Queen's Philharmonic

by Holmesianscholar

Summary

There is a vacancy at Queen's Philharmonic Orchestra for Principal Clarinet. John Watson, a modest but talented clarinettist, returns to London to apply to the orchestra to pursue happiness and purpose in life. Sherlock Holmes, violinist and concertmaster at the QPO, is in constant search of a musician who can fulfil his need to create the most colourful music together. Join their rehearsals to be a part of this slow, sweet, lyrical journey that they embark, one note at a time :-)

Notes

My most sincere thanks to Hertie, my incredible beta, who has saved my ignorant neck a thousand times already with the corrections/edits.
Love and thanks to my amazing friends, Mel, Noemi, and Qi Wen for reading my raw drafts without complaining. You lot are the best.

Sherlock, John, it’s been an honour to bring you to my world, even just briefly.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Where words fail, music speaks.
- Hans Christian Andersen

PART I

Chapter 1: Application

May 2010

John’s fingers paused over the keyboard.

[Is your address different from Curriculum Vitae?]

Yes. The address on his CV was still his New York one. John sighed and inserted his new address (however temporary this may be) in Golders Green along with name, phone number, and musical references. He should probably think through the references, actually... Things with the New York lot had been frosty since he left. No regrets there, though.

He opted for his old professors, conductors, and coaches that he’d known since his Guildhall days. They might still be fond of him, especially if they hear the reasons for John’s sudden homecoming (‘Justice will prevail!’ - he can almost hear them punch the air meekly). He might need a bit more time to himself before he reaches out, though; it had only been a few days since he moved back to London. He would apply for some jobs and keep this temporary housing until he was hired. Who knows if he’ll have to move closer to the workplace? Anyway. Focus, John. Next question.

[Professional experience.]

John wrote down his orchestral and chamber music performances. This section was always a bit
empty, as he had been in a doctoral program for the past five years. He barely had three hours of sleep every night from the sheer amount of work, juggling work and minimal social life, and couldn’t take too many jobs outside the program. Hmm.

[Musical education.]

Guildhall School of Music (Bachelor of Music)
New York Conservatory of Performing Arts (Master of Music, Doctor of Musical Arts)

[Date last auditioned live for the Phil.]

N/A

John quickly typed these, proofread three times, and printed the application sheet. Great. Done. No more procrastination. He gave himself a self-approving shrug.

Now, then. The repertoire list. He scrolled down to The master repertoire list for the audition.

John was pretty sure he’d played most, if not all, of the required master rep list, including both orchestral excerpts and solo rep, but he decided to skim through them anyway. No surprises so far... Slowly nodding as he went down the list, he raised his brows at the last sentence on the sheet.

[The Queen’s Philharmonic Orchestra tunes to A440.]

He closed the laptop and got up to fill a cup with water to soak some reeds. No time to lose, he must practice. He needed to record ten orchestral and solo excerpts and send them over within a week.

His mind wandered as he opened up his contacts list on his mobile phone. Am I still in touch with any good pianist who just happens to have Mozart K622 under their belt? Ah - actually, yes. He had more than few. Biting his lower lip in concentration, he sent a short and friendly text to five pianists, asking their availability to rehearse and record that week.

But there was no rush for him. 622 wasn’t his favourite, but he could play it in his sleep. It was a 'Must' for all clarinettists, anyway. Still should practice. Taking his reed box out, John grinned to himself.

Oh, Your Majesty. A440. I must be home.
OMGOMGOMG YOU’RE READING MY THING!!!! THANK YOU!!!!

This fic is a result from a prompt
Thanks again for the inspiration.

Please read the following!

1. This may be rather obvious, but it’s my first attempt at fan fiction. The only writing experience I have prior to this is limited to academia...

2. I am an actual musician. (!) Unfortunately, I am a solo pianist, not an orchestra instrumentalist. I don't know it as well as orchestra members would. However, I have been watching them, dated a few, and have listened to their rants from a close distance for over ten years, which I hope would suffice.

3. A LOT of this fic is, well, fictional/stereotypical/exaggerated, but most of them are also built on the basis of realism: audition procedures, some mentions of existing school names, existing people and places, musical technicalities, etc. However, please engage your suspension of disbelief to the fullest.

4. Audition procedures, requirement, and timelines are heavily based on an old New York Philharmonic audition form. The Repertoire list is universal to this day, especially the mentioned ones in this fic. For example, one of John’s preliminary recording pieces, Mozart’s Clarinet Concerto K622, is a very standard thing that every clarinetist just has to play.

5. I tried to come up with a name of the orchestra that isn’t quite taken yet.

6. John and Sherlock’s respective age is based on the ACD canon, in which John is in his early 30s and Sherlock in his late 20s. This made more sense as John in this fic had just graduated from his doctoral program, which people usually do in their early to mid-30s.

7. It is assumed that John has received the top notch education but is still relatively unknown in the world of music. More on this in later chapters...

8. The joke (?) regarding the concert pitch is that John is so used to New York Phil who tunes to A442, slightly higher than the British (and the universal) standard, A440.

9. I will be including various links for musical recordings throughout the fic, as it is about music - sometimes it’ll be the pieces that they’re playing in the moment, sometimes it’ll be a background music that you have to play while you read to be in the mood to the fullest.
10. Please excuse any grammatical errors, all of which are mine.

11. If anyone is interested in the science of orchestra, consult: http://en.uncyclopedia.co/wiki/Orchestra ... You’re welcome.
Sherlock slowly entered the concert hall. All the lights had been turned off. He could barely see where he was going if it wasn’t for the emergency lights on the floor alongside the aisles. He gazed upon the stage with a pale-coloured, movable partition wall in the centre. A small source of lighting shone through from the back of the stage, highlighting the screened area. Behind it was a music stand (with sheet music) and a bench. Towards the back of the rows of seats, he saw Greg frantically motioning him to hurry as the next applicant’s shadow emerged from backstage. The shadow sat down on the bench, took out the instrument, and became very still.

‘Oh, how nice of you to join us, Sherlock. Our first applicant just walked in too.’ Greg growled sarcastically. ‘You’re late!’

‘I’m here, that’s what’s important,’ Sherlock said, groping and stumbling around the seats. He flopped next to Greg unceremoniously.

Greg’s face, though in the dark, was visibly contorted. ‘Well, thanks, Edmond Dantes. Just be quiet and listen now,’ he whispered, then turned the microphone on to speak to the applicant. The mystery performer started to play Mozart upon Greg’s request. After playing several other orchestral and solo excerpts for about 15 minutes, the performer exited without a comment.

‘They’re not supposed to talk, then,’ Sherlock suspected.

‘Anonymity. We don’t want to know anything about them except their playing,’ answered Greg.

‘I didn’t know this when I was auditioning!’

‘You were told, Sherlock. You just don’t remember. We’re not supposed to profile them.’
'But it’s sort of obvious with this ridiculous staging anyway- why don’t we just give them a smaller light right on the music stand? That person was barely five feet tall and had a high ponytail down to the waist, wearing a knee-length dress - even you could tell that it was most likely a woman! And judging by the shape of their profile and the skull structure, she was most probably an East Asian.'

'Sherlock. I didn’t call you to make deductions at the candidates. I need you to listen to them and mark them either “yes” or ”no”. That’s what we do as the Audition Committee. I thought I told you all this already?’ Greg said, scowling. ‘Are you sure you want to be a part of this?’

‘Yes, like I said, I only want the best musicians for the group. I can’t have halfwits occupying the seats of Queen’s Philharmonic, now, can I. Speaking of which, I’m voting ”no” for the applicant earlier.’

‘I see that you’ve taken quite a bit of responsibility as the concertmaster, then,’ Greg smiled. ‘Mycroft was right, you are indeed an invaluable addition to the committee. I knew you’d take it seriously. I mean, don’t get me wrong - you’re still a difficult git, but your musical opinions are very helpful assets especially for times like this.’

‘Responsibility? Don’t be tedious. I’m merely interested in selecting the finest specimens from the batch. This has nothing to do with Mycroft.’

‘Alright, don’t be so bloody scientific about it, you twat,’ Greg said, rolling his eyes. ‘Specimens... Honestly...Anyway, your vote is not the absolute verdict here. We’ve got two more people behind you,’ Greg said, pointing to the dark glimpses of human-shaped blur one row behind. Sherlock gave a quick glance. One of the blurred shapes waved at him.

'I expect to be reimbursed for my time,’ Sherlock blurted out, blushing. Bless the darkness.

'Since when do you - oh, did Mycroft say something? He cut your funds, didn’t he?’

Sherlock opened his mouth in a futile attempt to deny this, but he remained silent, pressing his lips in a tight line.

‘Oh, you poor thing - I didn’t think he would actually do it!’ Greg scoffed without malice. ‘Of course we’ll reimburse you for your time. You’re doing an important job here, Sherlock. Truly,
quite important,’ he said patronisingly.

‘Don’t coddle me, conductor. I’m just merely asking a perfunctory question.’

‘Does that mean that you’ll need to pay your own rent from now on? Oh my God... And you live in the dead centre of town - this is too precious -’ he started to cackle.

Thankfully, Sherlock caught the sight of the next candidate’s shadow approaching the stage.
‘Okay, do shut the fuck up now, we have another performer.’

Greg wiped a tear away from his eye, still shaking from laughter.

* * *

4 hours later

‘Next.’

‘Bloody hell, Sherlock! At least tell them thank you? This is a stressful situation for everyone, certainly you must know –’ Greg whispered angrily to Sherlock, covering the microphone in front of him with his hand.

‘This person already knows that they fucked up. They had it coming when their tremolo was at least an eighth shorter than required. Not to mention the utter lack of lyricism. Certainly YOU must know, Lestrade,’ Sherlock spat without bothering to tone down the volume.

They could hear the applicant behind the partition wall scrambling as they collected their instrument and case. Judging by the noise, Sherlock was almost sure that they tripped on their way out. Though he felt no remorse for being blunt (honest feedback is the best medicine, he thought to himself), he hoped silently that they didn’t drop their instrument. That would be bad. Lestrade was shaking his head, pinching and massaging the bridge of his nose with his thumb and index finger.

‘Sherlock, please, be courteous. It’s one thing to call for the next person, but to stop them in the
middle of their performance and practically stab them with such comments? That’s not nice. Not nice at all! This is not Britain’s Got Talent!!’ (Sherlock grunted at this.) ‘No, Sherlock! No, this isn’t. This is NOT a sodding talent show. Please. I’m asking you to behave. We have to discuss this as a group and make a joint decision!’

‘But they sound so dull, grim, too vandyke-brown -’

‘Yes, welcome to the blind audition, mate. Don’t make me reconsider inviting you to the committee? Hmm?’

‘When are we going to be done?!’ Sherlock shuffled his hips around the seat. ‘I cannot sit still while these idiots play the same excerpts over and over again! This is torture!’

‘Please. It’s only been a few hours. When we’re done with the winds - we still have percussions this week.’ Greg sighed. Other committee members were decidedly shunning out this conversation, not even glancing toward them. The hall was still too underlit to make out their expressions despite their eyes being used to the darkness, but Sherlock was quite sure that they were close to a breaking point if they hear the Bolero one more time. The agony was mutual. Sherlock had never related to others more in his life.

‘And you go through this EVERY YEAR?’ Sherlock huffed, his eyes wide in disbelief.

‘Well, I am the conductor and a part of the committee, so I have to be here. Not every year though, but now we have two openings. Do you want to sit out for a while?’

Sherlock contemplated this for a second, but sitting out was not an option for him. ‘No chance, Lestrade. I need to hear them. Also, you need me to hear them.’

‘... Yes. God help me.’ Greg rolled his eyes, tilting his head back.

‘You do agree that the last one needed to leave, though, right?’

‘Alright, yes. The last one was indeed not as great as the others,’ Greg conceded. ‘But please try to hold your tongue until we give you the sign to let them go. Yeah?’
Sherlock curtly nodded. The next applicant’s shadow flickered behind the onstage wall. About 5’7” tall, short hair, prominent nose... Solid, linear, square physique, wearing a collared shirt and trousers... The applicant looked like a man. Or not? But - balance of probability. Sherlock was 95% sure that this person was a man. He wasn’t supposed to think about these things. That was the whole point of the opaque screen.

‘Here we go again,’ he gave an all-teeth smile, clenched, in mock joy. He had low hopes. He sincerely hated the audition, on either side of the stage. Patience level plummeted at an alarming rate at times like this. An older member on his left looked at Sherlock and pursed his lips wistfully in sympathy as if to say, You haven’t got the faintest idea, laddie. Sherlock softly shook his head.

Greg tapped the microphone once and greeted the applicant. ‘Hello, thanks for joining us. Make yourself comfortable. Please start with the excerpts from L’après-midi d’un faune, Rehearsals 3 to 7. Whenever you’re ready.’

Next to him, Sherlock could not hide his gratefulness for choosing Debussy as the first piece; they had been starting with Mozart and Ravel for a long while now. He slouched back in his seat a bit, already exhausted out of his mind.

Please, he tried to communicate telepathically to the (nearly) invisible applicant, please be good. He closed his eyes, playing the rest of the score in his head, leading up to Rehearsal 3 at the start of the Clarinet solo.

A few seconds of pregnant silence later, the crisp sound of G-sharp filled the darkened hall. Both Sherlock and Greg’s eyes flew open.

They turned to look at each other. Greg’s facial muscles relaxed into something like relief as the melody ascended and descended in a smooth curve. Even the other committee members (or their shapes) seemed visibly alleviated.

Sherlock didn’t realise that his mouth is slightly open. Iridescent colours flushed his vision like a cascade of diluted oil paint on a black canvas, permeating the dingy auditorium. Impressionist? Oh, of course- French, Debussy - Sherlock blinked hard. It had been so long since he’d seen this many colours. Whoever this was - this was an artist, not a mere applicant. At last!

They were here to make music.

When the Debussy excerpts were finished, Greg cleared his throat and asked for Mendelssohn’s
Scherzo from *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Shostakovich 9, Tchaikovsky 6, Beethoven 4, and Brahms 3. The clarinettist painted each work with a different medium, specific strokes, techniques. Sherlock’s eyes watered, absorbing them all in. He could cry, for God’s sake.

‘Let’s ask him for *Peter and the Wolf!*’ He breathed excitedly in Greg’s ears when silence fell again. When Greg gave him a look that clearly said *don’t you think we’ve heard enough*, Sherlock agreed quietly, though it was a lot shorter than others’ auditions. Greg shot another glance toward the other members to the left of Sherlock, all nodding knowingly. Sherlock bit down the urge to take the microphone himself and thanking the applicant when the conductor switched it back on.

‘That’s all for today. Thank you for your time. We’ll notify the results as soon as we can. If you are invited to the Finals, you’ll be playing live next week with us. Please check the website soon,’ Greg said.

The clarinettist behind the wall picked up after themselves with practised ease and exited without a word.

‘That was the last one this morning. Take a break, Sherlock, get a cuppa or something. Come back in an hour, and don’t be late. Everyone, we’ll meet back here at 1,’ said Greg, buttoning his jacket as he stood up. ‘I’m gasping for some fresh air. Come on, Sherlock.’

Groaning and stretching, the committee members staggered out the door. Sherlock was still seated, unmoving, until Greg pulled him out of his seat and guided him outside.

‘My violin,’ Sherlock said in agitation.

‘Oh, shit. Sorry.’ Greg went back in the hall to grab Sherlock’s case and handed it to the violinist.

Sherlock clutched the case around his shoulder protectively and closed his eyes shut. ‘Colours, Lestrade. Finally, dozens of them, hundreds of shades. Did you see - ugh, of course you didn’t. Why do I bother asking,’ he sighed.

‘Sherlock, you alright?’ Greg asked. ‘Are you just worn out, or... You haven’t reacted to the colour thing in a while.’

‘Stop teetering around the subject and just ask me if you want.’
Greg started, looking a bit indecisive. ‘Sherlock, you’re... You’re still... sober, right?’

Sherlock sighed. ‘Yes, MUMMY. I’ve been sober for months.’

‘What’s wrong, then? Are you in your “Mind Palace” again? What are you doing this time?’

‘Cataloguing,’ Sherlock whispered.

‘Hmm?’

‘This applicant - the last one - It’s almost decided that they’ve got the position.’

‘Er, I... I don’t want to jinx it, but yes, that one was the best we’ve heard. Hell, the best I’ve heard live in a long time!’ Greg chuckled. ‘Applicant #31, right? I’m sure they received high marks from the others, too. Come on, lunch is on me.’

‘No need,’ Sherlock smirked and started walking very quickly. ‘I have something better now. Better than anything.’

‘What? You should eat, the afternoon auditions will go for another five hours!’

‘Colours, my dear conductor. I don’t care about anything else!’ Sherlock shouted behind his back, still speed-walking. ‘What I need is data! I need to find out who this is. Applicant #31...Bloody anonymity! When is the Final Audition again?’ He yelled across the hallway.

‘Next Friday!’ Greg hollered back to him.

‘Fantastic. I will be back for the afternoon. Laters!’

_Time to catalogue._
Greg watched Sherlock vanish out of sight around the corner. Exhaling heavily, he made a mental note to buy a few boxes of ginger nuts to bring back to the auditorium. Food was not allowed inside, but Sherlock would eat some if he saw them. Mycroft Holmes would actually be thankful to him for feeding his baby brother even if it means spilling crumbs in his precious concert hall floors.

The elder Holmes was quite correct - Sherlock did prove himself to be quite useful for the Committee. It had been another means to distract Sherlock from the temptations of drugs, but lately he was doing so well even without them, thanks to Mycroft’s never-ending endeavours to maintain his sobriety.

Mycroft's nickname - ‘Ice Man' - was quite fitting in general, but Greg had never seen an older sibling caring for his younger one so dearly. Good on him for finally cutting his 'financial aid' - Sherlock was almost thirty years old, for goodness’ sake. Greg replayed the moment that Sherlock inquired about reimbursements in his head. What a special thing to be uttered from such an outrageous man.

Greg knew where his Baker Street flat was located. He also knew that the rent, even after the 'deal' that Sherlock made with his generous landlady, cost him at least four thousand quid per month.

Even with his concertmaster salary, Sherlock will probably have to move to a smaller flat - or to somewhere outside of Zone 3 or 4. (Well, probably not. Sherlock would never live anywhere outside of Zone 1, the posh fucker.) Or, he’d have to let his practice room for a flatshare. Greg dissolved into laughter again at the thought of Sherlock and a flatmate. Preposterous. Greg was quite fond of Sherlock and would gladly call him a friend, but by Jove! He would never be able to live with Sherlock without wanting to kill him. He silently wished him luck for finding someone.

On his way out, he spotted some copies of the season brochure near the lifts. He had been so busy lately that he hadn’t seen the finished product yet. Flipping through the pages absentmindedly, he felt a twinge of glee in his stomach. Oh, this fall season was going to be marvellous.
Greg left the brochure back on the shelf between the two lifts, whistling as he waltzed out the door, unaware of the last minute changes that had been made without his knowledge.

It was only a matter of time until he found out.

* * *

2010-2011 Queen’s Philharmonic Orchestra Season (abridged, featured works only)

*L'après-midi d'un faune, L.86* - Claude Debussy

*Symphony No. 3 in F Major, Op. 90* - Johannes Brahms

*Rhapsody in Blue* - George Gershwin

*Violin Concerto* - Esa-Pekka Salonen

*Concerto for flute and orchestra, FS 119* - Carl Nielson

*Symphony No. 5 in D minor, Op.47* - Dmitri Shostakovich

*Symphony No. 8 in G Major, Op. 88* - Antonín Dvořák

*Symphony No. 1 in D Major* - Gustav Mahler

*Overture, Scherzo, and Finale, Op. 52* - Robert Schumann

*Petrushka* - Igor Stravinsky

*Concerto in D major for Oboe and Small Orchestra, AV 144, TrV 292* - Richard Strauss

*Symphony No. 5 in E-flat major, Op. 82* - Jean Sibelius

*Pictures at an Exhibition, arr. Maurice Ravel* - Modest Mussorgsky

*Symphony No. 6 in B minor, Op. 74* - Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

*Concerto in C minor for Piano, Trumpet, and String Orchestra, Op.35* - Dmitri Shostakovich

*Peter and the Wolf, Op. 67* - Sergei Prokofiev

*Sextet for piano and wind quintet, FP 100* - Francis Poulenc

*Contrasts for clarinet, violin, and piano, Sz. 111* - Béla Bartók
Chapter End Notes

1. Please see the attached photo for the “partition wall” or “Screen” on stage for the audition. https://peteralexanderblog.files.wordpress.com/2017/04/610612971.jpg?w=489&h=275

2. Sherlock is a synaesthete, that is to say, he sees colours when he hears music. (I am a grapheme-colour and tone-colour synaesthete myself and wanted to include this titbit!) This is a big deal for him; more on this later. If you’re interested: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Synesthesia

3. Shout-out to Edmond Dantes, aka the Count of Monte Cristo.

4. I’ve personally never heard of a concertmaster who’s also in the Audition Committee.

5. John’s audition excerpts (e.g. from Shostakovich 9th symphony, Tchaikovsky 6th symphony, Beethoven 4th symphony, and Brahms 3rd symphony) are also major audition repertoire for clarinet.

6. Season programme: pieces with heavy clarinet solos are intentionally chosen for the purpose of this narrative. Also, please excuse the alarming number of Russian music in the programme. I’m... That’s.. It’s my research field. Also, it would never be altered last minute. I’m sure that’s unheard of.

7. Sherlock’s neighbourhood near Marylebone/Baker is VERY expensive as one might imagine. Current weekly rent on average is about 1000~1500 pounds, and though this story is set a few years back, I don’t think the present-day rent is too far from what it had been in 2010, as it’s in zone 1. Here’s a link to London travel zone map for your reference. http://static.standard.co.uk/s3fs-public/thumbnails/image/2016/01/04/newtubemapHIRES0401.jpg
Pre-Finals Rehearsal

Chapter Summary

TW: Past drug usage.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter 3: Pre-Finals Rehearsal

15 October 2010, 9 a.m.

Two hours before the Finals

‘Oi! I grabbed it first!’ Janine snatched the tea bag out of Billy’s hand, tore the packet, and put it inside her cup. ’Thank you,’ she said, walking away.

‘You’re proper cruel, d’you know that?!’ Billy barked. ‘You’re going to spit it all out your bloody horn anyway!’

‘I’m not spitting out any tea, love, it’s saliva,’ said Janine without missing a beat.

‘But - Earl Grey helps with my German bowing!!’ Billy attempted another feeble objection.

‘Now you’re not even trying,’ Janine said. ‘Earl Grey helps with my German bowing, seriously... Where the hell do you come up with these lines? Do you drink the Breakfast Blend for your French bowing? Honestly, Billy.’

‘Shut it, how dare you mock the French bowing!!’ Billy screamed.

‘I’m not mocking it. I love the French grip. That’s why I play the French horn. Get it, Billy? Oh, wasn’t that just the most awful pun!’ She winked at Billy, who was clearly struggling between an urge to retort and a reflex to laugh at her stupid joke. He exhaled shakily and settled on the Breakfast Blend after all. Janine beamed at him. ‘Just a few more hours, Billy, and you can get home to brew yourself a propa cuppa!’

‘Idiots,’ Sherlock muttered, re-crossing his legs on the couch. He felt unnaturally restless. The finalists were auditioning live today, and Sherlock was determined to find out which of them would play with the colours that he heard last week. Would it happen again? Or was that just a one-time miracle? The thought of being thrilled for a week over something that might turn out to
be *nothing* was hateful. He fidgeted in the seat, trying to summon back the colours from his catalogue.

Sherlock never remembered the exact moment that his synaesthesia 'started'. He had thought that it was just a common phenomenon that happened to everyone, but when he’d tried to communicate what he had seen in words, he had been often ridiculed.

It was only when his violin teacher told him about Sibelius, Rimsky-Korsakov, and Itzhak Perlman that he understood how rare and unique it was. ‘You’re sound-colour and/or tone-colour synaesthete, it seems - no wonder your playing is so expressive,’ his teacher had remarked. ‘This could be a good tool for your creative outlet, Sherlock. Not everyone experiences it; you can wield it for music-making at its finest!’

His teacher had observed it like it was a gift, but to Sherlock, it was more of a curse in disguise. Sure, he loved to 'hear' the colours rain and spark in front of his eyes, but it was positively draining when he heard dull performances. Most people played with one or two hues at a time, sometimes not very saturated at all.

The worst of it was that he couldn’t just turn this function off like a switch. It was as if the sounds were constantly chafing against his eyes and ears; it was so irritating. Lestrade once asked him to make an analogy of listening to something 'dull', and the best Sherlock could describe the sensation was reading a book in which the pages were entirely written in binary code.

‘A rare phenomenon’, 'unique personality', 'master of the tone’, ‘true prodigy’ - these were some of the things that Sherlock had been called. He’d toured all over the world with hundreds of orchestras and chamber musicians from a young age. His performance section on the biography by itself was no less than three pages by the time he had reached age twenty-one.

Overlapped with his twenty-first birthday was a concert in Los Angeles. Tired and bored of playing the same pieces repeatedly, Sherlock gave into a fellow orchestra member’s enticement to try the smallest dose of powder cocaine in backstage.

‘Get ready to *gliss* into the best trip you’ll ever have,’ the other musician had said. Sherlock didn’t mean to like it so much, really, he had just been a bit curious. *Just once*, he’d promised himself. Anything to feel better about this stupid performance - after all, it was his birthday.

That night, Sherlock had seen the most entrancing sparks of colours in his entire life. Thousands of shooting stars had flown in front of his eyes. Suns and planets had born and died, and whatever dull playing that he had to endure had turned into a bedazzling experience. He didn’t remember how exactly he played, but he’d never forget how he’d felt - - - his first time, high as a kite.

Of course, the aftermath was terrible, to say the least. The sparkles had long gone, dragging him back into a black hole of torpor.

He couldn’t lay off them for the following tours anymore. *Just once* had turned into *Oh well, when in Rome* and *Good Night, Vienna*. When he’d developed a threshold for powder, he hadn’t been hesitant with the usage of syringes. Intravenous injection of the drug was so much more potent that Sherlock had never missed powder again.

Even when performing with incredible orchestras such as Berliner Philharmoniker that was sure to
emit raw, fantastic colours without the influence, Sherlock had surrendered to the delicious charms of the drugs, chasing the high over and over again to witness the best varieties of the hues.

Years of such pattern had led him to a point in which he not only had become unable to perform while sober, he just never wanted to be sober whether or not a performance was due.

Mycroft had intervened at last, as he always did, and scooped him up from a backstage, somewhere in Prague. He’d sent him to a rehab for a couple of years (also known as the worst years of Sherlock’s life), and he only agreed to let his little brother be dismissed on a condition that he’d find a stable job in London where Mycroft can monitor him on a regular basis. Sherlock at that point had been dying to get out at all cost; two blind auditions at the QPO later, he’d become the Principal Violin and Concertmaster.

Much to Sherlock’s delight, the majority of Queen’s Philharmonic Orchestra (despite being utter fools sometimes, in his honest opinion) had been decent players who definitely knew how to command their sound and tone. It was difficult to tolerate them in person, but once they shut up and played their instruments, they were quite competent. Sherlock had to concede that it was a satisfying group of musicians with whom to work. Besides, Lestrade was one of the most sought-after conductors in the world - and for a good reason, too. He knew how to draw the colours out of them.

But the pigments and vividness that he experienced from the blind semifinals for principal clarinet were rather impressive, more so than anything he’d seen in ages. That last candidate before the break - the mysterious wind player - made such translucent, scintillating colours. He hadn’t been explicitly fond of the winds in general, but that one short audition changed his mind completely. He was deeply intrigued.

According to Sherlock’s data so far, the richer the colours one made, the less boring they turned out to be. Supporting evidence included Molly, the principal bassoonist and a fantastic pianist, who was decidedly the most interesting of the pack, and Mike, a real-life Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde with and without his cello. Both of them played with ferocious liveliness, and though Sherlock’s pride wouldn’t allow to verbalise it, he quite enjoyed playing with them.

Did this mean that he would also love to play with Applicant #31? Most certainly. Seeing as he ‘got on’ with Molly and Mike alright too, Sherlock was convinced that he might even be friends with him.

_Friends! Don’t be absurd_, he thought to himself. _You sound like a child._

But was it so terrible to be excited about getting to know a fantastic musician and possibly bask in the colours he can make? Sherlock was more or less content with the quality of sound that QPO produced, but ever since hearing the bloody semifinal audition, he needed something better. Stronger. He started tensing up again. _You’re a junkie_, a voice in his head whispered. _A junkie, in need of a fix._ Sherlock shuddered. He hated waiting.

On top of that, he hated playing in the wee hours, whether they’re rehearsals or auditions. It meant that he had to deal with imbeciles like Billy and Janine bicker over stupid things like who gets the last Earl Grey tea bag, every time. It meant that he had to listen to Soo Lin tune the orchestra at arse-o’clock with her rose-gold oboe, which was almost always a semitone sharp in early
mornings (no one cared about this except him, though).

Sherlock tried very hard to shut out everything while there was still some quietude. Only a few people were here on time today, and of course, it had to be that one day that Sherlock was actually on time. Where was everyone? He yawned behind his palms. He’d stayed up late the night before with Mrs Hudson, cleaning and tidying the room upstairs in an attempt to make it seem at least a bit habitable.

In the corner of his eyes, he could see Anderson and Donovan who clearly arrived together. They were standing very close to each other, talking with implicit body language, both of their hair wet. They’d used the same shampoo, apparently. Toffee eyes. Great. About time. Perhaps the second violin and viola may be more... harmonious.

The backstage suddenly filled with a number of incoming players, rushing towards the refreshments area to grab a cup of tea or coffee. Sherlock spotted Molly in the crowd and nodded a hello. She sat down on arm of the couch next to him, rubbing her bloodshot eyes, and yawned.

‘Good morning, Sherlock,’ she gave him a weary smile.

Sherlock grunted noncommittally.

‘I know, it’s early,’ she said.

‘Very.’ He suddenly needed a cup of tea quite terribly.

At the tea station, Mike Stamford was frantically stirring his coffee, milk, and sugar. He looked up at the violinist and greeted him with inexplicable gusto, considering how early in the morning it was. ‘Good morning, Sherlock! Beautiful day!’

‘Mike.’

‘You look tired - late night again, then?’

‘Quite.’

‘Better take care of yourself, mate! We’re not so young anymore, haha!’ Mike said, clasping Sherlock’s shoulder.

‘I stayed up late for a reason,’ said Sherlock, looking uncomfortable. He poured some hot water into his cup with a tea bag inside.

Molly joined with a cup of tea in her hands. ‘Did you finally declutter your practice room, then?’ She chimed in fondly, and whispered in mock-secrecy with a hand next to her mouth, ‘Sherlock is looking for a flatmate.’

‘Is that true! I didn’t know that you had an extra room, how nice!’ cried Mike, sipping his coffee.

There was no point in hiding this fact. Sherlock needed a flatmate as soon as possible.

Renting a two-bedroom flat in central London ate away at his savings at a dangerous rate, and Sherlock was not one to bother keeping a hefty savings account, as he (until recently) lived rather comfortably - owing to Mycroft’s aid. Rent was definitely his biggest expense, and cutting it in half would relieve the strain of having to pay such a sizable bill. Having a flatmate was the easiest solution.

He’d been posting an advert weekly for a month, but no one called back after the viewing
(presumably due to the chaotic state of the room). Perhaps disclosing this information to the orchestra members might expedite the process. Time was of the essence; after the rehearsal, he would take more decent photos for his advert.

‘Yes, I confess. I am indeed in search for a flatmate. It’s been unsuccessful, despite the convenience of the location. I must be a difficult person with whom to imagine living,’ Sherlock admitted.

‘Sherlock, that’s not necessarily true! You’ve hardly reached out at all! And now that the room is cleaner, I’m sure you could find someone soon, mate!’ Mike interjected.

‘Oh, please. Really, who’d want me for a flatmate? I must be barking mad to expect that anyone could peacefully coexist in the same flat with me.’

It wasn’t modesty. Sherlock knew that he wasn’t a ‘popular’ bloke (and he honestly didn’t give a shit). Practically everyone other than Mike and Molly despised him, and quite rightfully so; Sherlock had been criticising their playing during rehearsals for ages. He’d always thought that he was offering them ‘concrete feedback’ until Lestrade pulled him aside and asked him to stop.

Ever since then, Sherlock tried his best not to shout out mocking remarks of someone being out of tune or playing in dull tones in public. However, he couldn’t stop himself from giving his ‘advice' in private. He often cornered the musicians individually and told them what he thought.

Unsurprisingly, his reputation continued as an insufferable arsehole. Not that Sherlock cared much, anyway. He just wanted them to play better - and they did, after Sherlock’s criticism. That was all that mattered.

Thankfully, Lestrade popped his head backstage to announce that the pre-audition rehearsal would start in five minutes. Sherlock’s heart started to race. Patience...

Chapter End Notes

1. Please do not gliss into a drugged trip, not even once! To gliss (glissando) is to glide from one pitch to another.

2. There are two major bows and bowing techniques to play the bass: the French grip or the German grip. Tea will do absolutely nothing for them. Details: https://www.gollihurmusic.com/faq/14-BOWS_FRENCH_AND_GERMAN_GRIP.html
Chapter 4: Callback

A familiar sensation of butterfly colonisation in his endocrine system seized John as he walked to the Golders Green tube station, clarinet case safely attached to his side.

It had only been a week after the blind semifinal audition results were posted. John relived the flattering moment. He hadn't felt like this since his admission to the doctoral program at New York Conservatory five years ago. Even when his preliminary recording audition results came in, he considered it luck - but passing the semifinals made everything seem so much more real. It was such a short audition, too. Shorter than any of the major orchestra auditions, anyway. He remembered thinking that it must’ve been either fantastic or abominable.

He was thrilled - at least someone thought he played well enough to hear him again. And now, he was on his way to the Finals.

If he were to be chosen, he’d be starting the next rehearsal cycle as early as the following week. He shivered in anticipation.

London's mid-October air was already chilly; New York at this time of the year would still be warm. He couldn’t help but reminisce about the past year that led him to his eventual exile. Yes, it had been an exile - no other word would suffice.

Upon receiving his doctorate degree and successfully publishing his dissertation, John was offered an adjunct faculty position at the Conservatory.

Sick and tired of pulling all-nighters to write his dissertation, he was glad for a change in his lifestyle; he genuinely looked forward to teaching. He had a fair number of private students during his stay in New York, the experience of which had only been pleasant. The promise of teaching at a collegiate level was heady, as John’s students usually had been pre-teens. Not that teaching younger kids was bad, not at all. He loved teaching all ages of all level. He just wished for another solid group of students who were sure of their paths - students who really wanted to play, for life. Students who actually enjoyed the art of music-making. If he could fill the majority of his studio with those students, this could very well be a lifetime job - a very fulfilling one, at that.

Fully expecting a tight schedule of teaching, John had received two emails that week: one from the school, with his prospective academic calendar attached, followed by one from his former advisor (in hindsight, this should’ve been an ominous warning in itself, as they ended on terrible terms).

The calendar had seemed a bit incomplete, only highlighting only one Thursday at 10 in the morning, for an hour. That's weird.

Totally confused, John had opened the other email - the fateful, bitter, sardonic email that
confirmed the stillbirth of a teaching career in New York. To this day, he recalled the short email perfectly.

*Dear John, Congratulations on your publication. I sincerely hope that you enjoy your honorable consequences. Best of luck with your career, Dr. Watson.*

John sighed as he tried to push away the memory further back in his head.

Politics. In the end, it was just a game of politics that John had refused to play. He’d never accepted his advisor’s forceful interventions and personal additions on his dissertation. He’d turned down all the ‘offers’ to ghost-write various conference papers. He hadn’t bothered to ask for recommendation letters if they’d seemed even a bit corrupt, no matter how powerful they were. Also, he just didn’t have the time to look after the professors’ medieval history grads!

John had been busy. And proud. He didn’t play along, and he was tossed away faster than he could say ‘clarinet’.

In retrospect, he could’ve bitten back his pride and taken the ‘job’, teaching one hour of Music History 101 to visiting high-schoolers at College of Arts and Science - as a guest lecturer. Not teaching his own instrument, not even in his own department, not even undergraduates. He’d be a one-time speaker. Paid hourly (well, just one hour a year). And they titled him ‘adjunct faculty’. He didn’t know whether he wanted to laugh or cry.

John began packing that very night and moved out of New York a week after, never turning back, not saying goodbye to anyone except his students, and his closest friend in New York, James Sholto. If he could still call him a ‘friend’, that is.

*None of this matters right now,* John told himself, coming back to present. He was back in London, he had a temporary flat (he fixated on the concept of ‘temporary’, and not just because it was a tiny bedsit) on Finchley Road, Golders Green - and he was on his way to play a live audition for the Final callback. He was about to play with Queen’s Philharmonic Orchestra.

*You’re about to play with bloody Queen’s Phil... Count your blessings, Doctor Watson!*

Stepping out of the tube, John channelled as much positivity (sometimes, calling himself ‘Doctor Watson’ in his head helped) as he can muster and started walking at a brisk pace. Only a two-minute walk from here.

He checked his watch. There was still an hour left until his audition; he mapped his plan out visually. First, he’ll register at the desk, letting them know that he was definitely there - then, he’ll find an empty practice space, test his reeds, pick out the best one, and warm up -

‘John!’

Yes. That. That’s my name.

My name?
John swung around to find a rotund, bespectacled man, hurrying towards him from the main entrance of the concert hall. *Oh, I know him - his name was..."

‘Stamford! Mike Stamford! We went to Guildhall together!’ Mike cried cheerfully.

‘Yes, sorry, Mike... Hello! It’s been a while...’ John said.

‘Yes, I know, I got fat!’ Mike pointed to his middle.

‘No, it’s not that... I’m just a bit... taken aback, I didn’t expect to see you here.’

‘Neither did I! The last time I heard about you - You were abroad, right? New York? What are you doing here?’

‘Er,... I’m playing in the Finals today for QPO,’ said John, blushing a little. *Why am I blushing? There’s nothing strange about auditioning..."

‘Oh! You must be one of the three clarinetists, then! Yeah, this year is quite tough, innit! I’m the principal cellist here! Just had a rehearsal for you lot, on our break now. Here, let me take you to your warm-up space,’ Mike said cordially, tugging at John’s arm. ‘Do you want a cuppa?’

‘That - would be lovely, thank you,’ John said, allowing himself to be escorted. John didn’t know where he was supposed to be going, anyway, although he was here five months ago for the blind audition.

After John checked in at the welcome table, they walked through the corridors that led them to the lifts. Mike’s temples were glistening with a sheen of sweat. His black shirt and trousers were rather wrinkled with unmistakable cello-creases.

As they approached the lift, nothing could be heard except the tap-tap of their dress shoes on the marble floor. The hallways were deserted and badly lit. John wondered briefly if this was a lucid dream. Mike broke the silence.

‘So, are you just staying in town until you get yourself sorted? I suppose you’ll be moving back for good if you were offered the job,’ said Mike.

‘Actually,’ said John, ‘I just moved back a few months ago... In May. I’m staying at temporary housing in Golders Green.’

‘Golders Green! That’s rather quiet, innit? I thought you liked the bustlin’ of the centre, didn’t ye? Even Barbican was too far off, you insisted that you’d commute to school from Fitzrovia!’ Mike said, smiling faintly as old memories revisited him.

‘I..... I still do. But I don’t think I can afford the centre anymore. It’s one thing to live off-campus on scholarship... I’m afraid that no one funds me at the mo’,’ John said. He awkwardly looked down at the floor. The lift door opened in front of them with a *ding*.

‘Couldn’t Harry help?’ Mike asked, holding the door open for John.

‘Er... Probably not at the moment. I just visited her last week.’

‘Ah.’

John nodded. No other words needed to be said. Mike was one of the fewest friends (mostly because he was one of John’s oldest mates) who knew about Harry at all. The lift helpfully filled the silence with another *ding* as they arrived on the third floor.
‘So, how is she?’ Mike said after a beat, leading the way.

‘Better. But I don’t think she’s coming back. She quite likes Bristol.’

‘London isn’t for everyone, I suppose.’

‘Apparently. Can’t relate, though,’ John shook his head and sighed. ‘The quietness drives me crazy.’

‘Well,’ Mike shrugged. ‘You could get a flatshare.’

‘Flatshare!’ John exclaimed. ‘Come on. Who’d want me for a flatmate? Don’t be ridiculous.’

‘You’d be surprised,’ Mike said, brows raised, and opened the door to a small practice room. ‘You’re the second person to say that to me today.’

Oh?

‘Who’s the first?’

‘Oh, he’s a ... he’s in the orchestra. You’ll see him later, probably,’ said Mike.

‘Ah, so he’s a musician! That would be quite good, actually. He’d understand! We can work around with the practice time!’ John said excitedly. It was one of the biggest reasons (other than the money) that he didn’t see how he could find a suitable flatmate. He’d be making a lot of noise which most people won’t tolerate. But if the bloke was a musician - this could work out just fine -

‘I’ll introduce you later. I must warn you though, he’s a bit...odd,’ Mike shrugged.

‘How do you mean?’

‘I don’t - I don’t know how to explain. He’s - people don’t really like him immediately. Let’s just say that he’s not the most polite bloke. Who knows what you’ll think!’ he chortled.

‘I don’t really need to like him or be liked all that much, really. It’s hard to find a flatmate in the same line of work. If he keeps to himself and is looking to let, I’d love to meet him.’

Mike sniffed. ‘That’s your call! Alright, wait here and warm up - I’ll get you that cuppa.’ He left with a bit of hesitation, then came back to say, ‘It’s really good to see you, mate. It’s been hard to keep in touch - I’ve often wondered how you were doing.’

‘You too, Mike. Really great to see you. Thanks for your help.’

Mike closed the door behind him as he exited again, smiling.

John started taking his instrument out of his case. Mike returned shortly with a small paper cup of tea and gave John a thumbs up before leaving him to practice. John checked his watch again. 45 minute to go...
1. What happened to John in New York, while slightly exaggerated for dramatic purposes, is not unheard of in the world of academia/arts, unfortunately. I’ve personally been run over by some of these things myself (although not as dramatic, and sometimes without reasons).

2. No offence and all due respects to guest lecturers of all subjects, I have only included this bit to emphasise that John deserved to be hired full-time. This also comes from a personal experience, where I was sent to teach a group of 4-year-olds for 40 minutes a week in Upper Manhattan. An hour commute to teach 40 minutes per week, all because I had refused to cut my own lesson during my Masters to accommodate their schedule. Well, I wasn’t going to sacrifice that.

3. Shoutout to Golders Green, which was where I stayed when I was in London. This is in Zone 3. John isn’t a fan for personal reasons, but this is actually a great area to live!!

4. The home base for QPO in my mind is where the National Theatre is, on the South Bank. 80 minutes by bus (and a bit less than an hour on the tube), give or take, from where John’s temporary flat is located in Golders Green.

5. Guildhall School of Music and Drama is in Barbican, London. This is still in Zone 1 and, in my opinion, more or less central, but John, of course, liked the dead centre (also canonically, I suppose). Hence the reference.
Chapter 5: Final Audition

Concert Hall

John placed a reed on top of his tongue and sucked lightly. He was a bit nervous, which was uncharacteristic for him. He was a confident performer and he rarely experienced stage fright.

But something was bothering him in the back of his mind; it wasn’t that he was worried about the performance only if he was being honest with himself. If this went well (and he was going to ascertain that it does), he had to relocate somewhere closer to the rehearsal space and commit to weekly cycles immediately. He might even meet his future flatmate here. It bugged him more than he cared to admit, even to himself.

When his name was called, he went out to the stage where everyone had been waiting for him patiently in their seats. Only the principal chairs were present for the final audition. He glanced around to find Mike in the cello section, winking. John gave a tiny smile and walked to the front of the stage.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, this is Dr John Watson, our final finalist!’ Greg announced, pleased with his own pun, then winced slightly when he saw Molly rolling her eyes. ‘My name is Greg Lestrade. I’m the conductor here, obviously, haha! Dr Watson, give us a quick introduction of yourself.’

‘Hello,’ John started. ‘Just ”John”, please. Glad to meet you all. I’m honoured to be here. Barely a Doctor, actually, just got my degree in May...’ He paused, not knowing what else to say. ‘Could I, er... Could I have an A, please.’

Soo Lin gave him a resonating A in 440. John fought an urge to crack a smile and tuned his instrument. He nodded at Greg, signaling that he was ready.

Greg raised his baton. ‘Alright, you lot, let’s start with the excerpt from Peter and the Wolf. From the top of the page.’ He bent his knees and stretched his body in one smooth motion, swirling the baton for the cue.

John closed his eyes as he followed the orchestra with his ears. He felt the acoustics ricocheting the music. A low vibration hummed in his system as he let himself relax into the sound. This was it.

He was here, and this was really happening.
By the time John came out on the stage, Sherlock already knew that he had to be Applicant #31. The other two were not even close, musically or physically (according to the shadows behind the screen that he saw last week).

The first one, Jabez Wilson, was too tall. He played a bit too melodramatically, and Sherlock wasn’t sure if he’d even voted ‘yes’ for that one at the blind audition, actually.

The second candidate, Mary Sutherland, was too tiny, and she was so anxious that she had to restart one of the excerpts. Sherlock felt a twinge of sympathy somewhere in his chest; he himself had a terrible stage fright time to time, and he often had nightmares in which he was forced to play a piece he didn’t know in front of hundreds of people. It was truly unfortunate.

However, he was a bit too distracted with the fact that Applicant #31 was the third candidate of the day. He gave his bow a couple more coats of rosin in anticipation as Mary Sutherland left the stage, trembling.

At last, Applicant #31 was here. He was dressed in all black like the rest of the orchestra. Sherlock stared hard and recognised his height and body shape from the shadow that he saw at the blind audition. The applicant’s nose was even more magnificent in person. Sherlock watched him run his fingers through his sandy blond hair a couple of times as he walked out to the centre stage and glanced to his left. He noticed Mike’s wink aimed at him. Were they acquaintances? Possibly.

After the conductor’s short announcement for ‘Dr John Watson’ (frankly an anticlimactic name, in Sherlock’s opinion, as he waited nearly five months to find out), John spoke. Sherlock’s neurones started flying at a breakneck speed, grasping onto every word he uttered, to find any iota of a clue about this man.

He definitely sounded English, not to mention his name, and he most likely grew up in London. He had a doctorate which he received recently... in May? Oh - he just came back from America. Must’ve spent at least five years there, then. Why didn’t he apply for a professorship, though? Why is he back in London, applying for a performing job?

Ah, because he was denied to join the faculty, of course.

Where in America? It was too vast a country, and Sherlock wanted to pinpoint where exactly. He needed more clues. While he frantically scanned John for any more evidence, Lestrade was already signalling the orchestra to start. Sherlock sighed and joined in with the violins.

At least he’d get his wish and hear John play Peter and the Wolf, at last. He waited for John’s solo patiently. Please, don’t let it be a coincidence, he thought to himself. His mind raced with doubt. What if it was just a mistake? Can one even do that by accident anyway? Was it too good to be true?
Then John’s crystal crisp sound merged into the strings and the horns. Sherlock’s head began to spin and burst like a firework.

He’d closed his eye shut without realising. He knew the music inside and out to stare at the sheets, anyway - but it was almost a bit too much. The colours were so graphic and intense that it evoked him of his drug-addled days. He had to do a self-check of his sobriety again, though he knew he was soberer than he ever had been.

_It was John, after all!_ Sherlock screamed internally, revelling in the splashes of pigments that washed over him like spring rain.

That was _not_ a coincidence! Thank God, _that was not just a coincidence!_ 

John was not a coincidence.

Chapter End Notes

1. Peter and the Wolf is a Prokofiev composition – ‘a symphonic fairy tale for children’. It has a good clarinet solo in there, which is also a required excerpt for clarinetists.

2. Thanks Soo Lin for the A440. I personally prefer this. But I <3 NY Phil, too.

3. The nightmare in which one has to play a piece/instrument they don’t normally play is probably one of the most prominent common factors that musicians share. I’ve heard all sorts of horrible dreams regarding their performances, ha!
Chapter 6: Dr Watson, Mr Sherlock Holmes

The audition lasted about half an hour. Everyone let out a simultaneous sigh when Greg finally said, ‘That’s a wrap, you lot! Good work!’

One by one, they picked up their music and put their instruments back in the case, slowly disappearing towards the backstage.

After gathering his things, John went up to Greg, who was still scrambling with his scores on stage, and asked the question he’d been dying to ask.

‘Hey, er... When do we find out about the results?’

‘I wish I knew when exactly. Hopefully by the end of the day today,’ Greg said. John nodded, knowing not to prod any further.

‘But John--’

‘Yeah?’ He turned.

‘I’m probably not supposed to tell you this, I mean... I’m pretty sure this is technically not allowed, but I think it’s quite safe to say that you’ll be offered the position. You were bloody brilliant! Ah, sorry for my language. But you’ll be hearing that a lot now, in rehearsals,’ he grinned at John.

‘I got the job?!’ John said incredulously, mouth agape, a bit shaken from the suddenness of it all.

‘Again, disclaimers - I’m not supposed to tell you this, so please don’t go around the world broadcasting this. Not that it would matter in about a few hours, anyway. But keep this to yourself for the rest of the day, can you?’ Greg said.

‘Of course. Wow. I don’t know what to say, I’m chuffed!’ John exhaled loudly. ‘And you’re - you’re quite certain’

‘Honestly, John, if you heard the other two, you’d agree with me. Not that they were terrible. But you won, mate. The job’s yours. I’ll wait a few hours to email you the official papers and such. In the meantime-‘ Greg lowered his voice to a whisper. ‘Welcome to Queen’s Phil, John.’ Greg tapped John’s shoulders amicably and left the stage.
John stood alone in the centre. A few stage managers came back in to clear up the chairs and music stands.

He made it.

Though there was still an iota of uncertainty (as he didn’t have the papers yet), it was almost confirmed now. John Watson, Principal Clarinet at the Queen’s Philharmonic.

He couldn’t stop beaming. He needed to tell someone, anyone, though he knew he wasn’t supposed to.

* * *

He didn’t remember how he managed to find his way out of the building. When he stumbled out the door, he saw Mike waving at him as he put down his cello case on the ground. John sped towards him to somehow subtly share the news. Mike would keep the secret well for a few hours; he was a good lad.

‘John, do you have a minute?’ Mike said before John could break the news.

‘Y-yes, sure,’ John replied with a smile still plastered across his face. ‘What is it?’ he asked, slightly frowning as a tall man in a long coat inched closer to them. A bit closer than what it might be decorous, John thought. The man was holding a double-layered violin case by the handle on his right hand.

‘Well, actually, my friend here is the one who wants to talk to you. John, this is Sherlock Holmes, our concertmaster. Sherlock, this is Dr John Watson,’ Mike said, standing between the two men, each hand gently tapping on John’s left and Sherlock’s right shoulder. John took a proper look at the violinist for the first time; he had to raise his chin to meet his eyes. His mouth fell apart on its own accord.

A tiny jolt fluttered in his chest as Sherlock’s icy blue-green eyes examined him. Dark, unruly curls fell across his pale face and waved slightly in the breeze, reminding John of vintage Steinway pianos he’d seen in New York, the perfect juxtaposition of the darkest brown and creamy white. Sherlock was standing so close to John that the end of his violin case came in contact to John’s knees. Inexplicably, John didn’t mind that his personal space was thoroughly invaded and he chose not to step back.

Sherlock held a distinct aura of superiority, but he didn’t seem haughty. He couldn’t take his eyes off him, but he also wanted to look away and hide. John’s gaze travelled down for a compromise and landed on Sherlock’s long neck. A dark bruise on the left side of his jaw indicated that a violin was regularly tucked between his jaw and collarbone, adding another point of sharp contrast.
to his pallid skin. This only aggravated his confusion even more. He felt a little giddy.

_Had this man been in the orchestra this whole time? And he had something to talk to me about?_ John couldn’t remember anyone from the orchestra except Mike. He must’ve been more nervous than he thought; had he been in his right mind, there was no chance that John could’ve overlooked the fact that the concertmaster looked ... like this.

Suddenly, he was conscious of the fact that he had been sweating profusely. _A glass of cold water would be nice right about now_, John thought, licking his parched lips. He was now gaping at Sherlock’s perfect cupid’s bow without thinking - and his sharp cheekbones, like the concave curves of his own instrument -

John’s mind strayed all over the place, from the Met’s Greek and Roman statues to the Amati and Stradivari in Cremona, when he registered that he hadn’t said anything in a few seconds. He should say something. He should probably say hello. Every second was passing in a painstakingly slow motion.

Thankfully, Sherlock broke the awkward silence between them and smiled, reaching out a hand.

‘How are you?’ Sherlock shook John’s hand with such firm grip which nearly alarmed John. ‘You were in New York, I presume.’

‘Er, yes, how did you know?’ John squeaked. That was absolutely not how he wanted his first words to sound like. His face was now on fire.

‘I didn’t know, I saw. You have a name tag on your clarinet case with your business card - which has your New York address by the way. You also mentioned that you received your degree in May, so you had to have spent time in America. It hardly required any thinking,’ he explained with an air of apathy as John looked on with an awed expression, pausing only to lock his eyes with John’s.

‘Anyway, I practice on and off the whole day, and sometimes I’ll have chamber music rehearsals in the sitting room... Would that bother you? Potential flatmates should know the worst about each other,’ he continued.

John cleared his throat and turned to Mike. He had to break away and collect himself as quickly as possible. ‘So you told him about me already!’

Mike raised his eyebrows. ‘Well, not exactly yet. I was about to, just now - but you beat me to it, Sherlock. You two were both complaining today that no one would go halves with you for a flatshare, so I thought that I’d better bring you together, that’s all,’ he said with a dimpled smile. ‘How did you know it was him, though?’

‘Again, I didn’t know. Merely inferred with what I’ve gathered,’ he turned to look at John. ‘You clearly didn’t go down the pedagogical career even after acquiring your doctorate, which is usually what the degree is for anyway, so I assume that auditioning for the orchestra wasn’t on your original agenda - oh, don’t give me that look, it’s all for our benefit - which means that you left New York unexpectedly. Therefore, you might need housing, and if you are a sensible person at all, you wouldn’t have acquired a permanent place until you were sure you got the job.’

Sherlock faced Mike again. ‘Then today, I ”complained” to you about my need for a flatmate as you so quaintly described. And now you’re here with your old friend - most likely from Guildhall, I assume- who’d just graduated in May from abroad, came back in town, looking for a job and
housing. If he didn’t need immediate housing, I wouldn’t imagine that you would’ve called me for this meeting at all,’ Sherlock took a big breath after spelling it all out for them. He looked particularly smug.

‘Did you just - deduce my entire life in New York in one look?’ John asked shakily.

Sherlock shrugged, raising his brows as if to say it just sort of happens.

‘That’s ... quite brilliant, Mr Holmes,’ John was more fascinated by him every second. Sherlock had inferred all of this just because he’d said that his graduation was in May - is this person insane? Or a genius? An insane genius?

‘Please, call me Sherlock. Frankly, Dr Watson, now I’m quite certain you’ll need a permanent housing because you were clearly superior and probably hired,’ the insane genius added, stepping even closer. John squirmed inside under his scrutiny. It felt a bit odd, yet surprisingly satisfying, to be under Sherlock’s watchful eyes.

‘Er, thank you... And call me John, please. So, you’ve got a place, then, Sherlock?’ he asked, slightly intimidated by Sherlock’s towering stature. Normally, John didn’t mind his height being a bit shorter than others on the average, but Sherlock was so lean and all limbs that he seemed so much taller than him. He tried very hard not to stare at Sherlock’s neck and gave another brave attempt to meet his eyes. Sherlock’s gaze had softened considerably.

‘Yes, I’ve got an extra room in my flat on Baker Street,’ Sherlock answered in a warmer tone. ‘I’m assuming that you’ll tolerate my practice and rehearsals.’

‘Sure, if you’ll tolerate mine,’ John said playfully. ‘I’d be making a lot of noise too, you see.’

Sherlock replied to this at once without hesitation. ‘That’s not a problem at all. Please feel free to make your noise.’

‘Perfect. I’d... love to hear you, too. Noises will be made all day, then.’ John licked his lips and looked at Mike and nodded slowly. This might be a good arrangement. His eyes darted back to Sherlock and studied the buttons on his black dress shirt now, thoroughly distracted, and missed Mike stifling his snigger at the subtle, inadvertent innuendos flying about.

‘I must tell you though,’ said Sherlock, reluctantly. ‘I do have other shortcomings. I don’t talk for days on end sometimes. You’ve just got to leave me alone and I’ll soon come around. And I’ve got clutter around the flat that never seem to tidy themselves.’

‘Being laconic is not a shortcoming, and I’ll be the judge of the tidiness once I see the place. Speaking of which - when can I see it?’ John asked.

Sherlock bit his lips. ‘You could come now if you’d like. I’m done for the day,’ he suggested, then added hurriedly, ‘That is, if you have the time.’ John thought he saw tiny pink splotches forming on Sherlock’s cheeks.

‘My, Sherlock! I’ve never seen you blush, mate!’ Mike chortled, confirming John’s theory. ‘You really must need a flatmate, I suppose! Crossing my fingers for you, maybe John will take it and put an end to it all!” He clapped Sherlock on the back lightly.

‘Obviously. Dr Watson, would you accompany me to my flat for a viewing?’ Sherlock said, stiffening again, his speech more polite despite his invitation to the first-name basis. John didn’t know him well at all, but he could tell that Sherlock was raising his guard with propriety at the thought of the possibility that John might not take the flat after all.
But it was too opportune for either of them to pass up. They had a mutual understanding here; both had wondered if they’ll ever find a suitable flatmate who can stand them. They had both complained to Mike. What were the chances - that a) John’s audition happened to be today, b) Mike was a member of this particular orchestra, c) John ran into Mike today to catch up and tell him about his need for a flatshare, and d) it also happened to be the day that Sherlock apparently bemoaned not being able to find a flatmate?

John eyed Sherlock curiously. (He was gradually getting used to staring and being stared at.) He anxiously explored all possibilities for this chance to evaporate, securing himself with the ideas of the worst-case situation out of habit. When he couldn’t think of anything worse than just going back to square one of the flatshare hunt, he decided to take a leap of faith that this might be something like fate. It didn’t make him feel any better, however, as ‘fate’ had been cruel to John.

Five months ago, John was at his unhappiest period of his life, lost and hurt. He was led to believe that pure talent would never be enough to succeed in this business. He had been forced out of a city he once loved and returned home like an injured veteran. And he certainly didn’t have high hopes for what London had in store for him, either. He could only ask for a miracle.

Then something like today just happened, making up for John’s recent misfortune. If he went ahead and saw the flat to be fit, John would have landed both his job and a flat in one go. And possibly met the most beautiful man he’d ever seen, who might very well be his future flatmate. Did that ever happen in real life? Wasn’t this too good to be true? Was this the miracle that he asked for?

‘Yes, I’d love to,’ John replied. He needed to see the flat first and make a rational decision instead of romanticising his luck. It was hard for one to think rationally when Sherlock Holmes’ vehement gaze was fixed upon one, evidently.

‘Perfect. Mike, thank you. I’ll see you later. Taxi!’ Sherlock yelled with a hand in the air. John followed him closely. He waved goodbye at Mike, mouthing ‘Thank you’. Mike gave him two thumbs up and walked away jovially.

Within a minute, John and Sherlock were in a cab. ‘221 Baker Street, please,’ Sherlock said to the cabbie, shutting the door behind him. John was somewhat familiar with that area - it was near Regent’s Park if he wasn’t mistaken. What an amazing location - the day was just getting better and better.

Beside him, Sherlock laid his violin case on his lap and fidgeted with his fingers. A comfortable silence fell between them. John looked out the window and pondered over his almost-fate if he had stayed in New York. Probably nothing as good as this. Abstract shapes and voices narrated his miserable what-if scenarios as the cab crossed Waterloo Bridge, heading north.
1. OMG. They finally met. It’s chapter 6, and they finally met. Cue Subterranean Homesick Alien, by Radiohead. (If I could make this into a film, this would be the music for their cab ride to 221B. In fact, if you have the patience, please imagine their cab ride across the Thames / the cityscape outside the cab window while listening to this. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tEsgUiF2jGk )

2. Welcome to a healthy combination of both ACD Canon’s and BBCverse’s Johnlock MeetCute! This is truly a momentous and historical event that I just absolutely had to expand on this for multiple chapters. I’m aware that BBC Sherlock is a bit icier than ACD Holmes, so I aimed for somewhere in between. Enjoy heavy references and nods to all sorts of stuff.

3. Sherlock turns out to be not only a fantastic violinist but also quite good at making deductions. Well, his name is Sherlock for a reason, haha.

4. Sherlock has a Violin Hickey!! *giggles* Google “Fiddler’s neck” if you’re interested to know more.

5. Clarifications, just in case.

  - Vintage Steinway pianos sometimes have creamy, off-white ivory keys and not-quite-black ones, unlike the newer pianos that usually come in jet black and zinc white colour.

  - Met: Metropolitan Museum of Arts

  - Amati and Stradivari are some fancy af violins that are in the violin museum in the city of Cremona, Italy (they also have fantastic gelato. Do visit)
Chapter Notes

Thanks for reading! Make sure to click the hyperlinks, especially if they're musical pieces. They will help better your reading experience! (Hopefully.) Loads of notes in the end, as loads of music is mentioned. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 7: 221B Baker Street

John startled out of his reverie when Sherlock nudged him on his side. The cab had arrived on the corner of Baker Street and Melcombe Street.

‘We’re here,’ Sherlock said tersely, paying his fare.

‘That was a short ride.’ John stretched as he got out of the cab, swinging his clarinet case on his back. It had been years since he was in this area. ‘This is a prime spot - it must be bloody expensive!’

‘Oh, Mrs Hudson, the landlady - she’s giving me a special deal,’ Sherlock rummaged his coat pocket for his keys. ‘She’s a retired chamber coach and prefers musicians for renters. Before me, she had a pianist living here for ages,’ he said, jamming one of the found keys in the door to 221B.

When the door opened, a small woman walked out towards them with a radiant smile. She was wearing a lavish, peacock-patterned dress. Her face shone with sophistication and elegance, a lifetime of culture evident in every inch of her tiny physique.

‘Sherlock! You have company!’ She cried.

‘Mrs Hudson, this is Doctor John Watson, here to see the flat,’ Sherlock introduced them. John took her hand to shake, but she raised it to level with his face, which he took as a permission to kiss her hand. He complied. ‘Pleasure to meet you, Mrs Hudson,’ he said.

‘Likewise,’ Mrs Hudson said gracefully.

‘Alright, now that we’re done with the niceties.’ Sherlock impatiently led them to the flat upstairs and flung open the door to reveal the rooms.
Sherlock wasn’t kidding with the clutter talk, apparently. The sitting room was full of his belongings. There wasn’t a square foot without a book or a music sheet in it.

'Sherlock, what a mess you've made -' Mrs Hudson said, crinkling her nose.

A Georgia O’Keeffe painting of a cow skull hung on a wall, and underneath it was a large mahogany table with towers of scores. The few precious minutes of sunlight through the clouds bled into the windows, highlighting two armchairs against the fireplace. On the mantle was a bust of a severe-looking Beethoven. This would be a cosy setting for the winter, John imagined.

This was a well-furnished place, albeit a little messy - but it gave a comfortable lived-in vibe, and John immediately felt at home. He recognised a couple of lamps from IKEA (he had some too, in his New York apartment) and smiled at the familiarity.

On the other side of the room was a small upright piano, almost invisible with post-its and loose sheets of music haphazardly laid across the stand and on top. The wall adjacent to the piano had dozens of brownish-yellow objects sticking on it, which John soon discovered to be flattened pieces of rosin, spelling out EIIR.

‘Did Her Royal Highness commission this piece of contemporary art, then?’ John smirked.

‘When the rosin pieces get too small to use, I just sort of ... keep them. I strangely grow attached to them. I just had them strewn about in the room, but Mrs Hudson kept stepping on them, so she told me that I need to do something with them or she’d throw them out,’ Sherlock said, gazing at his work fondly. ‘I’m sure the queen wouldn’t mind.’

‘She should give you a knighthood,’ John teased. ‘But if she knew that her royal cypher was in the midst of such shambles, she might invite you in for an aggressive tea.’

Sherlock missed the joke entirely and bit his lips. ‘Obviously, I can tidy some stuff up.’ He dashed across and started to make even taller towers of books and scores on the table, which didn’t help the state of the untidiness at all.

‘What do you think, then, Dr Watson? There is another room upstairs if you'll be needing two,’ Mrs Hudson’s eyes twinkled in amusement.

‘Of course we'll be needing two,’ John scowled in confusion. ‘I'm here to see the room upstairs.’

‘Oh don't worry, there are all sorts around here! Mrs Turner next door's got married ones! You can still use the upstairs room for practice space,’ she hastily added and excused herself to downstairs.

John wasn't sure what she was implying. Did she think that he was moving in with Sherlock to share a room together? He felt his face redden at the thought of such intimacy. It didn't sound terrible, actually, only if they weren’t literal strangers. Sherlock was quite alluring, to say the least... But he had more propriety than to act on a mildly insane and reckless thought. Even if that did happen sometime in the future, he would probably take it slow and see what happens, as they literally just had met about half an hour ago.
Listen to yourself, John, you don’t know anything about him, and you’re already fantasising about sharing a room! John chided himself.

Mrs Hudson definitely mistook them as an item though, it seemed, even though John was a mere guest. The way she said ‘you have company!’ sounded like Sherlock never brought anyone over.

But surely he must have - a girlfriend? Boyfriend? Something. Someone. How could this incredible man be single? How could anyone leave him alone? Was he not interested? He would ask sometime.

John felt Sherlock watching him closely as he gave a once-over of the kitchen. It had a tiny table in the centre; it might squeeze in four people, maximum. This table, too, was occupied with a mountain of scores, books, and a thin layer of rosin dust. On the counter was a half-full kettle. Four cups with tea residue sat in the sink. Perhaps Sherlock wasn't expecting to bring a potential renter if he had left all this mess.

Sherlock was now in an armchair closer to the window. It looked strangely inviting, and John mirrored this action by sitting on the other chair.

‘So far so good,’ John said, squinting at the Beethoven bust. ‘This is a great location, and with a bit of tidying, this could be quite lovely. I wonder why it's still available?’

Sherlock sighed. ‘Haven't the faintest. Perhaps it had to do with the room upstairs. Or me. I'm not a mind reader, contrary to popular belief.’

‘Mind if I take a look at the room upstairs?’

‘By all means, go ahead.’

John climbed the stairs up and turned to find an open door on his left. He expected the room to be on an equal level of disorder as the sitting room, but for some reason, it was the only space that he'd seen so far that had no books, scores, or other unknown objects.

It was a simple room with a small closet, an empty bookshelf, a rectangular desk, and a chair. The walls were bare, but there were a few nails that had once held paintings or frames. Other than that, the room had a vacant space in the centre that would fit a double bed. John took a mental photograph and came back downstairs.

‘Thoughts?’ Sherlock prompted, looking anxious.

‘Er, well,’ John started when he was interrupted by a loud bang, the sound of someone running up the stairs, followed by a deafening knock. ‘Er, is someone here?’

‘It would seem so. Lestrade, come in. The door is open,’ Sherlock slouched on the chair and tilted his head back in annoyance.

‘How did you know it was me?’ Greg panted as he entered, and Sherlock shot him a glance that said ‘who else’.

‘Never mind. I don't want to hear it. Sherlock, there was--’ he stopped to do a double take. ‘Wait,
is that you, John?"

“Yes, hello, don’t mind me. Just looking at the spare room. I was about to leave,” John said, reaching for his case.

“We still have to talk, John. He won’t be long. Please stay,” Sherlock said. A slight urgency in his voice hadn’t been missed by John. He sat back on the chair opposite from Sherlock’s.

‘Lestrade, do stop the pacing and get on with it.’

Greg heaved a great sigh. ‘Sherlock, there is a problem. I would’ve called, but I was already in the cab, and this needed to be in person. Apparently, the board had changed the program last month, and—’

‘What?!’ Sherlock roared, furling his brows in a deep frown.

‘Wait, sorry, what?’ John cut in as well before he could stop himself. ‘Last month?!’

Greg scratched his head. ‘I - I must've missed the memo. This wasn't supposed to happen! We’d already agreed on the program months ago--’

‘Calm. Down. The damage is done. Now, did they change the program entirely, or is it just a few pieces?’ Sherlock buried his face in his large hands. ‘It must be Mycroft’s doing. This is fucking preposterous, did someone forget to bring him his afternoon cake?’ he hissed.

‘No, thank goodness! It's just a few additions. Instead of the Grieg special, we're going to do a contemporary piece - Esa-Pekka Salonen, you know, the Finnish bloke - and a chamber music week at the end of the year.’ Greg went into the kitchen to help himself to a glass of water.

‘Which Salonen piece is it?’ Sherlock asked, looking slightly relaxed at this news.

‘It's the violin concerto, written last year. This one’s for December, but I don't think we have the budget to hire an outside soloist at the moment. Sherlock...’ he looked at the violinist imploringly. ‘Do you know the piece? Do you think you can - learn it? In two months? For the concert?’

‘Two months are more than enough. I've never heard it, but I can remedy that tonight. Do you have the music?’ Sherlock looked at him expectantly, his face lightening up with the joy of a challenge.

‘Yeah, I've brought it with me. I made a copy of my score and the violin part. I'm afraid there is no piano reduction though, so we'll have to find you a pianist who can do it for you,’ Greg said, looking very relieved. ‘Thanks, Sherlock. I'll count on you.’

‘There's no need. Now, what of the chamber pieces? I'm assuming that you can't hire outside people for those, either,’ Sherlock sat closer to the edge of the seat, leaning forward.

‘This is a bigger issue, actually. The Salonen piece, honestly, I sort of expected you to do it, anyway. But the chamber pieces are: Poulenc Sextet, Bartok Contrasts, and Stravinsky’s L’histoire du soldat Suite. We have to take care of this within the group, because we won't have time to rehearse for these at least until April, Sherlock. We have to secure some players now.’ Greg took another swig of water.

‘Interesting selection. Perhaps I’ll send a Christmas card to Mycroft this year.’ Sherlock mulled this over. ‘John?’
‘Y-yeah?’ John looked up, startled; he didn't expect to be involved in this conversation.

‘Have you played any of these before?’

‘Er... yes, I have. I used to be in a sextet,’ John replied. A few years ago, he had performed the Poulenc piece with his wind quintet and a guest pianist. ‘And L’histoire, obviously.’


‘Never performed in public, but I know the piece.’

‘Good enough for me. Lestrade, are you listening to this? I think we've solved your little issue here. Now go home. John and I have to talk about .... the rent,’ Sherlock said, his eyes never leaving John.

‘Sherlock, I hear what you're saying, but I can't just take your word for the chamber music. Violin Concerto is one thing, but chamber music is all about cooperation. I'll have to see a group rehearse, then I'll decide.’ Greg started to pace again.

‘Fine.’ Sherlock swirled and leapt to the walls, stepping on all the furniture in his way, then ran his fingers along the shelves and muttered to himself.

‘Bach... Barber... Bartok! ... Contrasts!’

John watched him searching for scores on the shelves and was shocked that the clutter of scores was actually in an alphabetical order.

‘P.... Poulenc ... Aha! And I know exactly where Stravinsky is.’ Sherlock jumped with three score sets in his hands. ‘Lestrade, you play the piano part. I'll do what I can with both flute and oboe parts for the Poulenc. John, would you read with us?’ He said, handing the respective parts to them.

‘Now?’ Greg and John said simultaneously.

‘Yes, now, we are going to read some music. Clearly, this chamber night absolutely needs John’s participation, as all three pieces require the clarinet. And two of these are for violin, clarinet, and piano. Isn't this most opportune? Now, your respective instruments, if you will.’

As if he were hypnotised, John took out his clarinet and began assembling, wetting a reed in his mouth. Greg wordlessly walked over to the piano and took a heaping pile of music to place on the floor to make some room.

‘Why don't we do Poulenc first?’ Sherlock suggested, rosining his bow and humming lightly. ‘Lestrade, you give us the signal.’

‘What is this, a bloody spontaneous sight-reading party?’ Greg barked.
‘If you must call it that to make yourself feel better, sure.’

John looked at his part. It had been years since he played this piece; the last time was in Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie. Afterwards, he’d gone for drinks with James and had hours and hours of good talk, leading to another one of those almost-somethings at which they often arrived. He briefly wondered what James would say if he saw John in this predicament.

‘Do you realise how bloody hard the piano part goes? Sure, I know how it goes, but this is très vite et emporté!’ Greg roared thunderously. It was understandable; John remembered how their guest pianist also needed some solid practice prior to the rehearsals to collaborate.

‘Stop whining, Lestrade. Just the first movement, and we’re not playing for the Queen,’ Sherlock retorted, skimming through the oboe part.

‘Yes, you are,’ Mrs Hudson said as she came back into the sitting room. Everyone fell silent. ‘Go on. I may be retired, but my ears are still sharp.’

‘I have no time to argue with this, so I will let this one pass, Your Majesty,’ said Sherlock, shaking his head. ‘Come on, Lestrade! Count us in. It starts with A minor melodic scale!’

‘Bloody hell, give us a minute!’ Greg huffed. ‘This is not meant to be sight-read!’

John took pity. ‘Greg, don’t worry. Just give us the first three octaves, and from Rehearsal 1, you can just follow through with the first beats of each bar. This is obviously not a sight-reading material,’ he sympathised.

‘Alright, fine. Here we go. I’ll give you one bar. One, two, three, four.’

John had never played a sextet (for a wind quintet and a piano, no less) with a violin and piano before, for obvious reasons. When they took off with three resounding octaves in A minor, it sounded remotely similar to what it should, but Sherlock was reading the full score next to Greg, switching back and forth from flute and oboe parts, sometimes chiming in with the bassoon and the horn part as well when necessary, and it became an entirely different piece altogether.

Despite Greg’s protests, he was actually a decent sight-reader, and he ploughed through the notes in a relatively high accuracy. They all burst into laughter when the last note was horribly out of sync.

In an unspoken understanding, they went on to play the Stravinsky, which was the more successfully accomplished, as both Sherlock and John knew the piece well.

Lastly, Bartok Contrasts were played without further ado. The piano part was a lot easier to read, but there were a few tricky runs and long melodies for which John felt unprepared.

All in all, it was one of the most fun John had in a while during a rehearsal. By the looks of it, Greg and Sherlock’s content faces told him that they felt more or less the same. Mrs Hudson nodded and applauded approvingly.
‘That was the most ridiculous sight-reading I’ve ever done,’ John panted lightly. The bloody cadenza from the Contrasts’ first movement had him slightly out of breath. He was sure that he was beet-coloured from the neck up, too. Greg seconded the sentiment, cursing loudly.

‘I thought it was rather good, John. Performing probably suits you better than teaching, if I might conjecture,’ Sherlock complimented. ‘So, Lestrade. Do we still have an issue?’

Greg’s face lit up considerably. ‘I suppose- I suppose not. Only if you’re sure. And John, will you consider the offer to do these chamber pieces? Because you’re bloody phenomenal, mate. I'll speak with the artistic director,’ he said. ‘By the way, the official email is in. I just sent it before coming here.’

‘Wow, thank you!’ John said, putting down his instrument on his lap, dissembling slowly. ‘Thank you so much - this means so much to me.’

Greg turned his heels back to the door. ‘Next rehearsal cycle starts on Tuesday at 9 a.m. Don’t be late. You too, Sherlock.’

‘I’m afraid the rehearsal starts when I’m there, anyway,’ Sherlock dismissed this with a wave. ‘Please leave now.’

Greg shut the door behind him, chuckling away.

‘So, John. What do you think, will you take my offer too?’ Sherlock said.

‘I’ll, er, think about it and let you know.’

‘Surely you jest. There is no better deal. It’s yours if you want it.’

‘I - I know. But I need to sleep on it,’ John licked his lips. ‘Can I get back to you tomorrow?’

‘John,’ Sherlock looked straight into John’s eyes and enunciated. ‘Yours. If you want it.’

John’s breath hitched. In the distance, they could hear Mrs Hudson vocalising with a recording of Hindemith’s Das Marienleben. Dark clouds enveloped the sun, taking the sunlight out of the sitting room, accentuating the shadows underneath Sherlock’s sharp cheekbones even deeper. John swallowed hard.

‘Well, I should get back,’ he got up from the armchair, dragging his unwilling feet to the door and picking up his clarinet case. He didn’t actually have to think about his answer, but he also didn’t want to seem too desperate or impulsive. He’ll ‘sleep on it’ like he said and casually pass on the message in the next few days or so. Yes. That will do. He shook Sherlock’s hand again.

‘Looking forward,’ Sherlock said, closing the door shut.

‘Likewise,’ John said, descending the stairs.
He hadn’t felt so alive in a long while. God, this was crazy.

What the fuck did he just do - did he just become the principal chair, (basically) got a promising flat (with an even more promising flatmate), plus a solid chamber concert for the Phil in the upcoming season? Who was he and what alternative universe was this?

He pondered this as he took out his Oyster card at the Baker Street station. Then he realised that he’d have to transfer twice to get to Golders Green on the bloody Northern Line. Better get a cab instead. Hell, he really wanted to move even more. Baker Street had so many handy options for the tube... Although, if he travelled with Sherlock, he imagined that he might be sharing a cab mostly.

Okay, stop thinking about Sherlock now, he muttered to himself and hailed a cab.

* * *

Meanwhile, in 221B Baker Street, Sherlock skipped two steps at a time down to Mrs Hudson’s flat and rapped on her door loudly.

“What is it, dear?” The landlady paused the recording with a click and answered, scanning Sherlock’s expression. “Is everything alright?”

“Mrs Hudson, Doctor Watson will take the room upstairs,” he beamed.

Chapter End Notes

1. Mrs Hudson is fabulous, and yes, Sherlock did say that she is a queen.

2. Cow Skull: Red, White, and Blue (1931) is an oil-on-canvas painting by Georgia O’Keeffe, an American artist. I wanted to keep the idea of a bovine skull hanging off the wall - but in a different aesthetic. A replica, of course, as the original resides in the Met Museum.

3. BBC Sherlock uses at least one IKEA lamp - which Sherlock (here in this fic) also owns. So do I, actually.

4. EIIR: Elizabeth II Regina, of course - a nod to the “VR” in ACD canon.

5. Esa-Pekka Salonen’s Violin Concerto was written in 2009, the year before this fic’s setting. He is from Finland.

6. Igor Stravinsky’s L’histoire du soldat (The soldier’s tale) Suite is for violin, clarinet, and piano. I have yet to meet a clarinettist who hasn’t played this.
7. Béla Bartók, my favourite Hungarian composer, wrote Contrasts for violin, clarinet, and piano, which are in three movements.

8. très vite et emporté: ‘super fast & swept away.’

9. The Poulenc Sextet recording that I’ve hyperlinked is actually my own (please don’t share the link- hope it stays within the fandom only!). It was from a performance from 2014 with my chamber group. I worked with the best wind quintet I could ever ask for. I’m including my work because I want you all to feel my panic-ridden passages that poor Greg also had to undergo. Again, this is not a sight-readable stuff. Recommended thing to do is to listen for the final note (A), on which all six instruments have to play simultaneously - and imagine that Sherlock, John, and Greg played this moment out of sync. lmao

10. Hindemith’s Das Marienleben is a song cycle written for piano and soprano. Hyperlinked recording is my FAVOURITE by Roxolana Roslak and Glenn Gould. Mrs Hudson was listening to the first movement, Geburt Maria.

11. Thanks always for reading!
Exposition

Chapter Notes

Hyperlinks ...! Get your headphones out ;-)  

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They slipped briskly into an intimacy from which they never recovered

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *This Side of Paradise*

Chapter 8: Exposition

**Week 2 rehearsal cycle,**

**December 2010**

John woke to a soft tinkling sound of the piano. Still disoriented, he checked the time. 6:15 a.m.

‘Ugh, I thought we talked about this –’ John groaned, kicking off the blankets. For weeks, John had repeatedly implored Sherlock NOT to play music before the sunrise (or after midnight, for that matter), but Sherlock has never adhered to his petition. At least today it was a quieter, somewhat consonant piano piece, not a Xenakis violin solo, which sounded like a wailing mammal whether or not one was asleep, no offence to the composer.

Once John finally got out of bed, he recognised the lyrical piece to be **Ginastera’s Cuyana from *Tres Piezas***. He smiled to himself. Sherlock must be in a good mood this morning if he was on the piano. They still had two hours until they had to leave for the rehearsal, but John didn’t mind spending an hour or so just having tea while Sherlock played. He put on a dressing gown unhurriedly and went downstairs.

‘Cuyana?’ John asked, yawning. ‘If you’re going to play something at this hour, I’d prefer pieces like this, Sherlock, for future references.’

‘Cu-sha-na, John. He’s Argentinian,’ corrected Sherlock, finishing the last few measures, which should have sounded melancholic, but for some reason, Sherlock’s last chords were rather Elysian, and he looked not unlike an angel himself as he did so. He was in his blue dressing gown
this morning. Out of six or seven dressing gowns that John had seen, this one was his favourite. Sherlock’s eyes looked positively scintillating in it.

‘I’ll put the kettle on, then, shall I,’ John said, ignoring Sherlock’s comment entirely. ‘It’s too early to talk about Argentinian pronunciation... Blimey, Mrs Hudson must be a deep sleeper. Did you get any sleep? I’m still knackered.’

‘Two sugars for me,’ Sherlock replied absentmindedly.

John really didn’t mind mornings like this. Well, if he was honest with himself, he had to admit that he loved these calm mornings, domesticity percolating every corner of the atmosphere.

It felt like home. It was home.

It had been just shy of two months since he had moved in and they’d fallen into each other’s life perfectly like a bloody jigsaw puzzle. He’d never ended up waiting too long on the idea of moving, as he had transferred all his possessions the day after viewing 221B. That very night, Sherlock had opened a bottle of champagne and they drank in a familiar silence as David Attenborough narrated *Planet Earth (Ice World)* in the background.

Sherlock practised almost all day like he said he would, and he didn’t care whether or not John made any noise. When they played in their respective bedrooms, the sound was muffled enough that it mildly reminded John of his conservatory days.

However, Sherlock wasn’t really an ideal flatmate in many aspects. The only chore he did around the flat was washing his tea cups (after leaving them in the sink for at least a day). Despite his initial promises, he didn’t take down any of his book-towers on the table or the piano; they’d just got taller and taller until John piled them into smaller stacks.

About once a week, Sherlock invited Mrs Hudson or Molly to play the piano part to his sonatas or chamber pieces, expecting John to play mummy and make them tea. In a strange way, it was sort of like sitting a baby. Or a cat.

On Monday nights when they didn’t have rehearsals or performances, they had long talks about music, history, weird anecdotes that they’d heard over the years about composers or performers, and themselves. Sherlock didn’t seem like a talkative type at first, and John hadn’t expected him to open up so much within two months of knowing him and frankly been a bit surprised.

However, John did notice that, although Sherlock talked quite a lot when they were alone, he rarely said anything of significance especially regarding his past, and the things he did reveal were more like - factoids.
So far, John found out that Sherlock had:

1. studied at the Royal College of Music from age 17 to 21, then toured in and out of the country, performing with many renowned orchestras;
2. written a research paper on Prokofiev’s opera *Semyon Kotko*, the discussion of which had gone way past overnight, as John had also written his dissertation on Russian music;
3. professionally performed all Paganini Caprices and Bach Partitas and Sonatas by age eleven;
4. learned both piano and violin, but chose to pursue violin as his major because he couldn’t carry a piano with him; and
5. a brother who was remotely involved with the QPO in some way.

When John asked him why he moved to London permanently, Sherlock had simply said, ‘I needed to come home’. The unusual ambiguity of his wording had stayed with John, but he left it there for the time being. It was enough that Sherlock trusted him as a listener, and John had a feeling that not many people in Sherlock’s life had come remotely as close to hearing such details.

Another element in their lifestyle that brought them quite close in the past couple of months was their spontaneous sight-reading nights. Sherlock had a vast library of chamber music scores, and they picked a random one from his shelves every now and then to just sit down and play.

To John’s (pleasant) astonishment, Sherlock seemed to love listening to John’s playing. Though John had at first braced himself for the incoming snub, Sherlock not only paid him compliments, he sometimes asked John to play specific excerpts for him. After a few of those reading nights, Sherlock even asked if he can sit in during John’s practice. John usually didn’t care for another person listening to him practise, but somehow, he didn’t mind. There was something warm and cozy about having Sherlock sit on his bed, humming to himself gently as John played the clarinet.

Occasionally over tea or dinner, they listened to Sherlock’s collection of music. Sherlock had a refined taste when it came to recordings, and John relished these moments of just sitting around and listening to incredible compositions next to each other. Sherlock would throw his head back in his armchair and purr, his long lashes fluttering, eyes moving so rapidly underneath his closed lids as if he was dreaming. Certain harmonies would make Sherlock’s entire body go rigid.

It was a grand sight, just watching him listen to music. John could tell that Sherlock truly let go of himself at times like this and felt privileged to witness - or even be in the presence of - such spectacle. It was oddly intimate. John often fought an itch to brush away a curl in Sherlock’s forehead.

But there were also days in which, like he said, he didn’t open his mouth at all. It didn’t bother John all that much. Sometimes they just happened to sit next to each other, and one of them would just turn on *Doctor Who*. Hours had passed by like that in silence.
Once after not saying a word to each other for two full days, John had caught Sherlock sleeping on the couch with a laptop on his belly, snoring softly in front of the screen displaying photographs of cats in tight spaces. John slid on the edge of the couch, put Sherlock’s feet on his lap, and read a book for a few hours, his heart skipping a beat in fondness.

In short, John was irretrievably falling for his flatmate at an alarming pace.

But he never admitted this to himself fully, because he didn’t want to complicate anything. Sherlock had never shown even a slightest romantic interest in anyone, ever.

When John finally questioned him one day about his past relationships, he merely said ‘Not really my area’ and ‘I’m married to music, as you can tell, John’. He knew better to push him further and closed that door, however reluctantly (though not quite shut all the way). It was for the best, he thought. It appeared that Sherlock simply didn’t do relationships. Or close friendships - besides John - and he surely didn’t want to risk ruining it.

Sherlock, like Mike had said on his audition day, was not the most polite bloke. Rehearsals were, to simply put, both catastrophic and successful because of this side of him. Sherlock did try to hold his contempt for those who were a bit out of tune or slower than usual - to little avail. If he didn’t bark at the said players right there and then, he’d hunt them down during the break or after the rehearsal to let them know exactly what he’d thought and what they should do in order to fix it. Most of the orchestra members had given up on arguing with him, though, and they just silently took his ‘advice’.

Occasionally, Anderson or the trumpeter Henry Knight would retaliate, but Sherlock was adamant each time with his opinions. John watched Greg flail over Sherlock and another member looking daggers at each other across the room countless times, apologising profusely on Sherlock’s behalf later (‘Come on, mate, you know he’s just trying to help... To be fair, you did sound a bit flat in that section, you’ve got to admit...’).

At the end of the day, their collaboration improved slowly but surely, and Greg dismissed them with a big smile each time.

Unsurprisingly, John had become friends with most, if not all, of the orchestra members very quickly. It felt so natural to see Mike Stamford on a regular basis, of course; John had missed his company more than he’d thought. They often went out for a pint after an evening rehearsal, along with Molly, Janine, and even Billy, who seemed to love squabbling with the horn player (though without any actual heat).

Sherlock’s good mood in the morning continued throughout the rehearsal that day as their Brahms’ 3rd Symphony sounded more or less prepared for that weekend’s performance.
After the section rehearsals, John agreed to come out to the first all-orchestra pub night of the season, to which everyone except Sherlock attended. John, and even Greg, had invited him, but Sherlock flat out rejected and went home by himself.

John truly had wished that Sherlock could just be normal for once and join them, but as the night proceeded he was very distracted with the new percussionist, Sarah Sawyer. He learned that Sarah had also auditioned at the same week as he had, and this gave them something to talk about. John was glad that he wasn’t the only new addition to the orchestra and asked her how her audition had been.

‘I almost had a heart attack when I thought I didn’t have my go-to marimba mallets with me at the blind audition,’ Sarah recalled. ‘Thank goodness I had them stashed in my cymbal bag. I don’t know what they were doing there! I usually shove them in my mallet bag all nice and neat.’

‘Oh, that reminds me of a dream I had last night, where I was asked to play the English horn at a concert because all the oboists were out that day - and they -’ Janine paused to howl a shaky laughter – ‘they, they handed me an untrimmed clarinet cane to play with!’

Everyone pounded on the table with their hand in a hysterical guffaw at that. Relaying this vibe, Mike made a joke about conductors. ‘Hey, what’s the difference between a bull and an orchestra? A bull has horns in the front, and an arse in the back!’

Greg, and even the trombone player, Steven Bainbridge, who seemed most reserved and reticent, laughed with tears in their eyes.

It was a fun, jovial night, and everyone was in high spirits.

After the group had dispersed one by one, Sarah asked for John’s mobile number and suggested that they grab dinner the next night, of which John felt a bit flattered and silly. John was still not quite over the shock of having his life rearranged so drastically, and exchanging a number and scheduling a date (was that a date?) with someone at work - a confident, beautiful woman, no less - sort of made everything seem even more official that John was now definitely a part of this group. Perhaps, if things with Sarah went well, he’d get over his stupid crush on his flatmate. A bloke can hope.

* * *

On his way back home to Baker Street, John wondered what Sherlock would think of him being chummy with the orchestra people; Sherlock apparently spent months with them, but he never joined them for a social gathering, and tonight was not an exception.
‘Another pub night?’ Sprawled on the couch, Sherlock eyed him warily as John put his keys down on a side table. ‘What do you see in those people, is it actually worth it?’

‘Yes, it was an all-orchestra pub night! They’re nice people. I like them. I’ve become friends with them.’ John said.

‘Friends...’ Sherlock wrinkled his nose. ‘I never cared for having friends.’

‘What about Molly? Mike?’

‘More like “colleagues”. Good ones, though.’

‘Well, I’m a friend, aren’t I?’ John objected.

‘Don’t be absurd, John.’

‘You wouldn’t call me a friend?’ He felt disappointment rising in his voice.

‘Well, like I said, I don’t really have “friends”...’ Sherlock said distractedly.

‘So, I’m just flatmate, then?’ John said a little louder than he intended.

‘I mean...’ Sherlock seemed to have realised where this was going at last and recoiled. ‘You’re - you’re different, John. Yes, technically, you’re a friend. But to call you a “friend” is a bit... unfitting, don’t you think?’

‘Oh, right, you bloody tosser. Well, good thing I’m making other friends, then, if I’m unfit to be your friend.’ John snapped, and added with a sudden inspiration, ‘Oh, and I’ve got myself a date tomorrow, so I’ll have to pass on our Stravinsky reading. Don’t wait up.’


‘Sarah. Just got her number,’ John growled, then his mobile pinged with a text alert. It was Sarah. ‘Look, she just texted me. I’d better get this. Goodnight, Sherlock.’ John said sharply as he climbed the stairs, ignoring Sherlock’s shocked face. He was more crossed than he cared to admit.

Who did he think John was? *Technically a friend?* Were they merely two people who shared a flat? And here he was, just naively assuming that Sherlock accepted him (of all people!) as a good friend in such a short time despite his aversion to the act of befriending. Who was he kidding? Sherlock didn’t like people. Why should he be an exception?

But he did say that John was ‘different’. What did he mean by that? And - unfitting?

John slammed the door intentionally, feeling a tiny bit like a petulant child. He was sure Sherlock heard it. Served him right. He wouldn’t call him a ‘friend’, after all.

*Ping!*

John picked up his mobile to find a text from Sherlock.
What an utter berk. Sighing heavily, he opened Sarah’s text from earlier.

[John, it’s me! So nice to have finally met you outside the rehearsal, haha. How about The Green Room tomorrow, then? Right behind us after work!]

_The Green Room, of course_, he smirked, feeling a bit of his exasperation melt away at this. He liked that she had already picked a place for them and that the restaurant was called The Green Room of all things. She had a sense of humour. Smiling, he replied.

[Our green room to THE Green Room. Sounds perfect. We’ll leave together after the rehearsal.]

He received another text from her within the minute.

[Great. See you then!]

He threw the mobile on his bed. Changing into a dressing gown and grabbing a towel, he went down to the loo for a shower, resolutely not looking towards the sitting room where Sherlock was surely sulking. By the time he came back to his room, there were three more texts waiting from him, from Sherlock.

[John? Sunday night? SH]

[It’s a yes or no question if you’re having a trouble. SH]

[I’m amenable to a ‘maybe’. Or even another night. SH]

John couldn’t help but chuckle. This man was ridiculous. He considered replying, but he was still a bit too cross and decided against it. He’ll just talk to him tomorrow. They’ll sight-read on Sunday, no doubt, but John didn’t want to give in too early. After plugging his mobile to charge, he turned off the light and climbed into his bed, sighing pleasantly as he settled on the crisp sheets. When he was about to doze off to a peaceful sleep, he vaguely heard another text alert which he didn’t check until the next morning.

[Sunday night it is, then. Mark your calendar. SH]
Chapter End Notes

1. LOL. Iannis Xenakis’ violin solo work does sound a bit like a wailing mammal. I’m so sorry, Iannis.

2. Ginastera’s Tres Piezas has three delightful movements. Sherlock played Cuyana, the first movement; here, I’m attaching my own recording to add a touch of realism (people coughing and stuff in the audience lmao).

3. Prokofiev’s opera Semyon Kotko is about a veteran returning to his hometown after 4 years at war, and it’s only fitting that Sherlock did his research on this subject. ;)

4. Marimba is a percussion instrument, sort of like a gigantic wooden xylophone, played with mallets, which are long sticks with a ball on its end. Sarah’s go-to mallets are wooden ones and the ones with felt heads. She has a great selection.

5. Oboists play the English horn too. Janine’s dream is quite absurd here because she, a French horn player, was asked to play the English horn, then was given clarinet reed canes (untrimmed; not ready to be used for performance until it’s been shaped and cut). These dreams are terrible, but I’ve never met a musician who hadn’t had one of these nightmares.

6. ‘Horns in the front, arse in the back’ joke is so old, but I like the idea of Mike telling a corny joke. I love him. And bless Steven Bainbridge (and The Conductor himself) for laughing at that. (In case the joke was missed: unlike a bull, the horn players sit towards the back, and the conductor, the arse, is in the front. But Lestrade is a sweetheart <3)

7. The Green Room is an existing Restaurant behind the National Theatre. The joke is that the ‘green room’ is also a term for the backstage area for a performance venue. How appropriate. Punny af.
“‘Married to music,’’ he said? He used those words exactly?’ Sarah asked, sipping on wine. Her face was rosy with reflected light from the candles on their table.

‘Yeah, I don’t know what he really means. I’m guessing he’s just not very keen, you know?’ John sighed, skimming through the dessert menu. To be more accurate, he was trying to divert the topic by studying the dessert menu, which was very short. He was on a date, not a sodding ‘Sherlock Holmes trivia night’.

Everything about this was supposed to be a textbook romantic-dinner-date-for-two. They even had the candles. He’d never been to The Green Room before, but it was a hip, vibrant place, full of young people enjoying its modern vibe. Their meals were quite excellent, and it had been a while since he went to a sit-down restaurant with anyone besides Sherlock. He wanted this to go well.

‘Do you want to share a “chocolate brownie knickerbocker glory”?’ he suggested, quirking a brow at the silly name of the dessert.

‘Half a glory! Sounds delicious.’ Sarah quipped. ‘Does Sherlock like desserts?’

‘Ugh, does he!’ John scoffed, forgetting (yet again) his constant attempt to change the subject. ‘He loves sweets. If I didn’t stop him, he would eat sweets for breakfast, lunch, and supper. It’s bad enough that he thinks that half a chocolate croissant would be sufficient for supper, but sometimes he’d just drink a cup of tea with an extra sugar and call that a “meal”, I mean . . .’ He paused to look at Sarah, who was now grinning at him fondly. ‘What?’

‘You. It’s cute. I don’t know. It’s been an hour . . . and all we’ve talked about, besides the orchestra, is Sherlock. All you talked about, more like,’ she shrugged. ‘John, can I ask you something?’

‘Sure?’ John said, though he wasn’t so sure if he wanted to hear what she was going to ask.

‘You and Sherlock. You two are flatmates, I know that. But are you - oh, I don’t know how to put this delicately, so I’ll just go on and ask - are you two sort of, you know, together, or on your way there? I mean, I just want to make sure. Obviously, this is a date, I’ve asked you out,’ she waved
an index finger back and forth between herself and John. ‘And I don’t want to come between you two.’

‘Oh, er - no, not at all. Sherlock and I are flatmates. Friends. Well, not according to what he said last night, but at least I consider him a friend. More than mere colleagues, yes, but not more than friends either, I wouldn’t say,’ John rambled.

‘“Not according to what he said last night”-?’ echoed Sarah. A waiter came to their table for the third time and asked if they made up their mind about the dessert, but she smiled at him apologetically, mouthing ‘just a second’, and the waiter walked away in a slight annoyance. Unfazed, she stared back at John, her brows raised as if to say ‘So?’

‘It was nothing. We sort of . . . had a row. I told him that I like being friends with the orchestra people, and he said that he didn’t have friends, then I got cross with him, that’s all,’ John said.

‘Well, it’s not true at all, is it? He most definitely has a friend, and it’s you.’

‘That’s what I said, too. But apparently, that’s not what he’d call me because that would be “unfitting”. His word, not mine.’

Sarah eyed him suspiciously and mouthed silently- ‘unfitting?’

‘John, what if, by “unfitting”, he means that he considers you more special than a “friend”? I’m asking because - well, you should hear yourself. You both sound . . .’ She hesitated.

‘Sound what?’

‘Besotted.’

John huffed. She actually went there.

‘Besotted! That’s - that’s not how I wished to sound. Not at all. Exasperated, or annoyed, or aggravated, more like. And how could he be besotted - after all, he’s not the sort of bloke who would be into dating, anyway,’ he rambled, hoping he didn’t sound defensive. ‘He’s above all that, isn’t he.’

‘Well, now you’re just deflecting and telling me what you think he probably thinks. But what about your own feelings? I do think that you should think about what he’d said, that he wouldn’t call you a “friend”. I don’t know him as well as you do, but to me, it sounds like he meant the opposite of what you’d interpreted. What if he meant to say that the word “friend” was inadequate to describe what you have together? I’ve only seen him a couple months in rehearsals, but he doesn’t really get on with anyone well, except you! To be quite honest, I was mildly surprised that you even agreed to go out with me tonight because I suspected that you two were together. Seems that my doubts were not in vain,’ Sarah said. ‘Well, if he is interested, what are you going to do?’

‘How do you mean?’ John said shakily. This was a lot to take in.

‘Well, would you care for being something more than friends with Sherlock? And please, be
honest with me. I’ve sat here for the past hour listening to you talk about him “exasperatedly”;
she gestured a quotation mark in the air as she said the last word.

John pondered this. Sherlock couldn’t have meant that, could he? Could he have actually implied that the word ‘friend’ was misplaced? Is that why he said that John was ‘technically’ a friend? And why was this suddenly beginning to make sense?

But they were, technically, friends. Friends who spent a baffling amount of time together. If he was truly honest with himself, John did love every second of their technical friendship, even when Sherlock was being insufferable. John had never met anyone like that, ever.

Though most people’s shiny first impressions had inevitably faded a bit after getting to know them, Sherlock turned out to be more striking every day. He was full of surprises, and there wasn’t a single dull day with him. And Sherlock absolutely detested being bored - yet, he chose to spend most of his waking hours with John, praising him, sitting in during his practice, talking to him for hours. It was intoxicating to be the centre of Sherlock’s unwavering attention.

We’re just really good friends, then! John countered internally. Unfitting, my arse. Of course we’re friends, we’re best bloody friends who just really love to be around each other! Best friends who - sometimes accidentally wake early and walk to the rehearsal together -

John felt his face relaxing at the thought of their occasional hour-long walks to the rehearsal. It just happened naturally if neither of them hailed a cab, and they would walk wordlessly. Weather permitting, of course.

After the rehearsal, they’d share a cab home, sometimes to Tesco, if they didn’t have plans elsewhere. With each other, they never really ‘made plans’ except for those sight-reading nights, and even those were just out of minimal courtesy. There was an unspoken understanding that they’ll do something together if neither of them was occupied. John almost relished how Sherlock rarely even asked if John was free before deciding on a shared activity.

Oh, for God’s sake. You repressed, daft git.

Besotted didn’t even cover it. Who was he kidding?

Sherlock was fucking sensational.

The only reason that they called themselves friends was that there was no other word to describe what they had, but in reality, they were far, far closer than the word ‘friends’ could ever convey. John needed to stop pretending that he wasn’t completely head over heels for that idiot.

He met Sarah’s eyes and pursed his lips in resignation.
‘That’s what I thought,’ she bit her lips wistfully, waving at the waiter for the check. ‘Well. I guess I’ve already known, but since he never came out to the pub with us, I entertained the idea that just maybe you two weren’t together.’

‘We aren’t.’

‘Yet.’

‘I’m sorry,’ John said - and meant it too. ‘This is all still very confusing for me.’

‘It happens,’ Sarah shrugged.

Well. No ‘knickerbocker glory’ for them, John thought to himself. He did look forward to having something sweet, though. Perhaps he’ll stop at Waitrose and get a box of biscuits for Sherlock on his way back and have some over a late night cuppa.

And there it was, his thought bouncing back to Sherlock again immediately and without hesitation. It was time he acknowledged his feelings - to someone, if not to Sherlock. Not just yet.

And because ‘I have a devastating crush on my flatmate’ was too straightforward for people like John, he opted for a subtler phrase.

‘Do you know if Waitrose is open at this hour?’

* * *

‘Looks like they closed at ten. Try M&S,’ Sarah said, reading the sign on the door. ‘What do you need?’

‘Just . . . some biscuits, to say sorry. I might’ve shouted a bit.’

‘Any favourite kind?’
‘Er,’ he mulled over. ‘We like ginger nuts. And Scottish shortbread.’

Sarah simpered, her eyes on the ground. ‘We, eh?’

He pursed his lips regretfully at her. ‘I think we’re also out of milk.’

‘Heh, sounding already like a married couple, there.’

John chuckled uncomfortably.

‘Erm . . . I’m not conceding a hundred percent that something will definitely happen between me and him,’’ he added as they arrived at the bus stop. He wrapped his scarf tighter around his neck. God, it was freezing. ‘But I do have to sort some things out. I’m really sorry, Sarah. I should’ve thought about this before agreeing to go out with you tonight - but frankly, I hadn’t considered this as an option at all until now. I still don’t know if this is an option, because... well, I want to make sure he wants it too.’

‘Thanks for your honesty, at least. I really do like you, John.’

‘I like you too. Can we still be good friends?’

‘I’d be disappointed if we couldn’t after such a heartfelt talk! You can always talk to me about Sherlock - or anything, really.’ Sarah winked.

‘Thanks for understanding . . . But I have no idea what I’m going to do about him.’

‘I think it’s just a matter of time until you two figure it out. I’ve got to say - I’m rather jealous,’ Sarah said. The mallets in her bag clinked inside against themselves as she slid the bag off her shoulders and opened the zip.


‘Well.’ Smiling, she took out her wallet and waved at an approaching bus, signalling for the driver to stop. ‘Sherlock Holmes is a very lucky man, isn’t he?’

Chapter End Notes

1. I swear I didn’t make up ‘chocolate brownie knickerbocker glory’. It’s from the Green Room’s actual menu.

2. Tesco, Waitrose, and M & S (Marks and Spencer) are... shops. Mostly food.

3. If I got a quid for every time I missed a bloody bus because I forgot to wave at the bus driver... grrr.
Sherlock checked his mobile again. John's last text had come earlier in the morning:

[Sure, we'll play on Sunday. Who's the pianist?]

He hadn't answered when Sherlock texted him back that it would be Mrs Hudson, although he didn't ask her yet. He knew she'd be free, anyway.

John would be on a date with Sarah by now. After the rehearsal, he simply had said, 'I'll see you later at home, Sherlock' and left with her, flashing a genuine smile that Sherlock particularly loved. His stomach was taut with a pang of anxiety; Sarah was clever, talented, and not bad-looking, either. What was not to like, he supposed. John always found something good in everyone. He briefly considered having a cigarette.

She was probably everything that John wanted. A nice woman in the same line of work, sharing interests, hopes, and dreams. They'd be sharing dinners. Desserts. Perhaps even bed. Sherlock grimaced. Didn't John already have most of those things with him? Well, except the bed-sharing bit, which wasn't really Sherlock's area of expertise.

But John did seem to enjoy all the other aspects with Sherlock. Why did he have to go out of his way to find something more, when they already had a comfortable, content life together? He shifted his hips in the armchair, staring blankly at John's empty seat. If he were there, John would be making them tea and going through Sherlock's collection of records to put on that night after their sightreading hour, getting ready for a quiet evening in. Then Sherlock wouldn't be thinking about cigarettes or some percussionist from the orchestra.

In the end, didn't they all leave? Claude, his stand partner during a festival in France, stopped answering his phone when Sherlock's drug habits became regular. Alexandros, a Greek violinist he’d met in St Petersburg and his only friend during a three-month tour in Russia, left without a notice when he tried to get clean for the next performance series. What was the point?

Perhaps he had been daft, expecting John to be different just because he could make him feel the way he did. After all, they were just flatmates.
But Sherlock didn't imagine that they could get on this well, that was the thing. John not only tolerated him, he actually made time for him and - for a lack of a better word - made him feel wanted. He believed that John truly understood him. If any of his sentiment was mutual, why did John need to go out with another person? Well, maybe it was a casual, friendly date that didn't amount to much. Surely John was to realise that he couldn't find what he had with Sherlock. But the possibility that John just might prefer someone else over Sherlock was doing bad things to his brain.

John . . . He sighed. Since when did John become such a large, central part of his life? It was simply impossible to fathom any daily activity that he didn't want John to be involved; everything was more bearable when John was a part of it.

Even simple, hateful things such as early mornings had become enjoyable. He loved to wake John up with music; his morning agenda was to ascertain John's first action of the day to be an interaction with him, whether it be a wordless, soft pat on Sherlock's shoulder, or a sleepy ‘G'morning’, or ‘Bloody hell! Can you PLEASE play pianissimo, Paganini?!'

He'd never thought that a commute to work would be anything but detestable, yet John's added presence proved him wrong over and over again. Walking to work was his favourite, of course. Cab rides, which used to give him a sensation of being incarcerated rather than the comfort of being taken to the destination, no longer made him anxious when John was with him.

The most surprising thing, however, was that he was actually fine with public transportation, too. Once in a blue moon, they'd take the bus to and from rehearsals. With their instrument cases hanging off their shoulders, Sherlock and John would walk up to the second tier of the bus, putting away their Oyster cards. There was something companionable about sitting next to each other on a bus and watching people out the window on their way.

Sherlock used to think that he had put too much expectation from the very first moment he heard John play at the blind audition. For weeks before he'd even met the man, Sherlock had been anticipating and fantasising about the mystery clarinettist.

Then, the final audition gave Sherlock a name to this blown-out-of-proportion daydream. Even if ‘Applicant #31’ turned out to be Jabez Wilson or Mary Sutherland, Sherlock was quite prepared to start a conversation and be acquainted with them. But, of course, the universe was so rarely lazy, and John Watson just happened to be a handsome, down-to-earth bloke with beautiful sandy blond hair and dark blue eyes, who needed a flat when he, Sherlock, had a spare room.

Nothing about John was coincidental. He was everything and beyond his calculated hope - and God, the way he looked at him for the first time when Mike introduced them . . . (Bless Mike Stamford and his excessive need to help everyone.)

And beautiful John, his John, was out on a date with another person tonight.

He slowly got up from his chair and opened his violin case. It was nearly 11 p.m. Mrs Hudson was probably asleep, but that never stopped him from playing at an awful hour.

He rummaged through his Mind Palace for a score. Ginastera’s Cuyana was for happier times, he
decided, and pulled up *Danzas Argentinas*. The second dance started with the same chords as *Cuyana*, but the way this dance developed would convey what he felt. The piece was originally for piano, but he needed to play it on his violin right now.

He began to play softly, mournfully, wailing through the melody that followed. The release was better than a good cry. His face was dry, but his insides contorted with sorrow and helplessness.

* * *

He barely heard John's approaching footsteps when he pizzicato’d the last brittle, dissonant chord.

‘Are you alright?’ John asked, concern dripping from his voice.

Sherlock didn't turn around. The music had thoroughly washed him over and he felt extremely lethargic. He wanted to swoon like the silly ladies in Huxley’s *Crome Yellow*. Taking a deep breath, he got up and headed towards his bedroom wordlessly. No such energy to speak was left inside him.

‘Sherlock, talk to me. What’s wrong?’ John followed him. Sherlock closed the door shut behind him and sank on the bed.

‘Did something happen?’ John’s knock on the door was slow and reverberant. He always knocked with the most sombre colours. Today, it was charcoal grey, the same shade of grey Sherlock had seen on his way home in the sky.

‘Can I come in?’

God, he was going to be insistent. There was no way out of this. ‘Yes,’ Sherlock breathed.

John entered the dark room carefully with soft steps. His brows were furrowed in worry. ‘Sherlock, what was that all about? I’ve never - hey, look at me?’ he said, sitting down on the bed to his left. Sherlock stared at his lap and clenched his teeth.

‘What do you want, John,’ he whispered. ‘Did you have fun?’

‘Did I have fun? You mean the date? Oh, er... That’s actually gone to shite. I don’t think I’ll be seeing her in that context again. I felt really bad,’ John said, sliding closer to him and laid a warm hand on his right shoulder. ‘Sherlock, is something wrong? I’ve never heard you play like that. I mean, it was beautiful, but you sounded so . . . blue.’
Sherlock’s head snapped at this. ‘Did you just say “blue”?’ He gaped at John, all his anxiety and desolation forgotten. ‘Do you hear - do you see it too? Was it blue? I mean, for you?’ Sherlock’s brain was now flying through his favourite shades of blue - *Yves Klein Blue, Miro’s Circus Horse, Signac’s Town Beach* . . .

John gave him a perplexed look. ‘It’s a figure of speech, I suppose. I meant to say that you sounded sad, and I was wondering if something happened. Are you alright?’

Of course, John didn’t see the colours. He felt the excitement instantly evaporating into tiny specks of dust.

It dawned uncomfortably on Sherlock that he’d never told John about the colours. If he could help it, he didn’t like to talk about it, as it often brought back the memories of his dark past. Lestrade knew, of course, because Mycroft had been adamant that he was to be informed with as many details as possible so as to give him a good idea how important it was for Sherlock to stay sober.

‘I guess I just “felt blue”. Sorry your date wasn’t successful. I’m going to bed.’

‘Sherlock, I came to apologise. I didn’t mean to snap at you yesterday. I guess I was upset about what you said - that you wouldn’t call me a friend. But that’s rubbish, though, isn’t it?’ John’s hand rubbed up and down Sherlock’s shoulder. ‘I know that we’ve only known each other for a few months, but I rather thought that we were good friends. Perhaps one of your fewest friends, even.’

Sherlock bit his lips in frustration. ‘You’re not just one of my “fewest friends”, John. You’re... My only friend. And forgive me if I’m imposing on you, but--’ he paused and fidgeted around with his fingers.

‘But?’ John prodded. Sherlock could feel John’s pulse from the hand on his shoulder.

‘Well, I just think . . . I think that the word “friend” wouldn’t suffice to convey who you are to me, John,’ he gulped, as though surprised at his own confession. ‘You’re more than just that. I’ve never had a . . . friendship, like this one.’

John stayed silent for thirty-two seconds. Sherlock nearly jumped when he finally broke the silence.

‘I can’t believe that Sarah was actually right.’

‘What?’ Sherlock asked in confusion. ‘You talked about me?’

‘Of course we talked about you. You’re, well... You’re a rather big part of my life, you know.’ John sniffed. ‘She sort of translated what you’d said to me last night, for me. Which is why I’m now apologising to you for being an idiot. I should’ve realised, Sherlock. I just feel so close to you, is all. It’s almost ridiculous.’

Sherlock closed his eyes and massaged his temples. ‘If this is ridiculous for you, imagine how it would be for me. It’s rather new for me, and . . . I don’t know how it’s done, John. I don’t know how to keep a friend. And you . . .’ he breathed heavily. ‘You’re still here. And you seem to actually enjoy my company, of which I’m incredulous.’ Sherlock sighed. This was the most vulnerable he’d ever been, more so than when Mycroft found him in Prague.
Silence fell between them.

‘I have never met anyone like you,’ Sherlock added, after a while. He wanted to be very clear.

‘Sherlock.’ John squeezed his shoulder. ‘Sherlock, look at me.’

Ugh, here it was, the ‘I’m not interested’ talk. He dreaded it. He could barely meet John’s eyes. He suddenly remembered that he himself sort of gave this speech to John when he asked - *why the hell did I say that I was married to music*?! Sherlock palmed his face in regret and frustration.

‘I’m being absurd. I know. It hasn’t even been two months. I don’t wish to pressure you, John. I’m just--’

‘Sherlock, stop it. It’s alright. If it’s any consolation . . . I feel the same way, too,’ John said quietly, now stroking Sherlock’s back in a slow, soothing motion.

Sherlock shuddered at his touch. ‘I don’t think you understand, John. No one has ever been anything like you, to me. I know that the more I talk about this, the more I sound like I’m pressuring you.’

‘You’re not pressuring me into anything, fool. Honestly, I’ve got to say - I’ve never met anyone like you, either, and I do agree that we have something unusually great, here. And trust me, I won’t leave, unless you want me to. I quite like it here, as you probably could tell. I never felt more at home in my life. No, I’m serious, Sherlock. I don’t remember being this content, ever,’ John said, and Sherlock felt a little assured. ‘Please, don’t worry about it. It was just a misunderstanding, okay? I’m sorry. You have to know that you’re very special to me. Yeah?’

‘Okay.’ He felt a bit more relaxed. Perhaps it wasn’t a flat-out rejection. He was itching to go further into this topic and sort this vagueness out once and for all, but his tongue was tied. He’ll have to settle with ‘special friend like no other’ for now. These words weren’t exactly what he’d been looking for. With a sigh, he tucked his concerned away in his *Unresolved Items* drawer in the mind palace.

‘Well, are you going to sleep soon? I bought us some shortbread . . . I’ll put the kettle on if you’re up for a late night tea?’

‘I’d like that,’ Sherlock nodded, feeling the tension vaporising through his skin.

‘Good,’ John rested his forehead on Sherlock’s shoulder, pulling him to a tight sideways hug. ‘I’m glad you don’t seem blue anymore.’ He got up and walked over to the kitchen.

Blue.
Sherlock shut his eyes tight and sighed, hating how it felt like he was hiding something big from John. To explain the synaesthetic symptoms meant that he had to disclose his drug-addled past as well, as it was the motive for his addiction.

The two components, at least in his personal history, were inseparable, and he’d rather not say anything at all than to give John a half-truth. John deserved better, and the exhaustion of lying by omission for two whole months was wearing Sherlock out. It wasn’t exactly a suppertime topic to be perfectly frank - but Sherlock had always meant to tell him at some point, sooner or later.

No, it was more than that, he admitted to himself. It was far more than the mere urge and need to share everything with John: it was an absolute necessity to ascertain that John was NOT going to leave upon hearing his story.

He needed to know that the trust and bond between them were strong enough that John’s wish to stay wouldn’t be influenced by Sherlock’s past. Experience had taught Sherlock not to have faith in people to stick around. It still hurt him to recall Claude and Alexandros after all these years. He desperately needed to know that John wasn’t going to immediately leave him, like they did, and move out of the flat. He couldn’t lose another one. And losing John, his John, of all people - would be the coup de grâce for Sherlock.

But somehow, a part of him already knew that John wasn’t going to be budged by the accounts of his past.

Somehow, he trusted that John wouldn’t leave. For some odd reason that he couldn’t put into words, he believed that there was a tacit understanding between them that, whatever they had here - whatever this was - was indestructible.

Who else did Sherlock have to confide in about the most wickedly colourful, the most macabre part of his past? Who else, if not John?

I have to trust him, he thought to himself. I have to trust us.

‘Speaking of blue, John,’ he started reluctantly, ‘I don’t believe I’ve told you about my synaesthesia.’
1. For Sherlock’s performance of Ginastera’s Danza Argentina (2nd movement, Danza de la Moza Donosa), I found two recording that might assist your imagination.

First, you must listen to Barenboim’s rendition on the piano; the original is hyperlinked it at the mention of this piece. (Get ready for your heart to be torn apart.) The piece is meant for solo piano. (I can’t deal with how DRAMATIC Sherlock is)

The second recording I’m attaching is an arrangement for a piano trio (piano, violin, cello). Here, you can hear how it sounds on the violin, though they didn’t pizzicato the last chord. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CKnmKsOZBU0

2. Pizzicato: plucking the strings with fingers.

3. I included some of my personal favourite shades of blue.
Chapter 11: Elucidation

John put down the M&S bag on the kitchen counter and filled the kettle with tap water. His heart was pounding, his head noisy with blurred, abstract thoughts.

It was upsetting to see Sherlock brooding and angsty like this. It wasn’t like his usual reticence; something was definitely off tonight. The typical, companionable silence had transformed into an uncomfortable ambience around them, and John tried to ignore the sound of Sherlock’s anxious pacing in the sitting room as he added a spoonful of loose Earl Grey in the strainer.

‘Here you go,’ John said a few minutes later, handing Sherlock his cup of tea. ‘Do you need another dash of milk?’

Sherlock sat down on his armchair and took a sip. ‘No, John. It’s perfect.’

‘Good. Have some of these, too.’ John put down a dish of shortbread on the coffee table next to Sherlock.

‘Thanks.’

For another gruelling minute or so, they sat in silence in their respective armchairs. The only audible sound in the room was Sherlock’s incessant fidgeting and tapping against the arm of his chair. For the first time since the day they had been introduced to each other by Mike, it felt awkward and strained.

Unable to endure the restlessness any longer, John got up and dimmed the lamps and turned on the Christmas tree lights. If anything, the darkened room might help them relax into a conversation. He stared at the tiny, vibrant light bulbs on the colourful tree until his eyes watered, not knowing what to say or do.

At last, perhaps due to the moderation of the lighting, Sherlock opened his mouth.

‘John, before I start talking, I need to know.’

‘What?’ John studied the broken expression on his friend’s face.
‘I need you to promise me.’

‘Er, you can tell me what it is, then I’ll tell you whether or not I can promise you,’ John said jokingly, trying to lighten the spirit.

‘John,’ Sherlock bit his lips, the witticism lost on him. ‘Promise me, that after we’re through with this, you’re going to stay.’

John scowled in confusion. ‘Stay - here? In the . . . sitting room? Where would I go? I don’t understand.’

‘No. That you’ll stay here, and not move out.’ Sherlock’s voice was shaky.

‘Why would I do that?’

‘Because you might not like what I’m about to tell you.’

‘What-- . . . Sherlock, listen to me. Hey, look at me?’ John waved a hand, tilting his head to the side. ‘I promise I’ll be here. Don’t worry. Do you want to tell me what it is now?’

‘I don’t know where to start.’

‘Start from the beginning, if that helps,’ John suggested.

‘Not sure when that was.’

‘Not sure when the beginning was for - the synaesthesia, you mean?’

‘Right.’ Sherlock sighed. ‘You do know what it is, I believe?’

‘Er, I’m guessing it’s when you hear colours or something. I remember reading about Scriabin and his pseudo-system back in school,’ John said weakly, feeling a bit thick.

‘It’s a neurological phenomenon, John, in which stimulation of one sensory pathway causes an involuntary experience in a second sensory pathway. There are many variations, and everyone’s experience differs. Most common forms are grapheme to colour and sound to colour. Mine is chromesthesia, the association of sounds and tone with colours.’

John’s mouth fell open. ‘Wow. Yeah, that rings a bell. I’m terribly lacking in knowledge though. Why does it happen, do you reckon?’

‘Very little is known. I’ve consulted numerous articles and their hypotheses, but no one can explain this satisfactorily. All I know is that it has been very irritating and consuming as a musician.’

‘I can only imagine. That’s fascinating though. To see them all the time, I mean.’

‘Trust me, John. It’s more a curse than a blessing.’ Sherlock took another sip of his tea and grimaced.

‘So if it bothers you that much, why did you choose to be a musician? You could’ve picked a quieter career . . . like . . . a librarian?’ John quirked an eyebrow. The aim for a joke fell flat on Sherlock’s deadpan face yet again.

‘As a child, it was exciting to see the colours splayed in front of me, and my family and I often went to concerts. We went to New York for when I was five, to a concert in which Itzhak Perlman played with the New York Phil,’ Sherlock whispered reverently. ‘The colours I’ve
witnessed then had rarely been comparable to anything I’ve heard since. I knew then and there that I had to be a violinist. Did you know that he was also a synaesthete?

‘You heard Perlman’s live performance!’ John exclaimed. ‘And - no, I didn’t know that he also had synaesthesia. Wow. You heard Perlman, live, at age five. That really must’ve been phenomenal.’

‘That’s an understatement. Anyway, we stopped by Cremona to buy a violin for me. I was insistent. Mummy was so happy that I’d taken an interest in music. Mycroft, twelve years old at the time, had already been taking piano lessons for years by then, and he accompanied me when I needed a pianist.’

‘Bloody hell. You bought a-- God,’ John almost choked on his tea. ‘They bought you a sodding violin in Cremona. Your first violin as a beginner, in Cremona. Of course you did. Jesus. I can’t believe how posh your family is. What was it then, a Strad?’ he chuckled in disbelief, recalling how his own family couldn’t afford a decent instrument for him until he was seventeen.

What with his ailing and out-of-work parents, Harry and John both had to work two or three part-time jobs each to save up for a new clarinet. Until then, John had had a modest, used model of a Tosca clarinet that he’d found through mutual acquaintances of his then teacher. Not that it was a bad instrument, it was more than sufficient to do the job - but to hear that Sherlock’s family not only flew to New York to hear Itzhak Perlman play live but had been wealthy enough to take a detour to Cremona and just . . . purchase a violin. Just like that. As if they were buying a carton of milk from Tesco. They just stopped by one of the most musically distinguished towns in the world, renowned for the most famous string instrument makers, to buy Sherlock an instrument. John couldn’t stop shaking his head at the craziness of this all.

‘Don’t be absurd, John. It was an Amati,’ Sherlock said, waving a hand indifferently. ‘I’ve only acquired my Stradivarius last year.’

‘Oh. Right.’ Holy shit, an Amati, at age five . . . AND his current instrument was a Strad - Oh my God. John gulped. ‘Because a Stradivarius at age five would have been a tad too much. Right. But, of course, now it’s suitable.’

‘Naturally,’ Sherlock nodded. John’s sarcasm had missed him by a mile.

‘Anyway, we came home, and lessons began. I excelled. Oh, please - I’m simply stating what had happened. Tours and performances were booked for several times a year - and I revelled in the spotlight, the adrenaline rush of performing live, the glory, for years that followed,’ he paused and closed his eyes, adding a touch of drama to the narrative.

John rolled his eyes internally at the theatrics. He instinctively knew that this was the point where Sherlock’s life had taken a change in course, however far-off or bad it might have been.

‘Then? Did something happen?’ he prodded.

Sherlock pursed his lips and sighed before continuing. ‘Glory is always accompanied by gore, John, as a rule of thumb. On my twenty-first birthday, there was a concert series in Los Angeles, during which I . . . indulged,’ he said, breaking eye contact with John.
‘Indulged? As in . . . did you . . . get drunk and do something stupid?’ John frowned, imagining what it could have possibly happened.

‘Sort of. Except I didn’t consume any alcohol.’

‘But you did do something stupid?’ John smirked. ‘Go on then, what did you do?’

‘Er . . .’

‘Go on!’ John grinned even wider. ‘I wasn’t born yesterday, I’ve lived some three decades with musicians. Probably heard all the barmy shit everyone’s done. What was it, then?’

Sherlock sighed. ‘Er . . . Cocaine.’

John blinked several times.

‘Seriously?’

“Shut up.”

‘You took recreational drugs?’ He asked sceptically, staring into Sherlock’s eyes and sought for a sign of a joke. Sherlock gazed back in all seriousness without a word, causing John’s stomach to plummet.

‘No . . .’ John chuckled again, a bit drier. ‘You?’

‘Shut up!’ Sherlock said angrily. ‘It doesn’t matter anymore. Yes, it did get out of hand for some time. Mycroft brought me home. The end.’

‘Sorry, Sherlock. I didn’t mean to ridicule you. I just . . . I thought you were pulling my chain. Obviously not,’ he said assuredly at Sherlock’s scowl. ‘Er . . . So, cocaine, then. Do you mind talking about it? Say, what kind of--’

‘For your information, I started with powder. Then later, IV. The colours were much better that way, more than powder. Hence, the indulgence, and addiction.’

John nodded. Like he said, he wasn’t born yesterday - there were so many people, all throughout in life in musical circles, who were users.

Perhaps due to the exposure of such acquaintances, his attitude toward recreational drugs was milder than the majority of the everyday population, even though John hadn’t personally been attracted and thus had no experience. Sure, it was a terrible habit, and he wouldn’t recommend, condone, or participate in the practice. But, because of Harry, he’d always subscribed to the idea that addiction followed a similar pattern to chronic diseases and that it was something that can be treated, which made him more cautious not to address the issue through stigma-covered lenses. He
never identified Harry as his ‘addict sister’ even after years of her struggles, and he wasn’t about to label Sherlock now either. The addiction did alter his relationship with Harry, but - John didn’t want to think about that at the moment. He pushed the memory away hastily.

‘Alright,’ he shrugged, maintaining a neutral tone.

Sherlock stopped in the middle of putting his cup back on the coffee table, his occupied hand still in the air, mouth agape in surprise. ‘You’re not leaving?’

‘Well,’ John quipped sardonically. ‘I did promise to stay, didn’t I. It’s too late now to go back on my words. No choice.’

Sherlock’s voice turned icy immediately. ‘You can if you want to. It wasn’t a blood vow or anything. I won’t charge you for breaching the lease.’ He got up abruptly from his chair and headed towards his room. ‘Just . . . Leave your keys on the kitchen table on your way out.’

Ugh. John had enough of the theatrics and drama. Note to self: turn down the sarcasm many a notch when speaking to Sherlock about sensitive material. He put down his tea cup.

‘Sherlock, get your arse back in here,’ he ordered.

‘There’s no point, John . . .’

‘Point in what?’

‘You can leave. They all do. It’s probably for the best. I shouldn’t have imposed on you. I shouldn’t have . . . expected you to . . .’ Sherlock’s bitter tone faded into nothingness.

‘They all-? Do you want me to leave?!’ John asked incredulously, anger and disappointment boiling inside him.

Sherlock turned around stiffly and approached John, completely wrapped up in naked insecurity. ‘No. No,’ he said, his voice barely a whisper, reaching for John’s jumper sleeve. ‘Just . . . don’t leave. Don’t leave. Please.’

‘Oh my God. Okay, Sherlock Holmes, you and I are going to have some serious fundamental work here.’ Exasperated, John dragged the Sherlock by the wrist and deposited his sagging body on the couch, then sat next to him. God, it was going to be a long night.

‘Do not interrupt me until I’m done, Sherlock, or I will be very cross.’

Sherlock nodded.

‘First of all, how DARE you?!’ John roared, throwing his palms in the air, shaking his head. ‘How can you ever think that I’m going to leave here? That I’m going to leave - you? Sherlock, you listen to me. I will repeat this as many times as necessary: I am not fucking leaving unless you make me. Do you understand? There’s nothing or no one that can make me leave, except your
explicit verbal request. Is that clear?"

Sherlock nodded again.

‘Okay. Glad we’ve gone over that. Dear God above . . . Alright, next. Please know that sometimes I am very sarcastic and that you have to take it a joke. Alright? I can’t believe I have to spell it out for you, but I was just kidding when I said that it was too late to take back on my word. I promised you that I’ll stay because I will, and I want to. Understood?’

Nod.

‘Good. Now, this is the most important. Sherlock, you should know by now that I care a great deal about you. I endeavour every day to prove it with my actions, words, everything. And you should know, therefore, that I care about your well-being and health in all aspect.’ John cleared his throat. ‘That being said, I need you to listen to me very, very carefully.’

Sherlock held his gaze, looking hopeful and afraid.

‘The problems of your past are your business. The problems of your present, and future, are my privilege. I won’t ask or prod if you tell me that you don’t want to discuss it, but if you do want to tell, you have to be honest with me. I want you to feel comfortable enough to tell me anything and everything you wish to share. It doesn’t matter how crazy or ugly it might sound. I’d really appreciate your complete, raw, and unfiltered honesty. That’s what friends do, right? Talk and sort it out.’

John’s heart ached as he saw that Sherlock’s eyes were watering.

‘Thank you for telling me about your past. I mean it, Sherlock. It means a lot to me. Come here,’ he pulled him into a hug. ‘I’m going to be here, always, as long as you want. Anytime you want. You understand?’

‘Yes,’ Sherlock breathed, his shoulders trembling.

‘Okay.’ John broke apart and smiled. ‘We good?’

‘Yes.’

‘Good. Now, I have some questions. You don’t have to answer me if you don’t feel like going there.’ He took a big sigh. Better start with the good questions. Sherlock relaxed into the couch and faced John with a brave, expectant expression. He looked so young, so vulnerable . . . so
human.

John settled into his seat and licked his lips.

‘Tell me about the colours.’

Chapter End Notes

1. Thanks to Wikipedia for the definition of synaesthesia. ;-) I'm not sure how to put it into words myself.

2. Sorry if you have a different take on the concept of addiction; I'm merely speaking of what I learned from my recovered friends. They're not weak people, and I don't think continued substance misuse has to do with one’s willpower/strength of character.
Development

Chapter Notes

Thanks to hertie always <3 She writes!! http://archiveofourown.org/users/hertie/

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 12: Development

Week 3 rehearsal cycle

21 December 2010

London in December practically screamed Christmastime, every corner of the street covered with hanging light fixtures and ornaments. The shop windows were full of extravagant decorations. Millions of people frantically burst in and out of the shops to buy presents with the grand holiday only a few days away. But to the members of the QPO, it was just another Monday in yet another rehearsal cycle.

On the first day of the cycle, Sherlock and John had arrived thirty minutes late at the rehearsal, mostly because they didn’t have hot water in the morning.

While John was a night-shower kind of bloke and didn’t need much more than washing his face and brushing his teeth (which he persevered with ice-cold water), Sherlock had insisted that he absolutely had to take a shower that morning and demanded that John fill up the tub with several pots of boiling water.

John had refused at first, of course, but he’d taken pity at the flattened curls sticking out of Sherlock’s head and boiled three large pots of water for him to mix with the cold water in the tub. This had inevitably delayed them from leaving on time (what with Sherlock taking his sweet time drying his hair properly so as to prevent it from freezing), and the cab had been stuck in the rush hour traffic just then. John supposed that he could’ve left without Sherlock, but his subconscious didn’t want Sherlock to be the only one late, either. Those bloody curls were to blame.

Everyone was already seated when they finally got there. Sherlock and John sneaked in like a couple of delinquent teenagers who missed a class while Greg worked with the strings (sans Sherlock). The conductor looked up from his podium when he spotted the latecomers and fumed, but Sherlock didn’t pay attention as he started tuning his violin indignantly against the others' sound. John tried his best to catch Greg's eyes and facially express his apology for being late. Greg rolled his eyes and motioned the strings to a halt.

‘Well, now that everyone is here, at last.’ Greg raised his voice to get the orchestra's attention.
I've got an announcement. This performance week is the most important one so far, as we have two very special pieces to play, along with Shostakovich 5. Not that Shostakovich isn't special, mind. First is Mr Esa-Pekka Salonen's violin concerto, of course, which was written last year. A delightful contemporary work. Mr Salonen will be monitoring the rehearsal for this piece over there in the audience, which is why our rehearsal is taking place in the hall today. Say hi!’ Greg paused and waved his baton at the composer, who cordially returned his wave.

He continued. ‘The other one is a Winner's Performance. The soloist this year has won the Royal Competition for the Winds earlier this year. Please welcome Ms Irene Adler!’ Greg gestured his palm towards the hall again. A petite woman stood up from a front row seat and walked up on the stage with a flute in her hand.

The flautist was tiny and slim, but the stage filled with her presence immediately as she reached the centre. Several people gawked with their mouth hanging open. She was wearing a skin-tight, knee-length black dress and a pair of jet black stilettos. John's eyes lingered on the bottom of her shoes, which was coloured in blood-red, the same tint as her lips.

Her flute, shiny and silver, almost seemed matte in comparison to her large, piercing blue eyes, which were now scanning the room as if she had been a predator looking for her next meal. She was smiling, but John thought she looked rather lethal. He wasn't sure if he was terrified or fascinated. Probably closer to terrified. He vaguely heard Janine gasping ‘she's bloody gorgeous’ behind him.

‘Thank you kindly, Greg. So pleased to meet you all. It is a privilege to play with London's finest,’ she cooed, smiling even wider. ‘Certainly worth stepping out of the private chamber events, where my usual performances take place.’

‘Private events! I bet she plays only for royalty,’ Anderson whispered under his breath to his stand partner.

‘Precisely. Philip, isn't it? Oh, don't look surprised. I've merely conducted a simple research on the people with whom I'd be sharing the pleasure of music-making! And I do have a very keen pair of ears, darling,’ Irene said, lifting her chin seductively. John couldn't see Anderson's face from where he was sitting, but he could tell that the violinist was flustered from being addressed. My, her accent was quite posh.

‘Er, shall we start, then? Irene, if you don’t mind, we’re going to start with Mr Salonen’s piece first,’ Greg said.

‘Not at all. Plenty to feast my eyes and ears on beforehand.’ Irene turned to leave the stage, glancing at the string section curiously. John could almost swear that she made toffee eyes at Sherlock, who was now looking back at John, frowning.

* * *
As Sherlock put his violin and bow away after the rehearsal, someone tapped him lightly on the shoulder. When he turned around, Irene looked at him square in the face, reaching for a handshake.

Sherlock scanned her from head to toe, trying to read her like he usually did for anyone he saw. It was surprisingly difficult to discover much, other than her career (obviously), self-esteem (seemingly high, but questionable), and that her outfit was her armour of choice (see: self-esteem).

‘I don’t think we've met,’ she said.

‘No. Sherlock Holmes.’ He shook her hand politely.

‘Irene Adler. What a pleasure. I've heard so much about you from my friends. I adore your sound. And what a lovely . . . bow you've got,’ she slowly moved her gaze to his violin case, which lay on a table near his hips.

Sherlock didn't respond to this. What was he supposed to say to that? And what did this woman want? Who were these ‘friends’ and what did they tell her about him?

Ah, well, she played ‘private events for royalty’ - of course, the ‘friends’ must be some of the board members of the orchestra. His money was on that particular Duke from the board who had a penchant for long, windy soliloquy regarding the musicians at QPO. Sherlock rolled his eyes. Both Mycroft and Sherlock disliked that one; it was one of the few things in the world on which they agreed.

If Irene had heard about the orchestra and the members, there was little chance that she didn't know about Sherlock, as he did stir up the group and the board in a variety of ways. Sherlock wondered if she'd discovered his past. Mycroft had strongly warned the board not to slip anything to anyone, but that silly Duke and his blabbing mouth were not really to be trusted, Sherlock thought. If Irene did know something about Sherlock, she could be here with an agenda.

He backed away a little when she leant in for a whisper.

‘You know what they say about soloists and concertmasters, right?’ She smirked.

‘If you mean sex, it's not at all obligatory, and that's not what “they say”, for your information. The insinuation is for soloists and conductors,’ Sherlock replied mechanically.

‘Good, so you do know those sayings. What a relief,’ she said, slowly circling around him, not unlike a tigress scoping out the status of a wounded herbivore. Sherlock felt strangely exposed.

A few people that were still in the backstage area had their eyes fixed on the task of tidying their things away, but he could still sense that their peripheral vision and their ears were paying the utmost attention to what was happening to Sherlock.
Over Irene's shoulder, he saw John standing near the exit, coat and scarf on and the clarinet case slung over his shoulders, ready to go. John was waiting for him, as he always did after rehearsals. His arms were tightly crossed, but his demeanour wasn't of impatience. His facial expression, however, betrayed his nervousness. Sherlock didn't like when John made that face. He suddenly longed to head home.

‘I have to go,’ Sherlock shifted his steps, picking up his violin case.

‘Let's have dinner,’ Irene said, gently interlacing her fingers over his. ‘I want to know more about you. From what I hear, you have the most excellent attitude. I can finally see what they’ve been saying . . . I love the way you speak, and your voice, Mr Holmes. You're quite something,’ she flashed an affected smile.

‘I'm not hungry,’ Sherlock flinched at the touch. He tried his best to take his hand away as subtly as possible. She was way too forward, what with her hand-holding within a minute of formally introducing herself, and the staccato of her pulse, and -

Her pulse. Elevated. Rapid. Sherlock scowled, wondering if her behaviour was born out of genuine attraction. It had to be. Her eyes never left his. What else could it be - but how? And why wasn't she repulsed by his attitude already?

‘Good. You'll come along, anyway,’ she let his hand go and grazed his jaw line with fingers where his violin had marked its territory, stepping even closer into his personal space. Sherlock was frozen on the spot. She was so close now that he could count the colours of her irises.

‘Why would I want to have dinner if I wasn't hungry?’ he managed weakly. Her presence was paralysing; he knew he could move away to add some distance between them, but his body seemed to have grown roots beneath his feet. He vaguely heard John clearing his throat.

‘Like I said, I want to know more about you.’

‘Well, I don't really want to know much about you,’ Sherlock spat, though it wasn't completely true if he was quite honest with himself. Irene did make some good hues with her flute, and it wasn't every day that Sherlock met someone who piqued his interest. But John was waiting, and he wanted to go home.

‘Very well. Perhaps another night, then, Mr Holmes. Here's my card.’ She slipped a business card in his hand (from where did she even produce it?), backed away slowly, and picked up her flute case from the next table. ‘Sherlock Holmes. What a colourful name,’ she said, almost to herself, but loud enough that Sherlock could hear her.

He was already half way across the room when he heard this, but he kept on walking. His heart started racing. Was he imagining, or did she imply something with that word - did she know something?! He sought John's eyes in anxiety. A loud siren blared across his mind with a big red sign - ‘Retreat!’

‘Good evening, Ms Adler,’ he choked, and left the room with John. It was time he did some research on this woman.
‘Sherlock,’ John started after a few minutes of silence in the cab ride back home. ‘I wasn't trying to eavesdrop, but did she say—’

‘Yes, John. She did. Glad that your hearing is intact.’

‘No need to be snarky with me, you git. I'm just saying, how could she know? You said that the only people who knew were your brother, some people on the board, Greg, and . . . Me,’ John said.

‘She does private events, playing chamber music for the higher-ups. I suspect that one of the board members may have disclosed that to her for some reason. Probably thought he was being so funny and informative. And pissed drunk.’

‘But - okay. Say that she knows. But what can she possibly do with this information, though? It's not like she can blackmail you, it's already in the past! You're sober now. I don't think she could make a big deal out of this. Sure, she has that femme fatale thing going on, but being a synaesthete is not a crime or something.’

‘I know that, John. But if she were to threaten me that she will expose my past, think of what this could do to my reputation. If the public found out, the worst case scenario would be losing my job, and it might be difficult to find another. No one would take my word, a former junkie's, that I am sober. It's one thing for the board and Lestrade to be in the know, but if everyone knew . . .’

Sherlock sighed. ‘It is an illegal pastime, after all. I will be discredited.’

John mulled this over. ‘Okay, yeah, that would be a bit not good.’

‘Yes.’

‘Probably won’t be sacked, though.’

‘If they do want to maintain the quality of this orchestra, they can’t possibly sack me.’

‘That too, sure,’ John smiled in spite of himself. ‘But there's a chance that she doesn't know. Maybe it was a coincidence that she said that.’

‘Don’t be daft, John. She used that particular word. It's associated with what I have done, because it is the reason for what I have done.’ He covered his face with his hands, massaging his eye sockets. ‘I suppose there's only one way to find out.’

‘What?’

‘Dinner. But first, I think a phone call is due.’ Sherlock took out his phone from his pocket and dialled a number.

‘Hello, brother mine. Long time no talk.’
1. Irene WOULD wear Louboutins to a rehearsal, wouldn't she.

2. The ‘soloists and conductors’ thing is just a vague rumour that goes around in orchestras sometimes. This is almost never true, imo
John glowered at the noise around him. It was far too loud for a weeknight, even for this pub. Must be December, he thought to himself. He shifted to lean closer and practically shouted across the table.

‘I’m not so sure if this was a good place to have a deep talk, Sarah!’

‘Oh, John, get over yourself. Central London, December, everyone is getting pissed. Also, haven’t you read Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix? This is a perfect place to discuss secrets and such,’ she smirked. ‘I’m telling you, they should’ve gone to Three Broomsticks instead of Hog’s Head.’

‘I can’t believe you just made that reference,’ John laughed out loud. ‘What are we, then, Harry and Hermione?’

‘Well, more like Harry and Ron, actually. Sherlock is such a Hermione,’ Sarah scoffed. John nodded in agreement. He was the cleverest, after all.

‘What do you think they’re talking about?’ she asked, wiping a drop of ale off her mouth.

‘God knows. I don’t know if you saw, but she was all over him, devouring him! Held his hand! The way she talked to him, I swear, Sarah. She’s trouble.’

‘Jealous, are we?’ she grinned.

‘No! . . . Well, okay. Maybe. A little. I don’t know, it was just so easy for her to just go up to him and do those things! Also, I think she has a motive to get close to him. I don’t know what, but it has to be something.’ John sighed. ‘He’s probably so uncomfortable at that dinner right now.’

‘Give Sherlock some credit, he’s a grown man! He can look after himself. He’s probably shutting
her down with that massive intellect.’

‘D’you know, I think she might be quick-witted enough to counter all of his usual attacks. The way she spoke, Sarah. She’s an expert, I could tell.’

‘What could she possibly do, John? It seems quite simple to me. She likes him, she asked him out. Some people are just bold.’

‘Maybe . . . ’ John trailed off, staring at his pint glass. He couldn’t bring up how Irene had hinted that she knew something about Sherlock’s past; that was his privacy.

‘I gather that you haven’t told him about how you feel, then,’ Sarah said. It wasn’t a question.

‘Not yet. Not until I know for sure he feels the same. And honestly - I can’t be certain. Maybe he just never had a close friend like me and this is how he acts around a best friend, you know?’

‘That’s possible. Hmm. Well, I guess you could find out soon, though, right?’

‘How do you mean?’ John took a swig of his lager.

‘Think about it. Sherlock is on a date, a proper date. This would be a normal thing for anyone, but it’s Sherlock. He’s bound to show some sort of reaction afterwards. You can monitor his behaviour when he comes back tonight. Maybe it goes well, maybe he’s shaken, but he’ll definitely tell you how it went. Who knows if he befriends her? She looks a bit dangerous, but sort of - quirky, too. And mind you, she’s absolutely stunning!’ Sarah chuckled. ‘Who knows if he’ll change his mind and be chummy with her from now on?’

John bit his lips. ‘That’s also very possible. And I have to concede . . . She is pretty hot.’

‘God, yeah. If their date doesn’t go well, maybe I’ll have a go,’ Sarah shrugged. ‘Hey, don’t laugh! I’m serious! You think she’s out of my league?’

‘Not at all, I’m not making fun! Just imagine - if we went on a double date!’ John cried. He hadn’t laughed like that all week. Feeling a low buzz in his system, he gave a loose hug to Sarah. ‘Thanks again for being a good friend. I really enjoy hanging out with you, you know.’

‘Yes, I am a bloody brilliant company, aren’t I,’ she said.

‘Quite so. I’m sorry I’m only talking about myself and Sherlock. What about you, Sarah? How’s the volunteer thing going on?’ John said apologetically, changing the subject. He remembered from their ‘date’ last week that she’d been volunteering at the children’s hospital whenever she had the time.

‘Fun. I love the kids. Last weekend, I taught them how to play the tambourine. It was bloody cacophonous, my ears were ringing for hours after I’d left. I was planning to do a class on triangle, but I don’t think that would be good for my sanity,’ she rested her head on her fingers. ‘Maybe I’ll teach them how to play 4’33”.’

They both roared with laughter.

* * *


Meanwhile, 7.30pm, Belgravia

Sherlock had been approached by all sort of people in his life - people who were attracted to his physical attributes. He was aware that his features appeared aesthetically pleasing to some people; he was not a stranger to a variety of come-ons. Almost as a rule, everyone had left him alone upon having a conversation or two with him. Until this morning, John had been the only exception.

The flute soloist, Irene Adler, allowed herself to be the second person who didn’t leave immediately. In fact, she never had a shortage of witty comebacks to everything Sherlock cast at her, though the conversation was short. He was a bit startled to have been asked out, frankly, but it wasn’t a surprise to him that she found him desirable. People were strange like that. Trust them to have different reasons for making a pass.

He chewed over a few titbits that Mycroft had shared with him that afternoon about the flautist. There wasn’t much to use as an actual criticism, but perhaps he didn’t need to attack her with slights. He was secretly quite curious to talk to her in person. He had called Irene shortly after hanging up with Mycroft for dinner like she suggested.

He spotted Irene sitting alone at a table for two as soon as he walked in the restaurant. Even for such a posh place full of posh people, she stood out. Gesturing to the host that he had a company waiting for him, he went over to her table and took a seat across her.

‘Mr Holmes. For a moment, I thought you were standing me up,’ Irene purred softly. The restaurant was so quiet save for the soft murmurs and light clinks of silverware on plates from neighbouring tables. A waiter hurriedly came to take their orders; Irene asked for a bottle of Bordeaux and an assorted cheese spread. Sherlock asked for a glass of ice water.

‘Are you still not hungry, then?’ she asked.

‘Clearly not. You can’t be that hungry either if you’re just going to nibble on cheeses. Unless you’re going to order a main dish later. I’m not sure if I’ll stay that long, though,’ Sherlock answered coldly. ‘Let’s cut to the case. What did you mean by that remark?’

‘My, my! Manners! Mr Holmes, I don’t suppose we’re going to do this often, much to my chagrin, so if this is my only chance, we’re going to do this properly,’ she said, smirking.

‘Do what properly?’

‘You already know what I’m about to say. The colours and the snow, Mr Holmes. I’ve heard all about it. I wish to discuss it.’

He huffed at the colloquial usage of the drug from her posh mouth. *Snow, for God’s sake.* However, a part of Sherlock was slightly relieved at the possibility that she only knew about the powder cocaine, not the injections, which carried a harsher stigma. At any rate, he hated where the
conversation was headed.

‘Have you considered that there was a modicum of probability that I don’t want to discuss it?’ Sherlock spat. ‘Do send my regards to the Duke of Loose Lips.’

‘I will, my sweet,’ she wet her lips.

‘Please don’t call me that.’

‘Why ever not?’

‘Reasons.’ Sherlock began to wonder if calling her was a mistake.

‘Do you want to know why I really asked you out?’

‘Ugh. Just tell me. You find me irresistible.’

‘That is not altogether false. I do think you’re utterly tantalising, Mr Holmes. Your impossible curls, your choice of instrument, and the fiddler’s neck - quite a tease, aren’t you?’ Irene shot another naughty look at Sherlock’s bruised jawline.

‘Spare me your unfiltered, wanton comments, please. Do I want to know the real purpose for this “date”?’

‘I thought you might,’ she lowered her glance for the first time. ‘Thought you might understand. Please, if you will hear me out, I’d be grateful.’

Sherlock scowled. She didn’t seem like the type to even use the word ‘please’. Whatever she had to say, she was holding back the mystery to keep his interest. Oh, she was good.

He relaxed his face and settled in his seat. It was a bit unsettling to see her in this state, looking agitated and strained, unlike the aura that she had established for herself.

‘Okay. If you can be brief.’

‘I’m not entirely sure if I could-’

‘Please try.’

She swallowed hard. ‘Alright. The reason I asked for this meeting is that I wanted to know - how.’ Her voice trembled on the last word as she spoke with difficulty.

‘If you want me to stick around, you’re going to have to be less vague than this, Ms Adler,’ he rolled his eyes impatiently.

‘Call me Irene. I apologise for the ambiguity - I’ll drop it . . . I’m being delicate because this is a matter of secrecy. I wish to confide and seek help from you, as I heard that you were successfully able to convalesce,’ she sighed. Her eyes were no longer shining in mischief, her face suddenly sombre and downcast. A veneer or pretence faded away as she stared at her lap.

Sherlock, up to this point, was seriously contemplating walking out on her. Upon hearing the word ‘convalesce’, he raised his brows and gaped. It was the most unexpected. Even Mycroft wasn’t able to provide much information on her except that she had some affairs with the nobles here and there. Though, Sherlock admitted, it wasn’t like Mycroft was an intelligence officer. He was just a rich bloke with a bit of power.
It was the last of his surmise that she could have been an addict of any kind; she seemed so proper, so disciplined. So utterly posh, what with her attire, accent, and the way she carried herself.

\textit{Oh}, he realised. Her armour, the alluring demeanour, the teasing ripostes - it was all a front, a coping mechanism. She had been battling her addiction, and the only thing that must’ve helped was the illusion of having her act together. She was a terrific actor if all this was just a facade. \textit{No one deceives like a junkie}, a small voice in his head said.

No wonder her pulse was so erratic; she must’ve been close to crumbling. Even now. Sherlock was painfully aware of how tough the withdrawal periods could be. This was probably her last straw, by looks of it, if she had to step on her pride to reveal such a private matter.

‘Which was it?’ Sherlock asked, his tone significantly softer. His eyes instinctively looked for her arms, both of which were sheathed in long black sleeves.

‘Heroin,’ she confessed. ‘I haven’t used in the past week. I wish to be clean, for life. I don’t know how. I need to stay clean. If you can help somehow, please. Let me know what you did. If I sounded as though I was belittling you earlier - it was not my intention to mock your past, you have to understand. This is a difficult subject to broach on my part.’

‘Irene, I’m only a recovered user myself, not an expert on rehabilitation. The only thing that helped was the rehab centre to which my brother sent me,’ Sherlock said, the most genuine he’d ever been with her. ‘I don’t know what to tell you. Would you consider admitting yourself to an institution?’

‘I can’t at the moment, as you know. I have this performance coming up with you lot. And I don’t want to spend the last few days of my holiday in the rehab. Is there anything you can do to help me, at least until the performance night?’ She stared into his eyes beseechingly. ‘Anything. I’m losing my grip.’

The waiter appeared to set down a wooden block of varying cheese and a wine bottle. Sherlock asked for a clean glass for himself. This talk couldn’t continue without some alcohol in his veins, he decided; she \textit{did} beg twice. They stayed silent until the waiter revisited with Sherlock’s glass.

‘Mr Holmes?’ She asked again cautiously.

‘You can call me Sherlock,’ he heaved a heavy sigh, closing his eyes shut. ‘Listen, Irene. I know, I know better than anyone how much of a burden it is. I’ve been there, done that. It’s the worst fucking feeling in the world. (Irene grimaced at the profanity.) I obviously cannot help you in a fruitful way, but I can offer a few days of close monitoring. You will let me observe you from proximity. But you have to promise me.’

‘What?’

‘You have to promise, Irene, that you \textit{will} admit yourself to the rehab after the holiday. There’s no way out. Trust me when I say this. You have to admit yourself. Schedule a pickup by the second of January. I can look after you until the performance night, as you’ll be here frequently for the rehearsals. After that, I’m afraid I can’t help you personally, but I’ll contact my brother to send someone for the remainder of that period.’ Sherlock stared at her intensely to communicate the severity of the situation. ‘Do I have your word?’

Irene bit her lips hard. ‘The only way, is it?’
‘I don’t know for sure. It worked for me, though, and I think it will help you, too. Now, your word.’

She took a big sip of her wine. ‘You have my word.’

‘Fantastic. Welcome to the withdrawal paradise.’ he smiled. ‘Don’t you fret, Irene. Just a few more days, and you’ll get to the actual crevice of hell.’

* * *

10.00 pm, South Bank

‘When will I see you again? I mean, apart from less than twelve hours from now in a rehearsal, that is,’ Sarah said, buttoning her coat. ‘God, my ears are ringing, and I didn’t even teach a percussion class for kids today!’

‘Let’s- let’s pick a quieter place next time. Although, I’m not sure when the next time would be. Maybe tomorrow, maybe the night after. Who knowsss!’ John slurred. He was pleasantly inebriated after four pints, only realising later that he had to wake up early for a rehearsal the next morning. Regrets were for mornings, anyway.

‘I have a suspicion that we might find ourselves drinking again around this time tomorrow night,’ she started to laugh heartily, but the humour quickly died away as she turned to face him in a serious tone all of a sudden. ‘John, do me a favour? Don’t be harsh on yourself. This is a tough situation, and I’m sure Sherlock will come around.’

‘You can’t know that!’ John threw his arms in the air in frustration. Perhaps he was more inebriated than he thought.

‘I have a feeling, John. Everything will work out. Go home to Sherlock, he’s probably already back from his ”date”. Go and give him a tight good-night hug. He’d like that,’ she smirked.

‘He would, d’you know what, he would,’ John said sluggishly, nodding fervently. ‘I’ll go and hug the living daylights out of him, the posh bastard. I’ll bloody do it.’

‘You do that, John,’ she waved at him. ‘See you tomorrow!’

‘Bye!!!!!!’ John waved back with both of his arms flailing. Chuckling lightly, he hailed a cab. The weather was brass monkey, and he didn’t want to get on the bus to get home under fluorescent lights, which without a doubt would make his eyes sore and throbbing.

All the way home, he imagined Sherlock and his ridiculous coat swirling around, turning down whatever snide offer that the Irene woman had made, saying stuff like, ‘Sorry, but I’m spoken for.’ Then he would shoot ultraviolet rays from those magnificent cheekbones at her and return to 221B where he belonged, to John. Then John would, as he promised Sarah, hug the living daylights out of him, and claim him his.
Only, this could never come to fruition, as John’s not-so-drunk parts of his brains were screaming ‘but what if?’

He really had to do something about it soon.

Chapter End Notes

1. Shout out to Harry Potter!!!!! For those of you who haven’t read the books: Harry, Ron, and Hermione try to talk about something discreet, and Hermione suggests that they go to Hog’s Head (a local pub) for this occasion, as there are fewer people there and she thought that it was less likely for them to be overheard. But later, it turns out that they WERE overheard; they should’ve probably gone to Three Broomsticks, a more crowded pub, to hide themselves in plain sight.
2. John Cage’s 4’33” is a piece that is widely known as the “silent piece.” Wikipedia describes: The piece purports to consist of the sounds of the environment that the listeners hear while it is performed, although it is commonly perceived as ‘four minutes thirty-three seconds of silence.’
3. Apologies if you were expecting Handel’s Messiah. Please, at least in my own alternative universe, let me escape from the ultimate cliché just a little. <3
4. Mycroft is not actually all-powerful as he usually is. Surprise!
5. I personally have no idea if rehab is indeed the only way to recuperate from such habits, but what I heard from my experienced friends and acquaintances is that it was either rehab or cold-turkey method with strict monitoring by close people.
John didn’t know what to think. He felt so, so stupid. How did he not see this coming? How thick could he have been the whole time?

For the entire day, Sherlock had been completely occupied with the flautist, Irene Adler. They’d left for the rehearsal together in the morning as usual, but upon arriving at the venue, Sherlock merely said, ‘I have some business to take care of,’ and started looking for her, who apparently had been waiting for him anxiously in the backstage area.

John saw him walk over to her and whisper something - a question, it seemed - and she nodded with a sigh. They had a brief conversation before the rehearsal, which John couldn’t quite make out. He didn’t want to eavesdrop or appear concerned with Sherlock’s unusual behaviour. John decided to assume that they were just having a follow-up after their 'date' last night, though even that was uncharacteristic of Sherlock to say the least. His head throbbed with the consequences from his own previous night. Sarah gave him a knowing smile from the tea station when he met her eyes.

The rehearsal was fantastic; Sherlock killed it with the Violin Concerto, to the composer’s and Greg’s delight. As for Shostakovich 5, they mainly worked on the second and the fourth movements; only a few spots needed extra work, as most people had already played the piece before.

But the highlight was Irene’s flute concerto, which sounded even more brilliant and mischievous than a day ago. Could she have put in extra work sometime between the rehearsal and the date she had with Sherlock? John wondered. Not much time had passed since the last time they heard her, and it was impressive to hear such a change in her tone and lyricism overnight. She sounded more relaxed and uninhibited. What could have happened?

John’s question was essentially answered when Sherlock, immediately after the rehearsal, sought Irene again, and she smiled brightly at him as if she had been expecting this. A short exchange of hushed words later, Sherlock came up to John.
‘John, I'm afraid I can't share a cab ride with you tonight. I have a full schedule,’ he said, thoroughly distracted, his eyes fixed on Irene.

‘Er, okay . . . Is everything alright?’ John asked nervously. Time to time, Sherlock had stayed behind to talk to Greg or just to hog the entire concert hall for his own practice, so it wasn’t a new concept for John to go home alone - but now that there was someone else involved with the reason he lingered, the reason being a fatally beautiful woman, no less - John's stomach began to crawl with antsy feeling.

‘Yes. Yes. Everything is fine. I just need to, er, go over some orchestral stuff with our soloist,’ Sherlock said, flicking his chin vaguely towards the general direction to where Irene was standing, waiting for him.

Lies! John accused him internally. What a terrible liar, too! Why couldn't he just tell John, his best friend, that he fancied the woman? The truth would've hurt less than this obvious lie. Sherlock looked absolutely flustered; if it wasn't for his mind-numbing crush, John might've thought it was cute. Not that Sherlock wasn't already cute at all times. Bloody hell, focus! You were supposed to be cross with him! He almost forgot what the issue was altogether. Oh, right, he just lied to him. John stared pointedly. An eye for an eye, then.

‘Sherlock, if you want to spend time with her, I don't mind. Really. But at least you could just tell me so?’ He sighed, a twinge of disappointment apparent in his voice. God, he was terrible at lying, too. He minded so very much.

‘I don't think you understand, John. It's sort of obligatory at the moment. I can't explain yet, but I will when we are done with this performance cycle,’ Sherlock sank into a low whisper. ‘I'll see you at home later?’ He winked and turned his heels to acknowledge Irene. She batted her eyelashes bashfully and exited the room with him, resting her head on Sherlock’s shoulder as they walked out together. John's mouth fell apart. What did he just see?!

He only regained his composure several minutes after he got on the bus (to hell with the cab!).

Okay, he thought to himself, no reason to be furious with Sherlock having another friend, right? Though Sherlock never ‘had friends’ as he so vehemently expressed, he did deserve to make friends as he wished. Maybe Sarah was right; maybe Sherlock did change his mind and decided to be on friendly terms with Irene.

Just how friendly could they actually be by now, though? They had literally just met the day before. They only had one evening. That was all. That was all there ever was, so far.

One evening...

John’s insides were twisted with a pang of panic. One evening - that was all that it took for himself to fall for Sherlock, too, in retrospect. They had only been formally introduced a few hours before
he took one look at 221B, into which he moved the very next day.

One evening was all it took for John to develop an irrational fondness for this ridiculous man. One evening of sharing and making music together and John knew he was in it for good. If Irene was able to see what John did in Sherlock . . . Or even worse - if Sherlock felt anything like how John had felt for him on their first night . . . That would be truly catastrophic, as Sherlock's capacity for obsession had always proved to be deeper and wider than John could ever fathom.

One evening was more than sufficient for any of these to have happened. He blinked hard.

Perhaps it wasn't a good idea to head home just yet; he prescribed himself a walk in the park to clear his thoughts. It was a warm evening, though the sun had already set an hour ago. He would have a nice little stroll - and forget about the whole thing.

The possibility of their (mutual?) infatuation notwithstanding, Sherlock could do with another friend, considering how little interaction the man had with anyone else. If he was true to his words (‘married to music’), he probably wasn't interested in her romantically - or sexually (did he even feel sexual attraction to anyone?!).

John stayed on the bus for a few more stops to get off on the outskirts of Primrose Hill, one of his favourite places in London for a walk. Remembering how he'd come here quite frequently with his friends while at Guildhall, he suddenly felt incredibly lonely.

Desperate to calm himself down, he closed his eyes - but all he could picture was how strangely intimate Sherlock and Irene had seemed as they walked side by side, their shoulders brushing against each other with every other step they took.

* * *

‘On a scale of one to ten, how bad is it today? You don't seem to suffer as much as yesterday,’ Sherlock observed. He broke apart from the proximity and sat himself down on the piano bench, closed the lid, and leant an elbow on it, facing Irene. He didn't care for the physical contact all that much.

She flopped on a chair across from the piano, nibbling on her lips nervously, her posh facade entirely dissolved as soon as they were alone. Her lipstick needed retouching from the constant contact with her teeth. She glanced around the practice room.

‘Does that window open at all?’ She asked and stood up to pry it open. At the four-inch mark, the window stuck with a crack; a metal stopper was screwed in tightly to prevent any further opening. She groaned in frustration.

‘Why even bother? You know all the windows here are bolted shut with a four-inch give. We don't want anyone throwing themselves out. In this case, I must admit that they made the right choice,’ Sherlock smiled. ‘So, what is it, then? Tell me a number.’

‘I don't know. Seven or eight. I hadn’t slept at all for three days until last night.’ She went back to her chair and clutched both of her elbows as though giving herself a hug. ‘It was eleven yesterday,
mind you. I did everything I could. It helped to know that you were going to take care of me.’

‘I wouldn’t say that I’d be “taking care” of you. I’m merely observing you hinder any impulses you may get. You did sound a bit better today, though,’ Sherlock said.

‘No, Sherlock. That's precisely what I need. It helps. That you’re here. That someone's here, for me - for this part of me.’ Irene said quietly. The silence that followed was piercing.

Sherlock pondered what she said. Anything coming from this woman couldn't be taken at face value, it seemed. He'd noticed from their very first encounter that her implications between the lines spoke volume.

Obviously, it could be a relief to feel watched over at times like this, but Sherlock had a feeling that there was more to it. If the mere idea of being monitored made her feel better - so much that her scale of discomfort decreased from eleven to seven overnight - she might recover faster than he'd initially imagined.

But if that was the case - shouldn't she already have recovered by now? Surely, she must've had some close people around who cared about her - or - perhaps not?

It occurred to him for the first time that she might have been as alone as he had been - or even more so at this point.

Sherlock almost forgot how it felt like to be completely alone; he had John for the past few months. Only after John had come into his life, he had realised how lonely he'd been all this time. Though it was difficult to admit to himself, deep down Sherlock knew that what he had with John was very rare - and it shouldn't have been a surprise at all if Irene didn't have someone like that in her life. No one, as far as Sherlock was concerned, had that sort of friendship, or relationship for that matter. All of this could only mean that she simply didn't have close friends, just like Sherlock before he'd met John.

‘You're right, Sherlock,’ she said, interrupting his thoughts.

‘Hmm?’ Sherlock hummed distractedly. People often told him he was right, all the time. Because he was. Unfazed, he went back on track with his infer.

‘Me. The fact that I'm already better. Perhaps we have more in common than you’d known, after all.’

An understanding silence overlaid between their distance. A few seconds later, someone outside the door broke the quietude and knocked to check if the room was vacant, to which Sherlock barked, ‘Occupied!’ and rolled his eyes. Irene did the same, shrugging with her palms.

‘I tried. Really, Sherlock, I did. I tried to find someone who might care. There were friends, lovers, and people in between. But once they knew that I was using, they backed out. No one knew how to deal with this part of me. People who didn't back out had stayed for wrong reasons . . .’

‘Well. It is a bit extreme to resort to drugs.’
‘Speak for yourself.’

‘I do. I admit it was a bad choice. It shouldn't have been a choice at all.’

Irene let out a loud sigh. ‘Now I feel like a fool.’

‘Stop with the self-pity. You have to stop running at some point, Irene, and fight,’ Sherlock said, his voice rising.

‘I have no one to turn to!’ she shrieked.

Sherlock paused, choosing his words carefully. ‘I couldn’t have imagined saying this even a year ago, but you have to entertain the possibility that someone might be able to hear you out.’ A small smile passed over Sherlock’s lips for a flick second. ‘But I didn't think it was possible, either, and I don’t blame you.’

‘You're referring to your clarinettist friend,’ Irene surmised. Sherlock nodded silently.

‘Having John near me has been . . . rewarding. I’d always regarded having people close as a nuisance before. I still do. But John . . .’

John.

John Watson is the best thing that's ever happened to me.

He finished the sentence in his head, unable to utter it out loud. The idea was still too fragile, too brittle to bring it into life just yet, and it needed to be nursed a bit longer before he could put it into spoken words. He swallowed hard, scooping the sentence up to shelf it back into his mind palace.

It was true all the same - Sherlock couldn’t ask for a better companion. John was good to him, so caring, and reasonable even to Sherlock’s standard. John still cared about decorum, still told him off for playing music during odd hours, still thought cab rides were overpriced. He paid the rent on a clean cheque on the same day of the month without fail, never pushed the tea bag with a spoon and always had milk in stock, never ran out of good reeds, and still yelled at Sherlock for having too-small-to-use rosin pieces around the flat.

Why did John put up with him? Why was he always there for Sherlock?

The answer came to him naturally: well, probably for the same reason that I’d be there for him. He couldn’t imagine how his life would to be without John. He doted on the man, he was extremely fond of him --- was that the word, fond? Sherlock had never used that word before. It was sweet and somewhat accurate, but it sounded weird and silly on his tongue; besides, it wasn’t enough to convey what he felt. However, he couldn’t come up with a better-fitting word and settled with it with a sigh.

‘I’m . . . quite fond of him. All forms of true intimacy were abhorrent to me before meeting him,’ he said instead of the dramatic statement that he’d bottled up.
‘I understand this sentiment,’ replied Irene. ‘Never knew it would bite me in the back.’

‘Well, for the record, it was your choice to turn to substance. Having a trustworthy companion would be a healthier alternative. I only know this from experience.’ He shifted on the bench, re-crossing his legs. He might have surprised himself by offering a ‘healthy alternative’ to anything to someone. ‘Speaking of which, why did you start?’ he asked uncomfortably. He didn’t like asking a question without knowing the answer to it.

Irene sighed. ‘From what I hear, your reasons were—’

‘Colours. yes. Thanks for reminding me of my terrible choice. But don’t make this about me.’

‘I’m not. I’m trying to relate. From what I hear, your reasons were to heighten your senses. For me, it was quite the opposite.’

Sherlock narrowed his eyes. ‘To dampen the senses, then? From what?’

‘Oh, Sherlock. I told you, but did you listen?’ Irene said mockingly. ‘“Sherlock Holmes, what a colourful name”, I said, remember?’ She raised her brows. ‘Compute.’

‘You mean - you have--’ he started, his frown deepening on his forehead. ‘You’re a--’

‘Yes, Sherlock, about time! Do you now understand why?’ she threw her hands in the air, irritated. ‘You’re not the only one with this “condition”. I’m not saying I’m worse off, but it is quite draining to see the colours practically everywhere upon which I lay my eyes. Numbers, words, and not just the English alphabet! I’d ask if you have any idea how utterly maddening this is, but you sort of do.’

He closed his eyes as something clicked in his brain like a piece of a puzzle.

She was right, they had more in common than he’d thought. The parallels were unmistakable. He, a tone- and sound-colour synaesthete, heard colours; he’d turned to substance abuse to encourage the effects, with a stimulant. Irene Adler, apparently a grapheme-colour synaesthete, tried to diminish them - with a depressant. It shouldn’t have, but it made sense. He pursed his lips and gave a tiny nod to her.

‘Look at us both,’ she said, sighing deeply. He let out a dry chuckle.

‘Let me demonstrate.’ Sherlock slowly took out his violin from the case and tuned it wordlessly. ‘For me, when I do this,’ he said, playing a few measures in the Franck violin sonata, ‘the colours just rain in front of my eyes - in this case, it’s prominently a mixture of Chrome yellow and yellow ochre lightened with some zinc white. Splotches of solid Alizarin Crimson, the lightest shade of Windsor green, and indigo blue can be seen. Sparkles of off-white dots too.’

He lowered the instrument. It was an odd - but satisfying - to describe the shades in detail to someone who actually understood what he was talking about.

‘Some of them are diluted and runny as if they’d been combined with drops of turpentine or linseed oil. Some are very firm and crusty, like impasto. It’s so very distracting, obnoxious, and--’ he murmured, voice fading to a whisper, ‘-so beautiful.’

Irene nodded knowingly, though not seeming impressed at all - unlike John. Flashes of memories flickered in Sherlock’s head like motion pictures as he reminisced how John had reacted to his explanation when he finally confided in him a week ago. He revisited the memory of that night
quite often ever since, safely tucked away in a special drawer in his mind palace.

Contrary to his initial apprehension, John didn’t leave. Instead, he reassured him that he would never go. John was so understanding, firm, and kind - and his hug against his tearful, shaking body felt unbearably tender. John’s eyes had shone with curiosity and delight as he listened to the description of Sherlock’s synaesthesia, reflecting the sprinkles of colours from the Christmas ornaments on their tree. Slow blinks of iridescent lights painted over his face in different shades every few seconds, and Sherlock had focused intensely and memorised all of the variations. It was so comfortable and natural that Sherlock had wondered why he hadn't told him earlier.

John had asked him so many questions: how the colours appeared, what made him develop a regular habit, and how he’d recovered. About those who left him. About how it had been since he came back to London. He’d absorbed them all, taking in Sherlock’s intimate and jagged part of life with such ease, filling the gaps of silence with ‘Incredible!’ ‘That’s fascinating!’ or ‘Oof, yeah, I bet that was quite terrible’.

When he'd finished his tale, John had sat very close to him and said, ‘Not anymore, though, Sherlock. Please? Don't go back to that. You're doing so well now, hmm? I've got you,’ and brushed his hand over Sherlock's curls around the nape, which made him feel drowsy and tingly.

They talked about Sarah and his date a bit more in detail, too. John had been very clear that it wouldn’t have gone anywhere even if they started dating, which made Sherlock’s heart lighter. A huge relief had overcome him as the aftermath of divulging the cryptic parts of his life. Tea and shortbread forgotten, they’d talked and talked as if a floodgate had opened. Their sitting room had been so quiet and dimly lit and smelled faintly of Mrs Hudson’s freshly baked holiday-themed biscuits. Sherlock had never felt more complete.

When he opened his eyes as he walked away from the mind palace, Irene was describing her own version of the synaesthetic experience, unaware of Sherlock’s daydreaming.

‘. . . Just blinding glows of colours around and through the letters and numbers! As a child, I naturally had trouble reading because of this. I eventually learned to control it, but the drug was able to blur them out almost completely. What a bliss to have a rest,’ she took a big gulp of breath and continued. ‘Nothing else helped as much. Are you - listening?’ She waved a hand in front of him.

‘Yes, do go on.’

‘Your mind is somewhere else,’ she said, slouching on the chair. ‘It's John, isn't it. It's endearing how much you adore your little friend. What is the nature of your relationship, then?’

‘I'm . . . not certain,’ he said, heart beating a tad faster as their topic changed.

‘Did you tell him about this?’
‘Yes. He thinks it's marvellous. The colours bit, not the drugs bit, obviously.’

‘The way he waits for you after the rehearsals . . . You two are quite complicated, it seems.’

‘Quite the contrary. We are two very close people who care about each other. Nothing’s complicated there,’ he huffed.

‘I mean, you two are neither “just friends” nor “lovers”, but so obviously a couple. That is the definition of “complicated”.’

‘To call John a “friend” wouldn't do him justice. I told him that much. He's more . . .’ Sherlock scowled to find the right word. Special? Important? Significant? ‘He's more than that,’ he settled without a clear answer.

‘Sentimental, are you?’ Irene said, smirking.

‘Sentiment . . .’ Sherlock bit hips lips. The word always held a negative connotation in his book. Being sentimental was almost synonymous with being weak, and Sherlock couldn’t have that. It wasn’t exactly the word he would use for him, either. Friends definitely did not suffice, and sentimental was still a bit too weak. But it was an unassailable fact that he did have sentiments for John, if at all for anything or anyone. He could easily lie - it was just Irene - but John deserved better.

John deserved all of his honesty, even when he wasn’t present.

‘Yes,’ he finally admitted. ‘If that word entails what I feel for him, then yes. I used to think that sentiment was merely a chemical defect found in the losing side . . . and I have lost completely.’

‘That’s a beautiful way to put it.’

He grunted equivocally. ‘It’s science. Simple. Factual.’

‘Have you talked about it?’ She lit up for the first time since they entered the practice room. Somehow, talking about John brought her back to her playful, mischievous side. She leant forward in anticipation. Her head turned around sharply when another person peeped into the room to check the vacancy (to no avail).

‘Not really. Is that necessary?’ he asked nervously.

‘Not an expert on complications myself, dear. But I’d recommend sorting out your feelings for him and double check with him just in case?’ She shrugged. ‘Or, as I've been implying this whole time, I'm very available. And we have an exquisite understanding. Care to give it a go, Mr Holmes?’ Irene crossed her arms and raised one of her hands to her mouth in a mock-seductive way, an index finger between her teeth. Her shoulders trembled a bit as she stifled a giggle.

‘Oh, Irene,’ Sherlock sighed, though not actually exasperated. ‘No offence, but you'll never have me.’

‘Neither will you me,’ Irene smiled.
Chapter 15: Imminence

23 December 2010

Concert Hall, 3.00 p.m.

‘Is it entirely necessary to turn on this much spotlight on the stage right now? I can hardly see anything,’ Irene complained, squinting in the harsh light pointing towards where she stood.

‘That's what a dress rehearsal is, Irene. This is how soloists play on big stages,’ Sherlock said in a patronising tone. ‘It's not my fault that you've only played chamber concerts in dimly-lit salons.’

Irene opened her mouth to retort but quickly accepted her fate. She put down her paper cup of tea on the floor and began assembling her instrument. Sherlock took a seat in the middle row of the mezzanine, carefully folded his coat, and placed it on his lap.

‘Go on. Start from the top.’

She complied and took off with a vibrant tone, contrary to her seemingly sombre mood, pausing every now and then for orchestra entrances.

The hall was empty except for the two musicians; everyone had left after the morning rehearsal, which ended around 1 o’clock. It was a day before the performance, which meant that they had to come back for the evening rehearsal at 7.

Most of them went home for the break, each announcing their dire need to take a nap. John had left too, though it wasn't likely that he went back home. Sherlock knew that John seldom travelled all the way to Baker Street (although it wasn't that far) just for a few hours of break; he surmised that John and a couple of mates (Sarah, Mike, and Molly, by the looks of it) had gone to a nearby chip shop to wind down a bit, as they often did.

Sherlock himself had never joined them for this outing; he usually hid in one of the practice rooms.
and went over the work, sometimes snatching Molly out of the grasp of her friends to ask her for accompaniment on the piano. Molly had been very accommodating the whole year, but she never said yes to any of his requests this month at all, always opting to go out and relax instead and asking him to join (for some reason, she never gave up on asking).

Once or twice, Sherlock had been very tempted to give in and ‘relax’ - though the idea of slouching in a chip shop or a cafe with his colleagues and talking about the rehearsal didn't sound very ‘relaxing’ - only if John had insisted. But he never had.

It would be ridiculous, even to Sherlock's standard, to be disappointed at the lack of John’s enthusiasm to invite him. This wasn't always the case; during John's first or second month at the orchestra, he had made sure that Sherlock had been informed of all pub nights and in-between-rehearsal breaks, but eventually, he'd stopped without warning. No one was to blame except Sherlock himself; it was him who adamantly refused to come, anyway. But he'd be lying if he said that it wasn't disappointing at all. Perhaps one of these days he'd make amends and join for a change.

At the moment, he had a legitimate excuse with Irene, and it made him feel a bit better that he had a reason for not joining. He wasn't sure if he'd be fine with spending a break alone just because John hadn't asked (it wasn't like he could just show up without an invitation, was it?). It was John's invitation that counted. Should he have said yes time to time - or was it too late?

Suddenly, it dawned on him how he denied John so many things when John said yes to mostly everything Sherlock asked. Yes to flatshare, yes to listening to his practice, yes to surprise sight-reading sessions. Yes to walks, bus rides, or cabs. Yes to tea and/or talk, at any time of day or night. Yes to take-away dinners, yes to restaurants. Yes (though a bit reluctantly) to Sherlock’s increased time together with Irene.

‘Sherlock?’ Irene waved towards him. ‘What did you think? Should I redo the first movement?’

‘Erm, no, next movement, please,’ he said, slightly feeling caught off-guard. He had been tuning out Irene; he always thought dress rehearsals were unnecessary, anyway. She'll be fine. Ignoring a small surprise at the fact that he was able to block sound and the consequential colours just by being deep in thoughts, which usually didn’t happen, he decided that it would be respectful to actually listen to her play.

‘Do you know what - I don’t think I need more time. You and I both know that I sound amazing. Why bother?’ Irene rolled her eyes and started to put her instrument away.

‘Your choice. If you’re going to regret this later out loud, I will choose to ignore.’

‘I won’t. How did I sound?’

‘Exactly the way you think you did,’ Sherlock said, stirring in his seat awkwardly as he didn’t really pay attention to how she sounded.

‘Hmm. Incredible, then.’ Irene smirked. She dabbed her forehead with a small silk handkerchief, tousled her neatly-made bun, produced a small elastic hairband from the front pocket of her instrument case, and tied her hair in a messy ponytail - all in one swift, fluid motion. ‘Alright. I am at my wit’s end. I no longer care how ghastly I look, and my scalp is on fire. Can we please, for the love of Poulenc, get some coffee?’
Sherlock bit his lips at this in spite of himself, suppressing a laughter; she looked so candid - and God, should he dare - a bit lovable when she resigned to her core self. He decided that she wasn’t all that lethal when she didn’t have a façade on. She was now looking at her reflection in a hand-held mirror, whispering ‘wretched, perfectly wretched’ to herself.

‘Not in Poulenc’s name, I won’t.’ He yawned off his smile and got up from his seat. ‘Try again.’

‘Johann Sebastian?’ Irene urged.

‘Mmm. Better.’

‘Thank God. Oh, and Sherlock?’ She raised her brows as Sherlock turned around to face her. ‘Do pay attention to my performance tomorrow? It doesn’t feel great to see you utterly distracted when I’m on stage.’

‘Apologies,’ Sherlock sighed. But I am giving you my physical presence, which is the best I can give. I’m afraid my emotional presence belongs to someone else at times. Probably at all times. Tomorrow during the performance, however, I’ll make some amends, and you’ll receive my attention.’

Irene shook her head disbelievingly. ‘Do you ever hear yourself talk? Here I was, thinking that I was the diva drama queen. The way you speak, Sherlock. Goodness me. You really are something.’ She hopped down the stage and approached a disgruntled Sherlock, linking her arm through his. ‘Come now. Coffee time.’

* * *

10.00 p.m.

‘I am so done already!’ Mike cried and downed his third pint of lager in one swig. ‘Just one last performance, then it’s Christmas! Then I won’t have to see any of your bloody faces for TEN days, haha!’ he chortled victoriously.

‘Blimey, Mike. I haven’t seen you this wild since the week before our graduation!’ John laughed. ‘You sure you can pull through until tomorrow?’

‘He'd better if he wants to be alive to spend those ten days in bliss,’ Sarah said. Her face was very rosy.

‘Cheers to staying alive, mate.’ Everyone clinked their glasses in unison and gave a loud ‘Woot!’ but it was buried completely under the rowdiness of the pub. As the days neared Christmas, the pubs grew louder and more crowded as a rule. None of the QPO musicians gave a rat's arse about this.
Pub nights took place almost daily all throughout December from sheer exhaustion caused by gruelling rehearsals. The brass players, string instrumentalists, and the percussionists had their own tables. (Wind players did too, but they’d left an hour before).

John’s was the only table with a mixed group of instruments; to across him, a fully-inebriated Mike was rambling about his section; Sarah sat to the left of Mike, nodding furiously and bursting into explosive laughter whenever he referred to his cello by its (her) name, Michelle. To John’s right was a quiet but extremely drunk Molly, asking them who Michelle was for the fourth time (and why she was between his legs during the rehearsals).

John had secretly labelled these three as his ‘gang’, though he’d never acknowledged it out loud. He absolutely adored them. It felt like primary school again, and the talks between and after the tiring rehearsals were what best helped him endure this end-of-the-year madness. Especially with Sherlock completely occupied for the past three days or so, John really appreciated his gang and their camaraderie more than ever.

‘So, John?’ Mike tapped him hard on his arm. ‘What about Sherlock, then?’

‘What about him?’ John asked, his heart sinking a bit. Trying not to think about Sherlock wasn’t going so well. Sarah and Molly’s heads turned towards John, keen to hear what he had to say.

‘Well, if you haven’t noticed already, which I’m sure you have, the bloke’s all over the soloist these days! They’re inseparable! Yesterday I’ve heard from one of the cellists that they were in a practice room together, just chewing the fat! You alright with that?’

‘Yeah, I was going to ask the same, actually.’ Sarah chimed in. ‘I also heard a few horn players talking about how they even went to get takeaway coffee! What is going on between them?’

John sighed. He should probably order another pint if they were going to talk about Sherlock.

‘Honestly, I have no idea. All he told me was that they needed to, er . . . go over some music or something. I don’t buy it, of course, but they’re definitely up to something.’

‘But what about you and Sherlock?’ Mike asked again. Not expecting to be questioned about that, let alone from him of all people, John raised his brows.

‘How do you mean?’ John wasn’t sure if he liked where the conversation was heading.

‘John, my mate!’ Mike buried his face in his hands. ‘Are you saying that you and Sherlock aren’t together?’

‘What? Of course we are not - we’re not a couple!’

‘John!? Are you seriously telling me right now - that two months ago, after the most intense eye-sex I’ve ever witnessed in my entire sheltered life of music making, you just went to see his flat and nothing ever happened?’ Mike looked incredulous. ‘You’re telling me that you didn’t snog his smug face in that cab ride over? That you two are still just flatmates, even now?!’

‘Why would you assume that - why - I mean-’ John stuttered. ‘Yes, we, we are just flatmates. We’re friends, good friends. I don’t understand why you’d assumed that we were together!’

‘Because!’ Mike roared, stomping on the table with his almost-empty pint glass. Molly flinched a little and wiped the splash of beer that flew over her sleeves. ‘Well, you bloody idiot, Sherlock’s
been a completely different person since you moved in. I’d never seen him like that - he’s been glowing, mate. Glowing! And not just him! You’re the happiest you’ve looked in all the years that I’ve known ya! I’d assumed that you two were shagging on a regular basis! I mean, not that I’ve known him for that long anyway, but the difference is night and day! You never saw the other side of Sherlock that I’d seen, that Molly had seen. Back me up here, love,’ he said, tugging on Molly’s hand over the table. ‘Tell him how much Sherlock’s changed.’

‘S true, John,’ Molly slurred. ‘We seen ‘im for a year . . . ‘F you fink tha’ ‘e’s a git now, you should’ve seen ‘im then . . . I mean, I’ve always been fond o’ ‘im regar’less, bu’ e’s never been this - lovely,’ she hiccuped. (Mike clapped on her hand and cried, ‘I love her drunk accent!”)

John laughed a little at Molly’s choice of word, ‘lovely’. If tearing the rehearsals apart and dissolving his co-workers into tears were considered ‘lovely’ behaviour, he wasn’t sure if he wanted to know how Sherlock used to behave before meeting him.

‘Well, dunno what to tell you lot. We’re not together. Never have been,’ John said, shaking his head.

‘So, as his friend,’ Sarah prompted, ‘you’re alright with him and Irene dating, then?’

‘Dating-! I don’t think they’re dating, not Sherlock. He doesn’t . . . date. I’m sure he has his reasons, he said so. He’ll tell me later. He doesn’t do anything without a reason, he even said that it was sort of - obligatory. We’ll have a talk tomorrow night. It’ll be sorted out,’ John said.

‘Dunno, mate. From where I was watching, they looked proper chummy. If you have even a speck of feelings for him, it couldn’t have been easy,’ Mike shrugged. ‘I’m not telling you what or how you should feel. But I’m just saying. If I were you - I’d be proper jealous, I would.’ He wiped his mouth on the back of his hand.

‘I - I don’t know how I feel,’ John lied. Ignoring Sarah’s glance, he took a sip of his beer. ‘If Sherlock finds Irene attractive . . . There’s nothing I can do, or would do, about it. It is what it is.’

‘Oh, John!’ Molly scowled at him. ‘You’ve go’a be bloody kiddin’ me. The sky is blue! Me bassoon is brown! Sh’lock fancies ya! You fancy ‘im! Wha’s the problem ‘ere?!’

John pursed his lips in a tight line. Drunk Molly was right, he couldn’t deny that. But he didn’t want to acknowledge it, either. Although, he still wasn’t sure if Sherlock did ‘fancy’ him. He felt like a bloody teenager all over again.

‘Ah, give him a break. He’ll come around, won’t he, John? Like you said, he always has a reason for doing anything. I’ll tell you what, though! You really should talk about all this with him sooner than later,’ Sarah said reassuringly. ‘I’m not worried about Sherlock, but that flautist! Phew! She looks very determined. Bloody breathtaking, too, mind. And her sound . . . ’ She whistled.

‘Stunnin’,’ Molly whispered.

‘Legendary,’ Mike added. ‘Bit scary, though. She sounds like she’ll blow up the hall with her flute.’

‘Er, right. Thanks for the pep talk, but I’m really not sure where Sherlock and I stand at the moment. You’re right, though, Sarah. I should have a talk with him,’ John said.

‘Ha! I knew it!’ Mike pointed, too drunk for decorum. ‘Please, John, for me. Talk some sense to him! Tell him how you feel! I think you know what you want, don’t bother arguing with me - I’m your bloody fairy godmother! Don’t let my matchmaking be in vain!’ he smiled, grabbing John’s shoulders and shaking him.
‘Talk to ‘im, John.’ Molly goaded, too.


Sarah held his hand with both of hers, instantly calming him down. She stared into his eyes, grinning ear to ear.

‘Get the hell on with it, John Watson.’
Chapter Notes

Welcome to the performance night!!

*Thanks Hertie <3
http://archiveofourown.org/users/hertie/

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 16: Christmas Eve

24 December 2010

Concert Hall, 7.30 p.m.

Soo Lin's crisp A in 440 filled the hall four times. Brief moments of tuning later, Greg Lestrade appeared on stage as the audience applauded. He gave Sherlock a curt nod and raised the baton. The composer of the first piece, Esa-Pekka Salonen, was seated in the front row, watching them closely as they began playing his violin concerto. John smiled at Sherlock as he listened carefully to the building sound of the piece.

John had spent the past few weeks watching Sherlock memorising the work in full; it seemed that Sherlock rarely had a problem learning a piece by heart. His ‘mind palace’, according to him, had a big music library where he stowed away all the pieces he ever played. It was impressive to hear Sherlock's violin riding the orchestra like a smooth-sailing ship in the calm ocean.

He tried not to be too distracted with Sherlock's extra-posh tuxedo that he, John, picked up from the dry cleaner's the day before along with his own suit. The black tux jacket fit Sherlock's body like a glove; his trousers were somewhere in between snug and dear God above, those are tight.

John's favourite part of the outfit, however, was Sherlock's black satin bow tie. They had bickered for ten minutes straight that afternoon as John tried to keep Sherlock still while he tied the bow meticulously (‘STOP squirming around, or you're going on the stage with an open collar!’ ‘Do you think I'd give a shit, John?’). He grinned against the tip of his instrument fondly as he remembered.

How unprofessional, he thought to himself, that he wasn't paying the utmost attention to the live music that he was playing at the moment . . . But how can one stay focused when one had just found out a few hours before that Sherlock's polished black dress shoes were size 12.5?! Oh my God, John, show some respect to the composer, he scolded himself.
Sherlock, as always, sounded incredible. If John hadn't known any better, he wouldn't have been able to tell that the man didn't know the piece even a couple months ago; it sounded as though Sherlock had played this piece for a lifetime. He looked incandescent under the spotlight, his neck long and graceful against the burnt-umber colour of his instrument tucked under the chin. His curls bounced slightly whenever he bowed a particularly intense passage. This concert should have come with a parental warning, John thought. The way Sherlock looked at the moment was definitely not suitable for children. In fact, it should be illegal. Hmm.

John continued with his entrances in the piece along with the woodwind section, feeling giddy. It took a lot of energy to stop himself from shouting across the hall: ‘That's right! I get to go home with that violinist! He lives with me!’

Another applause and some shifts in the stage later, Irene came out to the centre, wearing a long-sleeved, extremely tight snow-white lace dress with a deep v-cut in the front and back. Several audible gasps were followed by a thundering, louder-than-ever applause.

John sniggered and exchanged a meaningful glance with Jeanette, the first chair flautist who sat next to him. John had a few talks at the tea station between rehearsals with her during which they'd placed a bet on Irene's performance dress colour (John had guessed red; Jeanette said she'd wear white. He owed her a fiver.) Jeanette wasn't a fan of Irene, but over the past few days, she did admit that the soloist deserved the win. John never really got around to spending much time with Jeanette, though he probably should, right? She was a perfectly nice girl - tall, dark, beautiful, sharp cheekbones, snide remarks - wait, was he still thinking about Jeanette?

He shook his head with a jolt as Irene tuned to Soo Lin’s A. The orchestra began the Nielson Concerto with the horns and strings in an upbeat tempo, and Irene transpierced the space with her flute, her sound lighthearted and frisky. The piece suited her personality quite well; even with a full orchestra behind, her sound projected flawlessly. John almost forgot about the burning jealousy he'd felt for Irene. Her technique was quite perfect, and it was by far the best rendition that John had heard.

At the end of the piece as the audience clapped vehemently, she gestured towards the conductor and the concertmaster, and both men bowed alongside her. Greg gave her a warm hug. Sherlock gave the tiniest of a smile to which Irene responded with a wide grin.

John's inside did another somersault against his will. He felt trapped in the middle of the stage, unable to leave until the conductor and soloist departed first. In a little while to John’s immense relief, the house light brightened to announce the intermission, and the audience flooded out the hall. Some of the musicians on the stage also exited towards the backstage as the stage managers brought back more chairs for the last piece, Shostakovich’s Fifth Symphony.

In the backstage area, John ran into the fourth and fifth chairs of each section who had been waiting to be called back for the Shostakovich symphony, which required a bigger orchestra.

He spotted Sherlock at once, surrounded by the other orchestra members and Greg as they congratulated him. The other half of the group was swarming near Irene, who was now almost buried under a dozen or so bouquets. John shimmied through the crowd and waited his turn to talk to Sherlock. By the time he reached the violinist, Sherlock was also holding a couple of bouquets (to John's surprise).
‘It’s from Mycroft. Ever the emotional. He manages to send one every time I play a concerto, wherever I am in the world,’ Sherlock said, handing them to John.

‘Oh, and I get to . . . hold them.’ John smelled the assorted flowers. ‘The sunflowers are from Mrs Hudson, it says! So she came!’ He said, pointing at a small note inside one of the bouquets.

‘Yes, she went back to her seat already. She loves the last piece, I can’t wait to hide from her when she starts gushing about Shostakovich’s fate in the ‘30s.’

‘I see . . .’ John said absentmindedly. He really wanted to pull Sherlock out on the side and ask him about what had happened with Irene; he waited four days for this moment and couldn’t hold his curiosity any longer. Guiding him to a corner near the door, John lowered his voice.

‘Sherlock, I just wanted to -’

‘John, I know. Can we do this after the concert? I promise. I’ll tell you everything. I just have to say goodbye to Irene.’ Sherlock held his gaze for a few seconds in reassurance.

‘Er . . . yeah, okay.’ John backed away regretfully as Sherlock shot him another glance on his way to the flautist, who was now barely visible among the mountain of flowers. He followed him slowly and strained to listen to their conversation, stealthily putting down Sherlock’s bouquets on a chair five feet away from them.

‘How can I ever-’ Irene started. John took a quick look at her face; she had tears in her eyes, and her hands were trembling quite a lot. Oh, God - was she alright? John’s sympathy kicked in. She looked a bit too distressed for a person who’d just completed a devastatingly successful performance. A sudden urge to interrupt and comfort her overcame him, but that might be out of his place; his better judgment stopped himself, opting to awkwardly pick up and rearrange the sunflowers that Mrs Hudson had given to Sherlock.

‘No need to thank me. They will be waiting for you outside. You can stay until the end of the concert, or you can go with them now,’ Sherlock said.

‘You have no idea how much the last few days meant to me,’ Irene said shakily. ‘Thank you.’

‘Likewise, for listening to my nonsense.’

‘Can we stay in touch? Do you think we can be - friends?’ She said. John’s peripheral vision caught Sherlock’s hand reaching for Irene’s for a handshake.

‘You know where to find me.’ He gently clasped her hand. Irene smiled wistfully.

‘Here’s to the losing side,’ she said. ‘Best of luck to you.’

John scowled at the cryptic nature of their conversation. It sounded like Irene needn’t worry about being friends with Sherlock, as they probably were already; their body language, spoken
language, the friendly air between them - everything indicated that they had been very close indeed in the past few days. He felt even more confused when Irene lowered the bouquets on a table next to her and dabbed her eyes with one of the rose petals. A rose petal!

‘I'll be going now. Happy Christmas, darling.’

‘Happy Christmas, Irene. Be good,’ he said and went back to the stage with his violin and bow. Irene picked up her flute case and as many bouquets as she can carry in her arms. John watched her speeding towards the exit. His heart nearly stopped when she suddenly turned her head around and addressed him.

‘Happy Christmas, John,’ she smiled.

‘Happy Christmas to you too, Irene. Congratulations. You sounded beautiful tonight,’ he managed, feeling exposed for no reason whatsoever. Feeling his face burning a little, he looked for an inconspicuous corner for Sherlock's bouquets, because intermission was almost over - he had to quickly stash the flowers somewhere safe and get back on stage. Most of them had already left backstage, preparing for the grand finale of the year. Just as he popped back towards the corridor leading to the stage, John saw Irene at the exit door, lingering a bit and glancing back one last time at him.

‘Somebody loves you,’ she winked.

John closed the backstage door shut behind him, his heartbeat hammering throughout his body. Who would -?

Nope, he definitely imagined hearing that. He couldn't have heard that. She must be messing with his head. Or he was losing his mind. Or she couldn’t have meant what he thought she did. Or -

Several people were going over some of the passages when he arrived on stage. Sherlock turned his head around to meet his eyes and mouthed ‘Time for Shostakovich’ and grinned. John’s heart thuddeded louder and faster, replicating the exact tempo marking for the fourth movement of Dmitriy’s masterpiece.

* * *

Greg’s flat, 11.30 p.m.

‘Fantastic job, everyone!’ Greg cried for the third time. ‘You were truly marvellous! What a piece to end the year with! Shostakovich is proud of us! Go say hello to Mr Salonen! I think he's in the sitting room with the string players. Help yourself to anything! Make yourself comfortable! Stay as long as you like!’

‘Cheers, Greg! We’ve heard you the first two times!’ John raised his glass of whisky towards the conductor, who yelled back, ‘Well, it’s a bloody rondo!’

Greg had a good taste in alcohol. On the kitchen counter was a makeshift minibar where he set up a collection of various spirits, wine, beer, and all sorts of mixers. John hadn't looked at the
bedroom and the library, but so far he was quite impressed with Greg's place. It was located not too far away from the concert hall in South Bank area. If John hadn't lived in an equally nice neighbourhood, he might have coveted this flat a tiny bit.

‘Trust you to have a dashing little flat right in the centre!’ Sarah said, clinking her wine glass with Greg’s whisky glass. ‘Is this yours, then, for real?’

‘What a good question!’ Greg chortled merrily. ‘I actually bought this place a few years ago when the market was falling a bit. I still have loads to pay back for the loan, but as God is my witness - this place is worth every pound! Make yourself at home. Did everyone get seconds? Come now, it's Christmas do! You're allowed to get plastered!’ He cheered and joined a group of musicians in the sitting room who were chugging drinks like there was no tomorrow.

‘Nice of you to come along, Sherlock! At last! I almost thought you didn't drink, or something. What have you got there?’ Sarah nudged Sherlock's elbow.

‘Dark rum with ginger beer,’ Sherlock said sheepishly.

‘Excellent choice! Suits you, eh? Dark and Stormy, how appropriate. How about you, John?’

‘Er, this is my second glass of Bunnahabhain, 18 years. Honestly, can you believe this selection? He must've spent a fortune for this do!’ John shook his head in amusement.

‘Blimey, you’re right. That bottle of Bunnahabhain alone must be a hundred quid at least . . . Good on you for having it neat. I think there was a Springbank 15 over there, too. And quite a few bottles of quality red and white. This in my hand is a posh-as-hell Cabernet Sauvignon . . . I have a newlyfound respect for him,’ Sarah winked.

‘Man of refined taste,’ John agreed.

‘This is meretricious,’ Sherlock said.

John rolled his eyes. ‘Sherlock, you can't be serious. That glass you're holding right now is a work of art! It's probably the best rum you'll ever drink! You've got to admit that you're enjoying this.’

‘The alcohol is not terrible, I suppose. But the noise, the people . . .’

‘You missed out on all the other pub nights. Just for one night, Sherlock, let it loose!’ John took a sip of the spicy drink. He closed his eyes as the liquid burned the back of his throat deliciously. God, he loved a good whisky.

‘I'm only here because you asked me, John.’

At this, Sarah slowly stepped away from the two men, raising her brows at John as if to say *that's my cue to leave!* John chuckled. They were now the only people left in the kitchen; everyone else had relocated to the sitting room to mingle and celebrate. The flat was big enough that the cacophony of drinking musicians was muffled by distance.

‘Where did you put my violin, John?’

‘They're all in Greg's library. He took all of our instruments there personally for safekeeping, remember?’

‘It's not guarded by anyone. How is it safe?’

‘It's just us here, Sherlock. And Mr Salonen, who I think is a lovely bloke, will most definitely not
steal our instruments. Relax now, will you?’ John brushed his hand on Sherlock's lower bicep. Sherlock grunted in response.

It was a strange feeling to be 'out' with Sherlock for a 'Christmas do'. The posh git would have refused to come if this was to take place at a pub, but not only was it *The Eve*, it was also quite late at night - all the pubs and shops were closed at this time anyway. John was secretly pleased that Sherlock accompanied him for a change for a night out.

In the back of his head, John was wondering if it seemed too impatient to bring up Irene again. Sherlock had asked him to wait until the end of the concert, which he did. It had been an hour since they left the hall. He decided that by now it wouldn't be too obsessive to skirt around the subject somehow, although Sherlock was far too clever and would notice his attempt right away. Feeling a good buzz in his stomach, John braced himself and tried yet again to broach the topic carefully.

‘Sherlock?’

‘Hmm.’

‘I . . .’

He didn't know how, after all. How was he supposed to ask? What words should he choose? He pondered for a moment before he said anything too reckless. His drunk brain provided the following.

*What happened with Irene?* Ugh, no, too direct.

*What did Irene want?* No. Too accusatory.

*So, then, laddie, you and Irene, then?* Oh my God, John. What the fuck. You do not talk like that.

*You were . . . quite busy lately.* Okay, that's not bad. Subtle, not too much . . . alright. That will do. He cleared his throat.

‘I missed you,’ he said, realising what he blurted out a moment too late. He bit his lips in an annoyance at himself. *What the fuck was that, John?! Out of all things?!?!?* He began back-pedalling. ‘I mean, well, you were . . . you were busy lately. Quite so.’

Ugh. Now it's worse. He hated himself. Time for another drink, maybe a bit of Springbank this time.

Sherlock didn't say anything for a few painful seconds, then opened his mouth. ‘I'm sorry, John. It was not my intention to push you away. Please understand.’

‘No worries there,’ John choked. Phew. He didn't think that was weird, it seemed. Close one. ‘Er, so . . . are you going to tell me now?’

‘Not with people here. It's a private matter.’

When John was getting ready to retaliate instead of waiting for a clear answer YET again (‘Okay,
now you're making me curious!'), Mike burst in the kitchen, dragging both of them by the sleeves.

‘Come on then, lads! Mistletoe time!’

‘Wha-?’ John said, startled.

‘We found mistletoe in the sitting room! Loads of it! Don't miss this!’ Mike was adamant. And very strong. And very drunk.

When they entered the sitting room, several people were paired up very closely. Every inch of the entire ceiling was covered with mistletoe. Whether or not Greg had planned for this to happen was too much for John to fathom. Sweet, or creepy? There was no way to tell.

John noticed Anderson and Donovan curled up against one another on a couch, already snogging passionately. It was a well-known fact that those two were together in the orchestra - but among the crowd were so many other never-seen-before pairs splayed around the room: Janine had Billy trapped in the cage of her arms against a wall, whispering something that was masked by the Christmas carol in the background (John knew that those bickerings were really their way of being affectionate!); Steven Bainbridge, the trombonist, was now brushing his thumb on the palm that belonged to none other than Henry Knight, the trumpeter, both bashfully grinning; and to John’s amazement, Sarah’s lips were practically attached to Jeanette’s reddened ears, and their arms were wrapped around each other tightly.

Mike laughed happily and pointed his chin towards Greg, whom John didn't see in the corner of the room. The conductor barked ‘took you lot long enough to find them!’ and approached a very smiley Molly, gently reaching out a hand. Molly took it and intertwined her fingers with his. Her eyelashes fluttered as Greg sat next to her on the floor.

‘Amorous night! Snogging night!’ Mike sang along a carol with made-up-on-the-spot lyrics. John gaped at the room full of laughing, shouting, talking, snogging, flirting people in disbelief; the mystique of mistletoe was truly powerful, it seemed. He turned to Sherlock, whose mouth was also hanging open, looking aghast. Mike winked at John markedly and gave a nearby cellist (his stand partner, if John wasn’t mistaken) a big bear hug, shouting ‘Happy Christmas’ in her face.

‘What the fuck,’ Sherlock said, looking paler despite the alcohol consumption. John doubled up in laughter; it was quite a sight to see Sherlock looking visibly petrified in the midst of unabashed PDA, let alone swearing with that posh mouth. His heart swelled with an overwhelming fondness. Without thinking, John grinned and pulled Sherlock in for a kiss, tugging on the back of Sherlock’s neck towards his face.

‘John?’

Oh, shit. He didn’t mean to go for a kiss. Shit, shit, shit. Think fast!

In the nick of time, he survived the mortification by twisting his head just a few inches to the right, aiming for Sherlock’s cheek instead. Just a peck. What’s a chaste peck on the cheek between mates, right? And it was Christmas Eve - and there was mistletoe! With all the excuses in the
world, he planted a quick kiss and stepped back, reestablishing personal space. His inebriated eyes
dawdled over the dark bruise on Sherlock’s neck. Oh, for God’s sake.

‘I don’t know. It’s your fault,’ John blamed him instead. Perhaps it was time to stop drinking.
Involuntary speech, involuntary action - that whisky was getting to his inhibition now.

‘It’s my fault that you kissed me?’

‘Quite so,’ John said, giving up on pretences. ‘It’s your bloody fault for being so fetching under
the mistletoe, innit.’

‘Wow. John, That’s quite enough for your daily alcohol intake. Let’s get you home.’

‘Is that an invitation, Sherlock?’ he smiled with his eyes closed. He no longer gave a shit.

‘I’m not “inviting” you to your own flat, John. You’re crapulous. Say your goodbyes now.’
Sherlock manhandled him across the room. ‘Lestrade, Mike, Molly. We’re leaving now. See you
next year.’


From afar, Sarah’s head turned toward them sharply at this news. ‘Let them leave, Greg! Go on,
get home safe! Happy Christmas!’ She shooed them away. ‘Go!’

‘But -’

‘Shut it, Greg. Bye, John! Sherlock! Happy Christmas, see you in the new year!’ Mike waved,
nudging a disappointed Greg in the ribs.

‘Happy Christmas!!!’ John waved back as Sherlock pulled him out of the room. After another ten
minutes of searching for their instruments in Greg’s library, they were out the door, enveloped by
the chilly air of London’s Christmas Eve.

Chapter End Notes

Rondo: a musical form with a recurring leading theme. If the Theme is ‘A,’ a
new/different theme would follow it each time afterwards, sort of like A-B-A-C-A-D-
and so forth. Greg’s theme here was “ENJOY!! GET DRUNK!!! YOU DID
WELL!!” and then half hour later he would come back and say the same thing. Imao
'It’s an hour walk, John! We’ll freeze to death before we can cross the bridge!’

‘As you can see, genius, there are no cabs around. No tube running. No bus. We’re going to have to walk,’ John said. ‘Plus, I need to sober up a bit before bed - otherwise I’ll have the worst hangover tomorrow. Today, now, I suppose. It’s past midnight, innit?’

Sherlock considered this. John did make a good point. In fact, they were both more intoxicated than they’d ever been in each other’s presence (that rum was a lot stronger than it tasted, the alcohol content concealed in the sweetness of the ginger beer). A bit of walking might clear up the fuzziness.

‘Fine. Waterloo?’

‘Let’s take Golden Jubilee today? It’s an equally pleasing bridge, I think.’

‘I’m only agreeing because it’s actually closer to where we are now. We may decrease the walking distance by at least five minutes that way. We’ll -’

‘Stop it, Sherlock. We’ll find our way home,’ John said, shoving him playfully in the shoulder.

‘If I get mugged on the street on Christmas, I will make you pay for this dearly,’ Sherlock whined, as a snowflake landed on his nose and melted away. ‘Oh, perfect, it’s snowing. Blast.’ He rolled his eyes.

‘It’s a Christmas miracle!’ John clapped his hand like a child. ‘I haven’t seen snow in London for ages! It used to snow a lot in New York, though.’

‘More chances for us to slip and crack the skull, how merry,’ Sherlock said sardonically.

‘Don’t you like it? I mean, I hate the slush afterwards. Bloody disgusting. But when it’s just starting to snow - it’s beautiful! It’s magical!’
‘Well, John. How do you know if it’s snow at all? What if it’s ash?’ he threw his palms in the air, not quite remembering where the reference was from. He didn’t even know why he’d even said such an odd thing. The mind palace was always a right mess when he drank.

‘Sherlock Holmes, did you just make a *Doctor Who* reference?!’ John gasped, clasping his hands over the mouth dramatically. ‘Did you – just - Oh my God.’ He stopped to double up again and laugh.

‘*Doctor Who*, that’s right. I was wondering where the hell that was from. Oh, come on. It’s not even a funny reference!’

‘I know it’s not, but it’s strangely befitting - you, snow, ash, dark reference, *Doctor Who*- Ha!’ John wrapped his left arm around Sherlock’s waist and clutched him tight, still laughing hard. ‘We watched that episode a few weeks ago! You remembered!’

‘I also remember that Christmastime is terrible for being in London, as it’s apparently the most popular time of the year for an alien invasion,’ Sherlock said. He quite liked how the reverberation of John’s laughter felt against him - he’d never admit it out loud, but oh, how he loved to make John laugh.

Warm tingles effervesced throughout his side and back where John’s arm was touching him, especially around his right shoulder, where John was now resting his head. Everything was in its right place; his violin slung on his left, John on his right.

The temperature outside must be far below zero, their exhalations condensing steadily into opaque fogs in the frosty air, but Sherlock had never felt so warm. He carefully raised his right arm and put his hand around John’s shoulder. John looked up at him with a beautiful smile and nuzzled into Sherlock’s chest as they staggered together across the bridge wordlessly. To their left, despite the steady downfall of the snow, the London Eye shone in a bright shade of blue, the same shade of blue as his favourite part in the second movement of a Faure violin sonata.

Sherlock had to admit that it was a bit magical.

As they walked side by side in maximum physical contact appropriate for walking, he remembered how disturbed he was at the sight of several couples displaying their affection in public at Lestrade’s. What he and John were doing now was akin to that nature, but it didn’t bother Sherlock in the slightest. In fact, it didn’t bother him when John kissed him on the cheek, either, or when he told him that he missed him. Or when he told him that he looked ‘fetching’. Or when he tied his bow tie for him this morning. It had been quite difficult to stand still while John’s face was hovering mere inches away from his, concentrated and mumbling to himself about the bow-tying procedure. He would have returned the favour if he had known how to tie the blasted thing himself.

His head turned towards John, who squeezed his side gently before breaking away from him. Sherlock complained internally at the loss of contact. While scavenging through his options to somehow keep touching John, he noticed that John’s scarf wasn’t done properly in the rush of heading out of the conductor’s flat. His exposed skin was reddened from the bitter-cold winter wind and snow.
‘Stop.’

‘Hmm?’ John hummed sleepily.

‘Come here.’ Now, Sherlock wasn’t an expert at bow-ties, but he did know how to wrap a scarf around a neck very well. He guided John by the small of his back to the railing on the bridge to stabilise him and turned his body to face him.

‘What are you doing?’ John’s steps were heavy.

‘I’m going to re-tie your scarf. It’s freezing, you’ll catch pneumonia.’ Sherlock unravelled the scarf from John’s neck and slowly bundled him, tight enough to stay warm, but not so much that he would suffocate. John stayed remarkably still for a staggering, drunk person. In the distance, they could hear carols being sung by a choir.

‘This is so unreal,’ John said as they resumed their walking. ‘You’re so nice to me right now. It must be Christmas.’

‘Must be,’ Sherlock muttered. They were finally near the end of this seemingly everlasting bridge. Judging by the degree of John’s wobbliness, going down the stairs all the way to the ground level would be a bit not good. He led the way to the lift and pushed the down button.

Another moment of eternity later, they were back on the pavement. John’s sense of direction was so disoriented that Sherlock had to practically manhandle him to walk north, not back towards the river. It took a while for them to return to walking in silence.

Ping!

John fumbled around and shoved his hand in his pocket. ‘I’ve got a - oh, never mind. I thought it might’ve been Harry. Hmm. Silly me.’

‘Do you still talk to your sister, then?’ Sherlock asked, trying to sound nonchalant. He always wanted to know more about John’s mysterious sister, but John didn’t seem to be keen on the subject for an unknown reason. Considering how much of an open book John had been, it seemed best not to prod. After all, he himself didn’t like to discuss Mycroft, either. However off-putting Harry was, she couldn’t be worse than Mycroft.

‘Yes, now and then,’ John said, looking a bit flustered. ‘She’s . . . not around very much. But it’s Christmas, so I thought maybe she . . . I don’t know. Who knows. Anyway, if it’s not my phone, it must be yours. Maybe it’s Mycroft wishing a happy holiday.’

‘Mycroft never texts me if he can speak. I dread to think that we might have been reduced to the text-on-holiday sort,’ Sherlock said, taking out his phone.
Sherlock stopped in his tracks. They must’ve confiscated Irene’s phone after letting her send this one last message, getting her ready for the week of supervision before the trip to the rehab. He shuddered at the thought of being back in that hell of a place; not one second from the rehab was worth reliving. He thought he’d dumped all of that in the special bin in his mind palace, but the contents of the bin were always so stubbornly present in the back of his head, never truly deleted nor forgotten.

It was not the withdrawal that made his experience particularly execrable; as usual, it was boredom - the people and their mind-numbingly dull life stories. He remembered the group therapy sessions to be the most irritating.

With the special request from Mycroft, he was allowed to have his violin in his room, but only during certain hours. Being unable to produce the sound and the colours he wanted, when he wanted, was one of the most excruciating things he’d faced. How many times had he tried to pick the lock to the room in which his violin was stored during the night, only to bang the secure door in frustration and wake up everyone in the vicinity? How many times had he desperately tried to get a hold of a radio to turn on the Classic FM, then failed to hold down his temper whenever someone wanted to change the channel, only to be sectioned until he’d calmed down again? He’d lost count.

Scowling, he wondered if Irene would lose control before getting to the final destination and if she would feel any better under professional supervision (as opposed to Sherlock’s been-there-done-that approach).

He pictured the last encounter he had with her at the concert hall backstage. The anticipation of his personal attention being taken away from her had seemed to take a toll on her greatly. Well, it was out of his hands now, but now that she had reminded him of herself, he realised that the woman concerned him more than he thought. He wasn’t sure why he cared so much about her. It was quite unsettling.

‘What - Sherlock, what’s up?’ John shook him gently out of his memories. ‘You alright? Who’s that from? You’ve gone pale!’

‘Nothing. It’s Irene. She’s . . . gone.’

‘Irene - gone? Where?’ John stared open-mouthed. ‘Is everything okay? I talked to her briefly at the intermission, she looked shattered! What’s going on?’

Sherlock knew he couldn’t hold out anymore; he’d made John wait for an explanation for almost a whole week. It was none of his business, but John would never judge, as he didn’t judge Sherlock for his past. If it was anyone else, Sherlock would have brushed them off completely quite a while ago. There was, however, something nagging at him, almost like a need - to justify his actions and his behaviour to John.
‘John, are you sober enough to listen to me now?’

* * *

It was one o’clock in the morning, and there were no cabs around. At their current leisurely pace, it would take them another hour to get back to Baker Street. Slightly panicking, John’s brain came back online. He no longer felt as fuzzy; his blood had turned cold at the mention of Irene’s name, flushing out the alcohol slowly out of his system. *Sober, yes, I’m sober, always* - he thought to himself. He felt a bit ridiculous for being so alarmed, but his curiosity skied through the roof by this point. Longing to hear better, he straightened up and made an actual attempt to walk stably. Though there was no one on the street (it was quite an odd feeling to pass through an empty Trafalgar Square), he glanced around as though to check if anyone was overhearing them.

‘What? Of course I am. I’ve been listening to you this whole time. Are you going to tell me what happened?’ John asked. It was only half-true what he told Sherlock; the whisky still sang in his blood in a low drone, though he could feel that clearheadedness wasn’t too far away. Bits and pieces of the night were still blurry in his mind, and he didn’t quite remember how long they’d been walking. He could still feel the warmth from snuggling Sherlock all the way down the bridge.

‘Well, like I said, it was never my intention to push you away for these few days. Irene needed my help.’

‘What sort of “help” did she need, then? Don’t worry, I’ve enough alcohol in my system, so you don’t have to be delicate,’ John said, trying not to betray the jealousy in his tone.

‘I need you to be quite awake for this, John. Allow me to start from the night of our consultation,’ Sherlock said.

‘You mean the date.’

‘No, it was decidedly not a date, at least not on my part. She came to consult me.’

‘What about?’ John raised his brows.

Sherlock sighed and started his tale, starting from the first night like he said. John listened closely, huffing and gasping throughout, as Sherlock reported every last detail on their meeting and the deal.

‘Wait, so she’s a synaesthete too?’

‘It’s not that rare, John. You make it sound like we are aliens.’

‘Right . . . Well, did it help, then? That you looked after her?’

‘It would seem so. I did the best I can. It’s all over now, she’s got professionals watching her until next week.’
‘Honestly, Sherlock,’ John smiled. ‘I didn’t know you could be so caring, it’s like discovering your new side!’

‘Just because I sympathised with her and cared about her well-being doesn’t mean I’m suddenly a caring person,’ Sherlock said. ‘Now that I’m done explaining to you, I won’t think about her again.’

‘Why not? Aren’t you going to see her again? She has your number! You said “you know where to find me!”’

‘I have no strong desire to see her again, to be honest.’

‘I don’t understand. I thought you liked each other?’

‘I’m certain she did. As for me . . .’ Sherlock paused as if to choose his words carefully. ‘We’re . . . on good terms.’

‘On good terms?! I’ve never seen you spend that much time with - anyone else!’ John said, swallowing the words ‘other than me’ that followed closely.

‘Like I said, it was obligatory. She asked for a very specific favour, and I helped her. That’s all.’ John sighed. ‘I know. It’s just that I’m so used to spending every day and night with you is all.’

‘You’re certainly not obligated to spend any of your time with me, John.’

That hurt John a bit. ‘You’re right. I’m not. In fact, I have no right to expect you to spend every waking hour with me. Yet, we do!’ he said bitterly.

‘John.’

‘No, think about it, isn’t it odd?’ John could feel that he was getting closer to achieving sobriety at this topic. ‘Has it ever occurred to you that we spend too much time together with each other?’

‘. . . We do, but is that a problem?’ Sherlock shrugged.

‘You tell me. Why do you think we do?’

‘Because we are flatmates who work together, and we get on -’

‘No, Sherlock. Really, think. Be honest. Between you and me, remember? I need your complete honesty.’ John shook his head. He had to be brave, he had to broach this subject sometime, and it might as well be now. ‘Why are we this way? What are we doing?’

‘What is that supposed to mean?’ A deep frown formed around Sherlock’s brows.

‘I know you understand what I mean. What are we doing? What is this - what are we?’

‘John -’

‘Who am I to you? Hmm? You mentioned last week that you wouldn’t call me a friend. What the hell am I to you if I’m not a friend, let alone a best friend?’ He paused to organise his next attack. ‘Then, the following night, we had an amazing talk, openminded and frank and all - then, there you were, inseparable with a stranger within a day of meeting her, then dropping her altogether just like that. What am I supposed to think of this? Don’t you see the resemblance here?’

‘What resemblance?’ Sherlock huffed.
‘Sherlock. What you did to her, apart from taking care and being generous, is what I’m precisely afraid of. I moved into your place one day after we’d met for the first time, and admit it - we’ve been quite inseparable since. Don’t you find it similar? To see you being able to just - cut your ties with her like this - it’s sort of disconcerting. It makes me wonder if that would ever happen to me, and if it will, then is it only a matter of time?’

As difficult as that was, John’s anxiety was partially alleviated with the outpour of his innermost thoughts. But he hadn’t asked the question that he most wanted to. Clearing his throat loudly, he soldiered on and put forward his peak concern.

‘Sherlock, do you ever think about - us?’

‘Us?’ He echoed. He looked even paler than when Irene’s text had arrived.

‘Yes, us. I can’t be sure about you, but I’m fucking tired of this.’ John pressed on, feeling braver by the second. Their walking pace had become quicker. Slightly out of breath, he continued. ‘We are good friends, best friends, sure. But whatever we have right now between us - this isn’t strictly platonic “friendship”. I’ve never been this close to anyone and it frightens me. Where are we going?’

‘What... do you want us to be, then, if not friends?’

*This bloody git was going to be the death of me,* John thought. He heaved the biggest sigh yet.

‘Sherlock, I don’t just want to be friends with you. I want to be your love, too.’

This was it. He’d shown his hand. All his cards were on the table now. There was no going back. John had said it, not just because he wanted to, but it had become too overpowering for him to conceal it any longer. Not that he was doing a good job at hiding it, either, but it was necessary to put it in explicit words for Sherlock. He deserved that much. With an immense effort, he dared to stop Sherlock by the forearm in the middle of Regent Street. Sherlock blinked hard several times, apparently computing what had just transpired.

‘Love,’ he stood still.

‘Yes, that. Do you understand what I’m saying?’ John held both of Sherlock’s hands in his.

‘Love,’ Sherlock said again, unmoving. He rarely repeated the same thing. *Uh oh, did I break him?* John was starting to get bit concerned. Regretfully, he resorted to humour.

‘Thank God your hearing is intact, sugar nut. You don’t . . . have to say anything. I just needed you to know. Come on, let’s go home. It’s freezing,’ John said, pulling Sherlock’s hand.

‘John,’ Sherlock turned to face him fully. ‘Er . . .'
‘Yes?’ Feeling the adrenaline coursing through his veins, John slowly faced Sherlock. He could feel it under his skin; something important was about to happen, a moment to which he might look back in the future again and again. He felt as if he was floating outside his physical body, looking at himself and Sherlock from afar, standing mere inches away from each other. He stared hungrily into Sherlock’s eyes for an answer. ‘Yes, Sherlock?’ He prodded again. His face was so close to Sherlock’s now that if he just tipped his chin up slightly, his lips could reach Sherlock’s.

‘I - I thought,’ Sherlock started after blinking half a dozen more times, ‘I thought . . . mere words are futile to truly convey what I feel, but it appears that I found the word.’

John understood. ‘Please, say it.’

‘It’s . . .’

‘Go on, Sherlock, I need to hear it.’

‘It’s love,’ Sherlock said quietly, his mouth forming a perfect circle, brows raised as if a sudden sense of realisation dawned on him.

John closed his eyes, adrenaline and dopamine singing a chorus in his blood. He was breathless, eyes stinging with warm tears, the happiest of tears. ‘Please, say that again,’ he choked.

‘I’m in love with you,’ Sherlock said, clearly shocked with the newfound discovery, still looking confused, but nodding slowly as though he’d never been so convinced of anything, as though he’d never said anything truer. His curls were slightly dampened and blanketed with a thin sheet of snowflakes, and wasn’t that the most precious sight?

John’s hand slowly cupped Sherlock’s face, admiring the curves of his wondrous, God-sent bone structure. Sherlock’s fingers traced a line on John’s, finding their ways to interlace them together. John shuddered and let out a breath of release, of soothing comfort, Sherlock’s words replaying in his head over and over again.

‘And I, with you,’ he said in a trembling voice, and leant in, slowly and tentatively. Sherlock craned his neck to meet him halfway. Their frozen, numbed noses brushed against each other softly. John nuzzled into Sherlock’s cheeks ever so lightly, drinking in the scent that was only Sherlock. He smelled musky and sweet, like petrichor. Old books. Evergreen trees. His skin felt familiar and novel. He made small sounds of hitched breath, and John knew that if he were a synaesthete, the sound would taste like ambrosia. Like happiness. Like a revisited favourite book, recognisable yet refreshing.

They smiled, nose pressed against nose, and just breathed for what felt like hours, a lifetime. Not even an inch stood between them. Sherlock exhaled in content and placed a soft, chaste kiss on John’s cheek, unhurriedly, lazily, holding a small bit of flesh between his plush lips. A drop of tear rolled down John’s cheek and landed on Sherlock’s long eyelashes, which made him flutter and look up in dismay. John let out a shaky chuckle.

‘Sorry, I just can’t believe this is happening - you have no idea how much I’ve wanted this.’

‘Neither do you,’ and he embraced him tight in his arms, burying his nose in John’s hair. ‘Hmm, your hair is frozen with snow,’ he hummed and shook his head in a jerk. John laughed out loud at that. His heart ached with fondness and love and God, he wasn’t even cold anymore. Only one
thing mattered, and that was to keep feeling and exploring Sherlock’s breathtaking skin with his mouth.

And there, halfway through the crescent of Regent Street, John mustered his courage, broke away slightly from the hug, and tipped his toes, closing the distance between their lips at last.

Softly, sweetly, he caught Sherlock’s full, lower lip between his lips, smiling. His teeth grazed against John’s. It was incredulous how intimate this act was, but it felt so natural, as though they had been doing this for ages, for aeons. Sherlock’s tongue started to caress John’s at a leisurely pace, sending a shiver down John’s spine. He let out a faint whimper in spite of himself; it felt ridiculously, awfully fantastic. And Sherlock - ever the mind reader - gently nibbled and licked at John’s lips again, eliciting another tiny moan from him.

Without heat, without urgency, their tongues intertwined in an open-mouthed kiss, their hands wrapped around each other closely. Languid, wet kisses turn into a series of fleeting pecks, and they swayed on the spot together, sighing against each other’s lips again and again, dizzy and drunk with love.

Panting lightly, John gave him one last firm kiss on his reddened, puffed lips, and brought Sherlock’s hands to his mouth to kiss his knuckles. ‘Let’s go home.’

Sherlock’s eyes watered. ‘Home, yes,’ he whispered, beaming. He returned the kiss on John’s eyelids with the lightest touch of lips, breaking away only to gaze him endearingly. ‘I’ll take you home.’ Drops of tears trickled down slowly.

‘Are you alright?’ John asked, wiping Sherlock’s tears dry, sincerely hoping that those were happy ones.

‘John,’ he muttered hoarsely. ‘I’ve been chasing and waiting for something like this all my life, between the reality and workings of the heart - the colours, sparks, and fireworks - I’ve been searching, and I didn’t even know what for.’ He kissed John’s forehead and pulled his neck for another tight embrace. ‘But it wasn’t the colours or the ecstasy. It was you, it was you all along,’ he said in revelation. ‘I found you.’

John felt his chest swell, touched and moved beyond belief, and choked back his own tears. ‘You found me. You will always find me. No matter where I am, in whatever universe I am - you will always know that you have to find me, Sherlock, and you will. It’s you and me.’

‘You and me,’ Sherlock whispered, smiling beautifully. John stared at Sherlock’s calloused hand reaching for his own.

‘Come on, I have to get you home like I promised,’ Sherlock winked. John’s heart skipped a beat. Oh, to be so loved, to be kissed so tenderly, to walk home hand in hand with his best friend - his love - on a Christmas day. He couldn’t believe his luck.

‘It feels nice to hold your hand,’ he said, feeling a bit like a fool. Grinning one like too.

‘Then I won’t let go,’ Sherlock smiled. Their footsteps were now making soft indents behind them as they staggered together. They still had to walk half an hour more to get home, but the snow had stopped falling. The whole of London was covered in a celebratory white to congratulate their union. John felt triumphant.
‘Des pas sur la neige,’ he whispered.

They were now turning onto Oxford Street. Sherlock hummed the Debussy prelude absentmindedly and squeezed John’s hand.

End of PART I

Chapter End Notes

1. This chapter was entirely inspired by Des pas sur la neige - Claude Debussy.
2. Doctor Who and the ash reference: in one of the episodes, it "snows" and turns out it was ASH of spaceships and beings burnt up. (Not explaining this well...)
PART II

Chapter 18: Interlude

Their Christmas Day was not much different from any of their ordinary days together, save for the fact that Mycroft called to say the niceties - and that Sherlock finally felt that he was allowed to kiss John as often as he wanted without jeopardising their friendship.

The ‘whatever they had’ had clearly slipped into the ‘more than friends’ zone the night before, much to their mutual happiness. Sherlock wondered if he should have reached his conclusion sooner so as to decrease the amount of angst, but he quite liked how everything turned out; the real scenario, albeit a bit unexpected, had been so much better than anything he could’ve hoped.

They spent the entire day cooking and playing music, basking in the newfound aspect of their relationship. John and Sherlock exchanged their gifts, both of which were books: Sherlock’s gift for John was a beautifully bound Chekhov Short Stories, and John’s, a collection of Russian Fairytales compiled by Afanasyev.

They relaxed, lazed around, smiled, and laughed, revelling in the fact that there weren’t any rehearsals until the third of January, enjoying the freedom while they could.

It was the most wonderful week in Sherlock’s life. In fact, the entire month of December was surely to be archived carefully.

He woke to John playing *Auld Lang Syne* on clarinet on the morning of New Year’s Day. Incredulous of his luck, he picked up his violin and played an excerpt from Prokofiev’s *Semyon Kotko*, which John immediately recognised.

‘This is Mikola’s solo, isn’t it? *If only I’d known a week ago where I’d be now...*’ How appropriate. I relate to this a lot, I must say.’
‘How do you know this opera so well? It’s rather obscure.’ Sherlock asked.

John shrugged. ‘In case you’ve forgotten, I do have a doctorate, concentrating on 20th-century Russian music, mate. Besides, this is one of my favourite works. Right . . . What shall we have for dinner, then?’

‘I’ll make us coq au vin if you don’t mind me using the good wine.’

‘Not at all, chef,’ John said, planting a small kiss on Sherlock’s cheek. ‘Anything you want. But first, I’ve got some plans for us.’

‘Should I be alarmed?’

‘No, no,’ John chuckled. ‘I mean, I still have some things I’d like to watch with you before we go back to rehearsals. If you aren’t bored yet. We did watch a lot of things this past week . . . But you said you haven’t seen the documentary on Sigur Ros.’

‘No.’

‘And . . . You haven’t seen Oscar Wilde’s Salome by Berkoff, either.’

‘No. I did watch Strauss’ Salome, though, in Austria.’

‘Of course you did, you posh git. But this play - it’s really something, I think you’ll like it.’

‘Fine,’ Sherlock said curtly, though he was quite curious; he loved the Strauss opera, and he did enjoy reading the original play by Oscar Wilde, too.

‘After that, we’ll make dinner,’ John said as he popped a DVD into the player and settled on the couch. ‘Come sit with me? Do you have your socks on?’

‘They’re on the coffee table next to you.’

‘Don’t take them off, I don’t want your feet to get cold. Come here.’

Sherlock bit his lips in an attempt to hide his grin and colossally failed. He slid his body around John’s inviting arm and nestled under the blanket that John spread over themselves. John gave him another kiss, this time on the nose, and reached for the cashmere socks on the coffee table. Sherlock watched John carefully enveloping his feet in soft, warm material, murmuring ‘God, your feet are icy’ and tucking them under the blanket.

‘There, all done. Now, time for Sigur Ros and the magic of Iceland!’ John said cheerfully, pulling Sherlock closer to him. ‘ Hmm. You smell so nice. How did I get so lucky?’

‘You’re smitten, John,’ Sherlock grunted, smiling, nuzzling John’s neck.

‘Quite right, I’m a lovesick fool. Don’t judge,’ John said. ‘Alright, pay attention now. Iceland!’

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Two-and-a-half servings of coq au vin (each) later, they discussed their past romantic entanglements (or the lack thereof, in Sherlock's case). John had already asked about Sherlock’s relationships a couple of months ago, and they both knew that it was John’s turn to tell.

John wasn't shy about describing his former lovers when Sherlock asked, although he did first get a glass of wine before starting his tale. He had had three romantic partners before Sherlock, which came as a surprise to him, who frankly had expected more. When he expressed his thoughts on it, John smiled and told him that it was because his past relationships lasted about two or three years on average.

‘Is that supposed to be a long time, two or three years?’ Sherlock asked.

‘Er, not really for me, but in comparison to others’, maybe. My goal was always to stick around as long as I can.’

‘I hope you will, John.’

‘You know I will.’

His first significant other was an Austrian pianist named Lydia, with whom he'd been assigned in a chamber group. They'd been together for three years when she announced that she was accepted to Hochschule für Musik in Hannover for her Master's degree; John chuckled in amusement as he recalled how she'd told him that she would have broken up with him anyway even if it wasn't for the distance.

‘The long distance would never have worked anyway, especially when I was about to go to New York, too. But I did consider flying to Germany every year if she was willing,’ he said.

Sherlock examined his face carefully, admiring how open and honest John was when he spoke.

When asked whether he thought about her now and then, John nodded and went upstairs to bring back a small cardboard box of mementoes, which contained all sorts of trinkets that John had received from his friends and partners; most of them were cards. He rummaged through the box and showed Sherlock a small card with a flower corsage attached to it.

‘This is the last one I've got from her,’ he said and allowed Sherlock to read. The content wasn't very interesting, but the fact that John had been keeping it for ages spoke volume about his sentimentality, and Sherlock felt oddly privileged to have been given a permission to step further into John's private, intimate part of his past.

John's second lover was a jazz drummer whom he'd met in New York during his master's program. Some of their mutual friends in the jazz department had taken John to Cornelia Street Cafe, where the drummer's quartet had a gig one night. Upon being introduced to David, John apparently had felt instantly drawn to him.

‘I probably shouldn't have been so impulsive, but . . . I don't know. There's something inherently different about jazz musicians, and I was so intrigued, coming from a classical background,’ John
said as he took a sip of wine.

‘We were so different - and I felt so uncool next to him. One time, I wanted to look like a drummer, so I suggested that we switch our instrument bags. He picked up my clarinet case, and I his cymbal bag . . . I never knew how much burden they had to carry on their back! Literal burden! I could barely hold it up even to wear the straps on my shoulders! Immediate regret. He laughed so hard.’

The reason for their breakup was, yet again, predictable and dull; David had become so insecure with the instability of his gigs that he lashed out on John constantly, and that was that.

‘But you were with him for - two and a half years?’ Sherlock asked incredulously. ‘He sounds exhausting.’

‘It was emotionally draining, yeah. It hurt when he left, but a part of me was relieved. I swore I'd never date musicians again after that,’ John smiled. ‘Never say never, I guess.’

‘And you said there was another person after him,’ Sherlock recounted.

‘Er, yes, but actually . . . I'm not sure if I can call that a relationship, so maybe we'll skip that one,’ John said hurriedly. ‘It was more like a fling, or . . . I don't know. We weren't really together. It was definitely something, but he wasn't interested in committing, and I got tired. That's all.’

‘If you don't want to talk about it, you don't have to.’

‘It's not that I don't want to - well, it's just that he's sort of recent, is all. I was close with him right before I moved back to London.’

‘Was he a musician?’ Sherlock smirked. He didn't want to make him uncomfortable, but it was nevertheless fun to see John blushing. Somehow, he could tell that this last ‘fling’ mattered the most to John, given his hesitance to go into detail.

‘Well, yeah. Wow. I guess I've only been with musicians, I never thought much about it . . . Er, this bloke was an oboist. It didn't amount to much nor did it last long, just about six months.’ With this comment, John let out a forced yawn and stretched. ‘Well, there you have it. Now you know. It's a shame I couldn't hear your stories, it would've been fascinating!’

Sherlock didn’t miss the underlying ‘I don't want to talk about it right now’ in his voice, but decided not to comment on it, and shrugged. ‘Not likely. I'm honestly glad I didn't waste time with anyone unimportant.’

‘So I'm “not unimportant”, then? How flattering, Sherlock,’ John said teasingly. ‘Who knew you'd be so romantic! “Not Unimportant”, ha! You sure know how to make a bloke blush.’

‘You're not just “Not Unimportant”, John. You're the only one that matters,’ Sherlock said without missing a beat. ‘And that's the highest compliment of which I'm capable.’

‘Okay, now you're really making me flustered.’ John grinned and brushed the back of Sherlock's neck gently. ‘Sherlock, all jokes aside, I'm just really happy that we are where we are now. It means so much to me that you reciprocate my feelings.’ Placing a firm kiss on Sherlock's temple, he got up from the couch and put his empty wine glass in the sink. ‘I'm going to bed now, it's late.’

Sherlock nodded and watched him turn towards the stairs. He thought about asking John to share his bed, but he felt as if that was a bit too much to ask. Yet.
‘Goodnight, dear,’ John waved a hand.

‘John, before you go –’ Sherlock said, mustering up a last-minute courage. ‘Tell me his name? The last one. You didn’t tell me his name.’


‘Good night.’

Sherlock came back to his room and sat down on the edge of his bed.

James Sholto . . . The name sounded familiar, unlike John’s other former lovers. Was he famous? Sherlock knew he’d seen that name printed somewhere. Where did he see it? It was written on a piece of . . . thick-ish paper . . .

A programme. He’d seen it on a programme somewhere.

Suddenly, a rush of adrenaline coursed through his veins. He got up and rummaged his desk drawers, looking for a specific programme - the QPO’s. When he found the booklet, he flipped through the pages towards the spring season.

\[ \text{Petrushka} - \text{Igor Stravinsky} \]

\[ \text{Concerto in D major for Oboe and Small Orchestra, AV 144, TrV 292 - Richard Strauss} \]

\[ \text{James Sholto, oboe} \]

There.

For a concert in the middle of February, James Sholto was supposed to be their soloist.

Did John not know about this? If not, how did he miss it? Had John never seen the programme yet? How - well, it was possible that John missed it, actually, now that Sherlock thought about it. John was never interested in thinking ahead of the rehearsals; his motto was to get through one rehearsal cycle at a time, and he loved the surprise of finding out the next one’s programme. No wonder.

Did James know that John was a part of QPO? Probably not at the time of his audition, as he must have auditioned many a month ago, perhaps even before John’s acceptance to the orchestra. Whether or not he knew that John was now a member of QPO was a mystery.

Perhaps John will find out on his own. Or, maybe it would be better for him to be surprised than to spend over a month in anticipation. Or not. Maybe John was over it. Oh, but the way he looked, flustered at the mention of James’ name - John wasn’t over it completely. Definitely not.

Sherlock stayed wide awake for hours, contemplating his options. First night of the year, and he was completely occupied with the thought of John’s ex. By the time he fell asleep, his sheets were crumbled into a ball from tossing and turning so much.
Rehearsals resumed. As it was always the case, January wasn't the happiest of the months. Everyone complained about the weather in varying intensity. It snowed many times, but not the magical, fluffy kind like they had seen on Christmas Eve; frosty drizzles of ice particles hung heavy in the air, encasing the city like a giant ice box in a cold, misty fog. One didn't quite need an umbrella, but a raincoat wasn't enough for it, either. The orchestra members employed special waterproof covers for their cases. Most of them managed to get to rehearsals without completely getting drenched, except those with large instruments, like poor Billy with the bass.

The first week of January was especially miserable as the heating in their rehearsal space broke and was only sporadically functional. When it did work, the space was so warm that people actually fell asleep during tacet. When it wasn't working, there was no telling whether or not their vibrato was caused from the chills.

Rehearsal cycles and concerts came and went smoothly. Some of the couples that were formed during Lestrade's Christmas party eventually broke up, including Sarah and Jeanette, who remained cordial and professional.

The last concert of the month with Dvořák, Mahler, and Schumann was a big success, and the conductor was in such a good mood that he bought drinks for everyone for all three nights of the concert. Even Sherlock came out to one of them. But it was only because John had asked - he started inviting Sherlock again to the pub nights after they had become intimate.

February crept in without warning, and the anticipation of meeting John’s ‘ex’ jerked Sherlock’s insides sporadically. Lestrade wasn’t exactly a proactive announcer of the following rehearsal cycles, always introducing the soloists on the first day of. Sherlock was dying to ask John, or to somehow bring him up subtly, but he didn’t want to upset him. After all, it was but a privilege to hear John’s past. Besides, John was often very distracting, and there never was a good time to broach the subject.

In the end, curiosity got the best of him. On the night before the first day of their rehearsal cycle for the oboe pieces, Sherlock’s patience cracked.

It wasn’t exactly an impulsive decision; he had been devising the best and the least invasive approach to somehow bring James Sholto up again, and it was, of course, through music; he decided on the excerpt from Strauss’ symphonic poem, Don Juan.

It had to be timed very well to milk the maximum reaction without raising any suspicions, too. The said oboe solo was in the middle of the piece, and his intentions might be obvious if he just played that part separately. It would be the safest choice to start from a few pages before.

Making sure that John was relaxed in the sitting room, Sherlock picked up his violin and started playing various excerpts as if he was just mindlessly going over a few things. Then, very carefully, he snuck into the middle of Don Juan, trying not to seem questionable. However, the response from John was immediate.
‘Hey! That - I love that piece. It has the most amazing oboe solo, do you know that part?’ John said, putting his book down. ‘I’ll play with you! Hold on, let me get my instrument.’

Watching John leave the room, Sherlock couldn’t believe how quick he was to take the bait. And frankly, John didn’t seem upset or triggered at all. Perhaps this was a good thing. Sherlock sighed in relief and continued to play.

‘Go on, play the oboe part, I’ll play the other instruments’ parts on my clarinet as they come. Bassoon, horn, clarinet, whatever. I know the piece like the back of my hand,’ John said as he entered the room again with his instrument case. Sherlock complied, imagining the orchestral accompaniment, fully equipped by his mind palace, and started from the low D which slid up an octave in one smooth motion. John quickly followed with the horn, flute, bassoon, and clarinet sections, taking his time with the rubato.

When the tone colour changed, they looked at each other in wonder.

They ended on a cadence as if they had been rehearsing this part for all their lives, then sighed simultaneously.

It was more incredible than Sherlock imagined; John’s conduct of sound was marvellous as always. He almost forgot why he had even started this stunt to begin with, until John put down his instrument and opened his mouth.

‘It’s been ages since I played this. Sounds quite good on the violin. I never thought about it being a violin solo.’ John shook his head. ‘I have . . . memories associated with this piece. They flood back to me whenever I play it.’

This felt like an invitation to ask questions, and Sherlock prodded. ‘Do you want to tell me about them?’

‘Ah, well, you know . . . Remember I told you that one time about my fling with an oboe player?’ John smiled wistfully. ‘Yeah, he and I used to play this all the time. In fact, he made me do the orchestral accompaniment. Not quite like an actual orchestra or a pianist would, but he said that I did a good job covering all the double reed instruments and the horn parts. It was really fun.’

‘Yes, you mentioned him, I remember,’ Sherlock said. ‘Good memories, then.’

‘Yes, for the most part. At least with this excerpt, I guess.’

Sherlock choke down ‘How would you feel if you have to play with him again?’ There was no need. John would see for himself the next day. Perhaps it wasn’t a big deal at all. Instead, he said, ‘We could make this one into our own memory if we played it more often.’

‘I’d like that,’ John said. He put his instrument back in the case and sat back on the couch. ‘Sherlock?’

‘Mmm.’

‘I . . .’ Splotches of pink bloomed on John’s cheeks. ‘I really like playing with you. You sound so gorgeous, always.’

‘The pleasure is mine,’ Sherlock winked and brushed his thumb against John’s lips, softened and
still wet from playing the clarinet. ‘Not only do you sound incredible, you look - delectable.’

‘That’s, wow.’ John swallowed hard. ‘That’s quite a word to describe someone.’

‘Simply stating the obvious,’ Sherlock said and kissed John softly. He no longer cared about James or the oboe excerpt or the fact that they had to get up early for the morning rehearsal. John was kissing back, His John, who played with the most scintillating colours, who loved him - and that was all that mattered.

Chapter End Notes

1. Shout out to my fav compilation of fairy tales by Afanasyev!

2. Semyon Kotko is an opera by Prokofiev. This excerpt that Sherlock plays is sung by a young male character named Mikola, who has the most amazing musical moment in the piece when his life is being threatened, as he laments how he wished he’d known a week before where he would be today. In this fic, however, Sherlock is using this context to convey how lucky he feels because only a week ago they were still “friends.”

3. Watch the documentary on Sigur Ros if you get a chance. It’s called Heima.

4. Strauss’ opera, Salome, is bloody awesome. It’s based on the Oscar Wilde play, and the rendition of Salome directed by Steven Berkoff is SUPER SURREAL. Hope you all can watch it someday, too. I can’t find a youtube video of it, but I bought a copy. It’s great.

5. During my life devoted to music, surrounded by professional musicians 99% of the time, I’d rarely seen someone who dates non-musicians. Some of us are more adventurous and have different circles of friends, but most of the time there isn’t time to meet the others. John’s case is just a stereotype.

6. tacet: music notation for a long period of silence. Usually a LOT of measures with rests. Literally not playing anything. People do fall asleep now and then when they lose counting, especially when the conductor is working with other sections for long.

7. Strauss’ Don Juan is a masterpiece, and the oboe solo here is ... otherworldly.
That night, John dreamt of James.

As dreams often were, nothing made any sense: after a particularly exhausting quartet rehearsal, they somehow had transported to James’ bed, and they cuddled like they used to, James’ arm securely around John, their breathing synchronised. Suddenly, they heard a screeching sound of high strings, then realised that they were floating in space, being chased by aliens shaped like tubas. Frightened, John reached for James’ hands, but he merely smiled and flew away, leaving John alone on the floating bed. The tubas charged at a lightening speed and crushed him.

He woke with a start, chest heaving. The nightmare left him with a pit in his stomach. The screeching violin sound didn’t stop, which John figured out to be one of Sherlock’s morning fits. Most mornings, Sherlock would play something on the quieter side, but now and then when he apparently woke on the wrong side of the bed, he played something violent and contemporary. Today must have been one of those days. Perhaps Sherlock had a nightmare, too.

The whole time on their way to the rehearsal, John thought about the dream. It made him feel guilty, even just to recall his dream in which he was intimate with another person when he was with Sherlock now.

But even in this crazy, nonsensical scenario, James had left John without a second thought. *Sherlock would never do that*, he muttered to himself. *Sherlock would never be that cruel.*

*But are you sure?* John asked himself. *Don’t you remember what he did to Irene?*
He tried very hard not to stress out, reminding himself that he and Irene are very different people. He recalled the Christmas holidays and their conversation in the snow. Sherlock was perhaps capable of being cruel, but John was quite sure that he wouldn’t do that to him. That gave him a bit of peace, just enough to get to the rehearsal without freaking out.

Needless to say, the moment of peace was short lived. It was not a pleasant surprise to John when Greg (very happily) introduced James to the orchestra as their guest soloist for the cycle. For a moment, John wasn't sure if he was still dreaming or not. But it was too clear, too real - and James was really there, smiling, waving, speaking. Eluding confidence and charm as always.

He could barely hear his self-introduction speech; his mind was fuzzy and cloudy with flashes of memories. He thought he was completely alright by now. Apparently not.

It wasn't that he had any leftover feelings for James - that was gone instantly on the night he dismissed John like he was nothing. But he had left a tangible ghost in John's chest, and it still hurt him in a nebulous, faraway manner, pricking at his heart uncomfortably. It was, in short, a bit not good.

Then he remembered that he told Sherlock James' name that one night when they talked about the ex-partners. (Not that James was exactly an ‘ex’. James was adamant that they were precisely Not Partners.) Sherlock, the clever sod, would have already figured out everything by now, calculating what was going on in John's mind just by looking at his face. It truly was an odd feeling to have one's former almost-something and current partner in the same rehearsal space.

Helplessly, he sought Sherlock's face in the room and found his eyes almost right away. Sherlock gave him an assuring look and mouthed 'Don't worry', not seeming surprised at all. Oh, of course, he already fucking knew about this - James' name must have been in the bloody programme. Everyone probably already knew that a soloist was coming in this week, except for John.

He rolled his eyes and looked at Sherlock again. Sherlock was now giving him a faint, kind smile. That calmed him down a bit, but then right before James went to sit in the audience during their Perturshka rehearsal, he spotted John among the winds. His eyes widened in genuine shock, but he didn't say anything and left the stage. Greg, ever the morning person, already had his baton up in the air, practically dancing, impatiently waiting for James to settle.

The rehearsal was supposed to be two and a half hours long, and their break wasn't until another hour or so. Until then, John was trapped in the rehearsal space without being able to resolve the tension. His neck tingled from a strange sensation, and he was certain that James was staring at him ferociously.

Anxiety was bad for performance. For the first time since Irene, John wasn't happy with his playing during the rehearsal. During the Strauss concerto, He was severely distracted with James' playing, especially because he recognised his tone right away. Music was indeed a powerful agent for nostalgia. Perhaps he really should take a look at the programme from now on to avoid future surprises. John made a small mental note to himself, though he really didn’t like to worry about later rehearsals if he could help it, because that would just be one more unnecessary thing on his mind.

A gruelling hour of rehearsal later, they had their fifteen-minute break. Most people darted to the
backstage coffee and tea station immediately. John saw from the corner of his eye that Sherlock was slowly joining the crowd as well, presumably giving John the space to talk to James, who was now wiping the inside of his instrument with a violet silk swab. John walked over him and tapped on his back.

‘Hello,’ John said, keeping his voice consciously stable.

‘John!’ James turned around and cried, giving him a loose hug, which startled John greatly. ‘You nearly gave me a heart attack, I couldn’t believe my eyes when I saw you - what are you doing here, playing that old thing?’

‘So you didn’t know that I was here,’ John said, realising that there was a very little chance that James could have known unless he made an attempt to find where John was now. ‘But you did know that I moved to London. Were you going to let me know at some point, had I not met you here?’

‘John, come on. You left so dramatically, I thought you didn’t want to be bothered. Why should I? Not that I’m not glad to see you, mate. You look well,’ James said teasingly, every syllable so heavy with humour and lightheartedness that it made John and his choices feel belittled. ‘Oh, don’t give us that face. Come now, let’s get some tea. We still have about ten minutes.’

It seemed that James had changed very, very little. He was still his hypnotising, subtly-coercive self, still somehow managing and manipulating the people around him with practised ease. Not knowing what to say, and quite frankly needing a cuppa himself, John let himself led to the tea station. Sherlock was sipping on tea next to Molly (muttering ‘I think I’m allergic to mornings’) and Mike (yelling ‘my rosin is allergic to mornings’) when John and James came to the backstage area. John gave him a brow raise to indicate that things were alright (even though they really weren’t quite alright) and received a short nod in return.

‘So, tell me, John. How have you been? London must be treating you well,’ James said, pouring himself some hot water for his cup of tea. ‘How long have you been working here?’

‘Er, just a few months, it hasn’t been very long. But I’m - happy. Yea, I’m doing quite well. How’s yourself? When did you even audition for this?’

‘About a year ago,’ James answered. ‘I’m doing fantastic. Doing loads of solo gigs.’

‘That’s ... great.’ John said. An uncomfortable few seconds of silence passed.

He oddly felt as though the conversation was not as flowing as it used to be with James; usually, James was a suave talker, always knowing what to say in any situation, leaving the other person a bit dazed. *Quick, John, say something lighthearted, you’re supposed to be over it,* provided his inner voice. He finally decided on ‘How long are you staying in London, then?’

‘Just a week. Business as usual.’

‘Right.’

Before John frantically searched for another half-arsed question to fill the silence, Sherlock snuck behind him and held out a hand to James. ‘Welcome, Mr Sholto. Sherlock Holmes, concertmaster.’

‘Alright? Call me James, dear. Sherlock, what a great name,’ James said casually and shook his hand, his face lighting up, perhaps grateful of ice-breaking intrusion, or perhaps for another reason
that John dared not delve further. ‘I do feel very welcomed, thank you. You sounded lovely.’

‘Yes,’ Sherlock nodded curtly. Of course he’d concur with a compliment . . . John couldn’t help but grin. But they were both right, Sherlock did sound lovely.

‘Confident! I like that,’ James said, flashing a big smile. ‘Well, we should get back out there soon. Hey John, how about a drink tonight, then?’

‘Erm. Sure,’ John frowned.

Frankly, he wasn’t sure if he wanted to, but it was inevitable, and he had been bracing himself for this suggestion ever since the moment he saw him. It had to happen at some point, and John would rather get it over with than let the awkwardness fester in his system.

Besides, he really should get some good closure, especially now that Sherlock was in the picture. Not to mention that he had so many questions for James about his behaviour. Almost a year passed since their ‘whatever’, and John knew that he had to confront that can of worms if he wanted to continue his relationship with Sherlock without any invisible burden. ‘Talk after the rehearsal, then,’ he said, feeling a little sick.

“You’re invited, too, Sherlock!’ James chuckled and turned his back. John watched James walk away, feeling disconcerted.

“So, that’s him. James Sholto,’ Sherlock said, stepping next to John.

‘Yep.’

‘He’s . . . quite a character.’

‘He could be, yes.’

‘Hmm.’ Sherlock sighed and tipped his head, gesturing towards the rehearsal space. ‘Come on. We’re going to be late.’

‘Are you alright with this?’ John asked. ‘If you don’t want me to go out tonight, I can cancel. Or if you want to come along –’

‘No, John, you should go alone,’ Sherlock insisted, however looking forlorn. ‘But I must admit . . . I think I’m beginning to understand how you must’ve felt when Irene was here.’

* * *

It was revolting.
They looked so, so familiar around each other. The way James pulled John by his shoulder to the backstage area - and even the way John talked to him, albeit uncomfortably, like they’d known each other for a long time. How James nonchalantly glanced at John while pouring tea.

There seemed to be a miscalculation as to just how much impact James would have, not just on John, but on Sherlock himself as well. Before he could help it, Sherlock donned on his most invincible battle armour on his facade and introduced himself to James.

The rest of the rehearsal was not memorable at all. Lestrade, however, looked more or less satisfied and called it a day, which Sherlock just couldn’t have it, as there still were loads of people who couldn’t count. Unlike the lenient conductor who might have let them go without rebuking them too harshly on their first day of the cycle, Sherlock had little patience. He couldn’t help but lash out his frustration to a few string players and the celesta player, telling them what and where exactly they should fix, but he only received contempt from them in response (‘Mind your own bloody business!’).

John suggested that they take the bus home that afternoon. When they found seats on the top tier of the double-decker, Sherlock carefully brought up what had transpired that morning.

‘Just one drink, then. ’

‘Yes, just one drink between old mates. That's all.’ John sighed.

‘Except that you two aren't just old mates.’

‘You have to understand, please, Sherlock. Sorry, but I really have some things I've got to address. I . . . I really would like some closure. Does that make sense?’

‘Yes,’ Sherlock said grudgingly.

‘Don't be like that. I know this isn't easy. You said you understand when Irene –’

A flare of defiance arose in Sherlock's voice in spite of himself. ‘You can’t compare her to this, John. We weren't actually intimate. There was nothing between us, whereas you and Sholto have had months of history!’

‘Well, I'm just saying - that I was jealous, alright? She was so talented and gorgeous and, frankly quite lethal - and I was afraid that she was going to take you away from me.’

‘Lethal?’ Sherlock gasped. ‘What about James, you conveniently forgot to mention that he was positively devastating!’

‘Oh my God,’ John growled. ‘Devastating! Is that what you think? Of him? That he's - wow. Sherlock. I have never thought that you had eyes for anything other than reading music! And why would I talk about my ex like that to begin with? Hmmm?’

‘Oh, for God’s sake, John. Lower your voice. We are on a bloody bus. What’s the matter with you –’

John barked a laughter. ‘There’s nothing the matter with me! And since when do you care about decorum?’ He sighed loudly in frustration, and quickly added in a quieter tone, ‘Sorry. Imagine I
said that without shouting.’

Several commuters on the bus coughed and cleared their throats. Sherlock rolled his eyes. People will do little else than minding their own business. He sunk down to a whisper.

‘It goes without saying, John, that obviously nobody is as devastating as you are, and you should know by now that there’s nothing that can take me away from you. But my point is: you should know that I am shaking with jealousy as you go out tonight. I will not lie nor try to hide this fact. The way you interact, John, and how he speaks to you - it really kills me.’

‘I . . .’ John's eyes softened in fondness. ‘I know, love. That's why I need to go and sort out this mess. I need to do this, not just for me, but for us. Once I deal with it, we can truly go forward. I had forgotten about how much he's wrecked me . . . It's actually better that he's here so that I can finally get completely over it. Do you understand?’

Sherlock grunted. He did understand, but he was far more in the mood for sulking.

‘But if you really don't want me to go, I'll cancel any minute. I don't want you to be sad.’

Sigh. ‘Now we're going in circles, John. Just go, but know that I'll . . .’

‘You'll what?’

‘That I'll . . .’ He paused. Blast, he could feel his face heating up. ‘Miss. You.’

‘Ugh.’ John made a pained noise at the back of his throat and tugged on Sherlock's hand. ‘You're unbelievable.’

‘So I've been told,’ Sherlock said moodily, keeping his facial expressions bleak.

‘Stop pouting. You do know that you're the only one for me, yes?’

‘Mmm.’

‘I'll take that as a yes.’ John kissed his forehead. ‘You're beautiful when you blush, you know that?’

‘Oh, stop it, John,’ Sherlock grumbled, but secretly - oh, how he wanted another kiss. He could never admit it out loud.

But John, his clever John, all-knowing John - grinned like a besotted fool that he was, and granted his wish by giving him another kiss in his hair and hugged his shoulders closer to him. ‘Not a chance.’

Chapter End Notes

1. Petrushka by Stravinsky is actually a ballet (but it's often performed also without the choreography), composed by Igor Stravinsky. This piece isn’t a concerto, so James sits that one out. He’s only there for the Straus Concerto.

2. The silk oboe swab is basically a piece of silk fabric attached to a string and a pin.
One drops the pin into the instrument and pulls it out, and the silk will clean the inside of the instrument. ~Very important~
Confrontation

Chapter Notes

I <3 Hertie!!
http://archiveofourown.org/users/hertie/

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Ch 20: Confrontation

John stared at his closet. What sort of outfit would say “I’m here to get closure because you are history, and I’m taken”? He usually never struggled to pick out his clothes for a night out, but he certainly didn’t want to seem like he put too much thought on them. Eventually, he decided on a navy jumper and dark jeans.

He arrived at Prince Arthur, a pub in Shoreditch, a few minutes before nine. Choosing a seat in the corner at the bar, John ordered his pint.

Just as he was taking his first sip, James entered right on the clock, punctual as ever. He took his coat off, revealing the same suit he was wearing earlier at the rehearsal, looking dapper. His blue eyes shone even in the dim lights.

‘Alright?’ He said, taking a seat next to John.

‘Hey,’ John said awkwardly.

‘Low-key, this place. It’s weird to have a drink with you in London.’

‘Indeed . . .’

James looked into John's eyes quizzically for a few seconds. Then he ordered his drink, too (‘Gin and Tonic, love’).

Neither of them dared to say anything first. The background music in the pub blared painfully, but it wasn’t loud enough to fill in the gaping wordlessness between them. James broke the silence at last in a cheerful voice.
‘What did you think about my sound, then? I just made seven new reeds just last night. I think some of them are quite good. Haven't exercised my abdomen muscles in a while, though, it feels tight. I think I've got to –’

John interrupted him abruptly. ‘James. Please. Cut the shit out. We don't have to do the small talk.’

‘What? Why not?’

‘We’re not going to sit here and pretend like everything’s fine, James.’

‘I wasn’t doing the small talk! It’s the talk!’

‘Yes. Your reeds sound fine. Your abs are, I’m sure, quite fine too. Can we move on?’ John hissed.

James slammed his glass on the bar. ‘For fuck’s sake, John. What the hell do you want to talk about, then? I'm just bringing up our old favourite topic, mate,’ James spat. ‘What the hell is the matter with you?’

‘That is NOT our old favourite topic, that's yours. And for the record, if anyone out there still fucking cares, there is nothing the matter with me. Nothing. I just want to know, James. It’s time we address this. What the fuck happened between us? And don’t try to wiggle out of this one.’ John was fuming. He didn't expect his temper to escalate this quickly, but to hell with the niceties.

‘Are we seriously going to go there? Ugh. Fine. You gotta let me at least take a fucking sip before we talk about this properly,’ James said, taking a big swig of his drink and winced. ‘You wanna know what happened, mate? Really? You’re the one who looked up at me with those puppy eyes and listened to my shit for months. You led me.’

‘Oh, for –’ John felt his anger rising. ‘No, no. No, you did not . . . ’ He raised his index finger dangerously in James' face and steadied his breath. ‘You didn't just say that. James - okay. Let's look at this objectively. Alright? Humour me for a moment. You took me on those tours of the city. Hmm? You texted me twenty-four-seven, for months. Who the fuck led whom on now?’

‘Oh, John!’ James said, feigning scandal on his face, a ghost of a smile lingering on his lips. ‘We were best mates! Of course I texted you all the time. I enjoyed your company and you mine. What’s wrong with that?’

‘You gave me your fucking key to your flat!’

‘Apartment, dear, that's what they're called in New York.’

‘Fuck you! You made me breakfast after I'd stayed over!’

‘I was still keen on making you some for tomorrow, but something tells me that you're not exactly gasping for it,’ James winked.

‘This is a sodding game to you even now, isn’t it?’ John's voice trembled. His blood was boiling. He wanted to break something. Calm, calm down. Think about Sherlock. Think about why you're doing this.

But as much as the thought of Sherlock splattered his heart with fondness like an ink spreading on a piece of parchment, he began to realise just how much of his heart was still torn from the previous year that he spent with James. He had far more pent-up fury in his system than he had
thought. Even after all this time, James was still poking fun at him, like nothing was serious. Like nothing had permanently affected him the way it did John.

He took another sip of his beer with a shaking hand. He thanked the loud ambience of the pub draining their conversation out; this was definitely not something two grown English men would talk about at a pub on a Tuesday night, and he didn't want anyone to overhear them.

James buried his face in his palms. ‘Alright, John. Let me try to understand here. You were hurt, I know that, and I apologised. I still feel bad, I do,’ James sighed. ‘I know that what we had meant a lot for you.’

‘Do you?’ John snapped sarcastically. ‘Because it sounded like you don't give a flying fuck about my feelings.’

‘Feelings, God . . . I hate talking about this, John. Why can't you just - look, I'm sorry I did that to you. It wasn't right.’

‘You better fucking mean that. And frankly, I'm so bloody glad that we didn't amount up to much, not to mention that even if we did end up together –’

‘Thank the stars we didn't,’ James cut in.

‘—We wouldn't have lasted very long, so it doesn't matter. But what I want to know is why, James. Why were you so cruel?’

‘Why does it matter? That was ages ago.’

‘I'm just reacting like a human being!’

‘Stop overreacting –’

‘Overreacting?’ John roared, his last string of sanity at its breaking point. ‘Overreacting! So you fucking drop me like I was nothing to you and, a year later, you waltz in here, as a bloody soloist at my workplace, having the nerve to flirt with me, and my boyfriend, but I'm not supposed to have a problem with that, no, because you think it's a perfectly okay thing to do?!’

‘Oh shut up, John, I didn't know you worked here. Wait, your boyfriend?’

Ah, that did it. That froze John up. His uncontrollable temper was numbed all of a sudden. He didn't mean to bring up Sherlock in this conversation at all if he could help it. Hating that he lost his composure, he pulled himself together and lowered his voice a bit.

‘Yes, you tosser, Sherlock is my boyfriend, if that wasn't clear when you saw us together on our way home after the rehearsal.’

‘On your way home - so do you live together?’ James' voice, for the first time that evening, audibly shook. ‘You live with your boyfriend? Since when did this –’

‘None of your business, mate. Now, all that aside, I want answers. I need to know why, James. Why were your actions and words completely the opposite? You really seemed to care for me. Hell, when I didn't know any better, I was sure you loved me. We were together, James, just without the labels. I'm not trying to demonise you here . . . I just want to know your reasons behind it.’
James looked deflated. His playful grin was long gone, and the bags under his eyes were more prominent.

‘I thought you wanted to just have a quiet drink.’

‘James.’

‘You really wanna do this here, in this loud, public place.’

‘I wouldn't be here if I didn't want to,’ John said. ‘Please.’

James didn't say anything for long minutes. John let him take his time, choose his words, to say the right words if he could.

‘Why does anyone do anything, John?’ James said quietly, swirling his glass in his hand. ‘I was bored, and you came along. You were delightful. It was fun. But . . . Hell. You want honesty? Here it is. I hate to be committed. I absolutely detest being attached to someone with labels. The last thing I want to be called is someone's boyfriend, or husband, or whatever. It kills me.’

‘Can I ask you why?’ John asked carefully, feeling a bit subdued. ‘You don't have to tell me if you'd rather not.’

‘I just wanted . . . I guess I chase the feeling of being married to music,’ James said after a long pause. He emptied the rest of the glass in his mouth. ‘I want to be this - invincible professional. Christ, I can't believe I'm admitting this to you, what's in this drink?’ He chuckled dryly.

Something about that phrase – ‘married to music’ – rang in John's heart. James continued his ramble.

‘I like the idea of being this impenetrable, independent musician. A romantic, but never settling down with someone in particular. You broke that pattern in me, John. I was afraid of losing myself.’

‘I know what you're talking about,’ John empathised. ‘But you could've told me about this then, and we wouldn't be having this conversation.’

‘You wanted to introduce me to your sister! Your only family member! That was way too soon.’

‘What was way too soon about it? It wasn’t like I was going to introduce you as my betrothed or something.’

‘No, it’s not about that, John,’ James sighed. ‘You were too unconditional. I was a jerk to you, and you still stuck around. How was I supposed to react to that?’

‘Too unconditional?!!’

‘Yeah, as if you were so sure that we would end up together. I felt like . . . I was trapped.’
‘I never meant to make you feel like that,’ John said.

‘I know. It was me. Not you. Tale as old as time.’

John rubbed his forehead. ‘You should’ve told me about this sooner. It probably wouldn’t have worked out, but we could be having a drink like old mates like we used to be.’

‘Please, John. We were never just mates, like you said,’ James admitted.

John’s breath hitched as he finally received James’ acknowledgement. He gaped at him for a moment. ‘I thought you’d never concede.’

‘Consider this my defeat.’

‘This is not about winning or losing, James. I’m not here to jump down your throat so that you can tell me that I was right this whole time,’ John said. ‘I just wanted to understand your reasons.’

James swallowed hard. ‘I betrayed myself by falling for you. I shouldn't have led you on. I'm sorry.’

‘That's alright.’

The lights dimmed even further in the pub, rendering the ruckus even louder than before. They sat without moving a muscle, resolutely not looking at each other, silently contemplating the overdue words that have been finally said.

‘I'm still with Ana. Do you remember? The soprano that I –‘

‘The rebound after me, yes, I recall,’ John said sardonically. ‘Does she know that you're meeting me here tonight?’

‘No, I didn't tell her. I haven't called since I landed,’ James said.

‘Jeez, how long has it been? You should call.’

James ignored this. ‘I thought Sherlock might join us. Now I know why he didn't.’

‘Yeah, he wasn't keen.’ John pursed his lips in a straight line. ‘Look, you should call her. It's your choice whether or not you tell her about this - about me - but do her a favour, and call. She'd appreciate it.’

‘You'd know, wouldn't you.’

‘If you're serious about her –‘

‘I'm really not,’ James sighed. ‘I'll call, and when I get back, I should tell her that I can't be with her. I don't deserve her love.’

‘Don't say that,’ John said a bit forcefully than he intended. ‘You're a cock, but don't say that you don't deserve love. Everyone does.’

‘You do, for sure.’
'Even you, James.'

James turned to face John for a fleeting second and looked down again at his glass, now empty save for a piece of ice. ‘Thanks for saying that.’ He raised his hand to summon the barmaid for the bill. ‘The drink's on me.’

* * *

‘Sure you don't want a second drink, then, John?’ James said jokingly, putting his coat back on once they exited the pub. It seemed that he wanted to end the evening on a lighthearted note.

‘I don't know about you, but I've got an early rehearsal tomorrow, mate,’ John said, smiling. ‘Something tells me that you probably need to get up early, too.’

‘Must rise early to make myself a glorious breakfast, mustn't I!’ James chuckled. ‘You know how good it is.’

‘Yeah, we just made up, don't push your luck.’

James laughed at that. For a moment, John felt that they were back in time when they had first met, before all their adventures, before all the drama. He wished that James had never happened to him.

* * *

But you did have a good time, John, despite the pain that ensued, his inner voice reminded him. It's never a waste of time to have loved someone. Anyone.

He smiled wistfully. It was true. After all, he wouldn’t be who he was now if it wasn’t for James. Shaking his head slowly, he glanced at his old friend, who mirrored him and shook his head as well. They stood there wordlessly, but John knew that they were both reflecting on their conversation earlier. Sherlock would’ve said ‘Stop thinking so loud’ at this point.

James shifted his weight and broke the tension. ‘Well. Say hello to Sherlock. Shame he couldn’t join us.’

‘I really don't think he would've liked to hear us bicker,’ John said, walking towards the street. ‘I'm going to get a cab here. I'll see you tomorrow.’

‘John?’

‘Yeah.’
‘You're a good man.’ James leant in and gave him a brief hug. ‘I'm only going to be here for a few
more days. Don't let me ruin your week.’

‘You couldn't if you tried. Goodnight.’

‘I'm just saying, mate. Valentine's this weekend, innit,’ he smirked. ‘Does Sherlock like sweets?’

‘Fuck off, James,’ John rolled his eyes. He felt a bit lighter with the banter. ‘And for the record,
yes. He does.’

He hailed a cab, which materialised quite soon. And that was that.

He texted Sherlock right away that he was on his way back. Sherlock replied almost instantly.

[About time.]

When he arrived home, Sherlock was playing his violin in the sitting room. Faure violin sonata,
second movement. Taking his coat off, John murmured a hello and tossed his keys on a side table.

‘John?’ He stopped playing abruptly and put down his instrument. ‘That was longer than I
thought. Everything alright?’

John drank the sight of his concerned, beautiful, anxious boyfriend, and embraced him fiercely.
He was only away for a couple hours, but it seemed like a lifetime since he saw him, and Sherlock
must have felt the same. A familiar scent that was uniquely Sherlock tickled his olfactory senses, a
scent of home - and John was so, so glad to be home.

‘Hold me for a bit.’

‘Are you alright?’ Sherlock asked again, still looking worried. ‘How was it?’

‘Terrible. Oh, Sherlock . . .’ John squeezed his arms around Sherlock and muttered under his
breath against the soft curls. ‘It was so terrible, so awful. Yet, I really needed that. It's alright now.
I'm alright.’

‘Would you like to talk about it?’

John considered this. ‘I . . . If you don't mind listening –’

‘I never mind listening to you, John. Your words, your music, anything - please.’ Sherlock rested
his chin on John's head and pressed softly. ‘I want to hear.’

‘I don't know where to start . . .’
Sherlock pulled himself away just enough to meet his eyes. ‘I know. A wise man once told me to start from the beginning, if that helps.’

*He still remembers that night,* John thought, and felt his throat close up, full of emotions.

Talking was all he did that night, but seeing Sherlock flooded him with waves of relief, and John felt the urge to pour his heart out, his *everything* out, to this incredible man in front of him that he was so proud to call his love. Sherlock deserved to know everything, not just about the night, but his entire history with James. He should start from their very first meeting at that despicable post-rehearsal do, where they talked about reeds. And Harry.

Oh, Harry.

It dawned on John that he had never told Sherlock about Harry either, at all.

From the beginning, then. From the very beginning, he should start his tale.

‘Okay, let's sit down.’ John guided Sherlock by the hand and sat themselves down on the couch.

‘From the start?’ Sherlock said, not letting go of John's hand.

‘Right. I'm going to jump around in my timeline a bit to do this thoroughly,’ John said, feeling a bit vulnerable. ‘I'll have to start with Harry.’

Chapter End Notes

JOHN BEGINS HIS STORY!! <3
Ch 21: Flashback

In October 2009, Harry had relapsed for the second time, and no one was around to take care of her. A night before she grudgingly admitted herself again to the rehab near her place in Bristol, she had made a one last phone call to John in New York. The sun had not yet risen when John picked up his mobile. After the call, John could not fall back asleep for hours, eventually phoning his advisor to postpone their meeting to another time. He had stayed home and cried all day.

Growing up with ill, bedridden parents had toughened Harry from a young age. Being six years his senior, she had always been the parent figure for little John, looking after the family by taking care of the finance and working three jobs at a time.

When a twelve-year-old John first showed interest in music, Harry had taken him to Royal Albert Hall on behalf of his parents to see the London Philharmonic performing Strauss and Mozart.

John particularly adored the sound of the woodwind instruments and had fallen in love with classical music then and there. Each with a chocolate ice cream cone in their hands, they hummed the catchy melodies that replayed in their heads as they walked home afterwards. It was the fondest memory that he had with his sister.

Both of their parents passed away in the year that Harry had turned twenty-one. A teenage John and Harry moved to Watford. They lived in a small flat with another family of four, who were lenient with John's practice sessions.

Despite John's guilty conscience and objections, Harry didn't go to uni in order to support his music education; weekly lessons in the city cost them dearly, and his instrument, more so. When he was accepted to Guildhall, they went out and treated themselves to chips and beer at Anglesea Arms. To this day, John never found a better chip shop in London.
John had a full scholarship with stipend and housing and no longer needed her full support, which saddened her and unfortunately left her with an empty nest syndrome. She turned to drinks, and John couldn't tend to her every day, what with his school schedule, keeping up his marks to maintain his scholarship, and having a brand new lifestyle in front of him. He'd blamed himself so much for how Harry turned out, for not being able to be there for her when she'd devoted her life to him.

They drifted apart without a chance for them to rebuild the relationship, and time did not slow down for them.

When John was accepted to master's program in New York Conservatory of Performing Arts for the fall semester of 2003, the news of John's imminent departure broke Harry's heart even further. Her alcoholism worsened. It hurt John to see her like that - but it didn't stop him from pursuing his dreams. Besides, Harry suggested that it might do one good to avoid living in one place for too long. She proved her point by moving out of the greater London area for the first time in her life.

Although John knew he should have tried harder, it was more difficult each day to pick up a phone just to check up on her. When her first attempt at sobriety had rebounded, he cracked open his rainy-day savings account and paid for the expenses on her rehabilitation, and the irony of it in comparison to her financial support for his childhood was not lost on him. Thankfully, she soon regained control with a great deal of help.

On the day he left for New York, Harry had taken a train all the way to Heathrow and gave him a ticket stub to the London Philharmonic concert that she kept from all those years ago, and they wept in each other's arms in the midst of the crowd in the airport, clutching tight.

'I love you, Johnny, I always will,' Harry sobbed, and John couldn't find the right words to tell her how much she meant to him.

* * *
A week after the last phone call from Harry, John went to a post-rehearsal do in the East Village, desperately needing an excuse to forget everything. His violist roommate, Cody, had been there too, who introduced him to James Sholto, a graduate student in Orchestra Performance program.

‘Alright?’

‘Alright, John grunted.

‘Oh, you're a Brit, then?’ James said, noticing the accent.

‘Yes, sounds like you are too.’

‘Yes. You look like you need a drink.’

‘Too damn right. I usually don't come out to stuff like this, but I suppose it wouldn't hurt to change my usual scenery of eggshell-coloured walls in my practice room,’ John said.

‘That's why I'm here, too. When I'm left alone with my knives and reeds on nights like this, I know I'm going to make bad ones. That would be wasteful.’

‘Right. I assume that you play the oboe, then?’

Though he had promised himself that he won't be thinking or talking about music, he ended up talking all night about reeds.

John had never had to carve his own reeds; he always bought the pre-made ones. He learned a lot about oboe reeds more than he had planned that evening; it was interesting to hear James talking about the precision that it requires for him to make the best reeds for his instrument.

According to him, the uncut reed had to soak for a certain amount of time only, then he'd trim the sides so that it would be exactly 70-71 millimetres, depending on the weather and temperature. He owned so many different knives, burnishing rods, and tools. They were both woodwind instrumentalists, but they lived in a whole another world from each other.

James was easy to talk to. He had a friendly, kind smile, and he welcomed any topic. They talked about life back at home and the new life they had in New York. They shared their favourite restaurants, shops, and recipes.

John confessed his hopes and dreams, goals and aspirations; before he'd realised, his pain and anger and sorrow and insecurities spilt out of him helplessly. James absorbed them like a soundproof wall, and replied with his own concerns, mostly regarding his music and technique, how he couldn't always relax his mouth nor maintain an expressive, smooth line when playing.

That night John believed that, after six bloody years in New York City, he'd finally found someone who understood him thoroughly. There were so many qualities in him that John had found appealing - attentiveness, humour, charm, and the inviting aura that allured even the iciest of the scholars and musicians in that group. He was a popular, sought-after bloke, as opposed to John who mostly kept to himself. It was fun to be friends with someone like that, someone who knew how to take initiatives.

When John confessed that he'd never been to any of the speakeasies in the city during the past six years of living here, James had (jokingly) taken personal offence to this, pulled him out of the
sorry-spirited post-rehearsal do, and immediately gave him a tour of New York City's finest bars and pubs.

The next day, they hit the museums and art fairs.

Two days after that, they went to Brooklyn Botanic Garden and sat under the rows of wintry, leafless cherry trees, spending hours and hours talking about music.

Within a week of meeting him, as his life messily entangled around James, John had become inseparable from him.

His apartment in Harlem was an hour and a half away by subway from James’ in Astoria, Queens, but he went over two or three times a week for a chat, tea, meal, more late night chats, which later turned into sleepovers. It was easy and comfortable enough for him to talk about his childhood difficulties, and most importantly, Harry. James’ silent hugs were tender and understanding, and that was all John needed.

After these heartfelt conversations, John watched his oboist friend carve his reeds as he commented the procedure; it was fascinating to watch him speak about the instrument in such a reverent way, and so tirelessly, too.

James texted and called him incessantly, all day and night, and John was only too happy to oblige him. Outside of school, they formed a wind quintet and performed whenever possible, thus having more reasons to spend time together.

Oftentimes, James had auditions coming up and needed a different pair of ears to listen to his excerpts, which educated John of all the classical oboe excerpts known to mankind. James would test his reeds one by one for John, and it was a heady feeling to select the best one out of the batch. Choosing a reed was a personal business, and James had let John in very deep within the realm.

It was obvious to John that his friend was very insecure about his playing, but also extremely self-absorbed, so much that it almost seemed like he was always fishing for compliments. That didn't matter to John, though, as he loved the way James played, and he didn't mind showering him with praises.

John's favourite oboe excerpt was, of course, the solo from Richard Strauss' *Don Juan*. Not only was it breathtakingly beautiful, it was meant for a clarinet to join in a duet, and John loved to contribute himself to the practice of this particular excerpt. It brought back such pleasant memories from the first-ever orchestra concert that he and Harry had attended.

John had loved the way James' high D on oboe rise effortlessly in an octave, producing a rich, pure sound with the barest hint of vibrato - just the perfect amount. He loved the way James' neck muscles expanded to accommodate more pressure as he breathed into the instrument, mesmerised with how his clear blue eyes squinted in concentration, how his taut shoulders and arms looked. He'd never appreciate the sound of oboe that much before meeting him.
Two months of their intense friendship had prompted James to hand him a set of keys to his Astoria apartment. ‘For safekeeping,’ he’d said, but John's heart skipped a beat in the implicit significance of owning a set of someone else's house keys. John didn't dare ask him what it all had meant.

John started to keep a list of his favourite things that James did. The Granny Smiths that James always had in stock for breakfast and pies. The incredible omelette he'd cooked for John in the mornings that he stayed over. Their quintet and sextet rehearsals - and all the secret glances that he gave on stage. The insect puns he’d made when his roommate, Jake, had been selected as the new Spider-Man on Broadway. The sangrias, empanadas, and take-out dinners that James insisted upon them. The late night films and the cuddles that followed. John was a sort of man to keep records of his life meticulously in written words, and writing about his days with James always brought him joy.

On an April morning, James invited him to a homemade dinner later that night, and John couldn't tiptoe around his feelings anymore.

Over a plate of impeccably cooked Bozena Shiro over basmati, he interrupted James' non-stop bitching about his reeds not working properly and finally broached the subject of them as a couple, asking him if he would accompany him to visit Harry together - only to be brushed off without so much as a second thought.

Laughing at John's serious face, James gave him a careless peck on the lips, and said, 'Is this what you want? I can give you all the kisses, but don't be silly, love. If we do start a relationship - God forbid, we won't - it'll die down as soon as it starts. I can feel it in my bones. We'll get bored of each other as soon as we label ourselves as an item.'

‘The label is literally nominal at this point, James, we already are acting like a couple,’ John spat. ‘Please, don't say that. I told you. We are not a couple, never will be. Anyway, I'm going to test some reeds for tomorrow's audition - care to join?’

John didn't need to hear another word. He left the apartment in a hurry, feeling as if he was waking up from a sweet yet horribly lucid dream as the piercing moonlight speculated his way home. On the N train, He recalled an off-Broadway show they'd gone a week before - *Avenue Q* - which discussed relationship and commitment, and how James had seemed put off by the concept.

It all came back to him then, all the tiny little red flags that had been signalling him to abort this at once - how had he not seen this wall between them before? Just how much of their relationship had been made up in John's wishful mind? Had any part of their friendship been genuine and honest?

He truly wondered how he missed those foreboding signs - that James had told him that his last relationship lasted almost four years even though he said that he hadn't felt the same from the 6 months mark. That he rarely slept in his own bed unless John was coming over, always having
someone else's place to spend a night for some reason, blaming a late night rehearsal or an early orchestra meeting. And come to think about it, he had the audacity and confidence to flirt with any moving, living thing.

That careless, meaningless kiss - he flinched in disgust. Sure, he wanted the kisses to be a part of their relationship, but it wasn't like John was dying for the physical aspect of it; he just wanted exclusivity. He wanted to call James his, and he wanted James to do the same for him. Was it really that silly to ask for something like that? Was that too much to ask for?

It was so, so unfair. They were clearly closer than friends. Hell, they've shared a bed three times a week, albeit the lack of sexual activities. But the intimacy was there, and so was romance.

Perhaps it was just the physical company that James has craved. Perhaps it was just the body warmth - or just the emotional proximity to a human being - but not necessarily to John. He wasn't even given a legitimate excuse. He almost didn't care for an explanation.

He felt so stupid, so utterly used, and hurt beyond belief. What with the absurdity that he already had to deal with at school, being harassed by advisors and professors - it just had been too much.

He couldn't bear contacting him until his very last week in New York, on which he discovered two things: James had begun a relationship with a soprano in his program, and Harry had convalesced well enough to be dismissed from the rehab centre in Bristol.

With or without securing a job, it had brought John to a conclusion that he absolutely had to return to England, as New York no longer gave him good reasons to stay. Wistfully but without hesitation, he closed the chapter of his life in America and hopped on the plane to Heathrow, lost and afraid.

Chapter End Notes
1. Anglesea Arms in South Kensington, London, IMO, has incredible chips for the price. 3.50 quid. Go get.

2. REED PORN *smirks*

3. Shout out to Brooklyn Botanic Garden!!!!!! I live a few minutes away from there. Please, do visit.

4. When I lived in Harlem, one of my neighbours was actually an actor who played Spider-Man on Broadway. Jake, hope you’re not reading this, but if you are: call me, because we need to talk about Johnlock.

5. If you have a successful Bozena Shiro recipe: please. Let me know.

6. Avenue Q is an amazing off-Broadway show. Come see~

7. Sigh. I dated a James back in my days. An oboist. Writing it into fiction was cathartic. This chapter is for you, dorogoï moy. Ya lyubila tebya.
Ch 22: Closure

When Sherlock woke in the morning to his alarm, he immediately noticed two odd things.

First, he wasn't on the couch where he fell asleep the night before; somehow, he transported to his bed.

Second, though he had no recollection of undressing, he was stripped down to his t-shirt and pants, and his dressing gown and pyjama bottom were neatly hung on the door rack. The last thing he remembered was feeling very relaxed and heavy against John's shoulder. John must've carried him to his bed - and undressed him. How John managed to take his clothes off without waking him up was beyond him. Nevertheless, Sherlock was grateful, because he rarely slept well when he wore more than that. Still, blushing profusely at the sudden thought that John had taken off his pyjama trousers, Sherlock got up from the bed and started getting ready for the rehearsal that morning.

By the time he dressed and came out of his bedroom, John was already having his breakfast with two steaming cups of tea ready for the two of them.

John didn't speak very much that morning at all. Perhaps it was because he had gone over his daily quota of words the night before. It didn't bother Sherlock at all, as he himself sometimes said no more than a few words for the entire day. They learned to talk with gazes in the past couple of months, anyway, and their cab ride was very quiet, except for a few loaded glances here and there.

Sherlock slithered his fingers around John's as they got out of the cab and earned another smile from him. Indescribable fondness spread in his heart, almost unbearable, almost painful. John was - John was incredible.

With pride, he walked into the rehearsal, holding John's hand.
Their ears were filled with a low buzz of people and instruments as they walked in the rehearsal space: Molly and Lestrade, exchanging subtle words (and not-so-subtle grins), Mike and a few string players furiously rosinning their bows, a muffled sound of various brass instruments from the stage, and James, assembling his oboe as he talked to Ajay in a gregarious manner. Judging from Ajay’s frequent lip-licking and gaping, Sherlock assumed that Ajay might already have been lured into James’ inexplicable charms.

John, as it turned out, was a fantastic storyteller, and his description of James was quite on the spot: he was an incorrigible flirt, making a pass at every moving thing. When Ajay left the backstage area with a wink, James carried on to his next prey, who happened to be Janine. She had just arrived a moment ago and was taking her coat off, hurrying to assemble her instrument. Leaning over her, James said a few unintelligible words under his breath that Sherlock couldn’t hear.

‘Sorry, dear, I’m sort of taken,’ Janine replied loudly in contrast, walked over to Billy in the corner, and wrapped her arm around him. Billy eyed her curiously for a moment before giving a loving peck on her cheek. Having seen this, James shrugged and left for the stage.

Janine turned around to watch him go and growled, ‘Why is he even here so early? The concerto rehearsal isn’t until 11! I can tell what kind of man you are, you beast!’ and stuck out her tongue. Sherlock almost smiled at that and swirled to see if John saw her, too, but he was busy assembling his own instrument. Realising that they were to report to the stage in two minutes, Sherlock took out his violin and tightened and rosinmed his bow.

During the rehearsal, Sherlock witnessed a snippet of John’s portrayal of James as a self-important soloist (even in his head, he didn’t want to use the word ‘diva’, because that was a bit too ridiculous even for him). When Lestrade counted them in for the beginning of the piece, James immediately expressed his unhappiness with the tempo, stating that it was too fast for him (it was NOT fast at all, Sherlock thought to himself, it’s marked Allegro moderato, not Andante), and he was not satisfied even when the orchestra followed his solo aptly. Sherlock bit down his protests and looked at John, who was already looking towards him, and they shared an exaggerated eye roll. When Sherlock brought his glance back towards the front, Mike (who was seated directly opposite from him) was visibly shaking his head.

On their way out afterwards, Sherlock and John pretended not to see Lestrade having a word with James. Lestrade was usually an extremely amicable conductor especially for guest soloists, but he spoke with a grave and serious look on his face, presumably something along the lines of ‘Please cooperate’.

James had seemingly taken the gentle advice from the conductor and was a bit more restrained with his remarks the next day. However, Lestrade had other frustrations in regards to Petrushka, grilling the second violinists and the pianist.
‘Alright, there,’ he said, flailing his arms. ‘I’m sorry, Louise, but you have to count with us. I know you have a lot of tacet, but you’re almost always rushing, I can’t have you rush on the celesta. Do you know which measure I’m talking about?’ Then, he hurriedly added, ‘Terribly sorry to single you out, but the performance is tomorrow.’

Louise Mortimer bit her lips and nodded, flushed with embarrassment. Sherlock thought it was only a matter of time that her mistakes were called out and donned the best deadpan face he could, trying not to yell out ‘I told you so!’

‘Also, second violins, what is going on?’ Lestrade started again. ‘I expect a higher standard from you lot! Please, I know you’re better than that. Please listen to your tones, especially in the Russian dance.’

Sherlock couldn’t help himself but break the poker-face and smirk. He knew that the said players were fuming internally; they would probably say a few sarcastic things afterwards. He didn’t care. This week was going to be insufferable anyway, and if Sherlock were to go down, he’d rather do so while trying to make better music with the people he played with.

He spent the rest of the rehearsal avoiding James’ hard stares and left for home immediately afterwards with John. John was still not quite talkative, but it hardly mattered.

Just when Sherlock thought James was done messing with him, James approached him on the night of the performance after their final rehearsal. Possibly because Sherlock was already in his performance attire (he knew what effects they had on the general public), possibly because John was having a talk with Sarah somewhere in the building and not in the backstage area yet. He braced himself as James spoke in his dreadfully honeyed tone, as usual.

‘Got any plans tonight, then? It’s Valentine’s.’

‘I really don’t care for those stupid commercialised holidays. But as it is a concert night, I assume that John and I might do something,’ Sherlock said calmly. He didn’t even realise that it was indeed Valentine’s night after all.

James scoffed. “John and I,” huh. How’s that going, then?’

‘Obviously, quite well.’

‘Hey, I have an idea. Why don’t you ditch him - I’m a woodwind player too, you know what they say . . . I’m quite talented with my mouth, too,’ James teased.

Disgusted, Sherlock frowned and tried to walk away, unable to erase the image of James and a phallic-shaped object caught between his lips. Dear God, make it stop–

‘I’ll take that as a maybe, then?’

‘This is highly inappropriate, especially coming from you,’ Sherlock spat behind his shoulder.

‘Ah,’ James quirked his brows. ‘So you know all about our history then. You do realise neither of us was the first? Sherlock?’

Sherlock stopped on the spot, trying very hard to control his temper. He took a deep breath.
'Yes, I'm aware. But I'm the current one for the foreseeable future, possibly longer than you could imagine.'

James caught up with him and raised his hand as if to cup Sherlock’s grimacing face. ‘What a fucking shame . . . God, you're beautiful.’

‘So I’ve been told,’ Sherlock retreated. He knew he didn’t have to respond to this foolery, but he had to have the last word.

At that moment, John barged into the backstage and barked. ‘Step away from him, James.’

‘Relax, John, it’s just a friendly chat,’ cooed James.

‘It most certainly wasn’t. You were hitting on me,’ Sherlock told on him, feeling slightly ludicrous.

‘What?!’ John yelled. ‘Come on, Sherlock,’ he said, snatching his hand, motioning him away.

‘Nothing is permanent, John,’ James sang.

John blinked hard several times and turned around abruptly, and Sherlock could tell that his patience snapped right there and then.

‘What are you doing? I thought we were over this already, James. What the hell are you playing at?’

‘Oh, shut up, John, it’s just harmless flirting! I know you two are together and that. It’s just something that I do with everyone, you know,’ James shrugged.

‘Well, leave my Sherlock alone!!’ John cried at the top of his lungs. Everyone around them stopped packing and stared at the scene, but Sherlock’s brain was doing all sorts of somersault at ‘my Sherlock’.

Embarrassed at the gaping looks, John lowered his voice and hissed. ‘Please. I’m so sick of your shit. Please go away now.’

‘Alright, fine, I’m sorry. It was uncalled for. Let me ask you one thing, though, John? Please?’ James said apologetically, which made both Sherlock and John pause.

‘Say it quickly.’

‘I was just wondering,’ James started. ‘I was . . . just wondering . . . If you thought my reed was okay today.’

John tilted his head back and laughed out loud. It was almost terrifying; Sherlock knew that when John laughed like that, he was sure to spit pure venom, and he was right.

‘You want my honesty?’ John said, panting slightly, veins sticking out of his forehead. ‘Here it is. I’ve heard better. Honestly. I think you can do better than that. I’ve always been honest with you, James, so you know it’s true.’

Hmmm. Sherlock pondered this. It was true. James' colours today were flashier and sharper than usual, and they hurt Sherlock’s eyes. He shrugged and nodded in agreement.
James’ face became ashen as he saw that Sherlock wasn’t arguing with this. His suspicions were as good as confirmed. Huffing loudly, he walked out without another word. The silence in the room was piercing.

‘Are you alright?’ Sherlock asked tentatively.

‘God, no. I think . . . I need some air. Do you want to come sit with me by the river? I . . . really need to calm down.’

Sherlock picked up his violin case and beckoned him towards the exit. Mid-February at the bank would be, without a doubt, freezing - but seeing John upset was far worse. He reached for John’s hand and squeezed it softly.

‘Sorry about all that. Thanks for being mature about this, Sherlock,’ John said, with that particular humourless smile that gave Sherlock a pang in the stomach. God, he couldn’t wait for the concert to be over already.

* * *

They returned to the backstage space forty minutes before the concert when John’s temper subsided and calmed. Only some members were back, but they weren’t to play until 8 o’clock. As John put away his coat, Sherlock nudged him in the arms and said, ‘Look. He’s lost it,’ and gestured towards James.

It seemed that James did, in fact, lose his mind a bit. He was sitting at the corner table with all of his reed kit splayed out, furiously carving new reeds, popping them in a small cup of water, testing them out frantically. Then he grabbed one of the ready ones and brought it to Ajay, who was cleaning the inside of his Tuba.

‘Hey, do you have a second? Would you tell me if this reed sounds alright?’ James asked desperately.

‘Uh, sure, love,’ Ajay said, uncertain. ‘I’m not a woodwind player, though.’

‘Doesn’t matter, you’re a musician, please. Hear me out.’ Quacking away a couple times on the reed by itself, he inserted the piece into his instrument and played the first couple of measures in the concerto, then looked at Ajay hopefully.

‘I don’t know, mate, it sounds alright to me,’ Ajay said. ‘I think you should relax now. You’ll be great. Er . . . Are we still on for drinks later?’

‘Yes . . .’ James sighed. ‘Thanks.’ Then he walked off, approaching the conductor who just walked in. ‘Have you got a second, maestro?’

John watched him go around in circles, asking anyone who came in for an opinion on his reed;
but everyone merely said, ‘You sound fine’, or, ‘Don’t worry about it, mate’, which seemed to fuel his anxiety further. John knew that James was at his breaking point, but he was still mad at him to give any assistance or reassurance.

And so it continued, the vicious circle of new reeds. Not minding this spectacle at all, Sherlock brought them cups of tea, and they sat in the corner, warming up and chatting with the other orchestra members as they came in.

Fifteen minutes to the concert, they heard James yelped a cry in pain, clutching his finger. He probably nicked his finger from trying to carve too quickly. Several loose threads of his reed strings were stuck on his tuxedo jacket as if to show his mental state. John sighed in sympathy; this had gone far too much. It was nearly time for them to go on stage, anyway. When John was halfway out of his chair, Sherlock darted across the room and swooped in front of James, beating him to it.

‘For your information, this is not for your fragile insecurity, but for the sake of the performance. Play your reeds for me,’ Sherlock said.

John gaped at this curious sight. James, too desperate to care, instantly pushed in a few reeds and played some excerpts for Sherlock.

‘The third one,’ Sherlock said, walking back to where he was sitting. ‘We should be getting ready to go, now.’

‘I thought so - I thought so too –’ James dipped reed #3 back in the cup of water and sucked. Then he turned around to face John.

‘John? What do you think?’

John nodded. There was no point in torturing the man at this point with taunts. Besides, reed #3 was indeed the best from the batch he just played.

‘Thank you,’ James muttered in relief, closing his eyes shut. ‘Thank you.’

* * *

The drama notwithstanding, their concert was quite good in John’s opinion. Petrushka sounded a lot better than their earlier rehearsals (he silently praised Sarah in his head every time she nailed her entrances; there were so many percussions in that piece!). Needless to say, James’ reed was a good choice, and he played the concerto beautifully with his confidence back.

‘John!’ James called from behind. His face was still flushed from the performance.

‘Congratulations, James,’ John said, trying to sound genuine. ‘You sounded good.’

‘No surprises there, innit?’

John smiled dryly. Now that the concert was over, James was back to his smug self. This was
what he would have had to deal with if John somehow remained in a relationship with James: the crippling insecurity (not that John himself had some to an extent, but James’ was severe). The incessant need to be reassured. Taking an advantage of genuine, sincere help, then reeling back to the complacency as soon as he overcame an obstacle, belittling the people who cared about him, taunting them, making them feel used and tossed away.

Their affair seemed like a thousand years ago, like some distant, phantasmagorical fairytale that he couldn’t remember anymore. James would never change. He never had any malicious intent. This was just who he was.

John wished that he had known about all this sooner.

*No, don’t regret, John. You just learned what not to do in a relationship the hard way,* he told himself. He sighed and started disassembling his clarinet.

Another wave of people swarmed into the backstage, including Sherlock. As the violinist walked over towards them after packing up and putting on his coat, James straightened his chest and offered a handshake, and John tensed up again slightly - but James merely said, ‘Thank you for helping me choose a reed.’

‘It was for the lot of us,’ Sherlock shook his hand.

‘You have a good taste in sound, I think I would’ve picked that one had you not told me so, anyway,’ James remarked. ‘You and I are quite similar, don’t you think?’

‘No,’ Sherlock said. ‘There is one fundamental difference between me and you, James.’

‘Pray tell, maestro,’ James goaded.

‘I would never, *ever* give up John Watson. I’d never do that to him,’ Sherlock said firmly. ‘Have a good life. John, I’ll be outside. Whenever you’re ready.’

With that, Sherlock turned up his coat collar and walked away as both John and James gaped at him, his violin case hanging from his left shoulder.

‘Wow. Your boyfriend is . . . Quite something,’ James admitted, looking paler.

‘Ha, bet your arse,’ John said proudly. ‘Well, this is it, then. I’m going to go now.’

‘Right.’ James bit his lips. ‘Goodbye, John.’

‘Goodbye,’ he turned around. He didn’t care for a handshake or a hug or - anything. He just wanted to leave as soon as possible.

‘For what it’s worth, John –’

John turned around. He hated James for always adding *one last thing* before they parted - it was so exasperating.
‘Yes?’

‘I did . . . You know. I always . . . ’ He stuttered. ‘I mean, I did lov—’

‘Yes, yes, I know,’ John cut him before he could finish the blasted word. ‘I know you did.’

An understanding.

For the first time, John truly felt like they were old friends. At last.

‘Thank you for stopping by in my life, James.’

Before he could register that James’ eyes were watering rapidly, John turned around, finally, for good. He could feel his heart mending, physically feeling the wound closing up, slowly but surely. He was finally on his way to truly heal.

Later that night when Sherlock took him to Angelo’s, ordered desserts and wine, took his violin out, and played the Aria from the Goldberg Variations, John murmured his thanks and kissed him softly on Sherlock’s chocolate-coated lips, blinking back a happy tear.

Just then, the last stitch on his numb, still-raw suture of his broken heart was sewed in.

Chapter End Notes


2. I swear to God, not every reed instrumentalist is like this. But the one I dated was, with a bit of exaggeration, sort of like this. Hence, the drama.

3. Bach’s Goldberg Variations are incredible - embedded is the Aria, the first movement.
John woke with a start when he felt something tugging at his blankets. It was still pitch dark from what he could see out the window; he could barely see anything. Disgruntled, he flopped over and tried to fall back asleep. Just then, a hand reached out from the dark and grabbed John on his shoulder.

‘What the-’

‘John, it’s me!’

John snapped his eyes open and stared hard at the source of the sound, which sounded like Sherlock, but at least two octaves lower. He squinted at the table clock on the other side. Fuck, it's early.

‘Sherlock, what the hell are you doing? I can still get at least three more hours of sleep. . . Please go away. . .’

‘This is important!’ Sherlock crawled underneath the blanket.

‘What in the name of ever-loving fuck is so important that you have to wake me up right now?! Ugh, sorry. I didn't mean to-’ John shifted to face Sherlock and cupped his face. ‘Sorry. I'm so tired, love, I really need to sleep. Go on, but be quick.’

‘Do you have 5 minutes to listen to me?’ Sherlock said.

‘Yes. . . I'm awake now. Tell me.’

‘Okay, here -’
John closed his eyes as he heard the soft click of the bedside tablelamp switch, followed by a ruffle of pages. Sherlock must've brought a book with him. With a small ‘aha’, Sherlock tapped on a page and began to read in his delicious morning voice.

‘My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk...’

John’s mind wandered across the half-asleep, dreamlike plains as the velvety recitation gently tickled his ears. It was a poem - a song, painted with Sherlock’s dark, low reverberating pitches and his impeccable rhythm. He exhaled sharply at the word ‘forlorn’, which was rather breathed than spoken.

He barely registered that he was drifting away to another dream as Sherlock finished reading some minutes later, his voice now softer than the mere rustling of the blankets.

‘Was it a vision, or a waking dream?

Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?’

‘That was. . . beautiful,’ John whispered sleepily and rubbed his eyes, blinking hard.

‘Keats. I told you it was important.’ Sherlock’s smile was triumphant.

‘Okay. Yes. Very important, but couldn't you wait until the morning and recite it over tea or something?’

‘John, how could I??’ Sherlock gasped. ‘I had to come here and read it for you as soon as I found it! How could I have waited? Waiting's boring!’

John chuckled. ‘You're right. Thank you. You never have to wait, day or night. You can tell me anything you want, whenever you want. But I can't help being grumpy if you wake me up in the dead of night to do this, alright? No offence.’

‘I know,’ Sherlock said, kissing John's shoulder. ‘I just had to share it with you right away...’

‘Yes, love. You're a romantic, aren't you. Why were you even reading poetry at this hour?’ John wiggled his arm and wrapped it around Sherlock. ‘Come on then, give us a cuddle.’
‘Here?’ Sherlock's eyes widened.

‘Yes, here. Is that alright? Just a few hours, yeah? It feels nice to have you in my bed.’

‘Okay.’

They shifted around to find a good position for both, with Sherlock’s back to John, and started to doze off within a few minutes.

As John was about to slip into a deeper stage of sleep, it occurred to him that it was the first proper time that they lay in bed together; it wasn’t quite the same as snuggling on the couch. Somehow, this was more intimate. In spite of himself, his breathing shallowed, and suddenly he was very conscious of his left arm that was draped around Sherlock. It seemed that Sherlock wasn't quite asleep either, as his uneven breathing manifested. John nuzzled his nose on Sherlock's neck - he loved it when John did that - but instead of relaxing and melting, Sherlock tensed up.

‘Hey.’ John's voice cracked.

‘Mmm.’

‘Are you alright?’

‘I can't sleep.’

‘Aren't you tired? We've been having intense rehearsals lately. . .’

‘My body is tired, yes, but I want to be awake right now.’

‘How do you mean?’ John frowned in confusion, his heart sinking a little when Sherlock let out a deep sigh.

‘John, it's been weeks since we had proper time together. It's always rehearsals, then we come home, have dinner, watch telly, then fall asleep. Other than that, there's always someone else there, like Molly or Mrs Hudson, playing the piano for us. It's not enough. I need to be awake now and enjoy this - this feeling of proximity - while it lasts, or at least until you wake up. I don't want to be asleep at the moment.’

‘Oh, Sherlock. . .’

‘I need more. Of you.’

A pang of guilt spread in John's stomach. It was true. They hadn't spent quality couple time in weeks.

It was different when they weren't in a relationship; it used to matter little if they didn't talk for
long, or had other things to do separately. Perhaps it was for this very reason that they slipped into such familiarity and conveniently forgot to make effort, knowing that they were comfortable where they were. It was already a well-oiled engine, and they were happy - but Sherlock was right. They hadn't done anything special since Valentine’s Day.

Stereotypical nine-to-five businesspeople might scoff at their schedule and dismiss them as being ‘flexible’ with a lot of free time. Yet, playing four rehearsals and four concerts a week were quite draining. Each rehearsal was two or three hours long at a time, and each concert, depending on the programme, also lasted more than two hours. Even with breaks and intermissions in between, making music wasn’t exactly a mindless work; in fact, it was exhausting beyond belief sometimes - especially on a cycle with more than one programme.

John and Sherlock (and surely the rest of the orchestra) made sure that their free time was not in vain. Most nights, they stayed in and cooked or had takeaways, later falling asleep on the couch while reading or watching telly. On their ‘weekends’ (Sunday and Monday), John made Sherlock help with the house chores in exchange to alphabetising Sherlock’s scores, which took hours at a time. They had a bit of a free time on Tuesday evenings, but something about Tuesday morning rehearsals really wore them out, and they just came home to laze around with some music on (and decidedly something very different from their rehearsal pieces).

John observed that Sherlock still had Molly or Mrs Hudson over for chamber music and was very excited about it, but that was only for a couple hours at a time, but as soon as they left, he threw on his dressing gown and spent the rest of the day in maximum laziness. Sherlock wasn’t exactly the most diligent when there wasn’t anything due; he worked better when they had deadlines or impending concerts - or something entirely strange that piqued his interest.

But, real life wasn’t always full of fun, unless one tried very hard. The past few weeks were certainly missing some.

Perhaps it was Sherlock’s way of initiating a spark of something fun - coming into John’s bedroom unannounced in the middle of the night, reading poetry and all. John liked spontaneity above all things, and Sherlock, of course, caught on.

‘You’re right - we need more time together other than just sitting around at home. I’m sorry we didn’t lately. Why don’t we do some sight-reading later, maybe? We used to play for each other all the time. . .’ John reminisced. ‘I'm just so exhausted every night, sorry. And I'm sure you are, too. But— ’

‘John, it’s more than that. Don't you see?’ Sherlock sighed, turning around and propping himself on his side. ‘I’ve come to a point where it’s not enough to just hear you play. Our musical moments can continue no matter what, I’m sure. But now - now I need more. Do you understand? I want to know your non-musical sides, too.’

‘I know you do. I want that, too,’ John said, turning his body too so that he could face Sherlock properly.

A shared grin, and a kiss.

‘I'm really proud of you,’ John said fondly, breaking apart.

‘What about?’

‘You. You've got so much better at putting your feelings into words. I mean, you were always
good at talking. ... but it took a while until you really said anything that mattered - to you. Look at you now!’ He brushed a curl away on Sherlock's forehead. ‘Telling me what you want after reading poetry in bed at arse-o'clock... Which, incidentally, is the most romantic thing anyone’s done for me.’

‘That can’t be true,’ Sherlock huffed. ‘You had so many partners before me!’

‘Erm, not that many... but yeah, no one's ever done anything like that for me. Nothing this ridiculous, nothing this absurd. Nothing this beautiful.’

‘This is exactly what I'm talking about! We need to - go out! And... engage in certain activities that will both relax and stimulate us.’

John smirked. ‘Are you suggesting that you'll wine and dine me, then?’

‘That's - that can be an option,’ Sherlock said, blushing.

‘Okay, Boyfriend. How about this? For the next month - or so— ‘ (Sherlock nodded enthusiastically.) ‘We will do boyfriend things, maybe one or two a week. Hmm?’

‘Which ones?’

‘Let me. ... Hang on.’ John bent down to the side table and reached for a pen and a piece of paper. ‘Here. I'll write some stuff down. Throw ideas at me.’

‘John!!!’ An undisguised excitement spread across Sherlock’s face. ‘Can we make this into a game? We'll each come up with a few ideas and - schedule them into the next month! And then, if we clear all of them, we'll win the game!’

John couldn’t stop himself from laughing. ‘Of course you’d want to make this into a sodding game... Against what, anyway?’

‘Against mundaneness. We can't live like this, not us. We have to fight!’

‘Okay, calm down a bit there. It doesn't have to be a fight. I mean, We're just going to go on some dates - it's hardly extraordinary. Two people who like each other— ‘


‘Okay, two people who love each other go out all the time. I'm just saying.’

‘Yes, but no one gets to go out with you, except me. That's why it's extraordinary.’

‘Oh my God, you...’ John clutched his chest with a pen still in his hand. ‘You’re impossible...’

Sherlock wasn’t having any of this; he pointed at the piece of paper impatiently and said, ‘The list, John!!’

‘Alright, alright.’

So they did, efficiently, logically, however with some difficulty.
The ‘non-negotiable’ items were established first. Most concerts were in the evenings on Thursdays, Fridays, Saturdays and in the afternoon on Sundays. Rehearsal cycles usually began on a Tuesday morning and ended on Saturday. On top of that, they had to work around Molly and Mrs Hudson’s personal schedules, as Sherlock liked to rehearse with them at least once a week. The month of April quickly dissolved into random and sporadic hours here and there after taking the ‘lazing around time’ into consideration. It was beginning to look a challenge already, and John wasn’t sure if they could really do this, until he glanced at Sherlock, eyes wide, full of glee.

_Alright, we’ve GOT to make this work, then._

They came to a conclusion that the only free hours that they can spend on dates were as follows:

1. Sunday night through Monday night.

2. Wednesday and Thursday afternoons between rehearsals (only a few hours)

3. Friday or Saturday mornings (not both; choose one).

‘Alright,’ John said, feeling invigorated, ignoring the sunrise. ‘There. Now, we each come up with a few ideas. . . And. . . How should we—’

Sherlock cut in without waiting for him to finish. ‘We’re dividing the month in half, and we’ll each provide several ideas for two weeks.’

‘You’ve thought about this!’ John smiled. ‘Well, go on, then! Tell us what’s on your list!’

‘I. . . Yes. But you must come up with yours first. I’ll write mine down too, then we’ll swap and read each other’s. If our activities are too similar, that wouldn’t be fun.’

‘Stop calling them “activities”, it makes me feel like a bloody schoolboy,’ John laughed.

‘Shut up and give me a pen.’

Chuckling, John got up from bed (reluctantly), found another pen for Sherlock, then busied himself with his list:

1. Tea and scone at Vingt Quatre at 5 a.m., a Friday or Saturday morning.

2. Post-rehearsal food-fest night- Camden, weekday?

3. Early dinner at Anglesea Arms, maybe Thursday before the concert.


5. A play on West End, maybe Shakespeare.
6. Lie-in morning, weekend, strictly confined to bed, Monday hopefully.

A few moments later, Sherlock shoved his paper on top of John’s, biting his lips. It looked as if he was trying very hard to control his expressions. It wasn’t surprising to John. It must’ve been difficult - for someone like Sherlock - to open up and discuss ‘activities’ that sounded ‘fun’ to him. Activities for the two of them, no less.

To the rest of the world, Sherlock was this tall, dark, brooding concertmaster, working at the finest orchestra in London, tossing icy remarks at coworkers, playing his instrument with almost an inhuman level of virtuosity - but here, at home, in the safety of John’s bed, he was a disheveled pile of lump in pyjamas, coming up with ‘activities’ that he wanted to do with his boyfriend at five o’clock in the morning. John’s heart ballooned inside his chest with affection and tenderness. Grinning, he grabbed Sherlock’s paper and handed his own to Sherlock.

*Oh my God*

John covered his mouth to stop himself from gasping out loud; Sherlock was probably feeling a bit vulnerable to share this at all - but, *oh my God*. He titled his list as *<A Tentative List of Activities with Him>* -

*With him.*

*With me.*

Something about the fact that Sherlock didn’t write the name down made John feel so loved, so precious. That he didn’t specify. Because for Sherlock, ‘him’ only meant John, and there was no one else.

‘Everything alright?’ Sherlock said, frowning.

‘Yes, yes, I just - I like that you wrote a title for this list.’ John pursed his lips, suddenly feeling emotional. *Okay, John, get a grip, don’t you cry at the sodding title.* John blinked hard and went down the list.

*<A Tentative List of Activities with Him>*

1. Tate Modern

2. Afternoon tea at the Orangery (the Fan Museum). Booking essential; Tuesday would be best.

3. One Monday in Oxford.

4. The Other Art Fair. Sunday night is the only option.

5. B&B, perhaps outside of London (optional). Again, Sunday night is the only option.
‘Hey!’ John exclaimed, feeling slightly less creative after reading Sherlock’s list. ‘This is a good list, Sherlock! You only included one food and drink thing - and I wrote so many— ’

‘I trusted you to do those, which is why I only wrote one. Have you ever been to the Fan Museum? They’ve got delightful murals. But like I specified, we should go on a Tuesday. It’s in Greenwich, so I don’t think it’s wise to go on a concert day.’

‘I haven’t been there yet. I like that you included some art-related things, too! Why haven’t I thought of them?’ John shook his head.

‘You wrote down a park and a play, which I haven’t.’

‘The Other Art Fair - I’ve been meaning to drop by sometime. I hear they’re amazing,’ John nodded as he looked again at Sherlock’s handwriting. ‘And Oxford! Great idea - it’ll be nice to get away from the city for a day.’

‘Right,’ Sherlock raised his brows. ‘Only because you know you’ll come back to the city the next day.’

‘Ha, you’re right. . . Er, speaking of leaving the city. . .’ John hesitated. ‘Our last items can be, er. . . Combined? Perhaps? We can do the lie-in at the B&B, yeah?’

‘I’m amenable to that, yes.’

‘Okay, good,’ John licked his lips. ‘Er, I suppose now it’s time to assign these to actual dates.’

It took another good twenty minutes to figure out, but they eventually had them written down. John knew - and he knew that Sherlock did, too - that if they didn’t ride out this unexpected urge to plan and schedule everything now, they’d postpone again and again until they were consumed by yet another month of blandness. It had to be done at the moment when the matter arose.

‘This is an ambitious plan,’ John said. ‘It’ll be a busy month.’

‘Quite so, now that they’re written down,’ Sherlock agreed, squinting at their joint calendar of the month. ‘But we’ll make this a game - and we’ll win.’

‘Certainly a challenge.’

‘It’s a game, John!’ Sherlock beamed. ‘And the game is afoot!’

* * *
So it began, with tea at 5 a.m. on a Friday.

Though both of them were knackered from the concert a night before, they both woke at 4 to get ready. They left the flat without their instruments - a rare phenomenon - but with a book each instead. Vingt Quatre, a 24-hour cafe as the name suggested, was a place that John used to frequent in his Guildhall days whenever he had a particularly long paper to write. Over tea and a book, John and Sherlock commenced the game, occasionally brushing their legs under the table and stealing a glance at each other. Though they had to come home later and take a nap before the concert, John considered this a very successful date, indeed.

The art-associated dates were a bit more action-based as it turned out. Unsurprisingly, Sherlock was quite familiar with contemporary artists that Tate Modern displayed, and he often had interesting anecdotes to add on top of the curator’s notes next to the works about the style or the techniques. John followed, smiling, as he recalled Mussorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition* that they performed a few weeks ago. They were enacting the piece in real life.

At The Other Art Fair, John watched Sherlock in an awe as he started chatting ardently with the original (and extremely talented, yet underrated) artists. It was something new - something John hadn’t seen yet - to witness Sherlock interacting with people other than musicians. When he came to think about it, he’d never seen Sherlock talking to anyone else outside the orchestra. An hour more of walking around in circles, they finally saw everyone’s booths at the fair. Then Sherlock (with his meticulous notes) went back to his favourite booths once more, fixed his eyes again at some works, shook hands with the dealers, and bought a few pieces then and there. Just like that.

Later at home, he didn’t even ask John to hang them in the sitting room and did the job himself, smiling at his new purchases.

By the second week, John felt exponentially closer to Sherlock and - if he dared - he knew that Sherlock felt exactly the same. Sherlock was so punctual and excited about every little date that John questioned why they hadn’t done this sooner. The fact that this was a challenge (‘A game, John!’) definitely fuelled Sherlock’s thrill, it seemed.

Dinners and the play, as textbook dates, worked wonders as well. Camden Market, and especially Anglesea Arms, were John’s favourite places for a bite. Reminiscing about Harry fondly, he told Sherlock again about his younger days as he listened with enthusiasm.

Sherlock took a particular care into booking a reservation for the Orangery cafe at the Fan Museum. The murals, as he had mentioned, were beautiful as well as the furniture and the garden view outside. John had never treated himself to a posh afternoon tea outdoors in his thirty-odd years of life; it was quite an experience to have tea, milk, various baked goods with clotted cream, and two types of jam served in front of him on delicate porcelain cups and plates.

‘I can’t believe that this place exists,’ John said incredulously, glancing outside at the garden. ‘Not that I go this far out usually, anyway, but wow - everything about this place is quite incredible. *Two* jam flavours, Sherlock!’

‘I’m glad you approve, John. Perhaps we’ll make this one into a regular date,’ Sherlock smiled against his tea cup.
'I’d quite like that, actually. Let’s do this again.’

‘Consider it inked in.’

* * *

Their regular rehearsals were still quite tiring, but some of the QPO musicians actually came up to John and asked what had happened to Sherlock, as they noticed that their concertmaster looked several degrees softer.

‘It’s not just that he barks less at the lot,’ Molly told him over a rehearsal break one day. ‘Not only does he control himself, he actually tells them his “advice” patiently. Patiently! I mean, this is truly a miracle if I ever saw one. The other day, he even gave me a hug after a rehearsal! A side-hug, but still, that’s a first. What’s going on with you two? Anything special?’

‘Sorry that he’d been such a git that you’re moved at a side-hug, Molly,’ John chuckled. ‘We’re just... happy. We’re making more time for each other, consciously. That’s all. We went to Oxford just yesterday, actually.’

‘A day-trip! How was that? How did Sherlock survive the bus ride? Or- did you go on a train?’

‘Actually, his brother lent us a car. Mind you, I don’t even have a licence-’ John leaned into a whisper as he confessed. ‘But Sherlock apparently knew how to drive, so it worked out. He wasn’t bad at all, though he did argue with the navigation... And the trip was interesting. We spent most of our time gawking at ancient buildings.’

‘Did you take any photographs?’

‘Er, no - we never thought of that. We were sort of... just enjoying each other’s presence, I guess,’ John said, blushing.

Molly beamed. ‘Seriously, John, I’m so glad that you two are happy.’ She spotted Sherlock walking back to the stage and shouted, ‘Still on for next week’s chamber rehearsal, then, Sherlock?’

‘Affirmative, Molly! Prokofiev Opus 80!’ Sherlock shouted back, waving a hand.

‘Honestly, John,’ she grinned. ‘Miracle.’

* *

Before they realised, week 4 had arrived. They had two things on their agenda: Hampstead Heath on Saturday, and B&B the next night.

Sherlock had never been to any part of the vast land mass of Hampstead Heath, and John wanted to give him a tour of the best bits, specifically the parts near Kenwood House, as well as the Hill garden and Pergola on the northwest side - a small, beautiful garden that often flew under the radar. If there was a ‘secret garden’ anywhere in London, John believed this was it.

Despite the cloudy weather, the trees were beginning to spring back to life, painting the landscape
in all shades of green. A lonely magnolia tree stood some hundred steps away from Kenwood House, and its flower petals were messily scattered on the newly-born grass, peppering the greenery with spots of white. John led Sherlock by the hand and stood under the magnificent tree.

‘This is one of my favourite spots in all of London,’ John said. ‘Particularly around this time, when the magnolia flowers are both on the tree and the grass.’

‘It’s beautiful,’ Sherlock breathed. A gentle breeze ruffled his hair lightly.

They stood there, underneath the snow-white tree, for long minutes, gazing at miles and miles of nothing but green.

‘How do you like the month so far?’ John asked, breaking the silence.

‘Almost as much as our Christmas holiday.’

‘Almost?’

‘It’s hard to beat that week.’

‘True. The month isn’t over, though. We still have to get to the Hill garden, and tomorrow we’ll be at the B&B!’ John squeezed his hand, still clutching Sherlock’s.

‘Right.’

‘You still haven’t told me where the B&B is located, Sherlock.’

‘It’s a secret,’ Sherlock teased. ‘Not exactly outside of London though, I’m afraid. But far enough to feel that we might be.’

‘Doesn’t matter, really,’ John turned his heels back towards the direction of the bus station. They had to get back to their flat by the late afternoon to get ready for the night’s concert. ‘As long as we get to spend a night and a morning together. Finally.’

‘Finally,’ Sherlock echoed, following John’s steps.

‘How are we feeling about that?’

‘About what?’

‘That we’re…’ John paused, to choose the right words, but he couldn’t. ‘That we’re about to… you know.’

‘Are you nervous?’ Sherlock said hesitantly. ‘I rather thought you were looking forward to this.’

‘I am! It’s just… It’s been a while. I guess I’m a bit nervous, yeah. I just… want to make you feel good, is all,’ John sighed.

‘You always make me feel good, John. We don’t have to do anything you don’t feel comfortable
about.’

‘Thanks, love - I thought I was going to give you that line...’ John laughed, feeling slightly better. ‘Well, come on. Let’s speed up. We’re on a schedule here. Next up is Hill garden. I plan to snog you senseless between the ivy-covered pillars. Better hurry.’

‘Race you to the bus stop?’ Sherlock quirked a brow.

A nod.

They ran, feeling very much alive.

* * *

Unexpected as it was, packing wasn’t easy for a night’s trip. John initially thought that it wouldn’t be much of a problem - toiletries, a change of clothes. It wasn’t even outside of London, barely an hour away from where they were. Perhaps he would not take their instruments. But perhaps a few condoms and lubricant? He blushed profusely at the thought and buried his face in his palms. Oh, God.

He wasn’t sure why he was so nervous about it. They were grown men who loved each other very much, getting away for a romantic weekend. Of course they were going to have sex at some point.

But it was with Sherlock - that was what it was. John had never thought twice about being intimate with his previous partners. Sex was a natural phenomenon that just sort of happened. But Sherlock meant so much more than just a partner or a boyfriend; he was his flatmate, his coworker, his life. Sherlock was irrevocably an integral part of John’s life now. No matter how much John wanted this to be a light-hearted trip, the significance of their first night together was a bit daunting. They’d waited a little too long, perhaps.

By starting out as friends, as flatmates, things were already a bit in limbo. Had they lived separately, it might have been a different story, but ever since the first time they’d said, ‘Well, good night,’ and retired to their respective bedrooms - it was more and more difficult to take the kisses and snuggles to bed. John was pretty sure he had not imagined the reluctance in Sherlock’s demeanour, too, whenever it became a bit heated between the two. And John was never, ever a pushy lover.

*Improvise. That will do.* John sighed deeply as he gathered the last bits of his overnight things. Making a mental note that he should stop at Boots to purchase some supplies (ahem), he went downstairs. Sherlock was on his violin, playing one of the Paganini caprices.

‘Ready, love?’ John said, glancing around for a hint of Sherlock’s overnight bag; if he still hadn’t packed, they were not going to make it to their dinner reservation in time. This was supposed to be their grand finale dinner, too.
‘You’re taking the green apple bag?’

‘Yeah, why?’

Sherlock raised his brows. ‘Is that big enough for an overnight trip?’

‘Well, I don’t need to bring my entire wardrobe with me just to spend a night, Sherlock,’ John said, still searching for Sherlock’s bag. ‘Where’s yours?’

‘My bag’s already in the car.’

‘Oh, so you did pack.’

‘Already did last night.’

‘Efficient, are we?’ Outside the window, John spotted Mycroft’s car parked on the curb. ‘Alright, then. Meet me in the car in five minutes. I need to . . . pick up some things,’ John said, walking towards the stairs.

‘Yes, I suppose you’ll need to,’ Sherlock replied, his face reddening.

That made John stop and turn. ‘Hey! It’s not just about the— ’

‘I know. But it would be wise for both of us to be thoroughly prepared.’

‘Thoroughly - both of us— ’ John choked. ‘Erm, are you talking about what I’m thinking?’

The violin halted with a screech. Sherlock put down the instrument in his case and locked his eyes with John. ‘For your information, I’m thoroughly prepared. Are you?’

John scrambled down the stairs faster than he ever had, almost tripping over himself.

Chapter End Notes

1. Ode to a Nightingale is a poem by John Keats. Hyperlinked audio is Benedict’s reading. Beautiful voice.

2. Do visit all of these existing places if you haven’t already. Incredible.
   #LondonDateIdeas lmao

3. Mussorgsky’s Pictures at an Exhibition is originally a piano piece with many movements, depicting a person who’s moving from a painting to a painting in a
gallery, complete with ‘promenades’ (the walking bit) and the paintings. QPO performed the Ravel orchestration a few weeks before they went to Tate Modern.

4. Oh my God, The Other Art Fair was such a good experience. I love art fairs in general, but this one particularly supports underrated artists that aren’t as well known, and I absolutely loved it. Had I been a bit wealthier, I might’ve come home with a few pieces myself.
Sherlock stood next to the window and watched John practically jog to the shop. He wouldn't be back for another five to ten minutes or so, depending on the length of the queue. Time for last-minute check in front of the mirror. Sherlock hurried off to his bedroom and examined himself carefully. Freshly dry cleaned suit, check. Ironed aubergine shirt, check. Polished dress shoes, check. Curls: styled and in place. Nails, trimmed meticulously. Overnight bag: complete with extra clothes, underwear, toiletries, keys, wallet... Check, check, check... and the rest, John was already on his way to get some. Check.

Dinner reservation had been made two weeks ago; this one was technically not included on the list, but they agreed that it would be nice to have a posh dinner before they get to their B&B night. They knew it would be too tiring to cook after a matinee concert, anyway.

He pictured John’s brief journey to the nearby Boots. Face flushed, probably looking very awkward in the aisle with various types of lubrication, decidedly not picking one by one up to read the descriptions despite his usual course of habit when purchasing something and just dashing to the checkout. Most likely blushing madly on the queue. Sherlock let out a shaky laugh. This was ridiculous. He should’ve ordered some online beforehand and saved John a bit of trouble. But again, he wasn’t necessarily focused on the sexual part of their relationship; he had been too busy basking in pure bliss the whole month.

He made sure to lock their instruments in his bedroom just in case and double checked the door as he exited. When he came downstairs, John was walking towards him with doubled plastic bags (why doubled? Oh), panting slightly. What a sight. Sherlock fought the urge to burst into laughter.

The restaurant was just around the corner - The Landmark - so they left their packings in the boot
of the car and popped down to the restaurant. Sherlock did an extensive research to find the best place for their ‘final dinner of the date month’, but who knew that a fantastic little gem was right on their block. John and Sherlock entered, hand in hand.

They were led to a window-side table with a great view, and a bottle of champagne was already in an ice bucket next to it. Without hurry, they ordered their food and sat in silence. Well, save for the soft sound of bossa nova music in the background. It was too faint to make out the colours vividly, though.

‘Champagne! Nice touch, this.’ John looked impressed.

‘Of course, John. This is a special night. We haven’t grown tired of each other for yet another month,’ he said jokingly.

John smiled. ‘Not yet, you say? Are you insinuating that you will, at some point?’

‘Only if you get boring, which is unlikely for a good while. I’ve made some calculations.’

‘Of course you did, you berk,’ John rolled his eyes. ‘This is such a posh place, Sherlock. I’ve always passed by and wondered what was it like inside. I used to think — well, you know. . .’ He sighed after a moment of hesitation. ‘Never mind. Anyway, I’m pleased.’

‘Why are you changing the subject? What were you going to say?’ Sherlock eyed him suspiciously. ‘You used to think — what?’

‘Okay, fine. If you must know . . . I used to think,’ John cleared his throat. ‘When I was in school, that is. I passed this block by on my way to Regent’s quite often and thought to myself, that this must be a nice little posh spot to. . . Propose.’ John gulped as he let the last word spill out.

‘Propose - marriage?’

‘No, to propose a thesis on the comparison between Hindemith’s Ludus Tonalis and Bach’s Preludes and Fugues. Of course to propose marriage!’ John threw his head back sardonically and laughed. ‘Don’t you think it’s a good place for that?’
Sherlock blinked. This was definitely not his area. He knew that people married for all sorts of reasons, but he’d thought that it was a dull tradition and probably a lot more of paperwork than one hoped for. Suggesting to someone that they do all that just to live together seemed a bit redundant to Sherlock.

His own parents didn’t get married until their thirtieth anniversary. But he did understand the concept of the proposal being a special, intimate one; he remembered that on their anniversary night, Mummy had organised a whole ordeal of a family dinner to bring it up in front of everyone and ask Papa to marry her (‘Enough is enough, dear’). He remembered how delighted Papa was, and how his face was soon covered in tears; even Mycroft had seemed chuffed for them, beaming like he had never done before. Later, Mycroft had told Sherlock how a single moment of misunderstanding - something about not being ready - led them to wait thirty years to wed each other and how much this meant to them. Sherlock had thought that it was a bit ridiculous to wait that long if that was what they’d been wanting all along.

Coming to think about it, their family was also at a nice restaurant like this when Mummy had popped the question. Hmm.

He took a glance at John and realised that he hadn’t said anything for a full minute.

‘I suppose it is an appropriate place,’ he replied at last, nodding slowly.

‘It is! Well. . . Have you ever - erm. You know.’ John leant forward on the table, his weight resting on his elbows. ‘Have you ever thought about it? Maybe someday?’

‘Not really gave it much of a thought,’ Sherlock admitted. ‘But I’m flattered, John. I don’t see why not.’

As if on a cue, John blushed and started back-pedalling. ‘I’m not — I’m not asking — ’

‘I know, John. I’m just saying, it’s all fine.’

‘Right. Okay.’ John licked his lips and tried to say something, but the waiter interrupted them with the hors-d’oeuvre. When they were left alone again, the moment was gone. Sherlock decided to digress. John was now trying to rework his facial muscles into a more neutral expression. Perhaps something like this had happened to Mummy and Papa, but in an entirely different way.
He pictured himself asking John to marry him. Or vice versa. Yes, somewhere like this restaurant might do — or somewhere more private and meaningful. Would have to be just the two of them. He nearly surprised himself with the flight of imagination and how quick and far he’d gone with the scenario in his head. It took barely a second from total indifference to a buzzing interest.

*Well, you can’t kill an idea now, once it’s made a home in your head.*

One thing was clear: married or not, Sherlock was keen to stick around. He reached for his drink and raised his brows in fondness, giving himself a tiny shrug. With every passing second, the idea of marriage with John, or even a wedding, seemed sort of - agreeable, actually. Even if he had to invite Mycroft.

*Look how much you’ve changed. It’s only been a few months, and look at you now. You’re very loyal, very quickly,* Sherlock, his inner voice cooed.

‘Well, here’s to our victory against boredom, then. We won the game, love,’ John cleared this throat again (somewhat unnaturally), picked up his glass of champagne, and raised it. Sherlock mirrored him, clinked his glass against John’s, and took a sip. The pale golden drink was smooth and bright, leaving an exquisite, fruity aftertaste.

‘Let’s try not to get you too drunk, Sherlock - you’re going to have to drive,’ John teased.

‘What do you take me for? This is a fizzy drink, compared to the stuff Lestrade has at his home.’

‘I know, I’m just being precautious,’ he chuckled. ‘Still can’t believe that you know how to drive and I don’t. I mean, I never had to all my life, I’ve only lived in big cities. .’

‘Mummy taught me. She would let me drive whenever we went down to their Sussex cottage for Christmas. Mycroft was insufferable when we were in his car, being fussy and pedantic; he was so worried that I was going to crash it into a tree. I do not miss those times,’ Sherlock grunted.
‘Your parents - a cottage in Sussex! That sounds lovely.’

‘Not when you have to spend the whole week with an annoying brother, no.’

‘Why do you have so much resentment for your brother?’ John asked, eyes narrowing in interest. ‘What did he ever do to you?’

‘Well…’ Sherlock pondered. ‘Frankly… Nothing in particular. I actually don’t even hate him, it’s more of a habit. Quite the contrary, really.’

‘Are you serious?’ John gaped in genuine surprise. ‘I thought you couldn’t stand him!’

It wasn’t often that John pushed him to answer questions about Mycroft; he always tiptoed around the subject, likely because he did so on the subject of Harry most of the time and naturally assumed that Sherlock felt uneasy to elaborate on his sibling as well. Part of it was true — Sherlock did his best not to talk too much about his brother if he could help it, but probably for a different reason.

John looked on curiously, arms crossed and leaning away from the table, his eyes practically goading him as if to say, ‘go on, I’m listening.’ There was no chance of mumbling away with a half-arsed excuse. He might as well tell him the truth. Sherlock heaved a deep sigh.

‘Er… okay. Don’t ever, ever tell him that I said this - I’d never tell anyone, except for you, obviously - but, growing up, he just excelled at everything he did. He’s also a musician, you know. And as much as it pains me to acknowledge, a fine businessman. He really knows his way around. Slightly too clever for his own good, always has been. And I was, of course, nothing short of a prodigy either, so that says a lot about him. I always felt this sibling rivalry growing inside me. I wanted to be the smart one.’ He paused to take a sip of champagne.

‘But - are you saying that you’re not the smart one?’

‘It is my deepest regret to say that I may be a close second, compared to him. He’s - beyond everything. Growing up, he was truly my role model. . . But I resented him a bit, too. Harmless envy. It’s just a running joke between us now, the rivalry. We’re not on bad terms. I just wish that he’d cut me some slack sometimes, that bastard. He always says that he worries about me constantly. Needless to say, it’s a lot of pressure.’
‘This is monumental!’ John clasped his hand over his mouth dramatically. ‘I didn’t know that you’d speak so highly of him. . . You’re actually admitting that he’s the smart one, then? Even cleverer than The Clever Sherlock Holmes?’

‘Again, please don’t repeat this to him - or anyone, especially Lestrade, they’re close mates— ’ Sherlock gave him a warning look. ‘Yes, without a doubt. He is quite the wise one, I must say.’

‘A rare moment of modesty. I’m forever honoured to have witnessed this.’ John raised his brows so high, eyes bulging, that his forehead wrinkled prominently. ‘Wow. I am never letting you live down this moment, Sherlock, I hope you realise that!’

‘I’d been too arrogant to be able to say any of these. . . But I owe him,’ Sherlock said, suddenly grave. ‘I haven’t told him yet, but I owe him so much. He pulled me out of trouble so many times. . . He’s the one who made me audition for QPO, he’s the one who made recommendations to the Board that I could be made one of the members of the audition committee. Without him, who knows where I’d be right now?’ He shrugged. ‘Perhaps somewhere hellish in Eastern Europe. Certainly not here, employed full-time, sitting with you, having this dinner.’

‘Then I owe him, too,’ John nodded. ‘If the credit goes to him for bringing you back to London, and eventually to me. . . Well, here’s another toast, to Mycroft, then.’

‘To Mycroft Holmes,’ Sherlock raised his glass again. ‘The elder and the wiser Holmes. Despite his reptilian façade and his weakness for baked goods, he is a good man and he cares about me more than I understand.’

John laughed heartily at the combination of lighthearted slight and praise as Sherlock closed his eyes and silently thanked his only brother. He meant it, too; this was indeed a very rare moment, but he did, deep inside, felt very grateful and lucky to have Mycroft in his life. For the extreme measure he had gone through to find Sherlock and, though he hated to relive it, to make him go to rehab. For (albeit coercively) bringing his sorry arse back to music, and to John. He would’ve kicked himself so hard if he hadn’t, however grudgingly, said yes to the audition committee.

Everything happened right on time, in retrospect.

‘How glad are you that I was there for your audition and was determined to find you since?’ Sherlock reminisced.

The effect of the recount was immediate on John, who grinned broadly, the corner of his eyes
wringling. ‘God, I always forget that you were there. It’s a bit embarrassing, really. I don’t remember how I played. . . But yes, I’m quite pleased that you singled me out from that audition and waited for me. You knew!’

‘And Mike— ’

‘Yes, Mike!’ John chimed in after another sip. ‘I was so surprised to see him there. Then when he introduced us - I mean, Sherlock, I tell you this all the time but . . . I really thought you were amazing, from that first moment. You took my breath away.’

‘And you, mine.’

Sherlock saw the reflection of his own face in John’s soft, smiling eyes, and reached for his hand on top of the table, interlacing them slowly. John let out a deep, content sigh and bit his lips, which was a habit of his right before bestowing a kiss. Sherlock’s stomach buzzed with butterflies as his knuckles were brought to John’s mouth and kissed chastely.

‘It felt like a lifetime, those two months of living with you but not being able to — be with you, you know. I wanted you from the very first day. But I’m glad we took our time. Look at us now! Already four months in.’

‘Four months!’ Sherlock took on a faux-scandalised tone. ‘Don’t be absurd, John, you speak of such trivial matter.’

John retaliated right away, not having detected the layer underneath. ‘How is that trivial? I’ve had four very happy months with a man I love! I don’t think — ‘

‘Oh, please, John. Why does that matter?’ Sherlock kept a deadpan on his face. ‘It’s not important, really. In fact, do stop counting. I’m sure it is our mutual understanding that what we have here isn’t going to be months. This is just a few drops of water, compared to an entire ocean of a time that we have. And to hell with the paperwork or tradition; if it’s something that means a lot to you, we’ll figure it out sometime. But know this: I’m thoroughly and completely yours. Always have been. Always will be.’

He watched the journey of expressions that passed through John, relishing every second of the change from gaping in confusion to peace, to an understanding. Sherlock couldn’t help but wink.
‘Do you really mean that?’ John asked quietly.

‘Obviously.’

‘You realise that this is as good as — ‘

‘Yes.’

John sighed and mouthed ‘wow’ silently. ‘Words . . . Mere words are futile to describe what I feel right now,’ John whispered.

‘Don’t worry, John. I feel it too,’ Sherlock said, heart skipping as John’s eyes locked with his.

‘God, you’re incredible,’ John murmured almost to himself, and squeezed his hand gently. He could feel John’s elevated pulse under the fingertips.

If this wasn’t love, Sherlock didn’t know what love was.

Their main course arrived. They retrieved their hands to themselves for the dishes to be placed on the table, but neither of them could stop grinning. Truly, it was better than any high he had experienced.

That was when it happened. Sherlock felt like he was going to burst into flames; this was a dangerous level of happiness, and he was still not used to it. He kept finding himself bracing for the impending doom.

An uncomfortable tingling sensation prickled the back of his neck. Great, now I cannot even relax when I’m happy, Sherlock thought to himself, his spirits descending almost as soon as they reached the peak, plummeting at a breakneck speed. He had too much to lose, now that he had everything he had ever wanted. This was different from when they first got together, or even when they went on different dates. He and John had just (however inadvertently) discussed their future - and they had agreed that their relationship was a permanent one without a termination in sight.
Overcome with fear (*Fear? Why?* He asked himself), Sherlock recalled his other moments of happiness, though such cases were rare and did not come even close to what he was experiencing now; but they were always accompanied with disappointment and heartbreak. God, he was bloody conditioned to feel this way - this was his own life giving himself a gigantic middle finger.

*How do you deserve this much goodness - what have you done to deserve this, deserve John, of all people? What will you do when things go wrong?*

Shuddering slightly, he poked at his food for long minutes and said nothing. *Shut up, I'm trying to have a nice dinner with my boyfriend, thank you very much*; he shook his head.

‘Alright?’ John, of course, picked up on Sherlock’s state immediately. ‘You’ve turned pale.’

‘John. . .’

‘What’s wrong, love?’

Sherlock swallowed hard. This had to be brought up now, or he might end up like his parents, if he was lucky enough at all to keep John around for three decades. He opened his mouth after taking a deep breath.

‘How. . . How long does it last?’ He was now having a full anxiety attack.

John frowned. ‘How long does what last?’

‘This. Erm, this - “happiness”, or whatever you may call it. How long? I don’t. . . I don’t know if I can maintain this. . .’ He looked away, feeling stupid. In theory, he already knew the answer; just had to relax, ignore the anxiety, appreciate the ‘present moment’, enjoy life one day at a time, et cetera. But it wasn’t easy following one’s own advice when one was anxious like this.

‘What do you — Sherlock, hey, tell me what’s bothering you?’

John’s voice calmed him down a bit; it was a palpable reminder that John was right there, right now.
Sherlock quickly went through his ritual of getting out of this state: today’s date, 24th of April. Sunday. They just had a matinee concert. John, his boyfriend, and he had a month-long date-a-thon (*NO, do NOT call it that, another voice interjected*) and this was their final posh dinner, and he was going to drive down to a nice little B&B and shag the love of his life (*making love*, *you prick!*). They were going to be fine.

‘Sherlock?’ John put down his fork. ‘Something’s wrong. Tell me.’

‘I just. . . Had a moment.’ He hesitated, but his concerns spilt out of him like a broken faucet. ‘But what if we fight, John? What if things go wrong? What if we don’t survive? I don’t want to— ’

‘Alright.’ John got up and picked up his chair to place next to Sherlock’s, ignoring the onlookers’ stares for doing something probably against the etiquette. Even Sherlock was a bit surprised. John took a seat again, very close to Sherlock’s trembling body, and put an arm around him. ‘You wanna know? You wanna know how this will be, then?’

Sherlock looked up half-hopefully, half-afraid, gasping a little as John’s hand cupped his face.

‘I won’t lie. We will fight. It won’t be always good. Hell, we might even crash. Sherlock, I can’t guarantee that we won’t have bad days. But here’s the thing— ’ he leant in closer. ‘It’ll be worth it, and we will always talk it out. I promise you that. As long as we don’t hide from each other, it’ll be okay. We’re talking about a long time here, love. It’s not just a fling, or just some casual relationship to pass the time. We are in this together, for good - right? Promise me you won’t neglect your feelings. I won’t either. We will fight, but only to sort things out. It’s not all bad - we’ll grow together. Be honest with me, and it’ll all be okay. I meant it, Sherlock, when I said that I won’t leave unless you make me. Just don’t - don’t give up on me.’

‘I’ll never give up on you, you know that, John.’

‘Promise?’

‘Promise,’ Sherlock sank his head into John’s shoulder, feeling a bit lighter. ‘Promise.’

‘There you go.’
'John, people are staring. . .'

‘Let them. They should be jealous. Since when do you care, anyway?’ John kissed his temple.

‘I care now because I feel a bit vulnerable and hyper-self-conscious.’

‘There. Points for being honest. Well. . . That’s normal, love. We just discussed a lot of things.’

Sherlock fidgeted nervously, but the anxiety was subsiding as quickly as it came. John squeezed his arm around him tighter and whispered again in his ear. ‘Don’t worry now. It’s just us here. You and me, Sherlock.’

‘You and me. . .’

They sat like that, his head resting on John’s shoulder, until Sherlock let out a big sigh. He felt calmness, then excitement, override the nervousness.

‘Thank you,’ he said softly. John smiled and kissed him twice, this time on his lips, brushing his nose against Sherlock’s.

‘Eat your food, it’s getting cold. Also, you’re going to need your stamina,’ John smirked.

John didn’t go back to the other side of the table. They spent the entire next hour nudging and brushing their shoulders, legs, and feet against each other’s under the table and the conveniently lengthy tablecloth until they finished their meal and dessert. As soon as they paid their bill, John grabbed Sherlock’s hand and dashed out of the restaurant.

* * *

‘I hope we didn’t exhaust ourselves of all the date ideas,’ Sherlock said, as he pulled up near the Bed and Breakfast.
John stepped out of the car and opened the boot to take out their bags. ‘Oh, trust me, Sherlock. We will be repeating some of these. But we’ll never run out of ideas. Anything with you is a pleasure. Even nothing with you is my privilege. And yes, we will grow bored sometimes. But we’ll just have to get creative,’ he said, handing Sherlock’s packing to him.

‘How do you always have these perfect answers?’

‘You’re not the only genius here, I’m afraid.’ John grinned. ‘We’ll take it slow, alright?’

‘Not tonight, John,’ Sherlock flashed a mischievous smile. Finally - about time!

‘Hmm?’

Keeping the straightest face possible, Sherlock quipped in monotone. ‘Tonight, I want you allegro con fuoco, and no tempo slower than that will be acceptable.’

‘Wow.’ John stopped in the middle of the track to bark a laughter. ‘Oh my God, Sherlock! How long have you been waiting to say that line? I’ve got to you give this one to you, that was good.’

Sherlock joined in with a low rumble of giggles. ‘All week, you have no idea how much I cringed when I first thought of it.’

‘God, please don’t give tempo instructions again in regards to our sex life, Sherlock. That’s - wow. That’s ridiculous.’

‘Noted,’ Sherlock breathed through the laughter. ‘I’m serious, though. I can barely– ’ he closed in and nipped John’s ear playfully. ‘—contain myself.’

‘Avec plaisir, maestro,’ John breathed. Not a moment to lose. They checked in at the front desk as fast as they possibly could and headed upstairs, unable to keep their hands to themselves now.
It was too quiet when John woke. The unfamiliar sight of the room almost frightened him. God, where was he?

Just as he was coming to terms with his whereabouts, Sherlock stirred next to him, nuzzling his nose against John’s stomach. Oh.

Right.

‘John.’

‘Yes.’

‘Stop thinking.’

‘Git,’ John murmured, stroking Sherlock’s bare back. Bare. Ah. He almost flinched, not being used to touching him under the shirt. It was marvellous, to be able to feel the smooth skin under his fingertips first thing in the morning. Beautiful, so utterly beautiful, he could cry. Sherlock’s soft eyelashes tickled his side like a floating feather.

Everything was right with the world. It felt as if they’ve always woken up together. The paradox of familiarity and novelty puzzled him. Suddenly, he was very aware that they were both naked under the sheets. Flashes of the past night’s frenzied activities flew across his memories. If Sherlock’s limbs weren’t currently half splayed across his body, he might’ve thought this was all a dream; but it was as real as Sherlock’s gentle rub on his belly. Seriously, this game was the best idea, John thought to himself. He was so irrevocably besotted.

‘Are you still thinking? I can practically hear your brain whirring.’

‘Just let me process some. . . Things.’

‘I’ll recap it for you, John. We “made love”. Twice. I’m still here, you’re still here.’ Sherlock grunted. ‘But don’t you dare stop what you’re doing with your hands.’
John let out a choked groan. ‘Fuck, I’m just - I can’t believe my luck, waking up next to you - you’re perfect,’ he said, caressing Sherlock’s back with a bit more intention.

‘No one is perfect, John,’ he purred sleepily.

‘Well, fine. True. Your voice is wrecked.’

‘Well, that’s because thanks to you, I screamed quite a bit. Of course my voice is wrecked.’

John giggled, feeling a fresh wave of arousal coursing through his veins as he remembered just how much noise Sherlock made. ‘Dear God above. Who knew that Sherlock Holmes would be a screamer? I think we might’ve kept some people up, the innkeepers said that this place was fully booked.’

A mop of messy curls shot up from the side of John’s stomach. ‘And you’re a filthy talker. I’m sure everyone’s here to do the same. “Billy” and “Gary” would have expected nothing less from us, too. And it wasn’t like I could control myself, anyway. You weren’t joking when you said that you trained all your life to use your mouth.’

‘Oh my God,’ John felt his face burning up. ‘I did say that, didn’t I. Well, how about you?! Speak for yourself, Mr “Let Me Show You What I Can Do With These Violinist Hands”. Don’t control the screaming, though. It’s hot. I like to see you completely helpless under me.’

‘Blast. Did I really say that?’ Sherlock buried his face in his hand.

‘After I snogged you to almost certain death, yes. Impressive hands, though. I’m sold.’

‘These are exclusively for my violin - and for you,’ Sherlock scooted up to cocoon him from behind. ‘I love you,’ he said softly into John’s skin, planting a kiss and a smile on his shoulder, absolutely melting John into a puddle. Warmth spread over them as they lay together, their bodies pressed against each other. John let himself relax in Sherlock’s arms and surrendered to heavy drowsiness taking over.

He was almost asleep again when Sherlock shimmied out of the sheets and said, ‘I’m parched. Be right back.’
'No. . . .' John whined.

'I'm just getting water!'

'Come back to bed!'

'Do you want some?' Sherlock brought over a glass of water. In nude.

'No - well, yes, but I want you,' John took the glass and gulped down the water. 'Get back in here.'

'Bossy. It's already 9!'

'Please, Sherlock - this is our holiday! The last thing on our list! The lie-in. Strictly confined to bed. Come on.'

'Fine,' he rolled his eyes, but there wasn’t actual annoyance in his tone. John smiled and closed his eyes again as he lifted the blankets and cuddled him. It was everything John hoped for: lazy, comfortable morning, doing absolutely nothing with his lover in bed. His lover - in every sense of the word.

'I never want this to end,' Sherlock whispered against John’s nape.

'Me neither. Probably should check out by noon though, don’t you think?'

'That's still hours away. Let's not get ahead ourselves.'

'Do you have some plans in mind, then?' John asked, turning around to face him. 'Don’t know about you, but I’ve got some things I’d like to do.'

'Oh yeah?’ Sherlock kissed his nose. ‘Do tell.’
‘In a minute.’

‘Lazy sod.’

‘Shut up and kiss me.’

‘Right, because I wasn’t going to if you didn’t make me,’ Sherlock smirked.

‘You sodding Mr Punchline. Do you always have to have the last word? God—’

‘How many more of those “Mr” nicknames have you got for m—Oh!’ Sherlock gasped as John’s hand snuck behind him and grabbed his arse. ‘You—’

‘What were you saying?’ John breathed, enjoying how responsive Sherlock was.

‘Please, John—!’

‘No, you were saying something about having the last line, go on.’ His fingers began roaming more freely.

‘John!!’ Sherlock panted, now fully aroused. ‘Stop teasing!’

‘Will you let me sleep next to you from now on, then?’ John lowered his head to kiss his neck.

‘First thing - first thing when we get home, we get rid of your bed upstairs and - turn into the practice room again. That’s what it was meant for, anyway - Johnnn!’

‘Alright, alright,’ John laughed fondly and pulled the sheet over their heads. Slowly, he showered him with kisses on his collarbone, down his chest, and stopped around his navel. ‘You took a shower afterwards, right?’
‘B-both times,’ Sherlock moaned. ‘But - I want to try. . . Can I try what you did last night?’

‘God, yes,’ John said, his expressions suddenly serious. ‘But first, let me play you the overture on this very expensive instrument I’ve got here in front of me—’

Sherlock choked and nearly yelled. ‘If you make one more clarinet joke about my cock, I swear to God, John! This needs to end NOW!’

‘You started it with that allegro con fuoco madness!’

Current matter forgotten, they both roared with laughter, clutching at each other. Then Sherlock snorted, which made them laugh even harder.

‘It was con fuoco alright,’ Sherlock wiped a tear, still chuckling away.

‘If that was too much for you, you could’ve just said “ma non troppo”.’

‘I can’t believe you’re both someone who gave me the best orgasm of my life and who says stuff like that.’

‘I think what you’re saying is that we’re made for each other,’ John said, licking down a trail on his pelvis where he left off.

‘Fuck, yes,’ Sherlock blurted out, his voice once again dripping in want. ‘We didn’t lose the moment, did we?’

John smirked. ‘Oh, I don’t think so.’ And on that note, John spread Sherlock’s legs and swallowed him down in one smooth movement, smiling as he heard a sharp intake of breath, followed by a string of gibberish words and pleas.

They didn’t leave the bed well past two in the afternoon.
Chapter End Notes

1. Wow. I can’t believe I wrote soft p0rn. That... happened

2. allegro con fuoco: ‘fast and fiery’. Yup.

3. ma non troppo: ‘but not too much’. It’s cringe-y enough for a safe-word material...
Reunion

Chapter Notes

THANK U HERTIE!! http://archiveofourown.org/users/hertie/

See the end of the chapter for more notes

PART III

Ch 25: Reunion

3 May 2011

It was almost the end of the season; everyone’s fatigue was evident in their sounds, collectively as a group. At least the weather had been pleasant, which improved Greg’s mood significantly. God, he was so tired lately- he couldn’t wait for the summer holidays.

Lately, it had been hard to find time to spend with Molly, too. She had a vibrant life of her own outside the orchestra: taking occasional evening classes at UCL on pathology, hanging out with her old dancer friends, and getting snatched away by Sherlock for chamber music. God damn it. Greg hadn’t seen her except at the rehearsals for almost a week. He missed her company, a lot.

He’d always fancied her ever since she started playing for QPO. The fact that she played both bassoon and the piano at a professional level intrigued him quite a bit. Though she was soft-spoken, she had strong opinions on music and interpretation.

All hopes of thinking of her neutrally have been lost when he found out, from multiple pub nights, that she was studying other non-music related things (namely the medical stuff and linguistics) with a passion. How cool was that?! Hell, she’d even gone to Le Cordon Bleu to study the art of baking, in Paris, and spoke fluent French as a result. All in all, too good to be true in Greg’s book. It took him a year to find all of this out, and another year to muster up the courage to ask her out formally after the Christmas do. She was the last one to go home that night.
On their first proper date, Molly had shown up in a ponytail, wearing a loose shirt and slacks, covered in a big coat and a long striped scarf. She looked so lovely, so herself - that Greg kept a mental photograph of her on that night deep in his head. He had had many lovers in his life - soloists and dancers and composers - but none of them was this down-to-earth, and none had made Greg’s heart flutter like Molly and her bashful smile did. She was truly incredible, and the layers of her charms were endlessly profound; she never ceased to surprise him.

Planning ways to get ahold of her on his way to work, Greg thanked the stars for the millionth time for living close by to the hall. At least he didn’t have to sacrifice commute time or sleep. He really shouldn’t complain, perhaps.

As he walked into the building, he thought about his introduction for the new soloist. This was one of his favourite things - to meet a new musician, welcome them to the orchestra with his puns, (hopefully) have a laugh. The puns didn’t always work well (he still had to work on the vernacular; something about selling bad music jokes to musicians wasn’t quite effective). Sometimes he cringed inside after making a speech. Practice, practice, only practice would make it better.

The new soloist was a pianist. Greg and the musical director heard him play almost a year ago when they booked him, but Greg remembered quite well how perfectly maniacal his Shostakovich sounded and how he had just the right amount, perhaps slightly more so, of lunacy and that particular jagged quality that they were looking for.

The bloke seemed inoffensive and cordial. In fact, he looked quite proper and dandy; but there was something really curious about the pianist.

First of all, his face was sort of familiar - but Greg didn't recognise the name at all. He was sure he'd seen that man somewhere many years ago.

The pianist also had this weird expression on his face... Not when he was being addressed, but when he didn’t know that he was being watched. Maybe it was the fact that, despite the friendly and charming demeanour, he looked sort of dead inside. His lips were smiling, but his eyes were gaunt and hollow, which Greg remembered vividly. Something was very off, the dissociation between his expressions and spoken words... But who was he to judge? Musicians were often dead inside anyway, right? Greg let out a sigh.

Trying to get his spirits up, Greg opened the door to the backstage as he hummed the first few bars of a piece for today. Sherlock and John were taking their instruments out among the others. Looking real rested, practically glowing. John waved a hand at Greg; even Sherlock gave a good-natured nod with the tiniest hint of a smile, which was unusual considering that he normally just
stared at one instead of a greeting (well, unless he had another intention). Grinning fondly, he scanned the room for Molly. She’d texted him half hour ago that she was on her way. Hmm.

Just when he was about to give up and go out on the stage, Molly came in with a clash at the door, flushed and panting.

‘Greg! I was calling your name behind you!’ She gave him a tight hug. ‘Alright?’

‘Hiya, darling, sorry I didn't hear you. . . I was a bit carried away.’ Greg pecked her on the cheek, his insides turning into multicoloured shades of goo upon seeing her.

‘No worries - you ready for some Shostakovich?’

‘Hell yes. He's your favourite composer, isn't he?’

‘Yes!! I love this concerto, this is probably in my top five.’ Molly’s face shone with delight. ‘I still know the piece inside and out, used to have a friend play the piano reduction for me. . . Still know it by heart! Ugh, I wish we had more bassoon concertos. Why do pianists get all the good ones?!?’ She shook her head with a sigh. ‘You’d better make this a good one, Greg.’

‘You'll have to cooperate, love,’ he winked.

‘Bet your arse! I'll pull a Sherlock on this lot if they can't bring their best game!!’

‘Ha! Looking forward!’

Molly turned around to take her coat off and assemble her instrument, cheeks still rosy and slightly out of breath.

*Things are still good*, Greg told himself. *She still likes me. I think.*

Feeling a ton lighter after seeing Molly, He went out on the stage, nodding a hello to everybody as their eyes met. Time to work on Tchaikovsky 6.
As excited as he was, Greg couldn’t count how many times he’d worked on this particular symphony. It was undoubtedly a masterpiece - if not slightly overplayed. The players looked as if they were thinking the same; they didn’t need to spend too much time on the general sound or direction of the piece, as everyone must’ve played it at least twice or more in their career. His mind wandered all over the place in the back of his head, daydreaming about his summer holiday with Molly. They were planning to go to Monterrey in June before the guest conductor would come in for a few weeks to fill in. Monterrey would be so blissfully warm, even now, in May.

More or less pleased with the morning rehearsal, Greg dismissed everyone after an hour or so. The stage crew hurriedly came out to rearrange their seats and wheeled their house Steinway towards the centre.

Exactly at 11 as their break came to an end, the door to the hall opened. A shadow of a man walked slowly towards the stage. Something about the aura around him made everyone fall silent and stop what they were doing, including Greg, though he knew that this had to be the new soloist.

The man finally reached the better-lit area near the lot; he was wearing a black leather jacket over a tight grey jumper and even tighter dark jeans, and to Greg’s dismay, a pair of sunglasses (indoors!). Greg gaped slightly as the pianist unhurriedly climbed the steps to the stage, hands in his pockets, chewing a piece of gum. His boots had sodding union flags on them. If he hadn’t known and was just judging by the look, he would have never guessed that this man was a classical pianist who was hired to play Shostakovich concerto with London’s finest orchestra (if he does say so himself). He looked more like a model about to shoot for some advert for a magazine. Greg only remembered him in a suit at their last (and only) meeting and had never imagined that this would be how he’d normally dress. The prepared pun in the introduction felt even more cringe-worthy. Greg cleared his throat and went for it anyway (not that he was able to think of a better pun). The key was to make it sound like it had just come to him out of the blue.

‘Everyone, this is Jim Moriarty, our soloist for the Shostakovich concerto! Welcome, Jim! That okay, to call you Jim? Or shall I say - Jimitrily?!’

Several groans, sighs, and ‘did he really just say Jimitrily’ were heard throughout the orchestra. Sherlock, especially, was rolling his eyes all the way into the sockets. John had a palm over his face. Greg glanced at Molly, seeking a comforting reaction from her. She was biting her lips, eyes fixed on the ground, brows raised, nostrils flaring. Though this was more or less what he’d expected, Greg wished that at least one person had smiled. It wasn’t the best pun, but - Dmitriy Shostakovich! He rebelled internally. Oh well.

Shrugging slightly, he looked at Jim and realised, rather uncomfortably, that Jim had a big smile
on his face. It was a bit unsettling.

Jim took his sunglasses off, revealing those two familiar, dark, sullen eyes. ‘Jimitriy! Good!’ his eyes widened as he ran his fingers through his short, impeccably styled hair.

‘Thank you. . . Would you like to introduce yourself, then?’ Greg said, regretting his pun more by the second. In the corner of his eyes, he saw Mike Stamford shaking his head slowly. _Et tu, Mike? It’s not like you’re the funniest bloke either! _He pursed his lips.

‘Sure!’ Jim’s bark-like answer startled Greg and a few others near him. ‘For the record, you can definitely call me Jimitriy if you want. Anyway!’ He clapped, looking around the orchestra. ‘Good to meet you all, I’m so honoured to be here. Heard so much about you! Well. . . I’m Jim Moriarty, hi! I’m originally from Dublin, and I play the piano! That’s pretty much all there is to me! Unless you wanna know more? I live with my amazing dog, Sebastian. . . I brought him to London, too! And I speak fluent Russian and German—’

Greg wasn’t expecting him to actually do an introduction, if he was being honest. It was just a polite thing to ask if they’d like to add something; most people didn’t say more than just plain old ‘Nice to meet you all.’ While deciding whether to give him a look, Jim had apparently taken notice.

‘Oops, that’s my signal to shut up now. Well, I’m looking forward to making some good music. Whatever you lot’s got in store for us. . . I already know it’s going to be - awesome.’

Jim took off his jacket, threw it carelessly in the general direction of the audience seats, and loudly cracked his knuckles. He took a seat and ran a few notes and chords on the piano, testing the sound of the instrument and the acoustics of the hall. After a few seconds, he winked at Greg. Picking his baton up again, Greg counted the tempo in and waved it rhythmically.

As soon as the piano entered, Greg’s entire back was covered in gooseflesh. He dared glancing back at Jim and his fingers, moving meticulously across the keys.

Gone was Jim’s friendly smile and demeanour; all that was left was steel-cold, menacing movements and expressions, both on his face and in his sound. A completely different person sat on that piano - it was hard to believe that it was still Jim, the talkative, attractive cover model from Dublin. As if he was wearing Shostakovich’s bitter and wretched soul over his skin, Jim continued with sharp, deadly sonority.
At the entrance of the piano solo, he instinctively shifted his view to Sherlock - an old habit, whenever he heard something unusually great or extremely distasteful, which in this case, of course, was the former. Sherlock’s eyes were already widened, almost burning a hole on Jim’s back with his stare. He met Greg’s eyes eventually. We’ll talk about this later, Sherlock’s gaze suggested. Greg nodded, smiling imperceptibly. God, how did they get such an incredible pianist?

He raised the baton high one last time at the last note. The sound of their joint overtone reverberated for a few long seconds before subsiding. The orchestra broke into an applause, their feet tapping on the floor, some of them using their hands to clap. Jim stood up and gave a low bow. Greg joined in the applause, thinking to himself - how come he had never heard of his name before?!

Jim turned around and flashed a big smile at Greg, the same dead smile that he saw last time. Greg shuddered. Where the hell do I know this face from? Jim Moriarty - I’ve never heard of his name before -

Sherlock might know.

Saying a few words of thanks and encouragement to the musicians, Greg exited the stage with the scores in his hands and approached Sherlock. Molly and John were talking to him, but surely they wouldn’t mind if he needed to take Sherlock away for a second. Just as he was nearing them, Jim flew in from the side and interrupted the trio first, leaving Greg hanging awkwardly around the lockers, ten feet away from them. With practised ease, Greg opened the scores in his hands and pretended to study them, overhearing their conversation without really meaning to.

‘Hi! I love your playing, congratulations! You’re really doing this piece justice, I can’t be happier - I’m Molly Hooper, by the way,’ Molly said breathlessly. Greg could hear how genuinely delighted she was to talk to a musician who performed her favourite composer’s work so bloody well. His peripheral vision showed them shaking hands.

John stepped forward. ‘Hey, I’m John Watson, clarinet. You sounded really great, thanks for joining us.’

They shook hands again. Greg was no longer pretending to eavesdrop; his eyes and ears were all over them now. Sherlock offered his hand for yet another handshake and opened his mouth to introduce himself, but Jim ignored the hand and went right for a tight hug, crying ‘Sherlock!’ not unlike a forlorn, long-lost lover.

Greg looked up squarely at them, in pure shock; Sherlock, visibly frozen, had his arms hanging in mid-air, not reciprocating the hug nor moving much at all. John was now frowning with palpable
discomfort, whereas Molly just gaped at the scene. She noticed that Greg was standing not too far away from them and mouthed silently: ‘What the fuck?’

What the fuck indeed. Greg furled his brows.

‘Have we met?’ A stunned Sherlock, at last, spoke with so much propriety in sharp contrast to the familiar hug that it almost seemed comical. He broke away from the hug - it was going on for too long, anyway - and took two steps back. Greg snorted quietly when John immediately inserted himself in the space between Sherlock and Jim, looking apprehensive, protective.

Jim grinned broadly - that same creepy smile.

‘Oh, Sherlock–’ he whispered. ‘Did you miss me?’

Chapter End Notes

1. Enter Jim Moriarty, ladies and gentlemen and all of y’all in the spectrum!!!

2. In case you haven’t clicked the embedded link: Jim is wearing the Doc Martens Union Jack Pascal 8-eye boots.

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