to Sherlock, and was also part of that very life that had been so rooted in London, which seemed so distant now. Preventing such a dynamic from developing with him now was another reason she must seek even more distance.

One week after their encounter with James Moriarty, on a Spring day that was losing the frost of winter and forecasting a warm summer to come, Irene was stepping out of her favourite bookstore on Marylebone High Street not far from Sherlock's flat, when her phone made the customised alert that meant Sherlock was texting her.

She shifted her weight to pull out her phone and managed to evade Nero’s hand grabbing for the device (he was already showing just as much of a fascination for it has his parents did). When she held it away from him he made a disgruntled sound, and she bounced him a little as she glanced down at the screen.

Where are you?

Marylebone.

A moment later he sent, *Have been given the all-clear to start phasing in speech outside of therapy sessions. Can also check out of hospital tomorrow.*

Irene experienced an immediate physical reaction in the form of a pounding heart and a ringing in her ears as a complex mixture of emotions swept through her. She was relieved for Sherlock, of course she was, but this also meant that their reprieve had come to an end, and now she might have to break his heart to reset it.

Sherlock had gone days and even weeks on end without speaking before, occasionally because of a
sulk but more often as a by-product of work turning his entire world inward. In truth, it had been his choice to extend this length of silence so long, as well. His speech therapist had phased in talking earlier that week within in the context of supervised exercises, and for once he had decided to adhere to medical advice.

That first day, everything they’d experienced and accomplished together had allowed him to feel more connected to her than he had with anyone before. He’d barely felt the pain of his injury in the afterglow of their shared achievement.

But in days that had followed he’d come to sense something in Irene that made him apprehensive, and he was aware that he was being a hypocrite by opting to ignore it. He could see, but refused to observe. If he were as unflinchingly honest with himself as he could be with his clients he’d have to admit that there was something there which he was leaving unexamined – a subtle but incremental distancing as if she were preparing for a permanent break – which he would have to confront at some point. He was just prolonging the wait until the inevitable.

It wasn’t that he was being selfish, or a coward – or not only that. It was also that wasn’t sure how he would conduct himself in the event of such a confrontation.

On one hand he had never been more certain of anything and he was willing to fight for this. For some reason he’d emerged from his unconsciousness with a certainty that he’d only ever felt when equipped with concrete data and facts. Images of something flickering played in his mind like the shadow a moth buffeting a light, but they were ephemeral and fleeting.

On the other, he only hoped that he could fight with her to find a way forward, not fight her. The prospect of losing so much ground and rewinding back to that dynamic was distressing, and it wasn't something on which he liked to dwell.

He distracted himself with work, but in moments between cases he still found himself having hypothetical conversations with her, but what he would or would not say to her changed moment by moment. He would only know how to respond when it was in reaction to whatever was said by The Woman herself, because while he’d had much practice with imitating her voice – most of all when he’d craved her company like a drug during his time operating under the cover of death to destroy the remainder of Moriarty’s network – he’d never any success with it.

But again – perhaps he wouldn't know how, even then… For once this wasn't a situation in which his own certainty could dictate an outcome.

When his doctors told him that he’d be released the following day he knew it was time to face matters. One way or another he wanted some sort of rapprochement before he returned to Baker Street, and he had delayed for long enough. With more effort than it warranted, he texted Irene.

*Have been given the all-clear to start phasing in speech outside of therapy sessions. Can also check out of hospital tomorrow.*

He watched his screen until it reported *Delivered*, then leaned back against the pillows, his heart pounding.

He only knew that he was resolved to not let fear dictate his choice in going forward. He must stand up for what he wanted, because for the first time since meeting her, he knew what that was. They would never be conventional, but he wanted to be a partner to her. He wanted to be a parent to Nero.

It was time to burn down the notion that he had already achieved everything worth pursuing; that
he was meant to be alone.

Irene entered the room without knocking, her cheeks faintly flushed from the warm spring they were experiencing, and her blue eyes looked deeper and clearer than he had seen since they'd been intimate. She was so beautiful, and as always when he saw her again after any length of absence, he was overwhelmed by his attraction to her, and both daunted and exhilarated by being in her presence again.

In one graceful motion she shrugged off her dark Max Mara wrap coat and slid into a chair next to his bed, then looked at him in the searching, solicitous way she'd developed in the past week. At first he'd appreciated the appearance of concerned attention, but lately it made him feel uneasy. They had never been that way with each other – if anything they could be frank to the point of brutality – and it wasn't organic. That look was one of the things that had first raised a red flag in the past few days.

They had always thrived in unspoken communication, but perhaps they needed to reconnect by actually speaking to one another. For some time he'd been aware of the power his voice had to seduce and to his pleasure he'd discovered that Irene wasn't immune, and he was equally vulnerable to her throaty purr.

"Irene," he said as his first word outside of therapy. His voice was far from the baritone to which she'd be accustomed; it was rough and precarious, but at least it didn't break. Her face seemed to soften with pleasure at hearing him say her name, though a shadow passed over it again in a moment, and wariness warred with his happiness at seeing her.

He looked down, gritted his teeth, and then turned his eyes onto her again. The time of overthinking was over; he needed to express himself.

But first:

"Is Nero all right?"

"Yes. Shall I fetch him? Your parents took him to get a juice in the canteen but they should be back soon."

Sherlock almost said yes. He wanted to see his son, but at this point he was at risk of using the boy to procrastinate this conversation.

"No, that's fine."

She nodded, and the room lapsed into silence. There was a faintly awkward, anticipatory feeling between them, and he blinked hard one more time, then reached for her hand where it rested on the arm of the chair.

She met his hand halfway with hers and the awkward feeling slightly abated, but he could faintly feel her pulse where their fingers were interlaced and it was elevated. She was nervous too.

"As I said in my text, I'm being released from hospital tomorrow," he said. Pathetic, he thought.

"Looking forward to being back at the flat?"

"Mostly I'm looking forward to wearing proper pants again," he said drily, with a gesture to the hospital gown he was still made to wear.

At that he saw the old mischievous fire brighten her eyes.
"Presumptuous of you to think you'd be wearing any pants there, either."

He didn't blush as he might once have, but his heart began to pound even harder. A retort, "Why wait? They're not monitoring my heart-rate anymore, and the door locks," came into his mind. But as tempting as that was it would be another delay tactic, and sex between them was better than that.

Other responses – salacious, humorous, flirtatious, overly sentimental – came and were also rejected.

"Will you be staying there?" he finally asked. He didn't want to sound tentative, but he did want to appear neutral.

"I can."

"For now," she added after a moment.

He nodded, once, though his mind was reeling.

"You're welcome to stay. Indefinitely, I mean."

"John's room upstairs is available," he added quickly at her expression – like the floor had suddenly disappeared from beneath her. "And I'm often away due to work."

She smiled again, but this time it looked wry.

"I'm not concerned about having privacy, Sherlock."

Concerned about.

He let his eyes drill into hers in a demand for elaboration, and she let out a loud sigh and got to her feet, then half turned from him.

"You meant that, didn't you?" she asked, her face only visible in one-third profile. "You would have me – us – stay with you. 'Indefinitely'."

He considered, running through dozens of eventualities and scenarios in moments, then said, "Yes."

The heavy ring of truth to the word surprised even him, but yes, he was certain. Stagnation could never lead to evolution, and the arrogance of thinking he'd already achieved everything worth doing would only lead to entropy. It was time to burn down all of his old ways and rebuild – using and integrating blocks from both of the two lives he had kept distinct for so long.

"How?" she asked, and her slim shoulders looked tense. "How can you be sure?"

He gave another moment's pause, then said, "My life as someone only obligated to myself, to what I want, is in the past; I need to move forward. I've recreated my life before, I can do it again."

"Yes… So can I. Have I. I've already done it." She turned her head to him, looking at him from over her shoulder with a small smile. "You've always been part of this life, you just didn't know it."

His breath stopped in his lungs at the implication of that.

"This' life," he said, not letting his voice show any emotion. "That suggest you're going back."

"Yes."
She said it as if hearing it aloud resolved it for her.

"A hard reset?"

Irene turned fully back towards him with a humming sound of mild dissent. "A soft reset."

He scoffed. "There's nothing soft about you."

She only looked at him, as though she wanted to say something, but she didn't.

"Stay," he said, before the word had even materialised in his mind. It was ready on his lips since he'd thought it about her so many times in the past week.

Irene glanced away, and Sherlock saw the sudden shine of unshed tears brighten her eyes.

He had blurted out the word in a flare of hope, but the instant after he'd said it, his heart sank.

"I can't." She looked pained and uncharacteristically awkward as she looked back at him.

"Sherlock, I can't."

Something centre-mass dropped heavily, dragging his hopes with it. This was unravelling far faster than he'd expected even in his worst-case projections.

"I once said those same words to you. You convinced me otherwise, as I recall."

Her lips pulled up almost imperceptibly on one side, and her gaze unfocussed as she seemed to recall that night on the ship. It could've very well been the night they'd conceived their son.

Then her smile shifted back into an expression he couldn't read. There were moments of such brilliant clarity between them, but all too quickly she'd retreat into his blind spot once more.

"Coming back to England was never about me, or about us. It was about Nero, and ending a threat that's been after us since before he was born."

"Yes. But the end-result is that my brother now knows about you, and he owes you for what you've done."

His voice took on new firmness, as if speaking with enough conviction would make what he were saying true.

"Mycroft can see to it: you can be Irene Adler of London again. He'll restore the information to your phone so that you have the same 'protection' as before, and resurrect your identity. It will be like nothing ever happened."

*Like I never burned you two years ago,* he thought.

Irene sighed, looking both unhappy and pitying, and ice began to frost over his heart. He could take her scorn and her anger, maybe, but he couldn't take her pity – not the pity itself nor what it portended.

"Sherlock… Mycroft is no position to offer me anything."

The panic of one sort switched to another in a heartbeat. For just a moment, he had forgotten. He was so accustomed to having Mycroft to help him that it was instinct to defer to his reliance on his brother. Mycroft had said so himself, what seemed like a lifetime ago. He'd been right, as always…
Sherlock managed to recover, skipping only a beat. "Then—"

She cut him off.

"Besides, that information is years out of date now, and likely obsolete. It's lost any of the power it once had to protect. And even if you did manage to leverage your brother's name, I won't have his thugs around as a constant presence around us in the name of 'protection'."

"Forget about them, I'll do it," Sherlock shot back. "I've protected you before, and I could again – but it wouldn't come to that extreme again, I'd ensure it. I'll keep tabs on anyone that would want harm to come to you. It would be easy."

She gave him a look that was equal parts tender, exasperated, perceptive, and (again) pitying, then sighed, and the soft sound sliced into him.

"If he's ever capable of it, your brother will do all of that anyway - release the information back to me, resurrect Irene Adler," she said. "Who knows when she might become useful again? But it still doesn't change... how things stand now. Besides, sanctioned misbehaviour isn't really misbehaviour, is it?"

Sherlock clenched his jaw against replying, because he still wasn't entirely certain what words might end up coming out of his mouth.

Irene stood and went to the window, where he heard her make a small noise to herself.

"James Moriarty was right about one thing."

Sherlock looked at her warily, waiting.

"It's interesting, isn't it?" she asked, fixing her gaze on something out on the road, or at least appearing to. "About names. How much of our identities we invest in what we're called…"

"I shed that identity you made for me the moment I could, and then I despised having to live under my given name in New Jersey," she said, and then he saw the side of her cheek lift in a slight smile. "You've talked about how being 'Sherlock Holmes' again was both a relief and an obligation to uphold. To me 'Irene Adler' is 'The Woman'; they're interchangeable. Perhaps I'm still The Woman to you, but… in many ways both she and Irene are relics of the past. I can't look backwards any more, Sherlock. I need to look ahead again."

It was exactly how he felt, and yet she was reacting in the opposite way he was, and the words of Newton's Third Law appeared in his head.

*For every reaction there is an equal and inverse reaction... Forces always come in pairs - equal and opposite action-reaction force pairs.*

He and Irene seemed destined and doomed to be such force pairs, harmonious in their perfect antagonism.

"I never thought I'd see it," he said, unable to hide his sudden bitterness. "Irene Adler – or whatever it is you'd like to call yourself now – running away."

To Sherlock's surprise Irene actually winced, and that small sign of vulnerability only incited him further.

"Fight or flight. You'd rather go on the run again than stay and face what a life here might mean."
With me."

She still didn't look at him, but her body tensed and he saw her fingers press into the windowsill.

"I told you – I warned you," she said, her voice sounding almost as hoarse as his. "The 'after' part
would be harder."

She wasn't going to deny it, then.

"I never took that to mean you'd just give up."

Irene turned to him at that, her eyes flashing and betraying a glimpse of raw pain, quickly covered
by anger.

"'Giving up' would be just slotting back into my old life here as if nothing has happened and
taking you on to it like an afterthought, then waiting until we grew bored with one another." He stared at her, his mind racing until he could somehow parse his feelings into words.

"Who would get bored."

His tone was cold and his eye contact unflinching, but the question filled him with dread.

"Either one of us, both of us. Does it matter?"

"I wouldn't."

"You can't know that, Sherlock."

"I can. I do. I told you, I'm certain. About this – about us."

She looked away and sighed, and the negation of her body language felt even more dismissive than
a verbal denial.

"So all the times you wouldn't accept my reluctance or uncertainty, and everything you've said to
me about our singular understanding, about how I'm your exception," he snarled, unable to keep
the emotion from his voice. "That's all fine and good, but only in small, controlled – by you –
doses. Only on your terms, always on your terms.

"Ever the dominatrix, yes Irene? It's straight out of the rulebook: make him need you, give him
what he wanted that he didn't even realise he wanted, and then take it away to reaffirm
who's really got the power."

Her eyes snapped back to him, and her mouth parted in a near-grimace.

"How can you still—"

"How can I not? There are only so many ways to interpret a given data set. I'm only applying the
most logical conclusion to—"

"Stop." Irene put up a hand, which appeared to tremble slightly. "This isn't a case in which you're
detached from the outcome and you can be objective. You can't be, your biases and insecurities are
going to come into play, because you're in love with me."

"Yes, I think we've established that!" he tried to shout, feeling like she was throwing something so
secret and private in his face at a time he was most vulnerable, but it came out as an impotent rasp.
His throat ached fiercely and his healing wound burned.

He swallowed hard, but the ache only intensified, and was joined by another in his chest. He felt impossibly small. How could she make him feel so empowered, and then so reduced?

"I see it now, in retrospect," he scraped out. "You've been biding your time until the least disruptive moment to tell me you're leaving. I suppose I should be grateful for even that courtesy – I'm sure it's more consideration than all your previous lovers have received."

Irene's face flushed in displeasure, whether it was because he was trivialising what they shared in the comparison with previous lovers, or because she saw it for exactly the manipulative and unworthy comment it was. He presumed it was both.

A moment later it softened, and he hated how it instantly filled him with hope again.

"I understand why you don't trust me, and I know it seems like we've traded places – that now that you're finally certain, I'm running away. But that's not it, it's not so simple. How could it be when it comes to the two of us? I'm not running, I'm still certain of what you mean to me, too."

Irene stepped forward to take his hand, and he wanted to jerk away, but he found that he couldn't reject the chance of being touched by her. Especially not if they had so little time left.

"This is not the end. Please understand, I'm doing this for both of us." Her voice sounded the closest to pleading than he'd heard since that night, but he found himself as unreceptive to it now as he had been then.

"Oh, so you moving to the other side of the world is you falling on your sword," he sneered. "'For us'."

The hardness in his voice made her sigh and lean back, and let go of his hand. He instantly regretted the loss of her touch.

"No. I meant what I said, there's a good life for me to be made in California. And I don't have to depend on anyone else for that."

"Are we in – a relationship?" he asked, his eyes boring into hers.

"I—"

"And forgive me if I have this wrong, as I'm not terribly experienced in this area," he said, "but isn't that what people in a relationship do? Depend on each other."

"Not for basic safety and autonomy, Sherlock. I can't depend on anyone for that but myself. I wouldn't be the woman you think I am if I accepted something like that."

Sherlock felt something harden against her in him. All the vulnerability and need he had so nakedly shown in the past week was shoved away and shored up.

"You've made up your mind."

She didn't look away from his eyes. "Yes. It's not fair to Nero to have one parent ever resent another. It's not fair to us."

He found himself asking again, "Which way round?"

This time, after a moment of painful silence, she answered.
"Both. And I can't... ever let that happen."

He closed his eyes lightly, his face a mask of pain.

"After all of this, after everything you've said, you've made me face and realise," he said. "You're asking me to let you go, to let my son go..."

"No," she said fiercely. "This isn't good-bye."

"I have no say."

Her silence was all the confirmation he needed.

"Or about Nero?" he asked with steel coming into his voice, low and hoarse as it was.

"Sherlock..." she said, her face going white.

Sherlock was curious whether the fear in her eyes was due to what she was worried he was capable of doing, or what she was. After all, it had only been a week since she'd made it clear that she would sacrifice Sherlock to get Nero back, and he hadn't even been the perceived threat then.

A part of him hated that he had put that haunted, calculating look into her eyes again - was he trying to hurt her as much as she was hurting him, by making her suddenly doubt something precious she took for granted? But another part felt gratified and pleased to see his words have a palpable effect on her.

Anyway, what choice did he have? He wanted, needed, to have his son in his life, and she wanted to disappear as quickly from it as she had reappeared, this time taking away so much more than what he'd even known he had.

"What, you thought you could introduce me to my son and then take off again once I've concluded my usefulness, and I'd have nothing to say about it?" His voice took on a brittle, ironic pleasantness. "'Yes, so pleasant to meet you, bye-bye now'?"

"Did you believe I wouldn't care? Is that what you think of me, Irene?"

She opened her mouth, but he cut her off.

"I'd like for you to leave."

She didn't argue, she promptly picked up her coat and moved towards the doorway.

"But this conversation isn't over," he said with the final excruciating remnants of his voice. "Nero is my child too."

She let out a small breath in acknowledgment of what he said, then hesitated for a moment.

"We'll be staying with Kate."

He didn't meet her eyes or speak, and she squared her shoulders, lifted her head, and left.

As soon as she was gone from sight he lifted his hands up to his face and pressed the heels hard into his eyes until they ached almost much as his throat, and gritting his teeth against the swell of emotion.

He felt humiliated and deeply hurt, but he couldn't find relief in anger that bordered hate the way...
he had that night in Mycroft's study. Such a response would've been easier by far to experience, but they were long past anything that simple. Though if he were honest with himself, it had hardly been that simple then, either…

Then and now, only Irene had the power to make him feel emotions this extremely. The difference was that then the truth of what he must do next became increasingly clear to him, until it had become a mandate as imperative to follow as breathing. But now, he couldn't even begin to fathom.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for your patience in getting this chapter!! The next update will not be nearly as long in coming, as it's mostly written :)

PS Any and all comments are loved by this author!
The Awakening

Sherlock had less than a minute to be alone with his agonising thoughts before John rapped on the doorframe with the back of his hand and started to enter, though he hesitated when he saw Sherlock’s expression.

“Well *that’s* confirmed.”

“What,” Sherlock snapped, dropping his hands to his lap, and John continued in.

“I thought I saw Irene Adler leaving down the other end of the hall. And now judging by the state of you…”

Sherlock sent a look towards John that was meant to incinerate on the spot, and John sighed.

“All right, forget lightening the mood. Do you want to talk about it?”

“No.”

“‘Kay.”

This time it was Sherlock who sighed, a long, forceful exhale with a hint of a growl at the end.

After a weighted silence, he said, “She’s leaving.”

John raised an eyebrow, then looked uncomfortable.

“And how are we feeling about that…?”

Sherlock sent John another glare.

“‘We’?” he snapped, though his voice came out strangled and hoarse. “Why don’t you tell me, John?”

John tempered his look of impatience with one of sympathy, which agitated Sherlock even more.

“All right, look, I was just—”

“Oi, what’s all the shouting about?” a new voice cut in. “I could hear you two rowing half way down the hall!”

“Oh *good*, the gang’s all here,” Sherlock muttered, although he felt a slight thawing at the sight of Mary as she appeared through the doorway as well.

“We’re not having a row – Sherlock is just…” John trailed off, realising they were discussing something she shouldn’t know. “Er…”

Sherlock’s mouth tightened and he looked away.

“Ohh, is it a big secret?” she asked, and Sherlock’s gaze snapped back onto her. The ironic sparkle he saw in her eyes was exactly what he’d expected.

“I…” Sherlock started, then ended lamely, “don’t like losing.”

“Well that’s not *much* of a secret, is it?” she said, but when she saw how genuine his anguish was
her face became serious and her lips drew into a concerned o.

He couldn’t very well discuss it with her in front of John, but not for the reason John would think. Sherlock couldn’t bear to act out the charade of ‘explaining’ Irene and Nero to Mary when she knew and understood more than John possibly could. Mary had seen first-hand what Sherlock had been willing to do to protect them, so going through the performance of ‘telling’ Mary about them would be too much of a farce.

Instead he remained silent.

Mary looked between him and John, and then asked “Is this about that woman? Irene Adler? And-and the child?”

Sherlock’s head jerked up and he stared at Mary in naked shock – was she really going to out herself to John?

“Er… Yeah – I told her, mate,” John said, seeing but incorrectly interpreting the look.

Sherlock nodded once – of course, then his face contorted again at the thought of Irene and Nero.

“I’ve been waiting for the right time to tell you, Sherlock – congratulations.”

“Don’t congratulate me, Mary,” he rasped out. “She’s going back to America, and she’s taking Nero with her.”

“America? What? Why?” John spluttered, while Mary remained quiet as if taking it all in.

“According to her, if she stays we’ll end up bored and resentful of each other,” he said. It felt strange to be saying something he’d so bitterly contested only moments before, and now that he was repeating her words there seemed to be a ring of truth to them. He shook his head slightly, banishing the thought.

“But why so far away?” Mary asked, her voice gentle.

“She’d started a new practice in San Francisco before the threat caused her to go on the run again. Apparently business was good.”

“But that’s on the bloody other side of the world,” John said, sounding indignant. “She can never just let anything be easy with her, can she?”

It felt good to have John back him up, but at the same time the small niggling feeling returned. Was it just contrariness to John, knee-jerk loyalty to Irene, or something more?

“And what if, God forbid, some other threat should pop up?” John went on. “This is Irene Adler we’re talking about.”

"She is better equipped than anyone else in the world to manage risk," Sherlock said, telling himself he was only playing devil’s advocate.

"With you both here you can both protect him. Ignoring that seems a bit irresponsible."

"The two of us in one place means twice the danger for Nero – twice the risk. And without Mycroft..." he trailed away, swallowing.

John paused, then said, "What are you saying?"
What was he saying? He pushed a hand through his hair. "I don't know."

He felt as if his brain were foggy from painkillers, but he’d weaned himself off of those days ago so he couldn’t blame his confusion on that.

Nero’s safety was tantamount, that was taken as granted, but was Irene right about them growing bored with each other? He tried to imagine what life would be like with her in London, experimenting with a relationship, being domestic. He found that he couldn’t actually picture it.

But grow bored of The Woman? That was even more unimaginable.

Though perhaps not to her.

He felt something like panic rise up within him again.

Was her believing that they’d grow bored only a product of her own fear, or did she feel differently about him than how he felt about her? Or was just he still too smitten to see how things would inevitably progress as clearly as she could? Regardless, he no longer felt assured that he did hold the moral high ground.

“I may’ve… been too hasty. By being binary in my approach to this.”

He couldn’t ask The Woman to sacrifice so much, again. He couldn’t expect her to relinquish her dignity and her autonomy, for his own selfish and perhaps misguided reasons. It wasn’t fair to expect her to not only meet him exclusively on his terms, but be the one to sacrifice everything in order to meet those terms.

His heart sunk as he realised how selfish and self-centred he’d been. He didn’t have experience in relationships of this type, but that was no excuse for ceding to the conventional definition of what one ought to look like. Irene didn’t have to jump through societally-defined hoops to prove she was serious about him, and to believe she did had been narrow-minded of him. Selfishness wasn’t new for him, but narrow-mindedness was another story; to Sherlock it would practically be a hanging offense if he believed in capital punishment.

John was looking at him as if he’d grown another head, but Sherlock ignored him and looked around for his phone, which he spotted on the bedside table.

“I have to speak with her again.”

“Thought you’d get there,” Mary whispered into his ear before brushing a kiss against his cheek then pressing his phone into his hand, and he looked at her sharply as suspicion blossomed.

In not disagreeing with anything he’d said, had she really been manipulating him into contrariness so that he would see things from Irene’s point of view? Or let him talk himself out of his set ideas? It was a tactic he’d often employed himself when questioning people – they loved to contradict assertions. In this case he’d have to include himself in ‘people.’ When it came to the emotions he felt for Irene, he supposed that he was.

Mary gave Sherlock a knowing little smile that confirmed his suspicions.

“What’s side are you on?” he asked, staring up at her accusatorily.

“Always yours.”
She moved to the door, then turned and added, “Unless you ever do row with John. Then I’m afraid you’re quite on your own…”

With one last wink she left the room, and John followed, still looking baffled and vaguely put-out.

Mary turned her face to John and her sardonic look became a genuine smile, and as they walked away down the corridor she took his hand, and the sight of it suffused Sherlock with a strange longing. Irene hadn’t even departed yet, and he already felt so alone. Was it that they were so at odds now that physical proximity didn’t matter? And could the inverse be true – that they could be close, without being near?

As soon as John and Mary were out of view he let his face go blank, though internally he was experiencing that familiar mix of one part aggravation, nine parts admiration that was as signature a blend to Irene as the scent that had once permeated his coat.

Did she always have to be right? Would they replay the dynamic of ‘The Woman who beat you’ ad nauseum for the rest of their lives? The small bit of annoyance faded as he actually considered that; it didn’t sound so bad, really. It sounded interesting in fact – the highest compliment he could pay someone.

Swallowing down what felt like a dozen rusty nails gouging his throat, he lifted his phone and selected Irene’s number. As it rang he listened with an alertness that preceded the fight or flight instinct, but she didn’t answer and with a sigh through his nose he ended the call without leaving a voicemail. It wasn’t his habit, and this situation was especially too delicate for that.

He tried several more times throughout the evening to get ahold of her, but she never did respond and he became increasingly agitated and increasingly convinced that he had damaged their relationship beyond repair with his demands and rigidity.

Darker and darker scenarios spun out in his head: he would never see Irene again - he would never see his son again. He had found her once, yes, but that was only because she’d had enough confidence in her own ability to evoke sentiment in him that she’d laid a trail of breadcrumbs for him to follow. If she decided that she didn’t want him to find her or their child, he would never see them again.

He felt a surge of powerful anger in response to his own hypotheticals. How could she do that, how could she keep his own son from him – not just for Sherlock’s sake, but for Nero’s? To deprive him of his father was short-sighted and exhibiting far more selfishness than he had been in their conversation that afternoon. But was that his fault as well, for making what she might perceive as an implicit threat just before she’d left? Was this a pre-emptive strike against what she saw as him turning against her in the most unforgivable way, and she was taking necessary precautions? Anguish seized him and he folded inward on himself in a convulsive movement, his face contorting in a spasm.

This is what he did; he spun out eventualities and followed situations to their logical conclusions given the odds of a given set of variables. The difference was that these scenarios were rooted in emotion rather than reason, and his volatile feelings created increasingly desperate and erratic outcomes. He was aware of that in a distant part of his mind, but in his weak and exhausted state that part of him had very little power to rein him in.

Sometime in the late hours of the night he came awake with a jerk. He’d been unaware that he’d fallen asleep and was even more unaware of what had woken him, but a moment later his phone made another alert sound. His heart jumped in mingled hope and fear at the thought it was The Woman, even without characteristic alert tone, but when he glanced down he saw that it was from
Andrea.

What he read next was the only thing that could possibly distract him from the situation with Irene, and suddenly profound relief and something that felt suspiciously like joy flooded through him.

*Your brother is conscious.*

There were three missed calls from Andrea, which had somehow failed to wake him, plus the text.

Without a thought to his state of undress Sherlock hurled himself out of bed, stuffed his feet into the hospital-provided slippers, and took off for Mycroft’s wing of the hospital.

A pair of large men flanked the doorway but he ignored them and honed his eyes on Andrea, who was leaning against the outside of Mycroft’s door. She glanced up from her phone as Sherlock skidded to a halt in front of her, breathing hard, seeming blasé, but the fact that she actually looked away from her screen and into Sherlock’s eyes spoke volumes.

“He’s asleep again, but they ran a few preliminary tests.”

“Never mind those, I can see for myself if…” he swallowed, and it wasn’t to relieve the lingering pain of his tracheotomy this time. Anyway, not speaking throughout the evening and getting some sleep had eased that, for now.

“He’s responded well so far.”

“Has he said anything?”

“Does whinging count?” Andrea asked, with a smirk on her lips but a faint gloss coming to her eyes.

Sherlock nodded curtly and looked away, but felt something swell within his chest.

He grasped the door handle and pushed.

Sherlock didn’t know what he’d expected but Mycroft didn’t look any different, and his initial euphoria ebbed. His brother still looked diminished and pale in his hospital bed, his skin waxy, and stark shadows beneath his eyes.

Sherlock pursed his lips and made his way over to a chair beside the bed, then leaned forward to stare intently at Mycroft’s face, looking for a sign of recovery.

“Mycroft,” he said loudly, but beside a slight flick of his brother’s eyelids there was no response.

He leaned back and closed his eyes, but just when his thoughts began to drift back to Irene and Nero –

"Well... this is a turnabout isn't it?"

Sherlock came back to awareness instantly at the sound of his brother’s voice, which sounded as hoarse and raspy as Sherlock’s, but was unmistakeable in its acerbic tone.

It took him what felt like ages to think of something to say, and even then it was only, "What– what do you mean?"

"You sitting by *my* bedside in hospital. Our roles are usually reversed in this scenario."
“If you hadn’t gotten yourself shot you’d have had your chance too,” Sherlock said, his voice starting to sound steadier despite his still-pounding heart. “You’re not the only one who wound up in hospital.”

“Yes… I can see that. You’ve received an emergency tracheotomy recently. Mary Morstan’s work, I presume?”

Sherlock raised a brow, but he couldn’t muster up any surprise.

“My secret weapon,” Mycroft said with a faint, humourless smile.

“Not yours,” Sherlock shot back, annoyed, although perhaps she was? He couldn’t imagine it, though.

“Secret, I’ll grant you,” Sherlock went on. “Though in retrospect it’s all so obvious.”

“Mmm. Sometimes the things that are closest to us are hardest to see…”

Sherlock sighed, and scrubbed a hand down his face.

“What’s wrong,” Mycroft said.

“Why would anything be wrong?” Sherlock asked, using irritability to cover up his deep and overwhelming relief at Mycroft’s consciousness. Not only was Mycroft awake, but he was still the same perceptive bastard.

Well perhaps not exactly the same as always. They had all been changed and marked by the experience of the past month, but it had nothing to do with trivial challenges such as a coma.

Mycroft gave him the side-eyed, tilted head paired with a raised eyebrow expression that always made him feel reduced to a child.

“No, seriously,” Sherlock pressed, aware that he was overdoing it a bit. “We’ve put a permanent end to Moriarty and his entire extended network, something that’s involved years of work and numerous sacrifices—”

“Sherlock—”

“Oh I don’t know. Maybe it’s that you’ve just woken up and already you’re meddling.”

Mycroft didn’t take the bait. Instead he just looked at his brother, his expression grave and concerned, and Sherlock found his thorny reserve crumbling. He deflated backward into the chair.

“She’s not staying. Now that the work is done, she’s...”

Mycroft leaned backed against the pillow, nodding.

“Ah. Yes. No need to ask who ‘she’ is. Going back to America?”

“With Nero.”

There was a long silence, and Sherlock started to organise how he was going to brief Mycroft on all that he’d missed, when his brother spoke again.

“You know, Sherlock… the fight’s not over.”
“Excuse me?” Sherlock asked, almost thinking he’d misheard.

Mycroft turned his head to Sherlock, looking him directly in the eye.

“But this time it’s not against any outside, external forces - it would be something far more personal. And taking on endogenous demons is much more difficult... as you well know.”

“What happened to ‘sentiment is a dangerous disadvantage’?” Sherlock shot back, ignoring the subtext of Mycroft’s comment.

“I’m not being inconsistent. I was trying to protect you then, and I’m trying to protect you now. And I wasn’t wrong, was I?” he added on, sounding slightly indignant. “She’s been a prodigious weakness for you.”

“I’ve found her to be the opposite.”

Mycroft leaned his head back again, and despite being contradicted he looked intensely gratified at that for some reason.

“Semantics,” he said with a small wave of his fingers.

By sheer habit Sherlock opened his mouth to ask how apparent opposites could be reconciled by saying ‘semantics’, but it took less than an instant for him to see what Mycroft meant. Yes, Irene Adler was both his weakness and his strength. In The Woman’s spectacular totality, that apparent contradiction was one of the less complex and enigmatic things about her.

“Your ‘Kryptonite’,” Mycroft said with a soft, ironic smile, and Sherlock didn’t know what that meant – Kryptonite sounded like a mineral, but wasn’t – but he captured the gist. The knowing and slightly wistful way Mycroft had said it also revealed that Mycroft considered Sherlock the same: Mycroft’s weakness and his strength. Suddenly Sherlock understood the gratification he’d seen in that smile – Mycroft thought Sherlock finally understood how Mycroft felt about him.

“There are things, Sherlock, things I... regret. Choices I made with a rational mind that...” He stopped, then restarted. “I’ve recently sworn to myself I wouldn’t repeat old mistakes. We must always use the correct tools for the correct jobs, mustn’t we, and—”

“What could you regret? You’ve never had friends, never had any romantic—”

“Friends and lovers, is that all there is?” Mycroft spat, colour rising to his pallid cheeks. “What about family?”

He suddenly looked dismayed, though whether it was because he’d seemed to lash out in jealousy or for some other reason, Sherlock wasn’t sure, and he looked away to allow Mycroft to recompose himself.

“T

“Irene Adler is your family,” he said, smoothly reframing the word, though Sherlock knew that isn’t what he’d meant in his outburst. “Your son is your family.”

At that, Sherlock felt his heart sink like a stone.

“I know that. But they’re leaving.”

“She loves you, you know.”

Sherlock felt his face twist like he’d just tasted something very sour. “Don’t.”
“Don’t state a fact?”

“Don’t say - that. It isn’t helpful. And it’s reductive.”

“Is it?”

Sherlock let a hard gust of air out between his nose. “Even if she did, doesn’t she love herself more.”

“Well then, you have that in common.”

“What – that we both love ourselves more than each other, or that we both love her more than me?” Sherlock shot back, feeling deeply annoyed.

Mycroft just raised his eyebrows, and met Sherlock’s glare without qualm.

“Fight for her, Sherlock,” he finally said. “Whatever it takes.”

“Why?”

“You don’t think you should?” his brother asked, tilting his head as he examined Sherlock’s expression.

“No, I want to know why you think I should.”

At first Mycroft only gazed back at him imperiously, but then the fight seemed to go out of him and he looked down at his fingers, which were splayed over the thin percale of the hospital sheet.

“You and I have so few people in our lives who… can truly know us,” he said, “and I’m coming to realise how even people like us aren’t immune to loneliness, as much as we’d like to believe we’re above it.”

“So, for selfish reasons,” Sherlock retorted, aware that he was still being difficult. It was so easy to default to that where his brother was concerned, even now. The thing was, it wasn’t Mycroft himself Sherlock was fighting. It was the part of himself that he had internalised as Mycroft’s voice within him – that voice of cold reason and judgment telling him that his emotional response was dangerous.

It suddenly struck him that putting conditions and qualifiers on his relationship with Irene hadn’t only been because of his narrow-mindedness and selfishness – it had been another barrier he’d thrown up to protect himself from those emotions, and the vulnerability they would create.

“No, not only for ‘selfish’ reasons” Mycroft answered, pulling Sherlock from his thoughts. “Also because you’re a father. And even though I’m not—”

“No. You’re not. So as I’ve said before don’t presume to lecture me about what it means.”

He couldn’t miss the flash of deep hurt he saw in Mycroft’s eyes and he felt something in him start to thaw.

He pressed his lips together, then after a tense silence said, “I know what you would do for me, Mycroft. I know what you did for my son, what you were prepared to sacrifice – what you did sacrifice. I…”

He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to reorder his thoughts, and when he opened them he saw that Mycroft was still looking down at the duvet, though every part of him broadcasted that he was listening intently.
“Before… You said that I took you for granted, that I was able to be reckless and take risks because I knew you would always be there to clean up after me, or get me out of whatever trouble I couldn’t myself. You were right.”

Mycroft’s eyebrows rose in shock, an expression rarely seen on his brother’s face.

“It’s not easy for me to admit,” Sherlock said, and Mycroft widened his eyes and tilted his chin down in an almost-nod, still staring down at his hands.

“But when you were in a coma, when I thought you’d…” He couldn’t actually say ‘suffered permanent brain damage’; it was still too raw and too awful. “When it seemed you could die, it clarified the matter. I do – on occasion – rely on you.”

Sherlock wasn’t making eye contact and he was fairly certain Mycroft still wasn’t either, but in his peripheral vision he could see his brother go very still.

He felt the need to fill the silence. “I didn’t have you as a resource, or a soundboard, or someone to vet the efficacy of a plan, and it was… difficult. Even then I still had tactical access, which was critical to the plan we devised. Without that…’” He swallowed, feeling overwhelmed, as the weight of the truth behind his words hit him. As did the weight of what he could’ve lost without Mycroft’s help – much of which Mycroft was able to provide even whilst comatose.

He had never conscientiously grasped just how much he had relied on his brother, and the fact that he had almost lost him when the stakes could not have been higher only exacerbated how much he needed him.

“It’s not just that.” Sherlock went on when he was sure his voice wouldn’t betray any hints of emotion. “It isn’t just the utility you have to me. What you said… about people like us, about understanding. You’re right about that. Irene Adler isn’t the only one with whom I find that understanding, but it’s a very small group. For a long time it was a group of one.”

“My fault,” Mycroft interrupted, and Sherlock felt relieved. He was starting to sound far too mawkish to bear.

“For so long I thought it was my duty and responsibility to mould you into me. Perhaps that was selfish, I know it was unforgivably arrogant. I should’ve just let you be yourself.”

“An idiot?” Sherlock said, but lightly.

“In more ways than one,” Mycroft added in the same tone.

“No… we couldn’t have that.”

There was a short silence, then Sherlock said quietly, “You weren’t a rubbish big brother.” The understatement expressed everything.

“Oh dear god, what have I unleashed?” his brother said in a suddenly loud voice, rolling his eyes. “Just induce me into a coma again, would you?”

If the tables had been turned, it’s exactly what Sherlock would have said, and it made him let out a low chuckle. It was so much better than an earnest response, which he hadn’t needed; Sherlock knew how Mycroft felt – he showed it in every action, and what it must meant to Mycroft for Sherlock to finally show some reciprocation and affirmation. Besides, they couldn’t both be so mawkish at the same time.
“Not before you see your nephew again.”

Mycroft’s mouth lifted into a small but genuine smile and he nodded, and for a moment they both sat in silence.

“Sherlock,” Mycroft said in a new tone. “Speaking of Nero… Andrea filled me in on the situation and I’ve devised a plan that will ensure he would be safe in London. It might help to persuade Ms Adler that staying here is an option.”

Sherlock straightened, but tempered any burgeoning feelings of hope.

“As you’re aware, in my position I enjoy some autonomy. I’d use the term ‘long leash’ but in a situation involving Irene Adler that metaphor seems a little heavy-handed. But essentially, my colleagues are accustomed to being briefed only when I deem it necessary; otherwise I’m able to more or less get on with it.”

“Yes. Your point?”

“The point, Sherlock, is that this allows me to claim that Irene Adler has been a sleeper agent in a years-long operation designed to permanently destroy Moriarty and his entire syndicate. A ‘long con,’ shall we say.”

Sherlock leaned back, wearing a poker-face even as his heart-rate picked up. “Go on.”

“Of course I’ll have to make the appearance of apologising for the deception, but ‘surely its necessity is understandable? There was so much uncertainty of whom to trust…’ Anyhow, the delivered results ought to justify whatever means I appeared to take.”

“What about Nero?”

Mycroft took in and then let out a deep breath. “We should also introduce the rumour that the boy is… my son. In doing so every remaining enemy of hers would understand that to act against her or her son is to act against me. Dispensing with modesty for a moment – that alone would be formidable protection.”

“But surely no one would actually believe that of you.”

The edge of Mycroft’s mouth turned in slight irony. “Still waters run deep they might conclude. It doesn’t apply to me, but…” He cast a sidelong look at Sherlock. “Who would’ve believed it of you, either?”

Sherlock didn’t respond. Mycroft was correct that such a story would provide substantial protection for Nero and Irene, plus it would offer a cover for Sherlock spending time with Nero, since it would have Nero as Sherlock’s nephew. Still, Sherlock felt oddly dismayed with the idea that Mycroft would be considered Nero’s father.

“The fact that you had a child with a woman who looks so much like yourself,” Mycroft continued, shooting Sherlock another patronising look, “will work in our favour. Everyone can assume he takes after his mother rather than me.”

“I offer this, but I do hope you realise what this would mean for me. I’ve spent my career fostering a certain perception of myself, only to be utterly humanised in one fell swoop.” He pronounced ‘humanised’ as if it were a curse word.

“Yes,” Sherlock said simply. As troubled as he felt by the concept of Mycroft taking credit for
Nero, he was also aware of what it would cost his brother. In certain ways this would be an even greater sacrifice for Mycroft than getting shot and put into a coma by a sniper’s bullet.

But Sherlock wasn’t convinced the deception would be necessary. Irene had made the point that not even Mycroft’s interference and protection could change her mind.

“And if she doesn’t accept?”

“I’m going forward with the story of her role as a sleeper agent regardless. She has no reason to contradict it, and if she does I’ll just find a way to discredit her. It wouldn’t be difficult.”

“I meant about Nero. About staying.”

“I know.” Mycroft sighed. “If she can’t accept that, then let her go.”

Sherlock’s brow creased in frustration. “You just said—”

“Yes. Again, the statements aren’t incompatible Sherlock. I meant, if she can’t agree, then let her leave. She does love you, but Irene Adler cannot and will not be constrained – as we’ve both seen first-hand.”

“What about what I want?”

“And what is it that you want?”

“I—”

He wanted her respect, her understanding, and intellectual, emotional, and physical intimacy with her. But aside from sex, her leaving London wouldn’t necessarily affect those things, and Sherlock also didn’t want to diminish her or hold her back in any way. That would be an unmitigated disaster in a countless number of ways.

As for physical intimacy, well, he had a flexible schedule and several passports at his disposal. And as much as he enjoyed that aspect of his relationship with her, he could manage with only the occasional top-up.

But how was Mycroft so perceptive in all of this – Mycroft, of all people?

His brother made a wry smile – Sherlock’s thoughts must’ve shown on his face.

“As I just said - sometimes the things that are closest to us are hardest to see. I have the luxury of distance in all of this, brother mine – I’m in the macro while you’re floundering about in the micro. I’m only making logical inferences from what I know about you, and what I’ve come to know about Ms Adler. I’m not burdened with the actual emotions involved, so it all seems rather clear to me.”

He’d said ‘emotions’ with the same delicate grimace as he’d said ‘humanised’ the minute before, but they both knew his statement wasn’t entirely true. Mycroft may not be directly invested in Sherlock and Irene’s relationship, but he was invested in Sherlock’s welfare and therefore had a stake in how things progressed.

The issue with this line of thought was that it was no longer only about Irene and Sherlock, and what arrangement would best suit them. As it had been for longer than Sherlock had even known, was about their child, too.
“I could accept her leaving if it didn’t also mean being separated from my son.” Because unlike with Irene, proximity with Nero almost certainly did matter.

Looking back, it was Mycroft’s active presence compared with his parents’ that had made his brother the most important person in Sherlock’s childhood, and Mycroft’s departure for University the most difficult and disruptive period of Sherlock’s young life. In retrospect it had been one of the ‘sins’ that had fomented resentment against his brother for years, and Sherlock didn’t want to repeat that dynamic with his son.

“You’ve already seemed to consent to my offer to assert paternity of the boy. Given your abhorrence of ever ceding credit to me for anything you’ve done yourself, you’re clearly willing to make allowances for his sake.”

“Yes, if I think something is in his best interest.”

Mycroft tilted his head, looking thoughtfully into the middle distance. “And so the question is, what is in Nero’s best interest?”

They both sank into silence again.

Sherlock was still convinced that being active in his son’s life was integral to Nero’s wellbeing, but he supposed that everything else depended on what Nero’s needs would be as a developing child. At just about a year old his personality was beginning to emerge, and to Sherlock he seemed perfect – intelligent, alert, perceptive, active – but he still didn’t know Nero well enough to project the boy’s future needs.

Perhaps even moreover than his relationship with Irene, this would be the greatest mystery of his life, and one that he would have to reassess and re-‘solve’ constantly. And perhaps it meant that he and Irene would always have ‘the work’ in a sense, because they would be collaborating on that for at least the next seventeen years. His heart-rate picked up speed at that; the thought was both terrifying and exhilarating.

He had wondered how they would be together when there wasn’t the structure of a case to serve as a foundation for them, but because of Nero they would never really be without that. In fact, it would be precisely what both of them relished – a challenge like no other.

He hadn’t come to a solution, that would take more serious conversation with Irene, but after the discussion with Mycroft Sherlock felt a great deal calmer, and he had to marvel at that.

Historically interactions with Mycroft had been fraught with antagonism, conflict, and competition, even when they were collaborating on cases.

But in fact, while all of the relationships with people in his inner circle had been initiated or defined by some necessity of the work, somewhere along the line professional and personal boundaries had blurred. Collaboration had crossed over into friendship and into love – platonic, fraternal, and romantic.

“I couldn’t have done it,” Mycroft said suddenly.

“What?”

“What you did – what it took to protect Nero. So I have no doubt you’ll also do whatever is necessary in going forward, whatever that might be.”

Sherlock felt warmth spread through him at his brother’s words, but he answered bracingly, “You
Mycroft made a thoughtful, acceding sound, then looked up with a wry expression.

“Apparently we’re more alike than I’d thought, and not in the way I might’ve previously expected. Or at least hoped,” he added, throwing a mock-sardonic look in Sherlock’s direction.

Sherlock let out a huff of appreciation, and a faint smile touched his lips.

Growing up idolising Mycroft had caused Sherlock to internalise a hierarchy – rather, dichotomy – of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ personal traits, and they had aligned with Mycroft’s natural metiers but not his own. So while striving to compete with Mycroft on Mycroft’s terms had contributed to him becoming the man he was, it had also come at the cost of great self-loathing and frustration, and ultimately had been destined to fail. He was done with all of that, and it seemed that Mycroft’s mindset was changing as well.

It would take some time for equilibrium to settle, but Sherlock understood that a corner had been turned in his relationship with Mycroft. What he was feeling wasn’t manufactured indifference towards his brother or the cheap and fleeting superiority he gleaned by making a sharp comeback – it was something else, and something new. It was a genuine sense of peerage.
Said and Unsaid

Chapter Notes

This is the penultimate chapter of Sui Generis. There is one chapter after this (which is mostly complete), and then there will also be an Epilogue.

Spoiler alert: this chapter is rated M >:-)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sherlock leapt from the black cab at the entrance to Comeragh Mews in Barons Court, then strode down the cobblestones to the house number his brother had given him and rapped on its custard-yellow door. His posture was confident and his determination to find some resolution with Irene strong, but as usual with her he was out of his element; unlike with work there were no variables he could control or predict apart from his own words and actions.

Scratch that, he thought with a brief grimace. If Irene were involved he didn’t even have jurisdiction over those.

Several moments after he’d knocked, the door opened to reveal the same statuesque redhead who had admitted him into Irene’s Belgravia flat almost two years ago, and Sherlock experienced a jarring sense of déjà vu. The difference was that this time the concern on her face wasn’t an act; it was genuine and held more than a trace of wariness.

“She’s upstairs with the baby,” she said.

He gave a short nod. “May I come in?”

She hesitated a bit longer than might be considered polite, and it dawned on Sherlock that Kate’s demeanour towards him was precisely the same as John’s towards Irene. She was protective of her companion and defensive of their own arrangement, also so recently recovered after so much time apart.

“She’s upstairs with the baby,” Kate said, turning to let him in and gesture towards a small staircase on the right side of the open-plan space of the mews home. It was cosily domestic, and stepping inside made him feel the mild discomfort of an interloper.

He gave another nod, this one of thanks, and made his way towards the stairs.

“Oh, some advice though – I wouldn’t try to change her mind,” he heard from behind him, and he turned with some surprise and a small bit of annoyance.

Kate was in the doorway with keys in her hand and a coat thrown over her arm, and before he could make any sort of retort she continued, “If she asks, I went out for a few hours.”

He reached the small upstairs landing and from one of the rooms heard a low murmur followed by a loud burst of agitated noises. He came upon Irene bending over Nero, who was chewing on his
fist with a scowl on his face, clearly fighting sleep. They both turned towards Sherlock at the same
time, and Nero pulled the fist out of his mouth to stretch splayed fingers towards Sherlock with a
squawk. Sherlock could practically read his child’s mind – *A diversion!* – and despite the tension
between him and Irene, he had to let out a low chuckle at the familiarity of that.

For the moment he continue to disregard that tension, and moved towards Nero’s outstretched arm.

Nero swiped his hands across his eyes to brush away a few frustrated tears, then reached out
towards Sherlock, who pulled his son into his arms without hesitation. The baby inspected him
with a rigid posture for a moment, then heaved a deep sigh and laid his head on Sherlock’s
shoulder, causing Sherlock to swallow down emotion.

He and Irene stood in silence as Sherlock rocked slightly, and when he finally felt Nero’s weight
grow heavy he slowly laid him back down, then examined his face intently. As soon as Nero had
allowed himself to relax he’d fallen into deep unconsciousness, which it was clear he needed. A
week after his trauma there were still faint purple smudges below Nero’s eyes, but he was showing
signs of improvement.

Sherlock could’ve stared at his son for hours, but at a certain point he looked up and met Irene’s
eyes again, and she tilted her head towards the door, her expression inscrutable.

After a final glance at Nero he followed her into a room next door, a sunny upstairs parlour that
seemed to play double duty as a sitting room and a study.

“Lately it’s taken two to put him down,” she said, also ignoring the palpable strain between them to
focus on their son. “He’s never liked settling to sleep, but now it’s an outright battle.”

*Taken two.* He’d remembered how it had even before Nero’s ordeal, when he and Irene had been at
his parents’ cottage. Right before they’d… he gave those thoughts a mental flick.

But he’d been in hospital, so: “You and Kate,” he said.

“Yes.”

He had a sudden and unpleasant realisation.

“She’s going with you.”

Irene hummed in assent. “Well it *is* my fault she’s out of a job considering I shot her previous
employer point-blank in the head. Besides, it would be nice to have someone to help me with my
work – someone who’s already trained.” She said the last word with a relish that made the double-
entendre clear.

Sherlock didn’t say anything, and Irene settled into a small sofa and stared up at him with
unnerving intensity. It called to mind the time they had first faced off in her sitting room, almost
two years before in Belgravia, and his earlier sense of déjà vu increased.

To cover for his inability to come up with a response, he took a seat in the chair opposite her.

She watched him, then tilted her head to the side.

“Still jealous?” she asked, picking up the thread of conversation they’d had in his flat the day
before everything had gone to hell, when he’d noted she’d wasted no time in moving back in with
Kate.
“Should I be?”

He hadn’t answered her rhetorical question then, but now the stakes were higher, he had made his feelings for her clear, and he needed to know.

Irene continued to stare at him with unsettling focus, then leaned forward slightly.

“It’s time to decide, Sherlock, once and for all, if you’ll trust me.”

“Oh, it’s that simple.”

“Actually, yes.”

He expelled air hard through his nose. “Then can you say, ‘once and for all,’ that you’re on my side?”

“No.” She went on before he had a chance to react to that initial response: “When it comes to us I’m on our side.”

She stated it as such a fact and without guile that he couldn’t roll his eyes as he normally might. It sounded like a facile statement, but that distinction – pairing them as a unit, even after the threat was over, even after their argument the night before – struck a deep chord within him.

He stared at her for a moment, then blinked and said, “So, what, it’s you and me against the world?”

It was a knee-jerk reaction, and he internally winced. He wanted to let his guard down with her and on an intellectual level he knew he needed to, but years of shoring those kinds of defences wouldn’t allow it so easily.

To his surprise, she answered with a small smile, “That has been my general experience. Even the recent exceptions – Mary, your brother – were situational allies. I won’t make the mistake of considering them allies indefinitely, whereas you…” Her eyes drilled into his. “I didn’t say it was easy, but it is simple: I choose to trust you. You’re the only one I trust.”

Her words struck him breathless again, but he ploughed on.

“And Kate?”

“I told you, Kate is a dear friend,” Irene said. “She’s loyal, she’s resourceful and brave, and she very well might’ve saved my and Nero’s lives last week when Moran tracked us here. But she isn’t…” Irene almost seemed to say ‘you,’ but finished “…like us.”

“And yet she’s the one you’ve asked to go with you.”

Irene’s brows furrowed as she surveyed Sherlock.

“And if I asked you to come instead?”

He opened his mouth then closed it again, as Mycroft’s words What is it that you want? replayed in his mind. He hadn’t meant to imply that, but the question was more than fair.

Was he willing to follow Irene and Nero to the other side of the world? To flip the script of what he wanted from her and rebuild his life on her terms as he had expected her to for him? How much was he willing to give up of his own hard-won life?
San Francisco wasn’t exactly ‘sunny California’ like the southern parts of state were, and it was even more prone to fog than modern-day London, but he couldn’t imagine himself there. He wasn’t adaptable in the same way Irene was. He could shape-shift temporarily, but when he’d needed to assume a never-ending coterie of characters during the banishment of his Hiatus it had become unbearable. Irene could find her element almost anywhere – it was one of her survival skills. And yet just because she was better at that than him didn’t mean she should have to be the one to make that sacrifice…

“Why are you here, Sherlock?” she asked, changing tact and pulling him out of one fire only to throw him into another. Her tone was gentle rather than confrontational, but he still felt a rising sense of panic at the question.

“To tell you…”

He stumbled to a halt when his mind refused to supply him the words to explain how he felt – or indeed any words at all.

“I’ve been considering your position. I…” Again he trailed off, and he felt frustrated by his inability to communicate when he usually prided himself in his eloquence. The sensation was such common territory where Irene was concerned, yet so foreign to his life in general, that the dissonance gave him whiplash.

After an interminable moment Irene’s expression changed from tense and expectant to one she only ever directed at him.

She held out a hand, and for a moment it was suspended in the air between them looking both imperious and like a lifeline. In a dazed state Sherlock crossed the small area to the sofa, and intertwined their fingers.

She tightened her grip and pulled him towards her so that his knee went to the edge of the sofa, and his face came to a stop inches from hers. His heart started beating wildly and adrenaline coursed through him, which caused his senses to kick into high gear.

He saw the brilliant depth of her eyes as they stared into his, the faint blush of expanding capillaries along the tops of her cheekbones, and the deeper pink just inside her lips, like the lining of a seashell.

She murmured in a voice that was suddenly low and husky, “Tell me like this.”

He didn’t pause to mark the wisdom of it – he closed the distance between their mouths before she’d even stopped talking, catching her lips still half-parted.

It was the first real kiss between them in days and a very different kiss from their last one, which had been a reckless distraction from the horror of Nero’s abduction.

This time the impetus was relief, and not only because Irene was letting him off the hook with her questions. There was relief that Nero was safe, relief that they had ended the threats to him once and for all, and now relief that they had this language to express themselves with one another.

Then nothing else mattered but the feel of her mouth melding to his, and he slid both hands behind her head, twining his fingers through her loose hair to pull her closer to him.

She made an answering sound of gratified relief into his mouth, and it set the spark within him aflame. All the tension and uncertainty he felt transformed into certainty and tension of a different sort.
“Kate’s out,” he managed in the brief moments they parted to break for air. In case you were wondering.

It didn’t seem she had been.

“Oh I’m sure she knew the instant you appeared on the doorstep that I’d be having you,” Irene exhaled in a rush, and the promise sent a shock of pure arousal through him.

Irene clearly took his appearance as some sort of victory, but that didn’t matter in the moment. Besides, perhaps she should do.

He let out a low groan, then closed his eyes and thrust his tongue past her teeth. She immediately tilted her face to deepen the kiss, and the smooth, deft caress of her own tongue against his made his head swim.

He still found it remarkable how quickly she could arouse him, and it wasn’t just blood rushing to the requisite location, it was a full-body awakening to her. In his profession the total mastery of his five senses was essential, but before Irene he had only ever used those senses in the service of an objective, never for sensation’s sake. There had only been the reverse during his darkest days – the total abnegation of sensation so that he could find some peace in oblivion.

Now was as if he sensed before he actually felt her firm hands slide down his back that mould around his arse and pull him in close, as if her breathing out was indistinguishable from him breathing in, and the way their breaths came faster and faster in perfect syncopation due to all-encompassing perception of the other.

All those years of mastering his senses had never prepared him for how sensation could master him in turn.

But when she knocked him to the side and straddled his sprawled body in one perfect motion, it still came as a surprise – albeit one that immediately sent a shot of pleasurable adrenaline through him.

She rolled her hips hard against him then pressed breathy kisses along the underside of his jaw, and he threw out a hand to clutch one arm of the sofa as he choked out a broken sound that was an attempt at her name.

He reached his other hand to her hip and grasped it hard as she rocked into him again.

They were still both fully dressed, but just the act of kissing Irene felt decadent and intoxicating. Each press of their lips and entwining of tongues felt like a prize, hard-earned and hard-won.

Irene took initiative yet again as she slid her fingers to his wrist and undid one button cuff and then the other without breaking the contact of her mouth. Then she pulled away with a drawn-out bite to his lower lip, and began unfastening the row down his chest. When they were all undone she shoved the fabric apart and ran her nails hard down his chest and abdomen, making his breath seize and his muscles twitch.

She dispensed with the ritual of mutual undressing and pulled her blouse over her head, then reached behind her to unclasp her bra, though he slid his hands under the cups as they fell away so he could mould his hands around her breasts. He palmed and squeezed them then became more deliberate and precise with his touch, as he trapped her hardening buds between his fingertips, and pressed and rolled just firmly enough to elicit a moan from her.

From the corner of his eye he saw the puckered row of healing skin where Moran’s bullet had
grazed Irene’s arm, but when he moved one hand to trace a finger alongside it she gave an impatient shake of her head, then intertwined his hand with hers, and leaned down to capture his mouth again.

There was something both predatory and desperate in the way she was kissing him, and Sherlock felt himself responding in kind. If Mycroft’s plan didn’t persuade her to stay, who knew when he might have this, have her, again?

He pushed those thoughts away just as she interrupted their furious kissing to begin yanking the side-fastenings of his trousers loose, first on the left and then on the right. Then she returned to his front to unbutton the top button and yank the zipper down, and with an eagerness that fed his ego and fuelled his lust more than he’d ever admit, Irene pulled his erection free.

He took in a quick breath through his nose at the feeling of cool air on the fever-hot skin, but it was exposed for only a moment. It was as if his mere appearance at the house, and what it implied, were foreplay enough for Irene, because after whipping off her own trousers she straddled him again, then sheathed him in one slick and fluid motion.

He made a choking sound from the sudden onslaught of stimulation, but she didn’t allow him time to adjust.

Perhaps she felt the need to re-exert some sort of control after the week they’d had, because she pinned his hands between hers and the top of the sofa, and used the leverage to find a deep, controlled rhythm, all while looking him straight in the eye with a blazing expression he found exhilarating. In the bright, determined gleam of her eyes he saw the same intense and complicated emotion that he was feeling himself.

He could only clutch back onto her hands and plant his feet on the carpeted floor as she continued to stare him down, her face becoming more tense and the furrow between her brows deepening.

He wanted roam his hands across the topography of her skin, or press circles into the small pink peak he could just make out above where they were joined when he glanced down, but their intertwined fingers and her grip on the back of the sofa kept his hands as restrained as if they were tied down.

Instead he contented himself with latching his mouth over one nipple and hollowing his cheeks around it, and at that she allowed herself the first sound of pleasure since they’d joined. She stilled her torso but continued the driving swivel of her pelvis, curving her hips into his with increasingly erratic and firm motions as he sucked harder.

As the friction between them began to stir every sensitive nerve-ending in his body, he felt a growing desire to flip her onto her back and drive into her from above, but she dug her knees deeper into the cushions and her thighs were like steel around his.

She wasn’t ceding her position, and despite himself he found it impossibly arousing. A tingling ripple passed over his skin and raised the hair on his arms, and he couldn’t help but utter a groan that trailed off into a low, ragged breath. In response she first tightened her grip on his hands, then, not looking away, she clenched her internal hold on him on the retreat of his thrusts. He could only stare back up at her as if he were under a spell; her eyes kept him in place as surely as her physical hold on him.

There were signs of mounting pleasure in her face but beyond the surface she was showing him so much more, and like a switch had been flicked he believed her about everything. The trust she’d asked him to have in her took root and became certainty - that she was being sincere in everything
she’d said to him about why she needed to leave, that her intentions were precisely what she claimed they were, and that she wouldn’t disappear again, this time with their child. There was no artifice in her raw need for him, and she was consuming him as if it would sustain her when they were apart, and starved for one another. He had been deceived by her before in so many ways – but never when they were together like this.

Here there were no misunderstandings, no masks in place, and no insecurities. She understood that, which was why she’d transitioned their conversation from the spoken to the physical.

It was a bit ironic: he and Irene shared a powerful intellectual attraction and understanding, and yet something he’d set up as its antithetical – sex – had become integral and vital to him as well. It was yet another false dichotomy he was deconstructing as a result of this whole experience.

And now he would give himself to her in every way she needed to take.

Something must have shown in his eyes, because she murmured a cry and leaned down to kiss him for the first time since they joined. She did so in a bruising way that was both a plea and a command, and was the exclamation point to all that she was expressing with her body. Although he remained pinned on the sofa he strained his neck to respond to her passion with his own.

She only broke the connection of their mouths when she arched her back into her climax, and after taking a moment to look up the long column of her flushed, dewy skin he covered her chest and upper abdomen with reverent kisses.

When she went limp a few moments later he hugged her tightly to him, feeling her heart thrash in her chest like the caged bird she refused to be.

In her post-orgasmic haze he could have rolled them over, but he no longer wanted to. Looking up at her now and feeling her weight pressing down into him seemed right and fitting. And besides, he was so close to release himself that he couldn’t imagine interrupting their rhythm for even an instant.

He clenched his eyes shut and pressed his forehead into her shoulder, but moments before the tide of pleasure broke and washed over him she slid from his embrace. He let out a gasp of alarm, thinking she really did mean to punish him for his perceived lack of faith, but then she replaced her body with her hands, which were sure and strong.

“No more children,” she said, sounding as firm as her grasp on him felt.

“This method isn’t—” he choked, clamping his hand on one armrest and arching off the sofa helplessly.

“Shh,” she said, tightening her grip a bit more than was pleasurable, and his words caught in his throat.

But then she slid downwards and suddenly it was her mouth, not her hand, wrapped around his erection and doing unimaginable things, and the heat and astonishingly erotic image of it wiped all other thoughts from his mind. She had reforged eye contact and he didn’t want to break that connection, but the overwhelming new feelings made him throw his head back with a hoarse moan and clench his eyes shut. His other hand went to the back of her head and without meaning to he bucked hard, and distantly he felt her hands spread across his thighs and press him back to the sofa, but his universe’s focus had narrowed down to one singular point in his anatomy.

And then the sensation expanded outward like the shockwave of an atomic bomb, consuming and
transforming him until it felt as if every particle of his being had been discorporated by pleasure. It went on and on, almost longer than he could take, before it finally receded and left him winded, coated in sweat, and insensate.

Several moments later he came back to some awareness and collapsed lengthwise on the sofa, and Irene draped herself along his side against the backrest. Whatever thoughts he may have been having before his orgasm, his mind was now a blank of euphoria and endorphins.

He could hardly use the word ‘tender’ to describe how they’d just been together, and yet that was always his prevailing sentiment towards Irene in the afterglow – tenderness, as well as a feeling of absolute oneness with her. Now was no different.

His relaxed, blissful state was marred by the realisation that he had found this with her again just as she was about to leave him. It was a parallel to the equanimity they’d found just before they’d parted ways almost two years before, on the ship *Independent Venture* – with one marked difference.

Then, he’d felt that he could risk intimacy because he had compartmentalised who he was in those International Waters with Irene and who he was in London – where he’d return shortly and resume his ‘real’ life in which sexuality and sentiment played no part. Now, there was no boundary line between who he was in London and who he was with Irene. It had always been an artificial distinction, but it had taken the events of the past few weeks for him to understand that.

After pressing a lingering kiss to her forehead, he slid from the sofa and ambled nude across the small hall to the bathroom, and several moments later he returned with water in two of the small disposable cups he’d found stacked there.

Irene rose to a sitting position to drink deeply, and he lied alongside her so that when she was done they fitted back into their embrace.

“You must find me unrecognisable compared with who you first met in Belgravia,” he mused a minute later, and he wasn’t surprised to find his voice almost gone.

It wasn’t the act of bringing her something to drink; manners (or what his paternal grandmother had termed ‘good breeding’) had been instilled in him as a child, though he did deign to ignore them when it suited – which was usually. Instead it was prompted by his mid-coitus thoughts about the incredible implausibility of him having a ‘sex life,’ and was in reference to the animalistic side of himself he’d shown her once again. His younger self would’ve been appalled if he’d been told that not only would he have such a thing as a sex life, but that it would come to have so much importance to him. It was conditional to one person, but that would’ve been irrelevant.

“Oh, on the contrary,” Irene purred, and stretched her lithe body against his before she slung one leg over his thighs. “At least, not once you showed that you’d observed the code to my safe…”

“I do,” he murmured, not in displeasure but in some awe, and when he glanced at her he saw a humorous sparkle in her eyes and her lips twist into a closed-mouth smile.

An instant later he realised he was conceding that she’d known him better than he’d known himself. Or at least she had been the more perceptive of the two of them when it came to that. He could grant her that, given the strategy she thought would work to the best effect when they’d first met – flattery paired with constant, thinly-veiled propositioning – and where he now found himself.

Had she seen that potential simmering within him, or was it the immediate recognition of seeing one’s own reflection in another? Both?
“Are you complaining?” she asked in mock sternness, looking down as she lightly raked her nails down his chest, before turning her eyes back to his.

“No,” he said, and rolled over to pin her beneath him and kiss her.

When they parted he drew back, solemn. “No,” he repeated, his voice husky from more than his healing tracheotomy. He looked into her eyes and brushed stands of dark hair from her forehead with the back of his hand, willing her to understand everything he meant by that.

By the seriousness of her own expression as she gazed back at him, she did. She reached up to intertwine her fingers with his, then raised her chin to kiss him again. This time it was tender and gentle, and it filled him with a swell of bittersweet sentiment.

He drew back to lean on one elbow. It was time to play his only hand.

“Mycroft is conscious.”

Irene’s brows shot up. “Is he…” He saw the gears turn in her mind as she searched for a delicate way to phrase her question.

“He’s still – Mycroft.” Sherlock gave a begrudging smirk of admiration. “He took on a sniper’s bullet and came out the other side exactly the same as always.”

“So did we,” she said, pushing herself back into a sitting position. “And we took on much more than that.”

Sherlock nodded, but had they emerged unchanged? He wasn’t taking into account her bullet-grazed arm or his tracheotomy, but in more intangible yet profound ways they were not the same people they had been. He supposed the same might be said for his brother…

Sherlock fixed his gaze at a bit of irregular plaster on the opposite wall and drew in a small breath. “He’s already devised a way to protect you. And Nero.”

“Oh?” Irene’s voice was colder, but she seemed interested despite herself.

“You should know that he considers this a fait accompli,” he said, looking at her again. “Whether you choose to accept its additional benefit of protection is up to you.”

She gave a curt nod, and he began to apprise her of Mycroft’s plan: Mycroft would claim that the Moriarty syndicate had been taken down as the result of a long-term and top-secret operation. That it had been designated as strictly need-to-know due to the pervasiveness of Moriarty’s reach, and involved only Mycroft and Sherlock Holmes, and the embedded agent Irene Adler. Mycroft would report that everything she had done, including blackmailing the British government and leaking information to Jim Moriarty, had been a calculated move to gain Moriarty’s trust, and was in service of the mission. And lastly, true to Sherlock’s assertion several days before, Mycroft was going to legally restore life to The Woman, and this time she would be within the fold of his protection.

Irene’s face was impassive until he reached the part about Mycroft also taking credit for Nero’s parentage, when she made a delicate grimace that gratified Sherlock more than he’d care to admit.

“He’s committed to that?”

“I believe that’s the one thing he’s leaving up to you. Obviously it would only be necessary if you required that additional level of security…”
If you stayed.

She nodded slowly, and Sherlock asked before he lost his nerve, “Does this change anything?”

Irene’s face remained composed but he could see subtle signs of anguish beneath the surface, and the small bit of hopefulness he’d felt in spite of himself faded away.

“You can’t rely on Mycroft for protection,” he answered himself, paraphrasing her words from the same-such conversation several days before.

“No, and neither can Nero as we learned the hard way. But it’s more than that. It would just be a different kind of imprisonment – which we both know is not unintentional.”

Sherlock felt the unfamiliar urge to defend his brother. “His concern was genuine. I assure you that he finds the notion of claiming Nero as his own as distasteful as we do, and he wouldn’t have offered it if—”

“The concern might be genuine, but his plan would still allow him to keep tabs on me and contain me should he deem it necessary. You must realise that.”

At that, Sherlock’s mind couldn’t help but supply what his brother had said to him the week before: *She’ll be in the country and under our ‘protection,’ which is just as good as ‘supervision’ for our purposes.* She was correct, and of course she’d find that kind of arrangement unacceptable.

“You’re still going back, then. To California.”

“Yes.”

He had prepared himself for this response and had even found some acceptance in its eventuality, but it still cleaved him in the heart when he heard it.

“When?”

She paused, then made a thoughtful noise as if something had just occurred to her.

“Not right away, if your brother follows through on his word. Another reason I wanted to legally resurrect Irene Adler was so that I could claim and liquidate some assets I have under that name around Europe – some which Kate didn’t know about… It would help considerably with establishing myself back in San Francisco.”

She finally looked up at Sherlock. “And we’ll be here for Nero’s first birthday next month. Four weeks should be enough time to tie off loose ends…”

Sherlock swallowed down the hard knot that had formed in his throat, and nodded once.

The rational part of his mind – that part which normally reigned over his every thought process like a tyrant – knew Irene hadn’t intended to imply that he was one such lose end. But where Irene was concerned that dictator had been deposed the moment they’d met.

She saw the shift in his expression and turned lean over and kiss him.

“I didn’t mean you,” she murmured against his mouth with a blend of tenderness and chiding.

Then she tilted her head back and peered down her nose at him with a pointed smile. “Although the tying up part could certainly be arranged.”
He lifted his head to recapture her lips and found that he already wanted her again – and not because of her remark, though it didn’t hurt. But she didn’t need ropes or bondage equipment to have him under her control, as she’d shown just several minutes before; in fact, she didn’t need to touch him at all to achieve that.

He wanted her again because although he’d trust that they could and would pick up again where they were leaving off– after all, hadn’t they just overcome so much to do precisely that, albeit two years later? – she was here now, in this moment. She was looking at him in a way he’d try to reproduce in his Mind Palace when they were apart but would never quite manage, and she was warm and slick with perspiration against him. He could feel even greater heat radiating from her centre where she’d slung a leg around his thighs in the narrow confines of the sofa.

First he would have her on her back as he’d envisioned, with one revision: it was his turn to have her under his mouth. He turned over and began to kiss his way down her body, as his fingers slid between her legs.

If they were to be an ocean and continent apart, it wasn’t just the inimitable way she looked at him that he’d want to have imprinted in his mind…

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! Any comments you might have are really cherished by this author :)
The End, The Beginning

Chapter Notes

I'm back with the final chapter of Sui Generis! I thought this day would never come, lol.

Please note that this chapter does end with a bang :P If that's not your thing you can close out of it when things get started and you won't be missing anything too plot-related.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Irene Adler thanked the taxi driver in a language she could speak conversationally, and after he set down her bags and the collapsed buggy on the gravel road where she and Nero had been let off, she turned to survey the sight before her.

She hadn't been in this place in three years, and it had never been a home to her, merely an investment, but the small villa and spare but beautiful land around it were familiar and filled her with bittersweet nostalgia.

She allowed herself to indulge in that for just a moment, and recalled the life she'd been living when she'd last stood on this spot. It had been two years before she'd met Sherlock, and before she'd even met James Moriarty, but she had already been compiling intelligence and data on her clients and strategizing what to do with it. She had been standing on the precipice in that moment, she just hadn't known it. Quite the opposite – she'd believed she was on the verge of real power. Thinking back on whom she'd been then was strange and dizzying, and she both envied and pitied that younger woman.

She had bought the stone and red-roofed home and its surrounding parcels of land as her star and wealth had been rising back in 2008. It had been upon the advice of a client who was the senior executive of the resort group developing an extremely exclusive hotel on the Adriatic islet of Sveti Stefan, and although she hadn't deemed him important enough to collect data on him, he had certainly proved financially useful beyond the client-domme relationship.

Through a UK-based agent that specialised in the Balkans Irene had procured the small villa on a hill just before the resort's opening in 2009, and she had seen her equity skyrocket since then. While the property was in the name of Irene Adler, she'd kept it hidden from her financial manager and separate from her other assets and so it had been unknown to Kate. It had been a financial precaution at the time, but when she'd been forced to go on the run and had left everything to Kate she hadn't let her know about this place. In retrospect Irene understood that a part of her had hoped that one day she could return, and in that case she'd have at least one asset left to her name.

The purpose of her previous visit had been to inspect the completed refurbishment and landscaping that she'd arranged after the purchase, and on that same trip she'd hired a property management company to let it out as a short-term vacation rental, and had set up a bank account for that purpose alone. The company deposited rent and subtracted its commission along with the costs of any repairs, and since she never made any withdrawals the arrangement was its own self-contained and sustainable ecosystem.
When she'd been forced to leave San Francisco the year before, she had briefly considered running here instead of assuming her given name and going back to Edison, New Jersey. In the very next moment she'd realised that that was impossible. The people who had been after her would've monitored any and all assets under her former name, and it would be as good as broadcasting her location if she accessed the account or the property, or amended it by taking it off the rental market.

But now that Irene Adler was going to be legally resurrected and under the protection of The British Government, perhaps 'Irene Adler's' last act could be to liquidate this final asset and start completely afresh – with the exception of Sherlock, of course. Always with the exception of Sherlock.

Irene hoisted Nero farther up her hip and grasped the handle of the roller suitcase, then moved towards the gate, which opened into a small pergola that canopied the walkway to the home.

The motion disturbed a brown lizard with an iridescent green back that had been sunning itself on the stone wall in front of them, and it darted down the side of the wall to Nero's immediate fascination and delight. He'd never seen a lizard before and he crowed and wiggled in her arms to get a better look, but when she took another step towards it, it shot into a crevice. Nero still insisted on getting down, and he braced his hands on the side of the wall and bent his entire body at an angle to peer into the gap between stones. He caught sight of it and made another excited cry and turned to her with wide eyes and a gummy grin, then dropped into a squat for a better view. Irene couldn't help but smile fondly at his fascination, and then took a deep breath of the warm, dry air that held a hint of the sea that was less than a mile away. The trip had been short but gruelling and so she was content to savour a moment of peace, but moreover this was the first time Nero had actively wanted to leave of the refuge of her arms since his abduction. She would certainly encourage it.

The lizard remained stock-still in its bolthole and after several moments Nero grew bored, and with one hand still on the wall turned on wobbly legs towards Irene. For a moment her heart leapt as she saw him eying the space between them as if to gauge whether to attempt a step, but then he dropped to his knees and crawled on the sandy soil towards her. Once he reached her he grasped the top of her foot and then looked up into her face with a sunny, expectant smile.

She smiled back at him, wide and genuine, and he hauled himself to his feet by her leg then raised his arms, and she bent to gather him up and press her lips into his cheek to the sound of his giggles. She hadn't heard that sound for far too long.

Suddenly her smile fell away and she clutched on to him as her heart started pounding hard in her chest. Standing there in the sunshine, under a bright blue sky with a gentle sea breeze tousling her hair, no sound around them but birds and the faint rustling of leaves, it struck her in a way it hadn't done in the previous week since the incident. Nero was safe. It was over.

She almost sagged at the weight of that, and she let out a low, shaky breath. Nero leaned back and placed a hand on her cheek, studying her with a small, familiar dent between his brows.

She put back on a smile.

"Shall we go inside, my darling?" she asked brightly, and a new smile replaced his look of concern.

Shifting him to one side, though he was growing a bit too heavy for that, she clutched the handle of the suitcase and walked towards the entrance.

Odd, it felt like coming home.
Later that night, after Nero had been fed and put to bed, Irene went out onto her terrace just as the lights along the coast were coming on in the thickening dusk. Beyond the hem of bright points was the sea, where only a few faint streaks of turquoise remained visible.

The thought of Nero with the lizard earlier that day popped into her head and she laughed to herself, then took a sip of chilled pinot grigio she'd poured from the bottle the property management company always stocked for guests. Her smile faded as thought of the lizard itself, in its own domain yet retreated into a shadowed crevice, alertly waiting for the presumed danger to leave before it could re-emerge and resume its routine.

That had been her, in the hospital waiting room as she'd waited for Sherlock to come out of surgery. In the aftermath of their ordeal and in her exhaustion only her reptilian brain had remained alert, and so she'd been reduced to her barest instincts and reactions. The terror she'd experienced for her child compounded with the panic that she would lose Sherlock had exaggerated her most personal and secret fears. Of inadequacy. Of irrelevance. Of all her successes and thrills being in her past. Of boredom. And perhaps worst of all, of complacency turning into resentment and destroying the fragile bond between she and Sherlock.

But perhaps what she had with Sherlock wasn't so fragile, she thought now. Perhaps Irene wasn't as fragile as she secretly feared. Her strength had been tested again and again, and she had survived. More than that, she had won.

Mycroft had told Sherlock that he would be reframing everything related to Moriarty as one long-term operation – over which he'd had complete control the entire time, of course – and she supposed there was some accidental veracity to it being one long game. There had been some setbacks along the way, and it hadn't happened in the way she'd planned or anticipated, but Irene had emerged through it victorious – and richer in ways she'd never imagined.

But speaking of Sherlock… at the thought of him her mind drifted to two days before when she'd had him on the sofa of Kate's spare room back in London, and her stomach did a pleasurable flip as a flush crept across her skin and warmed her in the breeze. The memory made her feel light-headed in a way the wine hadn't, though she took a reflexive sip.

It had been exciting, and not just because they were shagging on someone else's sofa in someone else's house and could be interrupted at any moment. As much as Irene was without false modesty or shame about nakedness, she wasn't quite an exhibitionist. When she'd first appeared in the nude before Sherlock that hadn't been to flaunt her figure so much as it had been to deprive him of usable data, and confound expectations so that he'd become wrong-footed from the outset and cede her the advantage. Still, being so indiscreet hadn't exactly lessened the thrill of it, either… A smile sharpened one corner of her mouth.

But that had just been superficial. The real thrill had been having Sherlock submit to her in the way he had.

She liked that he typically challenged her in bed. As in every other interaction between them there was unspoken competition that elevated both of them and rewarded both of them in turn. But after everything she'd been through she had needed to centre herself and had needed to exert control, and he had let her. The need had been more to channel the power and authority of that self for her own self-assurance than any need to show dominance over Sherlock. He was the vessel through which she could explore that, because she trusted him and felt grounded through him. And he had understood, and had let her. He hadn't tried to fight her on it, he had steadied her and ridden it out with her - so to speak, she thought as the small smile grew.

He hadn't revealed any weakness in ceding to her that way – he'd shown his strength. He was
secure enough in their relationship that he could give her what she'd needed to take in that moment to feel anchored. That alone proved that he wasn't the fragile man she'd found when she'd first returned, either.

She took another sip of the wine and set it down, then grasped the balcony railing with both handles and closed her eyes, breathing in the salt-scented air.

Once again she found herself at a railing facing some vast expanse of water at a pivotal point in her life.

Previously there was the moment on the deck of the ship the Independent Venture, shortly before she and Sherlock had conceived their son. Then there was the time she'd stood on her balcony overlooking the San Francisco Bay as the proof of that conception – a positive pregnancy test – had dangled from her hands.

Once she'd had Sherlock by her side and once she had been alone, but both times she'd had a decision to make, one that would define her entire future – and they'd been decisions that had led her to this point now.

For a moment a sense of vertigo overtook her, but she didn't step away from the edge. Her grip on the railing tightened a bit and she took in a short breath as a sense of determination steeled her.

She regretted neither of the decisions she'd made in these previous moments. They had brought seemingly insurmountable challenges and yet she'd dealt with them all and she'd emerged stronger and better for it. A tingling sense of intuition told her she was on the verge of a paradigm shift now as well, although she couldn't see how a move back to San Francisco would lead to that.

She reached behind her and picked up the glass of wine again, which was beginning to condense in the balmy evening air. After taking a sip – it still tasted wonderful – she decided not to jet off to San Francisco immediately, but to allot herself the weeks up until Nero's first birthday to clear her mind. She would begin to plan her move before then, but she would give herself a period of time to reset before doing even that. Thanks to the tidy sum that had accumulated in the account from the rental of the villa in the past several years, and the relatively inexpensive cost of living here, she could afford to take her time. Even if she lived well, though not lavishly, she could afford it for another year at least.

As the sky darkened to black, Irene noticed stars begin to appear overhead, and she tilted her head back to see if she could recognise any constellations. Almost at once she spotted Cassiopeia. She had been enthralled with ancient mythology as a girl, and still remembered the tale. Cassiopeia had been a queen exiled into the stars by one of the gods as punishment for her vanity – and yet, Irene mused, Cassiopeia had been elevated and immortalized, placed in a position that humanity would look up to admire for all time. What more could such a woman want?

A wry, not-quite smile touched her lips and she reached once again for her wine.

What, indeed?

At one point Irene had aspired to be distant and untouchable as well. In fact, one of her cardinal rules as a dominatrix had been that clients literally could not initiate physical contact with her.

But now? she thought, as a small frown appeared between her brows. By moving halfway across the world, was she acting out the ambitions of the woman she had been, The Woman who did want to be admired but never accessible, seen but never known? Would getting her way now actually be
more like the punishment it had been intended as for Cassiopeia?

Distance was important to a degree, she reasoned. Even conventional couples needed some healthy boundaries, and as a non-conventional couple (yes, they were a couple, she thought with some amazement, but no attendant recoil) perhaps they needed more than the usual allotment. One of the five 'love languages' people used to express sentiment was spending quality time with one another, and Irene thought it certainly applied to them – as in quality, not quantity.

She was also finding that this small distance from London, and from Sherlock himself, was helping her to find some perspective now. Sherlock hadn't done anything wrong; if anything he had made it clear that he would accept her in any way and on any terms she would let him have her. It was just that in his proximity, her sentiment and her fears had been like atmospheric interference that disturbed the sensors and processes of her instruments, whereas here she felt much more capable of thinking through things without distraction.

But the distance that she would be introducing by moving back to San Francisco was far greater than the breathing room they needed, and despite what Sherlock might think, she wasn't unaware of how that distance would effectively deprive him of his son – and deprive Nero of Sherlock.

She hadn't had family since she was a girl, even such as that was, and she never thought she would again. It hadn't troubled her. She had been alone by choice, and being solitary had suited her in every way. Her life was hers, diligently crafted and curated for her enjoyment, and her finances were subject only to her discretion. Children had been such an abject impossibility that she had never given thought to it, barring the occasional wince at the sound of babies screaming in her vicinity, and being grateful that she wasn't subjected to that on a regular basis. And yet when that solitary life had crumbled, the cracks left behind had created spaces for new priorities, sentiments, and values to take root. By chance and (more astonishingly) choice alike she had made and kept this child, and had created a family of sorts.

Where am I going with this? Irene wondered with a start, derailing her own train of thought. These were things her mind was becoming too wine-saturated to contemplate, and with one last glance at the sea - this time it would not bear witness to any life-changing decisions, she thought – she plucked up her glass and turned back into the house.

The following morning Irene was awoken by a dose of adrenaline pumping through her, and it took another split second for her to gain her bearings and realise that it was because the villa's doorbell had sounded. At once all thoughts of being safe vanished as experience-honed instinct took over. She leapt from bed and shoved her feet in the shoes beside it with the intention of grabbing Nero and escaping through the back door and then down the hill through the scrubby bush, but then she glimpsed the DHL van parked on the road through her side window, and it snapped her back into some sense.

Still wary, she opened the door only a sliver and held a kitchen knife in the hand concealed behind it, but the courier simply handed her a light parcel and turned back towards the walkway.

As soon as the cardstock envelope cleared the door Irene slammed and re-locked it, then glanced down at it. It was addressed to Irene Adler.

With her heart pounding in her throat she inspected the outside of it for several minutes, then tracked down a pair of leather gloves before she cautiously opened it. Only one thing slipped out: a flat, dark burgundy item that she recognised immediately. A passport.

At once it was clear: of course Mycroft Holmes had determined her location, had had a passport manufactured, and had had it delivered all within one day – and all presumably from hospital.
She flipped it open and some of the tension left her as she let out a laugh at what she saw. The photo was the booking picture she'd taken a little over a week before when she'd been arrested and taken to HMP Bronzefield, altered a bit so that it wasn't clearly a mugshot. Despite the subtle pettiness of Mycroft using the shot of her as a 'criminal' in a newly-legitimate passport for Irene Adler – or perhaps because of it – the selection struck Irene as rather amusing.

A moment later her smile faded as she considered that this was the very final step in bringing this entire ordeal to a close. She now had the means to sell this property and secure the life she intended back in San Francisco.

It also meant that time was also a luxury she could now afford, and it reaffirmed her decision to let Nero rest and recuperate in this peaceful place before being uprooted yet again.

As the days went by, it became clear that she'd made the right choice, at least for the time-being.

In the immediate aftermath of his abduction her son had been delicate and irritable, had only wanted to huddle in her arms and had gone into hysterics if she set him down. He'd constantly battled sleep so that he was exhausted in addition to everything else. After the immediate relief of having him back had abated, she'd started to worry about what lasting effects the trauma would have on his developing mind. After all, she and Sherlock didn't know what he'd experienced in the day and a half that he'd been away from them.

But here in this unincorporated area just south of the Montenegrin town of Budva he was returning to being the baby she'd known, and in fact he was blossoming in a way that he hadn't before. In part it was his age – at just shy of one year he was hitting major milestones almost every day – but she recognised that there was something else at play.

The day after their arrival Irene took Nero to the beach down the hill and below the cliff from their home, and it was made of brown pebbles rather than sand but the water was shallow, gentle, and clear. They'd left San Francisco shortly after Nero's birth, so he had never been in a body of water larger than a bathtub, and he took to it immediately.

She stood hip-deep in the Adriatic and dipped him into the water up to his waist then propelled him upwards again, then back in again, over and over again. He squealed with joy and smacked his hands against the surface of the water to make it splash, and the droplets sent fractals of light dancing across his face and Irene's hands and arms. Despite the occasional twinge in her healing arm Irene found herself laughing along with him, and it was an unbridled and releasing sensation that was totally foreign, but not unwelcome. Before, her satisfaction had always been predicated on the success of complex schemes and strategic calculations. Such things would undoubtedly still bring her pleasure, but the criteria of what could make her happy had expanded so that she could also find it in simple moments like this with her son.

Irene had not changed at a fundamental level. She was contemptful of the thought that becoming a mother intrinsically improved or elevated one's life, or fundamentally changed a person. In fact, as she'd already come to understand motherhood had only amplified certain aspects of her personality, to include Nero (and to a degree his father) in her self-interest. She was also still the same woman who would need unconventional challenges to be fulfilled, and yet… It was also true that previously unknown facets of that self could be uncovered like foundations buried in shifting sands.

When Nero and Irene ventured into town on the third day Irene felt unnerved and watchful at first, and saw first-hand the way her mood affected her child. Or perhaps Nero was already feeling that way himself with so many people and buildings closing in around him. Budva, with its low sand-coloured buildings and terracotta-tiled roofs, flowerboxes, and golden Adriatic light was another
world from London and yet similar enough for even a small child to make an association.

They didn't stay for long – Irene bought groceries and some essential toiletries – though by the time they left she already sensed herself relaxing as the only looks they got were friendly smiles, and the only interactions were from passers-by who praised Nero's eyes or long dark eyelashes, or his general sweetness. She would never lose a sense of watchfulness – it had been native in her long before she'd become a parent – but this place seemed so different and remote from her previous lives that she felt inconspicuous for the first time in years. Even better, Nero had seemed to be calming down.

The passport remained on her kitchen island, a rectangle the same shade of the blood she'd literally and metaphorically shed to earn it back. It drew and then immediately repelled her gaze each time she was in the same room as it, and something about it started to niggle at her mind.

It was all she needed to initiate the life she had envisioned for Nero and herself, and yet day after day passed without her contacting a realtor, or browsing apartment listings in San Francisco. She'd given herself until Nero's birthday to leave this place – they would return to London and from there they'd fly back to the states – but that date fast approaching and she would need to make certain preparations before then.

She didn't.

Still, as the days went by she also began to grow lonely in a way she hadn't been before. At first she thought that she should call Kate to come help earlier than planned, but it didn't take long to realise that it was specifically Sherlock she missed. When Nero did something particularly clever or funny she wanted to share a look with the one who had created this extraordinary little person with her. When she was spooked she wanted to find fortifying eye contact with him. When she was alone in the large bed, in the dark, she merely wanted him. She had only had him as a partner for a short time, and a partner in parenthood even more briefly, but she felt his absence like a physical ache. The certainty she had felt about moving back to San Francisco, a conviction so strong the week before that she'd needed to partly break Sherlock's heart in order to secure that life, began to waver.

She was watching another nightfall from her balcony on the fifth day since they'd arrived, enjoying the last of the bottle of wine she'd opened the first night, when she began to seriously reconsider that decision.

There was still no question of her returning to London. She would not live within the immediate sphere of Mycroft Holmes's influence; also there was still residual danger for her there, and she couldn't allow her relationship with Sherlock to risk stagnation – but her earlier doubts about being so far away began to resurface. Nero had the right to have a relationship with his father, of course, though his father would be willing to travel to California. But he also had the right to know his grandparents and his uncle, and basic logistics would make that difficult if they were a continent and an ocean apart. This past month had affirmed her confidence in her own strength, but strength and detachment were not the same thing.

Nero seemed to be thriving in Montenegro, and though it was not geographically far from London, it seemed to be outside of Mycroft's primary jurisdiction. If his influence did exist here it wouldn't be oppressive, and she and Sherlock could live their own lives whilst being only a short flight away from one another.

There was one glaring problem, however. What could such an idyllic and rural place offer her?

She could probably manage a decent living catering to the global elites that came to stay at the nearby resort, and perhaps she could diversify her income by establishing a small vineyard on her
property, but it might not be enough for her to be satisfied.

But would a similar lifestyle in San Francisco be enough for her, either? After all, in London she had grown bored with her career and had needed to find her thrills through ever-escalating means, and San Francisco was neither as cosmopolitan nor as international a city as London. It would certainly be easy to recapture a certain type of lifestyle, but was that lifestyle something she even wanted anymore? Securing Nero's safety had been the driving factor for all that they'd done, but wasn't this also an opportunity to reconstruct a life that she found fulfilling?

Returning to San Francisco was the safe and sure bet. Within the context of her life it would be conventional, and while that could be fine for Nero, what about Irene?

Was it even possible to find something that could suit both her and her child?

On the first day of their second week in Montenegro the resolution to her dilemma came to her, fully-formed and with absolute clarity. It was so neat in resolving the three issues of distance from Sherlock and his family, personal fulfilment, and safety for Nero with which she'd been grappling that she could only laugh at the absurdity of it having taken so long to occur to her. But as soon as the laughter subsided, a keen excitement took ahold of her at the prospect of it.

She phoned Sherlock for the first time since she'd left London, and he answered him immediately. She asked him to come. She was cryptic but firm, and she could tell was unable to get a proper read of her tone, but for all the show he made about having a case, in the end it was easy to get him to agree. As Irene had suspected, the dual demands of sentiment and curiosity would be impossible for him to resist.

When he arrived that evening she thought how incongruous yet welcome he looked in the doorway of her Montenegrin home. He wasn't wearing his omnipresent heavy wool coat, but he still had on a dark fitted jacket, and it made quite the contrast against the wild tumble of rocky hillside behind him, though the gleam of blue-green sea in the twilight beyond set off his eyes in the most striking way.

It didn't seem like only eight days had passed since she'd last seen him; his unique handsomeness dazzled her even more than the orange light of the setting sun that cast an aura around his silhouette.

Meanwhile he was eyeing her in turn, his expression neutral but his eyes hungry for her.

Before they spoke a word she stepped to the edge of the low single stair at the threshold and greeted him with a thorough kiss. She wanted to establish physical contact and banish any doubts he might have about how she felt about him after the week-long separation.

He immediately lost some of the formality in his posture and wrapped his arms around her waist, and lifted one hand to span her upper back across her back and pull her in even closer, and not for the first time she marvelled at the perfect way their mouths fit and moved together.

She finally drew away, her lips tingling and her heart pounding, then slowly broke eye contact to turn and lead him inside.

His breathing sounded slightly uneven behind her as they made their way into the house, and she couldn't help but smile to herself in pleased satisfaction at that. There were few things she enjoyed more than being the undoing of Sherlock, and she wished she could do more to unravel him – the kiss was just the beginning of what she'd like to do to – but that would have to wait for the timebeing.
By the time they reached her living room he had managed to assume his former composure, and he was casting an analytical eye across everything within sight but didn't comment, and she gestured for him to have a seat in an armchair before she served them both a local herbal tea.

"Nero?" he asked as soon as she had settled into the chair adjacent to him.

"Already asleep, I'm afraid."

Sherlock nodded, and she could tell he was disappointed but he immediately switched gears.

"So what is it? Despite your greeting at the door I assume you called me here for more than an international assignation."

She smiled a little at his phrasing, but then lifted her chin.

"What if I didn't?" she asked, feigning seriousness.

He went still, and she watched with amused affection as his face began to flush and he racked his brain for a response, but then she relented.

"No, you're right. As much as I think an 'international assignation' might be reason enough, that's not why I called you. Well, at least not that alone…"

She paused for a moment and took stock of his expression in order to track how it might change in the next moment, then said: "I won't be returning to the United States – San Francisco or elsewhere."

The cup he was holding paused halfway up to his lips, before he set it down slightly too sharply in its saucer.

"Are you coming ba—?"

"No."

He tilted his head in a casual motion, but every muscle in his body was taut as he waited for her to elaborate.

"I'm staying here."

His brow furrowed. "Here…" he repeated, as if the concept were so unfathomable that it couldn't even compute.

"Yes," she said.

In retrospect she'd made a life-altering decision her first night here after all, when she'd been looking out over the sea with a glass of wine in her hand. That had been when she'd decided to stay, though at that point it was supposed to have been for just a short time…

Sherlock stared at her for another moment before his face took on an expression that was part-grimace, part-sneer.

"Coming from the airport I saw more goats than people. Why would a woman like you ever want to stay in a place like this? For holiday, perhaps" —he said 'holiday' with all the scorn she would expect— "but surely not on a permanent basis."

"Nero likes it."
He made a scoffing sound, then said, "Being willing to murder me for our son is one thing, Irene, but surely you have some limits."

Irene laughed at that, and ran a hand through her hair. These days she always wore it loose and in waves; the sea-salt air agreed with it.

"I'm planting a vineyard," she said. "I had the soil tested years ago when I first bought the place, and it's perfectly suited to it. It's an emerging market here and I've always been interested. As you'll recall I was a part-owner of one in South America – it's how I let you locate me when I went on the run after you guessed my passcode."

He didn't react; he just stared at her expectantly with the fingers of one hand bracketed against the side of his face. He knew her all too well. A flickering sensation grew in the pit of her stomach, from both sentiment and anticipation...

"Oh, and going to work for Mycroft."

Again his face went slack as he stared at her in absolute bemusement. She gazed back with perfect equanimity, but her heart was pounding even harder than when she'd pulled away from their kiss at the door.

"I'm… sorry?" he finally managed, incomprehension becoming horror at what she might be implying.

"Good Lord, Sherlock, not like that," she said with another laugh. "According to Mycroft's public version of events I was an agent working for him this entire time. I'd merely be giving legitimacy to that story." She pronounced the word 'legitimacy' with slow relish and an ironic gleam in her eye.

He continued to stare at her for a long moment, before his eyes cleared and he snapped, "You won't even live in the same country as Mycroft – how would you tolerate him as your handler?"

"Mycroft's not your handler, he's your dealer," Irene pointed out.

"I ignore him the majority of the time."

"Right, you only take the jobs you find interesting. So would I. It would always be on my terms – of course," she added with a chiding look.

Irene watched him start to say "It's too dangerous" and was ready to pounce on that, but he wisely held back and her smirk shifted into a sharp smile.

He narrowed his eyes, and she could tell that he was starting to consider it. He was contrary by nature, but the logic of this was beginning to sink in.

"If a 'consulting spy' is good enough for John Watson…" she murmured, and Sherlock's eyes snapped back onto hers. That did it, she noted with satisfaction.

"Consulting spy," he repeated, and her smile widened to a grin.

"Too bad it's not the sort of thing you'd print on a business card," she said. "It has a nice ring to it, don't you think?"

"And Montenegro would be your home-base."

"Yes. It's perfect, really. My stances on Mycroft and London haven't changed, but Montenegro is
just far enough away without being on the other side of the world. And a vineyard provides cover for travel under the guise of research or networking, since practically every country in the world grows – and being a winemaker can get you into all sorts of echelons of society… Besides, Nero really does like it."

"And Kate?"

Irene had to mentally laugh at that. Of all things for him to bring up. The question was asked under the guise of thoroughness, but it was clear the man was still implausibly jealous of her former assistant-with-benefits.

"You're the first one I'm telling."

He seemed mildly appeased by that, but not assuaged - his eyes continued to bore into hers.

"Oh I'm sure she'll still come," Irene said with a slight wave of her hand. "She can watch Nero when I'm away, help run the front end of the wine-growing – and the back-end of my real job."

"If I'm the first one you're telling, how do you know Mycroft will agree?"

She only returned his look and raised an eyebrow, and after a moment he conceded by glancing away.

She imagined Mycroft would be more than eager to have even the formality of oversight over her, not to mention he'd be an idiot to dismiss her as a resource – and Mycroft Holmes was decidedly not an idiot. Besides, when she'd turned up alive it had transformed his previous story into a lie. Now she'd be turning his lies into truth. Well, some form of it anyway, which was close enough for people such as them in matters such as these.

Sherlock leaned back in the armchair and let out a long, slow sigh through his nose.

"Problem?" she asked.

She watched his face as countless questions and concerns occurred to him before he identified and then accepted her counter-argument to each one in turn, and then his expression smoothed and he looked at her.

"Not at all. It suits you." She thought she could even detect pleasure beneath the neutral expression (that she had found her milieu again? That she and Nero would be closer to him?), and this time Irene's smile was sincere.

“It’s still far away that you have an out,” she said with a laugh in her voice, but they both knew that she was being serious - she was offering him one last chance for reprieve.

“I don’t want an ‘out’, Irene,” he said, continuing to look her in the eyes.

“Careful, you’ll get the girl with talk like that,” her words still teasing but her voice serious, and a bit breathless.

“Oh?”

She raised her eyebrows and tilted her chin, never breaking eye contact. He didn’t either.

“Good.”

“Don’t say anything you don’t mean,” she said, sharper than she’d meant to.
“Never.”

She believed him, and her chest filled with sudden emotion. He might not always express things he did feel, at least in words, but he wouldn’t flatter her with insincerities.

“What’s a few hundred miles compared with what we’ve already contended with?” he added.

They sat in weighted silence for a moment, then she said, "You know what this means."

He considered her statement but seemed to draw a blank – or more likely there were simply too many implications and he didn't know which she considered the most relevant.

She leaned forward on her elbow to purr, "We could work together again…"

Sherlock made a thoughtful, amused sound, then said, "And presumably on the same side. Though when it comes to you one never can be sure… Nor Mycroft, for that matter.” His tone was deadpan but she saw humour glinting in his eyes now.

The edges of her mouth curved into points, and a moment later the quality of their eye contact changed. Her heart-rate began to pick up again, and his pupils began to swell to eclipse his irises. Apparently she wasn't the only one aroused at the prospect, she thought as her gaze dropped to his lips.

She slid down in front of him in a half-instinctive, half-intentional move that was sure to evoke all sorts of emotionally-conflicted memories. She wanted to erase the unpleasant connotation of that night and recondition this gesture to stand for something unreservedly positive. Reconditioning had been somewhat of a speciality of hers– it wasn't uncommon for clients turn to her to help him quit cigarettes or gambling, for instance – but this would be far more complex, since it was personal. As Sherlock had said later that night, this was her heart.

"I told you before…” she murmured up at him, the 'I'm on our side' unspoken but tacit, and she took his hand deliberately in hers as she looked into the depth of his eyes. He understood, and turned his hand so that it was cupping hers and his fingertips were lightly pressed into the underside of her wrist.

It had been a bit of a risk to speak like that to Sherlock back at Kate's, but she had thought her frank sincerity might compensate for any potential cliché. She'd meant the words, and it was important to her that Sherlock heard them.

Once again he was taking her pulse, detecting if she were telling the truth about that, about there being a 'their side.' It wasn't because he didn't trust her, though; it had become their private shorthand for communicating their sentiment.

That night when they'd last been entwined in this position, he'd had no reason in the world to distrust her either – about anything case-related or in general. She had played him perfectly because, in fact, it turned out she hadn't been playing at all. No, he had been taking her pulse for purely sentimental reasons, to confirm to himself that what she seemed to be feeling for him was genuine.

He had relied on those involuntary things that were beyond even her control and manipulation – the escalation of her pulse, the dilation of her pupils – to assure himself that what he was sensing from her wasn't part of some greater plan, and he had found that assurance.

Regardless of what had come later – her betrayal that followed within the hour, his vindictive abandonment of her to her death – her sentiment had been real.
And yet what a grossly inadequate word sentiment was for what she felt for him, and what he felt for her.

She had already thought it, and now she felt herself radiating with the notion of it, and the feeling was so overwhelming that she felt like she could barely contain it within her skin, or hold the words behind her teeth. She was in love with him.

They didn't speak like that though, and even love didn't capture the fullness and complexity of what it was she felt for him. Saying what she had said – she was on their side, always - encompassed so much more. It had laid her as bare and had been just as exhilarating to say to him as it might be for someone else to declare 'I love you.'

"Stay," she said now.

He stared at her, and she watched in rapt fondness as his brain stuttered at the request.

"The night," she laughed, coming to his rescue after his bewilderment went on a moment too long. She laced her fingers with his and brought his hand up brush a kiss along his knuckles.

"I haven't come all this way to just turn around again," he said in a reprimanding tone as his eyes honed back on hers again. His voice was a significantly lower register than it had been moments before, and his eyes were dark.

Both the comfort he had with implying that of course he would be staying at least that long, and the timbre of his voice made her stomach fill with warm anticipation, and without thinking or hesitating she did what she had wanted to do but hadn't had the chance to on that night two years ago.

At the same moment she rose from her knees, he leaned forward at the waist, and their mouths came together in a surge of warmth that unleashed a torrent of dopamine and adrenaline through her, and left her light-headed.

She thought he might haul her up onto the chair – he seemed to like her that way given his enthusiasm back at Kate's on the other woman's sofa – but she decided to do something different, and she coaxed him down to the floor with her.

He slid first to one knee then the other with such grace that she felt a growl of lust rise in her chest, and as soon as both met the carpet he raised his hands to cradle her face, and his fingers entwined through her hair as he pulled her mouth closer to hers.

Several moments later he wrenched away as if waking from a fever dream, and stared at her with dark eyes that were somehow both dazed and intent.

She looked back just as avidly, and after a brief eternity, he made a sound low in his throat and drew her face to his once more.

She sensed in him just as much a need to rewrite the outcome of that night as she'd felt herself, as he kissed her with more desperation than their separation warranted.

All the residual unfulfilled desires from that night and the longing she'd felt for him in the past week, she put into the embrace without filter or inhibition, as her lips curved against his and the tip of her tongue curled around his.

The room lacked the ambiance of the fire that had been crackling in his living-room hearth that night, but they created their own heat as the kiss grew in intensity and passion. She folded her arms
around his neck and enclosed them inside a small haven as she lost herself in the textures and sensations of the moment.

After several minutes of ravenous kissing, she tilted her head back so that her hair tumbled down her shoulders, and he immediately bent to her throat and moved his lips downward in worshipful caresses, as if brushing the calligraphy of a love letter into her skin. He might not ever express himself that way in words, but he had no difficulty in communicating his feelings through this, and she far preferred it.

The catharsis of revising that night was liberating, and tensions that she'd been holding for almost two years began to ebb away. Regrets about it were being replaced by acceptance and even wry appreciation. If they had done this then, as she had wanted in that moment against all her better judgments and the vague alarms sounding in her head, the cut of Irene's betrayal perhaps would've been too deep for even Sherlock's feelings for her to overcome.

Irene might even be dead now, decapitated by a scimitar blade 21 months before.

Because there still would have been betrayal. There had been so many times she could've turned back, and several times she had even considered how to extricate herself from the predicament of her own making, but by that point it had been far too late. Because of the involvement of Moriarty, she was just as much a prisoner to the consequences of her previous decisions prior to her treachery as she was after it.

Despite the awfulness of that night, in retrospect the precise way in it had unravelled had been necessary to bring her – them – to this point. It had also directly led to the conception of Nero. And she thought he realised that too, as his fingers flexed against her lower back and he continued to bend his head so that the tops of his curls skimmed her face.

His lips reached the base of her throat and then trailed hot gusts down her chest until he arrived at material. He lifted his hands to yank the matte silk camisole she wore free from her linen trousers, and slid those long fingers up her bare back, making her shiver against him. With one last kiss to the top of her collarbone he curved his back to nuzzle between her breasts, then moved his head to gently bite down on one raised peak through the silk. The sensation seemed to be amplified by the fabric and he applied even more pressure until it hovered on the threshold of pain, drawing a moan from her. Just before the exquisite feeling turned he switched to her other breast, but raised one hand to roll the bead of flesh he'd just released, while with the other hand he yanked her closer to him at the waist.

The low-frequency desire for Sherlock that was ever-present these days, like the bass hum of nearby electrical wires, switched to high-frequency need, and every nerve-ending in her body tingled and buzzed with it.

When he did slide one hand under the waistband of her trousers and she canted her hips slightly to accommodate him he found her slick to the touch, and with an alacrity that shocked her almost as if it had been an electric shock, his fingertips found the precise right place at once, and began moving in a way that made her feel as if she would climax in seconds.

He raised his head to look at her as he did this, his eyes dark, watchful, and starved for her reaction. She fought against the rising pleasure to keep her own eyes open and locked on his in turn. Her mouth fell open and perspiration began to collect at her temples but she kept her eyes wide, even as he began a pattern that made her curl her toes.

She tried to resist the feeling, but she was too keyed-up after their separation and he was too skilled and insistent. It was only a matter of moments before she was shaking apart in his arms, lightning
bolts shooting from her centre and making her knees go weak so that she collapsed against him, breathing hard. He gathered her face up in his hands again and kissed her deeply, excitement and satisfaction of a different kind making his own breath erratic against her mouth.

Her clothes suddenly felt hot and restrictive, and the loose-fitting garments posed no challenge to remove – by design. Beneath, she wore no underthings.

It was a bit more of a challenge to free him from his tailored suit and shirt with its endless buttons, but as usual they made a determined and well-coordinated team.

The sight of him fully nude made saliva flood her mouth, and any desire that had been sated was rekindled low in her belly.

Lean yet lithe, with a narrow waist, chiselled muscle definition, and broad shoulders, his physical beauty aroused her attraction the way no man had done before. Between the strong thighs that almost looked like a dancer's was the evidence that he was nonetheless very male, but even that part of him was incredibly attractive to her. It wasn't something only to be tolerated for the sake of their intimacy; even without her bias of sentiment, it was an exceptional specimen of its type – just like the rest of him.

The pale moonstone glow of his skin belied the fierce heat it radiated, although a flush was beginning to rise from the tops of his cheekbones as if he'd been slapped. As much as she was amused by the thought of that, between the two options she far preferred this method of putting colour into his face.

The small smile that had grown on her lips was altered by the abrupt pressure of Sherlock's mouth, and the tip of a tongue demanding entrance.

She returned the kiss for a moment, then broke it and leaned forward to push her hands up his thighs. When their faces were millimetres apart again, she tilted her head and pressed her mouth to the underside of his jaw. As her palm lifted off his skin and her fingers lightly traced across his inner thighs she skated her nose upwards and took the lobe of his left ear into her mouth and sucked hard, then bit down. He was sensitive there, and she felt him jolt a bit and grow even harder against the side of her hand.

She scraped the soft skin between her teeth then breathed hotly against the side of his face, as she skimmed her fingertips even more tantalisingly close to where he wanted her to touch him.

He gave a growl and shifted his hips in a futile effort to get more contact, and she let out a throaty, delighted laugh.

When she'd been at his mercy he had honed in on her most sensitive place immediately; she would do the opposite and tease this out for him. After all, she intended for them to savour this for hours to come.

No one would walk in on them now, not like Mrs Hudson had that night in his flat nor how Kate might've the week before. Not even Nero would interrupt, since he slept soundly through the night now.

She had him all to herself, in total privacy, and she intended to make the most of it. She wanted to not only revise the memory of that night in his flat but also create an array of vivid new ones for Sherlock to take back with him to London. Enough so that depending on his mood he could choose to recall a specific one as if looking up a certain word in the dictionary when he was missing her, or even better – create memories that might derail a deduction when certain images intruded at an
inopportune time.

She pushed his shoulder back against the base of the armchair he'd vacated and he allowed it, his eyes dark with anticipation.

She raised an eyebrow and one corner of her mouth turned up, and then she reached out with both arms to rake her nails hard down his chest, just before she leaned forward to place a contrasting tender kiss between the red streaks she'd made. Her fingertips continued traveling downward until they reached the tops of his thighs again, and she leaned forward on her palms to lavish even more attention upon his chest, then worked her way downward, skimming her nose down the divot of his abdomen, and nipping the thin span of skin above his navel. The muscles in his stomach twitched at that and her lips curled into a predatory smile, and then she bent her elbows and slid lower.

She circled and teased and let the anticipation of her touch build until he was on the verge of begging her for mercy for what would be the first time, but then she found that she couldn't hold back anymore herself. She wanted to experience the feel of him just as much as he wanted her to touch him.

When she finally wrapped her hand around the erection that was like silk encasing hot iron they both let out low exhales, and Irene tilted her head back to kiss him again as she began to move her wrist in a way she knew from experience he rather enjoyed.

He watched in rapt attention as she worked, his eyes closely tracking her hand even as he became more flushed and slick with perspiration, but when she replaced her hand with her mouth, he finally dropped his head backwards against the seat of the chair behind him. At that, Irene closed her eyes as well, and savoured the smell, feel, and taste of him contained in this sliver of a moment.

Several minutes later he gasped out, low and strained, "Wait," and she pulled back, thinking he was closer to coming than she'd realised.

But in a motion far more fluid than he should've been able to manage in his state, he swivelled at the waist to hook a finger into the interior pocket of the discarded jacket that lay a foot away.

He pulled out a metallic square and held it up to her.

"No more children," he said, repeating what she'd told him last time they'd been together. She grinned and took the condom from him.

After just a split-second he grinned back, and the expression changed his face, which up until this point had been so serious. Fine lines spread like fractals from the outer corners of his eyes, yet he looked suddenly younger. Eyes that had burned with such intensity before now radiated warmth and sentiment, and the atmosphere in the room shifted.

They came together with less ferocity this time, their kisses more tender and sensuous, even as Irene straddled Sherlock's lap and reached between them to clad him in latex.

She couldn't resist one final gesture of teasing and rocked against him once, twice, before smiling indulgently at his choked-off groans and taking him all the way.

Despite the passage of time since they'd last been together and his above-average proportions, she felt no discomfort - only relief. She had been intent on tormenting him a little, but she had ached from the delayed gratification too, and this was the remedy.

Sherlock wasn't demonstrative in what he felt, but it was evident in the new tension in his jaw and the trickle of sweat that broke free from the hairline at his temple.
Once fully seated on his lap she made a sliding motion with her hips and he shut his eyes and dropped his head back against the cushion behind him, and she saw the seam of clenched teeth as his lips pulled back. The almost interchangeable signs of pleasure and pain always fascinated her, and she watched him closely as she made move again, this time widening her stance slightly and taking him even deeper.

His eyes flew back open and settled on hers, and he retaliated by taking her firmly by each hip and rolling his pelvis in a whip-like movement that made her gasp. It also created friction in a place where she suddenly needed much more than a glancing touch. She leaned backwards and braced hers hands against his thighs, then arched her lower back. His next thrust brought him closer, but it wasn't quite enough, so she curved her back into an even sharper arc. On his third thrust there was direct contact with the deep-seated pad of nerve-endings that was elusive yet incredibly rewarding in the pleasure it could give, and she gave a full-body shudder and almost lost her grip on his legs.

Sherlock's hands on her waist steadied and held her, and when she lifted her head to gaze through narrowed eyes down at him she saw that his expression had taken on a new look of understanding and determination. He moved one hand to press the pad of his thumb into the most sensitive part of her anatomy, and she couldn't help but let out a shuddering moan as the stimulation from within and without joined to create one thrum of pleasure.

She had always admired his extraordinary self-discipline and control, but never more than now as he was able replicate the motion and maintain his pace and aim with almost machine-like precision. The fibres of her silk carpet began to dig into her knees, but that was a distant distraction compared to the swelling onslaught that was demanding the attention of the entirety of her being.

It wasn't long before she couldn't form coherent words, could only toss her head and move against him instinctively as his unwavering and merciless rhythm took away more and more of her self-awareness.

Throughout, their eye contact didn't waver, and though they were making love in a way they never had before, there was a constant - his expression as he looked at her. There was no longer any doubt in her mind that he was in love with her – that her feelings were not only reciprocated but perhaps even, somehow, exceeded. This was so much more than a technically brilliant performance meant to give her body pleasure—this was the fundamental expression of something more. Even in his concentration, even as his eyes narrowed in focus and exertion, she saw the emotion in them. There was wonder, awe, attraction... and she returned that look and all its multitudes.

As her climax drew closer her eyes clenched shut of their own volition, and without that tethering look the pleasure grew even more overwhelming; she simultaneously felt as if she were each particle of her being separately, and yet also scattered. A moment later her face contracted into its own impersonation of pain, and the sounds she made were needy and breathy - wordless pleas. For an instant before the sensation finally broke, when it was at its most intense, she almost felt as if she were in pain, so desperate was she for release.

When it came it was worth the near-agony of ascent. The blossoming pleasure shattered through her from deep within, and it rose from her core like shockwaves of colliding tectonic plates shooting toward the surface, so that when it reached her skin her flesh tingled as if from a body high. At some point she released Sherlock's thighs and clutched onto his forearms, but she remained frozen in a tense bow as the quake rocked her.

After an endless moment she could move again, and she could breathe again, and she drew in great shuddering gasps as Sherlock leaned forward to nuzzle the sweat-slicked hollow between her breasts.
Finally she felt reasonably returned to herself again and wrapped her arms around Sherlock's shoulders to hug him closer to her chest, before she lowered her face to brush it against the top of his head.

He leaned back to look her in the eye, and she noticed that his mouth was tense and slightly ajar – just before she became eminently aware again that they were still joined.

She let another low breath through her mouth and then her lips curved into a smile full of intent, and she briefly withdrew from him only to pull him forward by the hands and take his spot against the chair, although she turned her back to him. She reconsidered for a moment, thinking she'd rather not subject her kneecaps to the carpet for another round, then drew herself up into the armchair, eyeing the angle between them and seeing that as long as she remained up on her knees it would be perfect.

He rose to his feet and his long limbs pressed against the back of her thighs as he reached between them. She held on to the top of the chair and pressed down hard with one knee, but still the chair rocked off its feet when Sherlock re-entered her, though the thick rug muffled any sound.

She was more sensitive now, though the feeling of him was still glorious. They didn't share eye contact, but she leaned back into him and felt every motion of his body, every contract of his muscles, and every gust of hot breath against the tops of her shoulders. She was so aroused by this new way of experiencing sex with him that it wasn't long before she felt the stirrings of pleasure again.

Then he was cupping her breasts hard in each hand, not to titillate, but to hold her as close as possible to himself as he buried his face at the base of her head, and uttered low, unintelligible noises into the tangled tresses there.

He made several more movements that were more shudders than strokes, then went rigidly still, before finally relaxing.

She slowly drew away and then turned, and for several moments they looked into each other's eyes again, and she held her hand to his cheek as he recaptured his breath. Once he had, she settled back into the armchair, held eye contact, and let her thighs slide open.

He knew exactly what she was inviting him to do and despite being dazed by his afterglow he only hesitated to remove the condom, then bent to her as if drawn there by a force as elemental as gravity.

As his mouth, lips, and then his fingertips took over, she idly wondered if he had taken it upon himself to study female anatomy or if he were simply this much of a natural, and then decided that it was probably both before letting go of the thought.

She put his hands into his hair, entwined her ankles behind his neck and settled her hips deeper into the seat of the chair, then leaned back and savoured the gentle waves of pleasure that would soon become powerful currents again.

She would have her own memories to recall in their time apart to come…

Later, after she had slid back down to the floor to join him on the carpet again, she did manage one final thought before she lapsed into a light doze in the crook of his arm.

This felt sacred, like a purification ritual to bring resolution and closure to their difficult beginning. By some mutual understanding, neither of them had spoken beyond his comment about 'no more children' or made noise aside from hushed murmurs or moans, as if her sitting room had become a
place of worship. They had somehow both sensed that this was a conclusion of their first chapter together, and the beginning of an untold number in their shared future.

Chapter End Notes

This was the final chapter of Sui Generis. There will be a brief epilogue, but this is the conclusion. All thoughts and comments are cherished by this author!

Author's note: I would like to sincerely thank IreneSelina (her tumblr name) for first mentioning the brilliant concept of Irene being a consulting spy! This happy ending could not have happened without her invention of this idea <3

Works inspired by this one

Cover for Sui Generis (2013) by randomscientist

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!