Inconsequential

by SincerelyChaos

Summary

“So it’s inconsequential to both of us, it’d seem,” Sherlock summarises, now stretching his legs, moving over to lie on his side. “So glad that we had this talk.”

Notes

Here will be awkward conversations, Sherlock's sexuality, kink and fumbling, developing relationship, because this is nothing but self-indulgent storytelling for myself.

It started as a writing excersise when my executive functions were a bit impaired and I couldn't keep enough information in my head to continue writing on something I had already started.

It worked, and so I've kept on writing.

Very unbeta'd, and even more of a personal sandbox than Floodgates (there, I said it).
“So, that thing that Mr Michaels said, right as we were leaving…”

John pauses, seemingly searching for the right words. His voice is surprisingly steady considering the amount of alcohol they have recently consumed on their almost empty stomachs.

It had been 2 am when they’d managed to get a room in a dingy little hotel, and its minibar had proved to have little to offer when it came to food. But where it had lacked in solid food, it had provided well in terms of beverages.

Above Sherlock, a ceiling fan is doing nothing to help with the stuffy air. Despite the dimness of the room, the sight of the rotating, brass-coloured blades only seem to further provoke the vertigo that’s slowly building up somewhere inside his head.

He closes his eyes as it begins to feel like the bed is moving ever so slightly beneath him.

“He seemed to imply that you were… you know.”

It’s not a question, or at least it’s not phrased as one, and so Sherlock doesn’t bother replying.

One of the men they had questioned earlier that day had tried to appeal to some kind of good will on Sherlock’s part, implying that as a fellow gay man, Sherlock should be able to relate why he had chosen not to reveal the real reason behind his presence at the scene of the crime when questioned by the police.

Sherlock hadn’t found himself relating to the man in the slightest. But then, he rarely did when it came to such things.

The queasy feeling seems to be spreading to his stomach. Sherlock tries to remain very still, hoping that the sensation will pass.

Sherlock knows the conversation that is about to follow. It’s a conversation they’ve already had once, a year and a half ago, during their first meal at Angelo’s.

That time, they’d known each other for less than two days and John had dropped the subject after Sherlock had answered a few of his less-than-subtle inquiries with purposeful obscurity. Sherlock knows that this time, John is unlikely to let him get away with that.

“So, ehm, are you?”

There’s a shuffling sound as John shifts on his bed. Judging by the sounds, he’s turned over on his side, facing Sherlock. Even in the relative darkness of the room, John must be able to see Sherlock’s chest rise and fall, his breathing deliberately slow and even as he tries to breathe the faint nausea away.

“Am I what?”

John should at least have to say it out loud, ought to have to take any of the words into his mouth.
Homosexual.

Queer.

Gay.

“Gay. Are you? Are you gay?”

John’s voice is inquisitive rather than hesitant now. Alcohol sometimes have that effect on John; causing him to forget about the years he’s spent building up a reserved but seemingly polite distance to most people around him.

“Would that be a problem for you?”

The words come out cold, distanced. There seems to be a need for that in this almost claustrophobic room, where the muggy air feels like it’s vibrating with questions that shouldn’t have been asked and answers that are impossible to provide.

“No, why would it be a problem?”

John sounds genuine in his question, and Sherlock feels a sting of something not unlike anger, because there’s the answer right there: it’s in the few feet that separates their narrow twin beds and in the way John had looked at it as they entered the room.

It’s in the way John frowns when there’s only one room vacant and the way he’s pointedly reminding everyone that he is not himself gay.

Sherlock had known that being ‘homosexual’ was a deviation long before he’d known what being homosexual actually meant, not to mention reflecting on his own potential sexuality.

At that point, it had already been made blatantly clear to him that whatever he was, he was in no way ‘normal’, and he felt no need to add anything more to the list of his so-called diversities.

And anyway, what does meaning does sexual orientation even have when you’re unlikely to ever find yourself in a position where your sexual desire is something that will ever affect another person?

“Because you’re not.”

There’s a silence before John answers, sounding more sober this time, his voice more careful as he speaks.

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“What does the question of me being or not being gay have to do with anything?” Sherlock counters, clenching the fist of his left hand, the one John can’t see, because John has nothing to do with what Sherlock might feel or not feel when it comes to these matters.

Sherlock is aware of what he is, but it doesn’t matter - shouldn’t matter - because Sherlock has never acted upon any of his potential desires, and so he shouldn’t have to answer for something that cannot even theoretically affect another person.

“I’m sorry- I just wondered why Mr Michaels would assume—”

“People assume far too much.”

“Okay.”
The fan is whisking around air, and the minibar is humming where it stands in the corner of the tiny desk. Sherlock can hear his own breathing, but he can’t make out the sound of John’s breathing.

And what or whom you desire shouldn’t define you. Unfortunately, Sherlock knows that in the eye of most people, it still does.

There were far too many anomalies in the way he functioned, in the way he behaved, so many things that made it so easy for people to dismiss him even when he was the one knowing the answer to something that none of them seemed able to figure out on their own.

Giving them yet another reason to do so, giving them another name to call him on top of the others - the ones that he got because of things he couldn’t hide or couldn’t control or choose - would have been to settle for a life in which none of the things that he was capable of would matter in the slightest to anyone else.

Would John still call Sherlock ‘amazing’ if he thought that Sherlock might interpret it as a come-on?

“Yes,” Sherlock finally said, more to the fan and the fridge and the sound of his own breathing than to John, who he couldn’t see, couldn’t even hear in over the darkness and the humming and the swooshing and the sound of his own pulse.

“Yes, I’m gay,” he says again, attempting to clarify. “I just fail to see how that matters.”

The queasy sensation in his stomach is starting to give way. He moves his legs a bit experimentally.

Around him, nothing changes.

“Ehm, well, I guess it doesn’t.”

John’s voice, careful, thoughtful.

“If it doesn’t matter to you, that is,” John adds.

“It doesn’t.”

“Never?”

“No.”

“Have you ever wanted it to?”

“Not in any substantial way.”

“Alright.”

“So it’s inconsequential to both of us, it’d seem,” Sherlock summarises, now stretching his legs, moving over to lie on his side. “So glad that we had this talk.”

The last bit he adds with a hint of sarcasm, knowing that John is sure to pick up on it even through effect the alcohol has had on his perception.

John, again, is silent.
For a moment, it occurs to Sherlock that John might in fact fall asleep at any second, leaving Sherlock alone with the humming and the swooshing and the beating—

“You have questions. More questions.”

“It’s none of my business, you’ve made that quite clear.”

“Get it over with.”

Turning over once again, this time so that he’s facing John’s direction, Sherlock adjusts the thin sheet that he’s using as a duvet in the heat.

“Another time,” John says after a few seconds, sounding almost a bit deflated. “We should sleep.”

When John falls asleep - Sherlock can see how his breathing has shifted to an even, slow rhythm by the way his chest moves - it doesn’t feel quite like being alone, no, it feels more like being… listened to.

Sherlock had said it was inconsequential, and John had accepted this, had seemed to agree.

And so they both agree on this; that it doesn’t matter what or whom Sherlock desires.

Only it does, if only theoretically - if only ever for Sherlock, right there and then - it does when what he desires is something that he will never have, and when who he’s desiring is willing to agree that this fact doesn’t, in fact, matter.
“I was wrong.”

John says it like an afterthought, but sitting there in his chair with his journal open and not a single page turned for several minutes, Sherlock knows it must be something that has required quite a lot of thought.

“It does matter,” John continues, swallowing, and his posture straightens as he steadies himself.

Outside, the rain is pouring down, and through the partially open window behind where Sherlock is standing he can feel how charged the air is. It’s only a matter of time before the thunder finally breaks loose, releasing all tensions in violent meteorological phenomena.

Sherlock is in the middle of rummaging through the papers on the desk in search of a couple of notes he’s sure he must have put with the others, if he could only recall where--

“It matters what you want, even if you don’t want to want it. It’s still… part of what you– of who you are.”

Continuing to riffle through various stacks of paper, Sherlock suddenly finds that he no longer seems to remember quite what he had been looking so intently for just seconds ago.

A gust of air makes him shiver slightly, makes him want to wrap his dressing gown closer around himself. He doesn’t. Instead, he ignores John, at least physically, because acknowledging him might encourage him to continue talking about the subject, and Sherlock wants to do no such thing.

When ignoring one thing, focus tends to drift to other things. Sherlock finds himself listening to the sound of the rain on the windows, the constant smattering against the glass making any life that goes on outside their windows seem muted all of a sudden. The sound of the rain does, however, lend a certain feeling of normalcy to this sudden perturbation of their usual patterns.

Three nights ago, with their heads dull and heavy from the cheap, overpriced alcohol, the stuffy air and the lack of sleep, something had provoked a rupture, and there had been things said that could only be said during a lapse in time or judgement.

Sherlock had hoped that it would have been a one-off. But hope is something dry and clinical, and that’s what this ought to be as well.

Dry, clinical, inconsequential.

(It’s only a hypothetic question anyway.)

Sherlock leaves the papers scattered over the desk and the surrounding floor, moves to close the window to prevent any rain smudging the ink on his notes.

(Keeping it dry, unchanged.)
Almost instantly, Sherlock feels like he’s closed all the air out of the room.

“Who I am is not determined by anything but what I’m capable of and what I chose to do with that capability. What remains after that is only residual waste.”

John closes his journal, muttering inaudible to himself, but Sherlock is already stalking out of the room, his dressing gown billowing behind him.

It’s a dramatic exit, one that Sherlock would usually be at least mildly conciliated by, but right now, all he can think is that perhaps silk dressing gowns are just a bit too… ‘theatrical’.

It had been a stupid indulgence anyway.

Chapter End Notes

Side-notes:

I was at the excellent exhibition "Queer British Art" at the Tate a few weeks back, and at one place, an actor was cited saying that it was not uncommon to use dressing gowns on stage if one wanted to play a character that was meant to be subtly queer.

It was also mentioned that 'theatrical' was a description that could also be used to imply queerness. I thought that was definitely something Mycroft would pick up on, and perhaps use to insinuate things when he thought Sherlock wasn’t aware of what signals he might send out ("Oh, now you're just being... ‘theatrical’ about it, Sherlock."). After a while, the phrase might establish itself in Sherlock's inner monologue.
Chapter 3

Sherlock adjusts the cuffs of his new shirt, frowning to himself in the mirror.

It’s not that it’s not just as exquisitely tailored as his other shirts or that the silk fabric isn’t just as smooth against his skin as he’s used to. No, the only thing that differentiates this garment from the rest of his not insignificant collection of shirts is the fit.

The way this shirt doesn’t strain over his chest or accentuate his narrow waist makes him look a bit broader and more toned, giving the illusion of a normal build rather than the sinewy silhouette his usual way of dressing effectively highlights.

Sherlock might not particularly like what he sees in the mirror, but there are things far more detrimental for his well-being than the shape of his shirts.

From the kitchen, Sherlock can hear John mutter to himself as he puts away the dishes.

It’s all about priorities in the end, and Sherlock’s always known that.

(“You can’t always have it all, Sherlock,” his mother had frequently told him, and Sherlock sometimes wonders if she has any idea of just how many things he learnt early on that he will likely never have.)

* *

When John returns from lunch with a coworker later that day, Sherlock’s in the middle of trying to fix Mrs Hudson’s cordless. In front of him on the kitchen table, pieces of the phone as well as various tools are laid out in what might seem to be a random mess, but which very much isn’t. There’s an order and a reason for everything Sherlock does, it’s just that not everyone is clever enough to figure it out.

It’s been a week since they woke up, hungover and starving in the dingy little hotel where the unfortunate conversation had taken place just a few hours earlier. Neither of them had brought it up since then, and things were slowly returning to their version of ‘normal’, discounting a few awkward silences and a decrease in the numbers of accidental touches between them.

As John passes through the kitchen, his eyes linger a bit longer on Sherlock’s clothing than usual, but he lets the new pieces pass without a comment.

* *

It had started with the dressing gown.

The deep blue, silk-fabric had fine stripes woven into and pockets deep enough to hold both
cigarettes, lighter and a book; the three things Sherlock needed in order to get himself through the endless hours and days at the fancy rehab clinic his brother had sent him to.

It fit his thin frame perfectly, and as he wrapped it even closer around himself, Sherlock doesn’t even care that the garment will make him look a bit poncy, because at that moment, the smooth, cool fabric is the best thing he’s felt in days.

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It isn’t until he’s already seated in front of his laptop and the Skype call comes through that Sherlock remembers that he’s still dressed in nothing but a sheet.

Judging by the way John's eyes widen in surprise out there on the crime scene, Sherlock gathers that this might a slight overstep to some social convention or another, but seeing how there's a murder to solve - a tricky one at that, Sherlock pushes all such thoughts aside, just hoping that the young officer stalking behind John doesn't make any faulty assumptions about the situation, something that never fails to make John deeply uncomfortable and in need of defending his heterosexuality.

It's tiresome, this whole business of categorising people based on their sexuality.

What or whom you desire shouldn't define you. Unfortunately, Sherlock knows that in the eye of most people, it does.

He'll have to be more careful from now on.

*

Being gay, it seems to Sherlock, is less about who you are attracted to than how you look or how you act.

A hair style can be suddenly and loudly be declared ‘gay’ and a certain kind of gesture will make you ‘look like a faggot’ in the eyes of a group of teenagers, and even if Sherlock himself was never part of any group or circle of friends, the slurs and implications were impossible to miss even to him as an outsider. To him, these judgements seemed entirely random, but he nonetheless picks up on them, carefully avoiding to accidentally do anything that might give him away.

It's impractical to supply people with any further ammunition.

Life's already enough of a minefield.

*

As Sherlock's reputation both as a sociopath and a consulting detective grow, Sherlock finds that he can afford to test the waters a bit in terms of his own appearance.
He lets his hair grow out a bit, letting curls fall artfully onto his forehead, expecting at least a cutting remark but the only thing he receives is an increased amount of appreciative looks, from both men and women.

As his shirts gradually becomes tighter and his trousers become cut in a way that will better show off his behind, Sherlock discovers that his personality and his interest in toxins, murder and the dead serve to make him appear almost sexless in the eyes of anyone who's ever spent more than a few minutes in his company.

If you're a freak you might as well be a good-looking one, and Sherlock does so like the way he looks now. Additionally, the initial glances and the occasional flirting (that usually end abruptly as soon as Sherlock utters more than a few syllables) that he is subjected to from all genders are not entirely… unpleasant.

Sherlock himself does never return the attention. It's no use grasping for what you will never have, after all.

It is all fine, in fact: the hiding in plain sight and the freedom to if not act, then at least look the way he wants to. It's all fine, until John Watson steps into his life, licks his lips and tell him that it's all fine, only to proceed to defend himself from any and all insinuation about him being gay.

For some reason, it's no longer fine after that.

Being gay isn't contagious, but shame is.

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At the Palace, John asks if Sherlock is wearing any pants, and after looking at each other for a few seconds, both of them break out in hysterical giggles.

It's like someone has opened a window in that stuffy old hotel room that Sherlock feels like he's been stuck in for over a week, and as he sees the tears of laughter in John's eyes, hears John joke about Sherlock forgetting his pants and John blogging about it, it feels like it might be fine after all.

Then, of course, Mycroft makes his best to ensure that it doesn't stay that way.

“Sex doesn't alarm me,” Sherlock says, because it really doesn't, if anything he finds the phenomenon in itself intriguing even if actual people's sex lives are often tiresome and predictable in the extreme.

“How would you know?”

And it's a fair question, and at the same time it isn't, because you don't have to have practical experience with something to know if it scares you or not.

Beside him, John blushes, and Sherlock wonders why, because if anything, the implication that Sherlock's a virgin ought to make it clear that no one in this room thinks that they're a couple, at least not in a more traditional sense.

Sherlock doesn't blush, at least not until he's faced with the printed photographs from The
If John notices, Sherlock hopes that he will attribute any shift in Sherlock's face as that of an innocent - such a hatefully inaccurate term - presented with pictures of an overtly sexual woman.

The woman herself, however, is inconsequential to his reaction.
Sherlock steals John an ashtray, and if there was a second of doubt about whether John might be uncomfortable with getting a (stolen) gift from his (gay) friend, that doubt all melts away as John laughs until Sherlock can’t stop himself from joining in.

Laugh, Sherlock finds, is a bit like thunder: it’s an outflow for accumulated tension, and once it finally broken, it gets a bit easier to breathe.

*  

Around him, everything seems to be spinning, and beneath him, the floor is slowly swaying like it attempts to rock him to sleep.

He resists it, forcing his eyes to remain open, but what he sees and hears all feels so distant. And then, just as he’s about to slip away again, there is suddenly a steady pressure, one fixed point that grounds him minutely. It’s moving over his cheekbone, and he hears a voice, but he can’t quite make out the words.

He blinks, and then he sees her, sees The Woman as she stands above him, the tip of her riding crop caressing him seductively.

Mesmerising.

It's hateful to be beaten in his own game, but there's also something quite brilliant in being beaten this way.

He admires her methods, and the leather feels like a whispered promise against his skin before it all becomes too hazy to make out.

The last thing he hears is John’s voice, and it makes him think about tiny explosives.

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John is livid.

It’s not that he’s yelling or punching things - the way he punched Sherlock’s face yesterday after Sherlock had provoked him by first punching him - no, it’s another form of anger. The silent kind that slips out in the cracks of whatever disguise it is that you try to keep holding together.

Irene Adler had said that the problem with a disguise was that it was always a self-portrait of sorts.
Sherlock disguises himself as sexless - and he is, in a way, because there is no sex in his life - and John disguises himself as easy-going - which he isn’t, not really, he only happens to have a high threshold for things that are either morbid, dangerous or unexpected and so people assume that he’s a friendly, accepting chap, since he survives living and working with Sherlock.

But right now, something that doesn’t fit into any of these categories must have upset John, because as he and Sherlock have their breakfast, John can hardly manage half of his toast and his jaws are clenched and unclenched as he thinks that Sherlock’s reading the paper and not observing him.

It’s the bruise and cut on his face, Sherlock realises, that John’s gaze flickers at.

“Quite a woman, that Irene Adler,” John finally says, looking up properly at Sherlock before taking another bite of his toast.

“Yes, quite,” Sherlock agrees, because she is.

A clever, not boring, strategic woman who can take down assassins and who knows how to keep all her options open. She is indeed quite a remarkable person, and Sherlock can’t even be upset that she drugged him. Instead, he’d inspected the vivid bruises that the blows from the riding crop had left on his arms. They sting and throb when he moves, and it’s really rather fascinating, as pain goes.

“Oh.”

Sherlock lowers his newspaper, eyeing John, trying to figure out what John’s getting at.

“I thought women were not… ‘your area’?”

Sherlock gives up on the article he’s reading, putting it away and forcing himself to meet John’s eyes.

“Girlfriends are not ‘my area’.”

“Oh.” John looks startled at first, a bit like he had done when he’d walked in to find the very naked Ms Adler biting Sherlock’s clerical collar, leaning over him. Then his tone grows almost accusatory. “But you’re… gay?”

“Oh, splendid, you remember. Then perhaps you also remember that I’m married to my work and that what interests me about Irene Adler is unlikely to have anything to do with her genitals.”

A second too late, Sherlock realises that what he’s said might perhaps be possible to interpret in quite another way than he’d meant. Or, rather; that it might have come out a bit too close to what he’d actually meant.

“She’s not boring, and she knows how to treat royalty,” he says quickly, attempting to make John smile.

John doesn’t smile, he only keeps looking intensely at Sherlock, like he’s trying to put the pieces together.

For once, Sherlock wishes that his friend was just as dim as Sherlock sometimes likes to pretend that he is.

“So…” John says, licking his lips nervously but keeping his gaze steady. “You like what she does. Professionally.”
“If you mean the blackmailing of dozens of powerful people with dubious morals in order to establish a position where she’s basically untouchable even to the British government, then yes, I’m a fan.”

Picking up his paper again, Sherlock finally allows himself to break eye contact with John.

Their eyes meet again half a second later, when Sherlock finds the newspaper ripped out of his hands, and John pinning him both with his glare and with a very determined grip around Sherlock’s wrist.

“You really are the typical public school boy, aren’t you, Sherlock?”

The way John says it - like he’s doing the final test to a hypothesis that he’s almost certain will prove accurate - makes the skin on Sherlock’s neck prickle, and it’s a struggle to remember to breathe, to remain eye contact and to--

“The posh boy likes a bit of rough, is that it?”

Sherlock can’t help staring at John, because of all things he’d expected out of this conversation - on outlet for John’s anger after having felt left out yesterday, more poking at Sherlock’s sexuality, perhaps even a scolding for getting drugged even though that was hardly Sherlock’s fault - this is not it at all.

“That’s why you’re so captivated by her. You liked it. The way she challenged you.”

There’s no reason to deny that, even if Sherlock wants to protest, wants to say that a mental challenge is a rare thing and should therefore--

“The way she… beat you.”

John spells out the last two words, makes a point at making them sound almost like the whip had when it landed on Sherlock’s skin, and Sherlock could say something, because he hadn’t liked the beating one bit, it had been more overt violence than subtle power play, but it hadn’t been boring either and so--

“No,” Sherlock simply says, but it comes out sounding like a whisper.

His gaze is travelling between Sherlock’s eyes and Sherlock’s wrist, still held perfectly still in a firm grip, not even trying to break away, John raises his eyebrows inquiringly.

“Yes.” John finally answers his own question, nodding to himself, no doubt taking in everything that Sherlock’s face is betraying at this moment. “Yes, you do, don’t you?”
Chapter 5

The air is growing more and more compact in 221B, charged with all the things they don’t talk about.

The rupture keeps expanding, Sherlock thinks, sliding his finger over the four day old welts left by Irene’s riding crop, then absently encircling his own wrist with his other hand. It’s a ghost of John’s grip three hours earlier, and that is one of the things they do not talk about.

* *

Stepping out of the shower, Sherlock undertakes the task of shaving. It's perhaps a bit excessive, his daily shaving, but it's a routine, and Sherlock's always hated the feeling of stubble regrowth on his face.

(Would he hate the feeling of stubble if it were on someone else's skin?)

He would rather not have a body to care for, because it is a nuisance at times, having to keep it fed and rested and all other things he don't see the point of, but now that he's stuck with this body, he might as well make the best out of it. John will occasionally tease him for his ‘extravagant potions’, will poke fun at his well-kept nails (‘seriously, are you having your nails done?’), but until now, Sherlock had thought it might be written off as yet another eccentricity or perhaps a result of his ‘haphazard pedantry’.

From now on, it might present with another kind of subtext for John, and it's absurd, but it's also the way the mind works.

Categorise and sort into neat boxes.

‘Posh boy’.

What does implications does that have to John?

Sherlock doesn’t know - can’t know - exactly what John thinks he’s figured out about Sherlock and Sherlock's possible inclinations, and he can’t know how that assumption will affect the dynamics of the two of them.

Hidden under all the possible implications of John’s gesture lies a fact that Sherlock’s long been aware of but that he’s never found relevant to examine too closely; that John is not as straight as he himself would like to believe. It had been a simple deduction, one Sherlock had made within the first days of their companionship, based on seemingly trivial little observations of John’s more or less subconscious behaviours. It doesn't matter, because whether or not John has any bisexual tendencies, it's clear to see that they are either deeply repressed, subconscious or something he's made a conscious decision about not acting on. It hadn't seemed important at the time, but given the recent events, it's been something that Sherlock's had to take into account.

Sherlock knows just how defensive people get about parts of themselves they don't want to acknowledge. It's the reason why Sherlock's started dropping hints about John's heterosexuality into conversations, why he told Irene that if he wanted to look at naked women he'd only need to borrow John's laptop.
He has no desire to challenge whatever self-image John needs to retain. In fact, he's got everything to lose by doing so.

“You don't care for it,” Sherlock says, breaking the silence from where he stands by the window. “You don’t care for me finding anyone to be a worthy opponent.”

John slowly looks up from his laptop, his face too neutral to fool Sherlock for even a second.

Sherlock, having prepared and censored this deduction carefully beforehand, paces the sitting room floor with his hands pressed together like in prayer, pretending to consider his own question.

It's afternoon and they've spent six hours not talking about it. Six hours of catching up on the latest research in biochemistry, showering, trying a new piece on his violin (too uninspired composition) and trying not to think about what John said about “a bit of rough”.

Clearly, not thinking had never been one of Sherlock's most cultivated talents, and so here he is, trying to repair any potential damage instead of leaving it be.

“It clearly upsets you, which is curious. Is it because it raises the game to a level where you can't follow it? No, you're working with me, so you're clearly used to not keeping up. That's not what's bothering you. It must be something else, then. The fear of what harm a truly clever mind could do when it’s set on winning the game? No, you're not about fear. You don’t fear danger. What do you fear then? Oh.”

It's a balance act, this, Sherlock thinks.

He swivels around to start pacing the other direction, watching John from the corner of his eye. No, he corrects himself as he sees a minute flicker of something that looks like barely perceivable dread in his friend's face before it dissipates. It's not a balance act.

It's a shell game.

“It’s not the game you fear, it’s being left out of it. You normally don’t mind me being miles ahead of you, because being well behind me is still being miles ahead of everyone else. But when someone else with a decent intellect and a modicum of imagination enters the playing field... then the importance of each piece changes. The game is suddenly played with different rules, rules you have no access to. And you don’t like that, being reduced to playing the role of the spectator. You’re a man of action, and what you fear isn’t a dangerous game, no; it's having to watch the game from the sideline. It makes you feel… redundant.”

John’s shoulders square up a fraction and his breathing picks up, but his gaze remains steady on Sherlock, following as he moves over the carpet.

The key to a shell game is to feint the spectator into thinking that they know under what shell the object is. And that’s what this is; making it seem like Sherlock has found a reason behind John’s actions, close enough to the truth to be believable, yet far enough to distract from any potentially more threatening explanations.

“Brilliant, as always,” John says, making it sound more like ‘fuck off’. “I’ll just go off be
redundant somewhere else then, shall I?”

Close. Close enough to hurt, and the charge in the air is making him far more reactive than he usually is. Shutting his laptop and putting it under his arm, John makes his way towards his own room, disposing the empty tea cup on his way.

Playing this card against John is not desirable, not even after John’s own little ‘deductions’ this morning. Still, compared to having John start questioning other possible causes for the tension between them, it doesn’t seem like that much of a hardship.

Sherlock’s hardly had time to pick up his violin before he hears John’s footsteps moving towards the sitting room again. He doesn’t turn around, but it’s curious, John returning so quickly.

“You know what Sherlock? I might not like being left out of the game, but neither do you. You, on the other hand, you like to be outplayed. You actually enjoy being defeated, as long as it’s done with an unexpected move. Perhaps you hate losing, but as said; you need a challenge; need to be challenged.”

Putting his violin down in its case again, Sherlock remains turned away from John, glancing out of the window to the autumn street below.

“And that’s why you do it, isn’t it? Because in some ways, you are bored with winning. You keep looking for opponents that will give you what you need. You weren’t even angry that Irene got away. You enjoyed it. I think that when it comes to how the game affects the two of us, Sherlock, I’m not the only one with issues.”

John doesn’t move any closer, still it feels like his presence becomes more and more palpable.

“You’d like to surrender at times, wouldn’t you? You’d like someone to make you surrender, because you can’t do it on your own.”

Breathing in, breathing out. It’s only words, and there are things Sherlock knows he can’t have.

A minute later, one of the many things Sherlock cannot have gives up a sigh, shifts uncomfortably and then returns back to his room.

The door remains closed the rest of that evening.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

For J, who gave me a lot to think about on this subject with their comment on last chapter - thank you!

Also, my biggest thanks to those of you - especially Pat, who's providing me with amazing summaries of things I hadn't even paid conscious attention to in my own stories - who share your thoughts so kindly on this little on-going experiment of mine. Since I don't really have any plan for where I'm going with this, and I only go with what intrigues me on certain themes in this story, it really fires up some ideas and enthusiasm.

Thank you.

It was during secondary school that Sherlock met Gabriel Samsoie.

Gabriel was a substitute teacher in chemistry, but while his teaching skills were mediocre at best, his knowledge about organic chemistry wasn't. What finally caught Sherlock’s attention, though, was an unexpected deduction that had nothing whatsoever to do with Gabriel’s professional qualifications.

Gabriel Samsoie was in a romantic relationship with another man.

It wasn’t that Sherlock was unaware of the existence of homosexuality outside of his own - now efficiently compartmentalised - desires. Quite the opposite; anything else was impossible when growing up during the 90’s, in the wake of the AIDS fear and in the tide of a countermovement of pride and growing visibility.

Still, the thought of his substitute teacher with all this academic ambitions, terrible puns and secret syndicalist sympathies engaging in any of the kinds of behaviour that Sherlock had come to associate with gay men was simultaneously completely absurd and weirdly… compelling to imagine.

Within the days of his initial deduction, Sherlock managed to deduce that Gabriel must have been with his current boyfriend for at least two years, that said boyfriend was most likely a borderline hoarder, insisting on saving anything that could possibly become ‘useful’ one day, that they had a romantic sex life utterly free of any kinks and that they regularly went to look at cars together, but never managed to agree on which one to get.

Sherlock was aware of his own prejudices, but it still baffled him to realise that someone so completely… ordinary could be gay. Gabriel was neither flamboyant nor ashamed of his sexuality, but was simply pragmatic about it, knowing that his temporary teaching job and being in an openly gay relationship was not compatible.

A few times during Gabriel’s lessons, Sherlock found himself trying to imagine what it would be like, as a homosexual, to live out your sexuality without becoming your sexuality.

The thought experiment proved useless, since the thought of having anyone actually coming close
enough to him that engaging in any kind of sexual or romantic relationship would be on the table was far too incongruous to entertain.

“So… what’s with the clothes, then? A case?”

John’s voice is slightly hesitant, bringing up something that he’s not sure that he ought to pay any attention to.

“No.”

Sherlock’s answer is short and dismissive, and he doesn’t bother looking up from phone as he puts the kettle on, still a bit warm from his shower.

His new trousers certainly does a less effective job of showing off his long legs and his behind, but the cut is classic, silently tasteful. When worn with his new shirts, he finds that the combination makes him look less distinguishable, more average and more handsome than… pretty. It’s a despicable word, really, but unfortunately one that has stuck in his head after having heard a few people use it about him, usually before he has opened his mouth to speak to them. After that, pretty is rarely a descriptive he finds himself confronted with.

“You look… different.”

“New tailor.”

“You don’t get your shirts tailored,” John blurts out, then seems to regret his observation, judging by the way he bites his lip.

“Very observant of you. I would never have guessed that you had such a keen interest in fine clothing, given the state of your wardrobe,” Sherlock simply states, waiting for the kettle to boil while his heart beats just a fraction faster.

This is not a conversation they ought to have, neither of them.

“Ha, bloody, ha,” John says drily, returning his attention to his own phone, resuming his eating of Weetabix.

It’s the morning after their mutual attempts of verbally disarming the other, and at least they are talking.

Sherlock only wishes John could have chosen another subject for the conversation.
“So, I hate to ask this, as I'm fairly certain I won't get an honest or even a civilised reply, but what the fuck is going on, Sherlock?”

“It's not my problem if you didn't follow when I told you why the banker would--”

“I'm not talking about the case here.”

After casting a quick glance at John, Sherlock returns his gaze to the street in front of him, his fingers tapping absently against the wheel.

“Well, since we are in fact on a case, perhaps you could just limit your inquiries to anything relevant to that.”

“Oh, come off it. We've been sitting here staring at a building for two hours. I'm fairly certain a bit of talking would not completely derail your extraordinary focus,” John says in a way that's both self-conscious and edges on the line between teasing and mocking.

Extraordinary. Sherlock wonders what John would say if he knew that that used to be a common paraphrase for a homosexual individual. Mycroft has an affinity for old films, and he had frequently used phrases he’d picked up there to mock Sherlock when they were younger. It had taken years for Sherlock to figure out the wherein the “joke” of calling Sherlock curious, a fluent swimmer or pointing out that Sherlock was built on an uncertain foundation lay.

Eventually, Sherlock’s awareness of the origin and meaning of Mycroft’s little allusions had turned the fact that he was - literally - wearing a silk dressing gown into an act of quiet defiance of his brother's insinuations.

Waiting for John to continue, Sherlock remains silent, taking his hands off the wheel only to have them resting in his lap without having anything to fidget with. He eventually settles one of them into his coat pocket.

“You're avoiding me. Would you mind telling me what's that all about?”

Sherlock briefly considers denying doing any such thing, but after two and a half weeks of increasingly awkward interactions, even attempting to deny this would probably be considered an insult on both their intellects.

“Didn't want to make you uncomfortable,” Sherlock admits, not sure what compelled him into being quite so honest.

Then again, it might be better to simply have this over with.

“And exactly how is acting twitchy and avoiding me whilst being even more rude than usual supposed to help make me feel comfortable?” John asks incredulously.

Sherlock sighs.

“I don't want to pose as a threat to your sexuality.”
“A threat to my-- What are you talking about?”

“You're pride yourself on being open-minded, but the idea of anyone making the faulty assumption that you're gay is still very distressing to you. Now that you know that you're not only living with a man, but a homosexual one at that, you might subconsciously be somewhat unsettled by some of the previous aspects of our… friendship. All I've done is cut back on those.”

Casting a glance at John, Sherlock can see that John is struggling to process the implications of this information while simultaneously trying to come up with an answer.

“But I… why?”

“I just told you why,” Sherlock snaps impatiently.

“But I told you it didn't bother me.”

“You like to think it doesn't bother you. While I applaud your aspirations, I'd rather not risk anything. Your companionship is… valuable to me. And to the work.”

This is not a conversation they have. They don't do this.

Sherlock knows that wanting something not to matter is not the same thing as that something being truly and utterly inconsequential to you.

“Thank you. For telling me.”

This is even more unsettling. It's one of those phrases that Sherlock has absolutely no idea what to make of, nevertheless how he's meant to reply to it.

“Still, you're a daft git if you think that what you've been doing-- It's not 'comforting'.”

“Duly noted.”

Sherlock isn't sure what to make of that either, or how to adjust his actions accordingly. There's an anger, somewhere, but he pushes it down, and it lingers down in his belly, feeling faintly like a heart burn.

“Listen, I shouldn't have brought it up, back at the hotel. It's not any of my business.”

“No.”

“Still I… tell me if I'm overstepping here but… have you ever wanted to?”

“Wanted to what?” Sherlock says shortly, his fingers having found their way back to the wheel and are now drumming it impatiently. He should just tell John off.

And yet.

“You know. That. Meeting someone.”

“Why would I want that?”

“A lot of people do. It's nice, sometimes.”

John is hesitant, his own fingers moving in his lap, most likely without him even noticing.

“Your brother implied that you--”
“You should know by now that my brother doesn't know everything, and I certainly thought you'd learned not to pay attention to anything he says.”

“Oh. So you're not a--”

“John.”

John cuts himself off, snapping his mouth shut and redirecting his stare until it's resting on something far outside the window.

“Sorry about that.”

They sit in silence, nothing happening in the building in front of them and the air getting thicker and thicker between them. Soon, one of them will need to open a window if they're not going to suffocate in here, Sherlock thinks, unwrapping his scarf. It's suddenly far too warm.

“I'm just trying to understand, Sherlock,” John eventually says, quietly.

Sherlock thinks of a firm hand around his wrist and insinuating words in a rough, unyielding voice.

He swallows, trying to focus on the case, on why they're here.

*Understand.* What's there to understand?

“At first I thought you weren't interested in anything sexual. But then it became clear, thanks to your friend the dominatrix, that you can be. And that's what I don't understand. Why you would deny yourself-- You've never been one to withhold from anything you find… stimulating.”

Sherlock considers not answering, because there's really no question posed and there's also no answer he's willing to give, but as the seconds go by, Sherlock finds an answer forming in his mouth, and he wonders why he'd give John that, but in the end, he does.

“Relationships are messy.”

“Yeah, they are, I guess.”

“And most people are tedious.”

“To you, yeah.”

“Oh please, if you were so intrigued by your girlfriends, how come you don't try harder to keep them?”

“Fair enough.”

That's as close to admitting that he's not actually putting in all the effort needed that John will ever come, Sherlock realises.

“So, ehm. You don't do relationships?”

Sherlock just needs to lift his eyebrows for John to nod to himself.

“Right, OK, we've covered that then.”

John licks his lip, that sometimes infuriating habit that Sherlock knows means that John is either
nervous, searching for words or trying to get his head around something. In other words, it's a very frequent habit.

It's not a hard deduction to see what line of inquiry that will follow.

“No,” Sherlock replies without giving John time to voice the question.

“I'm sorry?”

“You were going to ask if I'm asexual.”

“Right…” John's voice get that mix of amazement and frustration that it only ever gets when talking to, or about, Sherlock. “So you're--”

“John,” Sherlock interrupts, nodding towards the house in front of them.

Seeing a red car park on the driveway, silence settles between them as the wait for the moment the driver gets out.

The game is on, and fortunately, that means any other thoughts are not.

*

It's several hours later when they once again close the door of 221b behind them.

Case closed and a group of youngsters cleared of any accusations of pulling increasingly dangerous pranks, when it had in fact been a younger relative to their client who had wanted to drive the older man from his home, Sherlock and John are both slightly twitchy from the under stimulating case and the lack of high that usually follows the resolving of a case.

It's just as he's hanging up his coat that Sherlock's phone suddenly goes off, the sound of a woman's moan breaking the silence.

Irene. Text.

Instead of pulling out his phone, Sherlock casts a glance to his side.

The expression of John's face is one of anger, and Sherlock finds himself studying a pair of darkening eyes, more curious about that brief flash of anger he sees in them than he is on the text that provoked it.

“So, she keeps in touch, does she?”

It's probably meant to sound flat and uninterested, but it comes out sounding almost… challenging.

“As you are aware.”

“So you don't do relationships, but her you'll keep in touch with?”

It's no use in arguing about it. In fact, remaining silent seems to be a far more efficient way to get John to do something about his frustration.
Sherlock leaves the hallway, moving into the sitting room, John still untying his shoes by the door, something that means that John has planned to head into the shower as soon as he's done.

On the screen, Irene’s message reads *It's soon December, Mr Holmes. What do you want for Christmas?*

Sherlock wants a lot of things, but he knows better than to wish for them. If you want something, wishing is far less effective than just grabbing a hold of whatever it is you want.

The problem is when you are not sure if what you want is something that you’d be better off without.

“You don’t do relationships,” John repeats, his voice slow and deliberate as he follows Sherlock into the flat, ending up standing close behind him, “but there are other things you might do.”

A tingling moves along Sherlock’s neck, making him repress a shiver.

John’s mouth is close, so close all of a sudden, his words almost spoken into the skin just below Sherlock's ear.

“Or rather thing you’d let someone else do to you. Is that it?”

Sherlock is not sure if he's meant to answer that, not sure that he could even if he wanted to. He remains still, phone in hand and John's breath against his neck.

The ghost of a grip around his wrist. That same voice, balancing between anger and something infinitely more complex. It's only sense memory, but it feels almost palpable.

What Sherlock wants is irrelevant, because he shouldn't have it, he really shouldn't, but somehow John seems determined to make him aware of just what it is he can't have.

Things like this doesn’t happen to him.

“Tell me,” John says, and Sherlock can actually hear him lick his lips, trying to find the words, his voice now wavering between hesitant and determined. A note of fear, interlaced in-between the words. “Tell me you never think about such things. Tell me you don't want it, and I… I promise I'll back off right away.”

Second after second pass by.

Sherlock closes his eyes as he waits for the silence to become long enough to be read as the answer it is.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

The idea behind the allusions Mycroft used to address Sherlock’s queerness are from a blog post sent to me by GallifreyanGirl79 - thank you, and as you might have noticed, I loved it.

(http://the-toast.net/2015/05/22/code-words-for-gay-in-classic-films/)

Thank you also to those of you who have either sent me ideas or brainstormed with me on tumblr for this chapter; brilliantlyburning, isitandwonder, hubblegleeflower, synteis and simpleanddestructivechemistry! A special thanks to bittergreens, with whom I sat on Sherlock’s pub (yes, it's in Sweden!) last night and discussed the dynamics of this little out-of-hand story with. And finally, thanks to pennypaperbrain, who managed to directly put her finger on what was bothering me so much about the characterisation in this chapter and find a solution that made this so much better.

During his years at uni, Sherlock quickly learned to deduce who had been sleeping with who - much to his fellow students’ dismay and amusement - and while the mindless sharing of bodily fluids that people seemed almost obsessive about engaging in didn't surprise him, the amount of young men that once or twice experimented with another man and then continued to date women as if nothing has changed, as if that didn't redefine their whole sexuality, did surprise him.

For some reason, Sherlock never found himself deducing any of those encounters out loud.

* 

Sherlock's not an expert on the nuances of interpersonal communication.

He is, however, fairly certain that what had been said and done yesterday did not fall under any kind of ‘platonic’ category.

Which is the problem, in fact, because what he knows about John Watson does not fit in with the actions and words used last night. And Sherlock does so need things to add up.

Standing in front of his wardrobe, Sherlock hesitates, eyeing the garments hanging in neat rows.

It would seem redundant to keep up the new dress code given recent events, but not continuing would mean admitting, if indirectly, what it had been all about.

There's only so much humiliation he's willing to expose himself to.
With a sigh, he puts on one of his new shirts, followed by the trousers that goes with it. The result that looks back on him through the mirror doesn't quite look like him. Not like he's used to looking.

A lot of things are not what they used to anymore.

* 

“Right, right then,” John mumbled just below his ear the night before, after the silence had stretched out between them for long enough to be unambiguous. “Good.”

With that, John pulled back, and Sherlock imagined how his friend must have nodded to himself, processing and settling into whatever it was that had just been agreed upon, a determined look on his face.

Below Sherlock's ear, the skin was still tingling, and it was a novel experience, so Sherlock remained where he was, not moving a muscle, simply cataloguing every sensation that their brief interactions had left him with.

If this was actually about to happen, then Sherlock would not stop it, regardless of any reservations he might have about… the potential of this causing more than a bit of mess. It’s plausible, perhaps even likely, that John will not follow through with any of this, and even more likely that if he did follow through, he wouldn’t know how to go about it.

While he can’t always make the correct deductions about people’s emotions or their more complex motives, Sherlock’s more than capable to tell when someone might be in over their head.

The bathroom lock clicked as John closed the door behind him. A single click, then Sherlock was alone with his thoughts and his doubts and everything else he wanted to avoid. Everything he’d never wanted to want.

John has no experience in these kind of things, that much is clear, and while Sherlock too lacked any practical experience, at least he had a fair bit of theoretical knowledge.

More than that, Sherlock had a great deal of experience of dealing with John, knowing what buttons to push to either encourage or discourage certain behaviours.

He had, after all, cured a psychosomatic limp on their first evening together. This would likely prove almost as easy to navigate a bit if need be.

Later, when John left the bathroom, clean from the shower and dressed in pyjamas and the terrycloth robe, Sherlock was on the sofa, attempting to read an article on pharmacology. The anticipation made his skin crawl, and the ambivalence came in waves, washing over him and leaving him with different half-formed decisions each time it subsided.

Their movements around each other were an echo of normality for the rest of the night.

*
John lifts an eyebrow at Sherlock’s clothes as Sherlock sits down at the table, but he withholds any comment.

Eyeing the toast and the fry up with disinterest, Sherlock pushes his plate away before pulling out his phone from his dressing gown pocket. Wearing the tartan dressing gown had seemed like a compromise in terms of his recent efforts to come across as less… queer.

“About last night,” John says, clearing his throat.

He’s wearing his striped jumper, and he looks tired, like he hasn’t been sleeping much. Still, there’s no signs of him having had nightmares.

Sherlock looks up, meeting his gaze over the messy desk in the sitting room where they eat their breakfast whenever Sherlock’s experiments take up too much of the kitchen table for them to sit there.

“I’m going to… ask you a few questions. Later. And I want you to think about them very carefully before giving me an answer. A sensible answer. I need to know… some of your limits.”

This is… to be expected, Sherlock supposes. John is, his anger issues aside, very thorough. Still, even considering another conversation on the topic is less than enticing.

It would be so much easier if John would just grab his wrist again, hold it, pin it and refuse to let go. Easier if John just stepped into his space and--

No. Now is not the time for that kind of thoughts. Maybe there never would be any time for that. There were still so many things left unanswered.

Sherlock has more than a fair share of questions of his own, but he’ll keep them to himself, having decided last night that the most manageable way to go about it would be to observe and deduce as they went, unless John changed his mind during the night. The more additional research Sherlock had done on the subject, the more extensive his own mental list of things he did not want to be part of grew, and at the end of the night, he’d begun questioning the whole thing, despite his initially positive outlook on his ability to steer this in a rather desirable direction.

He doesn’t even know if this is meant to have any sexual aspects at all, or if John just wants to see him in pain, or simply to order him to do various of domestic tasks. Given their relationship, Sherlock can certainly picture both the latter scenarios, but his interest in one of them is well below zero.

“Who decides what’s ‘sensible’?” he hazards to ask, trying to keep the any emotion out of his voice.

“I do,” John says, staring him down. “Sensible means that you’ve actually thought things through and can present me with some actual limits. I don’t want any crap about you being open to anything.”

“What if I am?”

John simply gives Sherlock that look, the one that means that John isn’t as stupid as Sherlock might think, and that he also knows Sherlock well enough to call him on any and all bullshit he might try to pull.

Sherlock slowly nods.
It’s seems a bad idea to continue to read up on the subject at hand, and so Sherlock attempts to
distract himself from any thoughts of his own homosexuality, John’s lack thereof, the inevitable
mess this will turn out to be and why this will sooner or later come to prove all of his previous
conclusions on why he shouldn’t do… this.

His violin resting between his chin and shoulder, Sherlock tries to focus on the music and on the
way his fingers move to transcribe the notes into actual tones, vibrations that move through the flat
and fill every corner of it.

John is reading in his chair, and Sherlock is aware of his every shift and move.

It’s not anticipation. It’s more the feeling of willingly throwing oneself in front of a car and hoping
that you’ll not be hit by it.

“Sherlock?”

Realising that he must have finished playing some minutes ago, Sherlock turns around to face
John.

John doesn’t look any different, and yet there’s something in his eyes that--

“Put your violin away.”

Oh.

There’s a hint of John’s professional voice - his commanding voice - and yes, that’s certainly…
adequate. More than adequate.

“Or what?”

Looking at John with his bow demonstratively raised, Sherlock ventures a challenging half-smile,
hoping that John is confident enough in his military persona to allow himself to simply--

“Or we’ll just forget about this whole thing, as you’re clearly not interested,” John counters in a
deceivingly calm voice, the edge beneath it barely audible.

It’s neat, John’s way of using Sherlock’s own curiosity against him. Not bad at all for a first move.

He could push the issue further, but John should have some positive reinforcement for having
made sure to have an effective argument at hand, and so Sherlock just lets a few moments pass by
before he slowly starts to put down his violin, taking his time with every part of the procedure.

In the silence that follows, Sherlock turns back towards the window, eyeing the street outside,
waiting for John’s next move.

It’s hardly imaginative, resuming their positions from last night, and yet that’s what John does.
Moving towards him in the same unhurried way that Sherlock had just used to put away his violin,
John comes to stand behind Sherlock once again, and there’s a waspish comment on the tip of
Sherlock’s tongue, but before he gets around to voicing it, the sudden sensation of fingers on his
shoulder almost causes him to startle.

Fingers. A steady pressure, shifting slowly over his shoulder, moving over his collar and then…
skin. Skin on skin as John’s fingers come into contact with his neck, drifting towards his tendons as a thumb strokes along the vertebrae of his neck.

Sherlock inhales.

Exhales.

He’s used to John’s casual touches the way John’s used to his own haphazard invasions of personal space, but this touch is all new sensation to him.

Unexpected. Distractive.

Warmth is radiating from where his skin is being stroked, and when John speaks again, Sherlock feels the fingers shifting from their stroking into an almost-grip on his nape.

Suppressing a shiver, Sherlock notes that he had not accurately accounted for the effect of another person’s deliberate touch might have on him.

An underestimation. A rare thing.

“That wasn’t so hard now, was it?”
“Now, I'm going to ask you a few things.”

John’s face is on his shoulder, more or less, and so Sherlock can't see what's--

Oh.

So that was the point of this particular positioning then. To keep Sherlock from deducing too much. A realisation that of course only makes Sherlock even more curious about what he'd find in John's face if he were to just--

“First. Do you want me to stop?”

“I wasn't aware you had even started.”

The fingers on the back of his neck tightens, but it's nowhere near painful. The sense of force behind the action, however, is quite intriguing.

Although not as intriguing as the fact that there's restraint in John's movement; that there's something John is restraining himself from.

The breath against his neck is picking up. John's words are almost spoken against his pulse, lips not quite touching the skin over his carotid artery.

“So that's what John wanted, then.

Interesting, if perhaps a bit… limited.

Sherlock had been right. It's about jealousy of sorts. John is nothing if not possessive about certain things, and clearly that extends beyond romantic entanglements, then. When it comes to actual, living people, John wants Sherlock's focus to be on him and not--

“Only if it's boring,” Sherlock offers.

Somewhat predictably, a second hand trails up his back, stopping only as it reaches the back of his head, fistling in his curls. A sharp tug, and Sherlock feels his neck bend back a fraction. The first sting of pain becomes a more constant and less endorphin provoking burn as he allows himself to further lean back, easing the strain on his follicles.

It's predictable, perhaps, but paired with John's form behind him, John's breath against his pulse and the hint of vulnerability in his position, Sherlock finds that he responds quite instantly, and he wonders if John can make out his increase in heart rate. John's position will not allow him to observe where the blood flood is currently redirected.

He makes no sound, holding back anything that might make this into something it isn't.
“That’s a ‘yes’ to pain, then. Now, what else would you let me do to you?”

“I think,” Sherlock says, managing to keep his voice steady, “that it would be far more efficient for you to tell me what you would like to do to me, and see if I have any objections.”

Putting anything on the table himself would be far too much of a risk. This, Sherlock knows, will have to be on John’s terms. Sherlock will not be able to control the consequences or the direction this is taking otherwise.

“What I want to do to you? Can't you deduce that?”

John’s voice is slightly mocking, and it's frustrating. And interesting.

He could ‘smart-arse’ his way out of that question, as John would call it, but it's a balancing act, pushing John further whilst simultaneously keeping him in a place where he feels he has enough control.

“Not really my area,” Sherlock admits, and lets a bit of strain creep into his voice, the position of his head starting to become quite uncomfortable.

“You'll have to learn to observe, then,” John simply states, putting an end to that discussion. “Tell me, is this something you want most of the time, or just at certain times?”


John has pulled his head further back to the side, making it harder to speak, and there’s a burning in Sherlock's face, so he guesses that’s what humiliation must feel like under these circumstances.

Another first.

“And what will you do to let me know when you don't want it, or if you'd like me to stop anything?”

The grip on his hair eases a bit, John clearly needing him to be able to speak more coherently. On his nape, John’s fingers remain steady.

“Why don't you practise observing that?” Sherlock says, wavering between challenging and cheeky.

John is leaning in just a bit closer.

“No. I asked for sensible answers, remember? While I might be able to do a better job than you on deducing the first, the latter is something you'll have to tell me. And how will you do that?”

“I believe the word ‘red’ is commonly used in some similar circumstances.”

It's a gamble. Sherlock isn't sure if John's aware of the - most commonly - sexual associations to that particular use of the word, and bringing up any similarities to whatever John might want out of this and the form of sexual situations in which that word might be used is… thin ice.

“Alright. Finally; any limits?”

“Tonnes,” Sherlock answers truthfully, because he has no clear idea of what John has in mind for this, and his more recent research had suggested that there was more than a fair amount of things he was not at all interested in.

“I was hoping you’d go deeper,” John says, echoing Sherlock's own words and tone of voice
I was hoping you'd go deeper,” John says, echoing Sherlock's own words and tone of voice from their first crime scene.

A shiver, but not out of anticipation.

*John remembers.* John memorises his words.

A reminder, albeit not at the most convenient of times.

Especially not just as Sherlock's about to tell John about some of his limits without knowing what he's asked to limit down from.

“I do not like being startled. Tickling is appallingly juvenile. This arrangement is not to be discussed with anyone else. I don't like dirt, waiting prolonged periods of time or doing any kind of tasks. I don't enjoy pain for pain’s sake; make it interesting or challenging, or else just leave it. Any kind of humiliation associated with animal-like behaviour or infantilization is clearly off the table. I want to be able to speak, but temporary manual silencing is acceptable.”

He's aware that both his voice and his choice of words have become less colloquial than usual, which he knows that John has picked up on as one of his defence mechanisms, one he uses when he needs to distance himself from something he does not want to seem affected by or ignorant about.

It's just an abbreviated version of the mental list Sherlock has, but he gathers it's enough to convey the message that Sherlock is both putting effort into giving a ‘sensible’ answer and knows what he's talking about.

It's hardly his first time researching similar topics, and his own indulgence in certain fantasies has taught him what he does and does not like to a fairly wide extent.

“Fuck,” John breathes, and Sherlock isn't sure exactly what about his list had provoked that reaction.

Inhale. Exhale.

“Right, I can work with that. To begin with.”

John clears his throat silently, not letting go of Sherlock’s hair or neck. When he speaks again, his voice is clearly aiming for a ‘by-the-way’ sort of tone, but missing the target.

“What about… anything sexual?”

Inhale.

Exhale.

It's the question, the one for all the marbles. The one that might make or break this.

“My list,” Sherlock says slowly, “is in no way complete yet, as I don't know exactly what you have in mind and can't be asked to cover all eventualities, but I think you can be fairly certain that I would have listed that if it was a hard limit.”

He shrugs, as blasé as he can manage when held by the nape and hair by a short flatmate whilst his cock is half-erect.

John isn't gay, isn't bi, isn't anything but plainly straight with a -consciously or subconsciously - repressed hint of curiosity, and so it hardly matters. Sherlock's own reactions might prove
problematic, but that's assuming John will even want to proceed in this, and that's not something Sherlock will count on yet.

“So I was right, then. You really do like that sort of thing. No wonder you got all worked up about that woman. Do all you boarding school boys--”

“I,” says Sherlock, wanting to keep things accurate, “did not attend boarding school.”

John sniggers slightly, Sherlock can feel the vibrations from his body behind him.

“That,” John replies with a smile in his voice, but the smile isn't his usual kind, Sherlock can tell from the sound, “was hardly my point.”

Sherlock shifts a bit, suddenly wanting to know if this is affecting John the way it's affecting him, even though it seems unlikely given John's lack of sexual attraction towards his gender, but proximity is still proximity and Sherlock wants to know and he doesn't want to know and--

John takes a step back, tugging his hair even harder, making Sherlock almost twist in his grip before releasing him. For half a second, Sherlock sways a bit, unsteady when losing the grip on his hair after having had his head inclined for so long.

At the loss of the pain, which had been marginal towards the end, if he didn't count a certain pull on his neck muscles from the uncomfortable position, Sherlock finds that there's still more endorphins than usually in his blood, making things a bit slower and more manageable than usual.

It will pass shortly, but it's welcome for as long as it lasts.

Behind him, John is once again walking away, leaving Sherlock standing by the window.

A pattern, and not a very exciting one at that.

What had been said, on the other hand, had been far more informative and interesting.

It's just endorphins, Sherlock knows. It's just the effect of the endorphins that's making his hands just a bit unsteady as he picks up his violin to give himself something to do while he sorts all the new information.
Chapter Notes

My thanks to pagimag, who paused in her own depraved writings to read and brainstorm my depravities, making sure that they were somewhat coherent and also supplied me with a little stack of very interesting scenarios for future reference...

Patience has never been something Sherlock's naturally gifted in.

Sherlock briefly wonders if that's something John had taken into consideration when he wound Sherlock up only to leave him there on the floor of their sitting room as John continued going about his day as usual before leaving for an evening shift at the clinic. It must be Wednesday, then, Sherlock observes, remembering in the back of his head that the clinic is only open during evenings on Wednesdays.

Useless data.

Why does he even--

His fingers sore from hours of playing the violin, Sherlock barely feel the keys beneath his fingertips as he types on his laptop.

With a grimace, Sherlock realises that he's reading an article about the occurrence of same-sex attraction in straight men, and that he has fourteen additional tabs with articles about the science of human sexuality open.

So much for not thinking about it, then.

* *

Observing oneself and one's own motives is, Sherlock is aware, not generally considered a particularly pleasant activity.

When you are someone who pride yourself with being ruthlessly unsentimental in your observations, while also happening to be one of the most observant people in the country, observing yourself almost becomes an act of self depletion.

By the time John returns home from the clinic, slightly late due to having passed Sainsbury’s to pick up toothpaste on his way, Sherlock is lying curled up at the sofa, facing the sitting room, performing risk-reward analyses on every addiction he's ever had and ending up with results that could best be described as ‘inconclusive’.
Being aware of a bias unfortunately does nothing to cancel out the effect of said bias.

“Anything on?” John asks, sinking into his chair with a sigh.

He looks tired, and very much not like a man who's just about to throw himself into any kind of power play.

Given Sherlock's folded up position on the sofa and his general lack of movement, deducing the answer to that shouldn't be too difficult even for John, and so Sherlock waits for him to reach this conclusion on his own.

“Not talking tonight, then?”

Sherlock's been talking. He's been talking to the skull, or just out into the empty sitting room, his voice tense and frustrated as he examined his own motivations for agreeing to... well; he's not even sure what it is he's agreed to.

But he's getting increasingly clear on why he’s agreeing to it - to why he would even consider taking such a risk.

Because it is a risk. This could make John panic and leave, it could reveal things about himself that he rather not have out in the open, it could-- so many things.

It's a risk. And therein lies the problem.

Sherlock is an addict. One that is painfully aware of just what he's barely managing to escape through his addictions. He doesn't lack awareness, he just lacks any motivation to actually change his behaviour. There's nothing irrational about wanting to avoid what he's been skilfully keeping at bay for more than a decade now. In the end, one might even consider it an act of survival instinct or self-preservation - qualities others seem to think he lacks.

He doesn't.

It's just that ever since he last got sober, the only thing potent enough to even be considered a feasible substitute has any kind of risk taking behaviour.

It's all he's left with.

And he's been slipping, has been feeling the edge of greyness, has felt the pull of--

Sherlock swallows, knowing that the too bright light from the lamp on the low bookcase next to the sofa will undoubtedly allow John to see every shift in his face.

John, in turn, clears his throat.

Straightens up a fraction.

“I don't really need you to talk right now.”

Sherlock is an addict, but what's John's real--

“In fact, you keeping your mouth shut would not be a bad thing at all. All I need you to be able to say is one single word, and I doubt you'll feel the need to use it tonight.”

Oh.

The unsettling feeling of dissonance over being both instantly impatient and instantly annoyed
over John’s poor timing must have shown on Sherlock’s face, because a shadow of hesitation flickers over John’s features for just a brief second before the muscles around his mouth shifts marginally and any visible hesitation is once again absent.

“I’m going to take this slow. And don’t - don’t tell me that that’s ‘boring’, or ‘dull’, because honestly, I don’t care. You get to experiment all the time. In this experiment, I’ll… set the pace. I want to take my time and… see just what and how much you’re willing to take. I’ll take my time, and if that's not alright with you, you only need to say one word.”

‘Taking things slowly’ truly doesn't sound very appealing, mostly because Sherlock has very little idea of what that means, but this apparently happening, now, and what does John have in mind, should he--

John eliminates the distance between them with just a few strides, and Sherlock stubbornly remains curled up on his side, not moving a muscle as John moves purposefully towards him. But instead of pulling Sherlock up to his feet or at least attempt to get him into a sitting position, John simply sits down on the sofa on the only space available, right next to where Sherlock's head is resting.

The position makes absolutely no sense.

Then, just as Sherlock realises that John can watch him, but that John is out of his own field of vision, a hand makes contact with his… hair.

Keeping his face void of all reactions, Sherlock feels how John's hand is slowly…...stroking his hair.

His breath wants to pick up, but he forces himself to pace his breathing, keeping it steady.

He's fairly certain that this is not what they agreed upon. They might have been deliberately vague when discussing it, but if hair-stroking is what John means by starting slow-- No. It doesn't make sense.

Refusing to let himself tense up in protest but also unable to relax into the strange sensation of John's fingers threading into his curls, Sherlock's body remains rigidly still, waiting for something in the situation to shift, to give him a reason to snap, lash out and just leave all this.

Theoretically, Sherlock isn't against humiliation under certain… circumstances, but this is not humiliation, it's…

...pity? .....tenderness? ...petting?
All hateful things.

Something in his face must have given him away, because without letting his hand leave Sherlock's hair, John leans a bit forward to better see his expression.

Sherlock will not meet his gaze. Instead, he keeps staring in front of him without actually observing anything.

“Have something you need to say, Sherlock?”

Amusement.

Ridicule? Mockery? Teasing?
Sherlock knows there are nuances, but it's one of those things he’s never quite managed to learn how to differentiate between.

*Challenging?*

Stubbornly, he keeps his face blank, his mouth closed and wills his body to relax a fraction more.

John gives him a few seconds, and when he speaks, it's frustratingly matter-of-factly.

“Thought not.”

Against Sherlock's scalp, blunt fingertips creates patterns of waves, fingers sliding through the curls, occasionally getting stuck where product has made the hair strands stick together.

Saying the word that would make John withdraw his fingers is unthinkable, because Sherlock does know a challenge when he's presented with one, whether he understands the point of it or not. Questioning the way John's chosen to go about this isn’t an option either, because that would involve him actual talking, and Sherlock does not want John to think that this is somehow an effective way to get Sherlock to break his occasional spells of silence.

John’s fingers alternate between sliding through the hair and lightly massaging the scalp, and it's not that it's in any way unpleasant, it's just that it’s… lame. Innocuous. Insipid. The very antithesis of what an addict looks for when in need of a fix.

(There’s no use to be delicate about the reason they’ve ended up here.)

Gradually, Sherlock’s body relaxes into the sensation. It's no longer light enough to put him on edge the way light touches have an tendency to do, but firmer and more palpable. The more he thinks about it, the more intrigued he is by the fact that this is what John chose.

As his hair grows increasingly tousled and wispy from John’s hands, Sherlock contemplates the only thing not boring about this; the obvious and rather fascinating dissonance between what Sherlock had thought what John would want out of this and what John actually decided to start with.

It takes a few moments for Sherlock to catch on when the movements of John’s hand changes in character.

The increasing pressure has shifted into something more like.... tugging.

Realising that he must have closed his eyes, Sherlock blinks them open and feels the incisive light of the room almost stinging his eyes.

Yes. Definitely tugging. Curls teased between fingers, hands fistling loosely, pulling away from his scalp and--

Not enough, but oh, so much closer to what he craves, what he’s never thought he’d actually experience from any other hand than his own, and Sherlock’s eyes slid close, a quick inhale giving him away--

And then it’s no longer the light that makes his eyes sting, because there’s a burning sensation on his scalp, and one sharp inhale soon turns into a rapidly increasing breathing rate as John alternates between easing the pressure and pulling hard on the strands of hair.

“So that’s how it is, is it?”
John’s words, almost a mumble, coming from above him. John has leaned forward a bit, most likely to be able to better observe Sherlock’s face, and suddenly, Sherlock feels almost painfully exposed.

The pull on the hair just at his nape eases, and for a minute, there’s nothing but endorphins flooding Sherlock’s blood stream as John almost gently cards his fingers through the curls, pain beginning to dissipate.

It’s not unlike the rushes Sherlock’s experienced hundreds of times before, after a temporary pain has stopped and the excess pain-relieving neurotransmitters are yet to be reabsorbed. Experimenting with pain is hardly a new thing for him, but this is slightly more... intense. The vulnerability of it, the flush on his cheeks that can’t be blamed solely on the pain and the contrast between how John’s hands are touching him now - gentle, almost caressing, soothing - and the way they touched him just moments ago.

“Come here.”

Sherlock follows John’s hands, only a bit uncoordinatedly, as they guide his head up until he finds his cheek resting against worn denim, feels the flex of the muscle beneath and the warmth that radiates from it--

A sharp tug, and his body jerks.

Seconds of soothing touches, fingers combing through tousled curls and--

Sherlock loses all focus on where his head is now resting, the rapid and unpredictable alternations between pain and relief making metacognition and even simple observations register as fleeting and peripheral.

It’s-- functional.

Medicinal, in a sense.

And when fingers leave his hair, gently trailing from the base of his skull, along his spine and down to the collar of his shirt, it takes a few seconds to realise that that’s something new.

John’s hand stills, fingers resting against the side of Sherlock’s throat, and there’s no pressure, only presence, a contact area for warm skin.

Laying there, still curled up on his side like he’d been when John had taken a seat next to him, Sherlock finds that his limbs want to curl up even more, enfolding himself in his own arms, seeking out the pressure and the warmth. It’s just biochemical reflexes, but the manifestations are intense enough to be quite interesting to observe as he refuses to give in to them.

Sherlock’s eyes remains shut, closing out the light that surrounds them, and as he becomes more and more aware, it’s mostly tactile sensations that registers.

As he pushes himself up into a sitting position, swaying a bit before his blood pressure readjusts, Sherlock turns to look at John curious about what he might read in his face and unwilling to think about what his own face might look like at this moment.

When he meets John’s eyes, Sherlock finds himself wanting to instantly avert his gaze.

He’s never particularly liked not understanding what he sees in someone’s eyes when they look at him, and the way John’s face--
There’s too much new data, too much hormones still lingering in his blood and it seems likely that things will continue to be awkward afterwards if they’re to do this again.

John’s face is difficult to read at first, but then his features shifts, and he grins, a slightly crooked smile, raising his eyebrows and giving Sherlock that face; the teasing, intrigued expression that seems to communicate the question ‘...really?’ as clears as if it had been written on his face, and Sherlock finds himself breaking his silence just to snap back at him.

“Oh, shut up.”
Chapter 11

The come down is always a nuisance.

Sherlock is on the floor beside his bed, observing the different sensations as they manifest themselves, carefully navigating the aftermath of what had taken place on the sofa just minutes ago.

There’s the haziness from the endorphins still lingering in his blood, a faint ache on his scalp, a strange and somewhat unfamiliar urge to be close-pressed against-diffuse into something, a lump in his throat and finally: his half-hard cock.

He’s not going to do anything about that now. It would compromise the data he’s collecting on his own reactions after the encounter, and Sherlock's needs to know just how the experience of any kind of painplay alters when another person is involved.

(The unpredictability, the additional sensory stimulation from another’s body, the psychological impact of the awareness that you’re being observed, the inclusion of submissive elements, the verbal humiliation… There's an obvious potential.)

Observing his own reactions after having been exposed to something novel is part of the appeal of any new sensations, because while sensations might often turn out to be painful, upsetting, distasteful or simply disappointing, they are always useful in terms of offering him new reactions to catalogue and analyse.

Sherlock has a vast experience in what psychology refers to as ‘sensation seeking behavior’. It's what keeps his brain from-- No. It's crucial, being able to provide his brain with different kinds of highs and intensities, but after almost every kind of high comes a drop; the sensations experienced when his neurotransmitters and state of consciousness rapidly alters once more, striving to return to baseline.

The come down after a high-fix-rush-kick is never pleasant, but some come downs are less unpleasant than others.

So far, this particular come down has been relatively mild, with no sensations of ants crawling under his skin, no arrhythmia nor any immediately overhanging threats of serious repercussions of any sort. In fact, this come down seems almost negligible so far compared to some of the others he’s experienced during his life.

Still, there’s a sense of pressure or hollowness behind his sternum and an unexpected heightened emotional reactivity that he can’t recall from any of his previous experiments with pain.

Adding another person into the equation clearly changes the outcome in more than one way.

Interpersonal complications.

It was only to be expected.
“Sleep well?” John asks, cleaning up after his breakfast as Sherlock enters the kitchen.

Sherlock doesn’t reply, because John only ever ask such inane questions when he’s nervous, and Sherlock doesn’t want to encourage any further exchanges of social niceties between them anyway.

He doesn’t, however, miss the way John rests his eyes just a second longer on Sherlock - or rather on the aubergine shirt and the well-cut suit trousers Sherlock’s wearing - than he usually does.

This morning, Sherlock wanted the familiarity of his regular, fitted clothes, and given the fact that John really isn’t doing anything to make their relationship less threatening to his own sexuality, there is really no point in Sherlock going out of his way to do so either.

“Fine,” John mutters to himself. “Still in a mood, then.”

“I am not in a mood,” Sherlock objects, standing on tiptoes to see if there’s any clean mug on the top shelf, or if they’re all in the sink, unwashed.

“Oh, good, I suppose,” shrugs John, putting away butter and milk in the fridge.

John’s masturbated this morning. Sherlock can feel the faint smell of semen as he passes John on his way to the sink, where he reluctantly starts cleaning one the mugs.

It's been 43 days since John last had a date, and 78 since he last got laid.

Sherlock briefly finds himself wondering if this particular circumstance will in any way affect the direction their current arrangement will take.

The thought, whilst lined with complications, is not at all unpleasant to consider.

Adding sexual stimulation to the pain is, in Sherlock's experience, very effective.

Adding another person instead of his own hands, toys, fingers-- Adding John--

*(Adding the sensation of having his body exposed to John's eyes, the vulnerability of not being able to hide his reactions as John--)*

Sherlock minutely shakes his head, ridding it of images that doesn't belong in this room, in this context.

An interpersonal complication.

(Unless John decides to move them in that direction, in which case it might prove to be an advantage.)

Behind him, John is taking a seat at the now slightly less cluttered table. Sherlock hears the sound John’s phone makes as the screen is unlocked, and Sherlock pours himself some coffee before he goes to find his laptop, putting it down on the table almost at the corner of the kitchen.

John is seemingly lost in whatever he's doing on his phone (most likely reading blog comments or Facebook updates, then), and so Sherlock allows himself to do a bit of research.
After only a few minutes, he’s managed to confirm his hypothesis about his reactions last night, or at least find data that supports them. It all makes sense, psychologically and biologically, and that’s what matters.

He needs things to be understandable.

“I'm promised Mrs Hudson I'd take her to buy a new cordless today. She didn't trust me to do it on my own, she said. I guess you're not coming?”

Sherlock shakes his head, instinctively opening up another browser window to hide the BDSM forum that he'd been reading. His smiles grimly to himself when he realises just how illogical his reaction is, given that John hasn't moved, only broken the silence, and that he's still seated on the opposite side of the table.

Shame.

“Didn't think so,” John mutters to himself, pocketing his phone and looking at Sherlock for a few seconds before he gets up from the table.

John leaves the kitchen, and Sherlock finds himself looking him over as he heads towards the bathroom.

An average man, at least physically, if one didn't take the shattered scapula and the scar tissue of his shoulder into account. Deceivingly average. And yet.

He swallows, closing his laptop and taking a sip of his coffee.

Sherlock has been aware of his own attraction for several months, but it’s been manageable, only making itself known occasionally and until the issue of his sexuality was addressed, it wasn’t something Sherlock had deemed especially noteworthy. He's been superficially attracted to other men before, and while it's occasionally been a cause of mild frustration, most of the time it's just been something he’s taken as a learning opportunity. It's an advantage, being able to observe the physical manifestations of sexual attraction first hand. Knowing your own tells and being able to observe them in others.

“I'm leaving, you need anything from the shops?”

John appears in the kitchen doorway, already wearing his jacket.

The one that looks slightly military in its cut, Sherlock absently notes.

“Schampo. Make it two bottles while you're at it.”

“I'm not going all the way to your poncy hairdresser to get you your absurdly expensive hair potion. Anything else?”

Shaking his head, Sherlock watches John disappear out of his line of sight, deciding that he might use the time for an experiment.

He's not going to let his thoughts get ahead of this, he's going to stick to what John's clearly willing to offer him.

Pain.

Leaving his half-empty mug on the table, Sherlock heads towards his bedroom, where he keeps
his box of various clamps.

Different parameters, but the experiment might be worth conducting anyway.

(At least, it’s rarely boring.)
His movements are still just a fraction slower - and maybe a bit more languid, softer - as Sherlock makes his way to the bathroom, his shirt still untucked and unbuttoned, the silk fabric shifting around him when he turns to close the door behind him.

Turning on the taps, Sherlock regards the clamps he's holding, watching as water runs over the plastic and the metal of the differently shaped objects in his hand.

His skin is still sore in multiple locations after his… session, and while Sherlock had purposely avoided all kinds of direct sexual stimulation of his own body and had refrained from masturbation, he can still feel a low, simmering arousal every time he moves in a way that causes the ache to intensify.

It'd been awhile since he last engaged in this particular activity without orgasm being part of the end goal. The combination of these two sensations - pain and sexual pleasure - is far more potent than each sensation is on its own.

*Synergetic.*

He's long suspected that he might have conditioned himself to a degree where the pain from the clamps alone would be enough, even without sexual fantasies or touches, to provoke a sexual reaction.

There’s one confirmed hypothesis.

When it comes to his other hypothesis, the one he initially set out to test with this little session, he finds that the results are not quite comparable to the data he has from his encounter with John. Having one's hair pulled while in close physical proximity to another person, being watched, being… degraded, is quite another thing than applying various clamps to different sensitive areas of one's skin, after all.

Closing the taps, Sherlock wonders what it would take to go about to get John to use them on him.

(Such data would be far easier to compare--)

The thought of just wordlessly presenting John with the box of implements does have a certain, abstract kind of appeal.

Sherlock turns the tap off, picking up one of the clamps - a plastic claw hair clip - and regards it with a frown.

Well, he might not present John with *that* particular kind of clamp.

Regardless of their usefulness in terms of inflicting pain, the associations they might evoke in John, given their more customary use, would not in any way be advantageous.
(There's nothing particularly... *masculine* about the tiny clawed clip that's pinched between his thumb and forefinger.)

Simply asking would of course be the simplest way to find out whether John would be amenable, but putting John in a situation where he's expected to make use of objects he probably lacks experience with has a potential risk of making John feel out of his depth. An additional problem might arise if John finds that Sherlock is in any way directing... *this.*

(Which he is, in a way, but John doesn't have to be made quite so aware of that fact. In time, perhaps John will be in charge. That thought isn't without appeal.)

And also; that's not the kind of game they play. Sherlock don't ask. John simply gives.

(Or takes, depending on how Sherlock chooses to define it. *Semantics.*)

Using the nearest cloth to dry off the clamps, Sherlock sighs and resigns himself to the reality of an inconclusive experiment.

The sensations and the novel chemical reactions he'd experienced after his encounter with John had failed to present themselves after his solo session, which was only to be expected. There hadn't been any impulse to seek out the pressure of another body against his, no sense of needing... assurance that it was all... *fine.*

(That he was... *fine.* Alright. Acceptable. A strange and unfamiliar urge, that.)

The experience of feeling lonely rather than alone as he had retreated to his room. An illogical wish for John to seek him out. It had all been more than a bit unsettling.

Even without comparable data, Sherlock's research on the more physiological aspects of painplay had revealed a highly probable explanation for this uncharacteristic and novel experience.

*Oxytocin.*

Failing to present itself when the pain and touch originate solely from his own actions, but is released when in closer physical proximity to another person whilst the pain and the touch is applied.

Pair-bonding hormone.

Pointless in this context, but still a solid explanation for his reaction afterwards.

*Oxytocin* makes you seek eye contact, makes you act in ways that will further promote pair-bonding.

The reactions had seemed much more manageable once Sherlock had confirmed the underlying, chemical cause behind them.

It's simple but potentially destructive chemistry, and Sherlock is quite intrigued by both chemistry and destruction, after all.

And just like in the case of pain and sexual pleasure, it seems like the combination of chemistry and destruction might have a certain synergetic effect.

Realising that he's absently begun clamping a few of the clamps to the skin of his left palm, Sherlock smiles briefly to himself and considers just letting himself relieve the tension caused by the arousal that seems unwilling to dissipate. But no, that won't do. John might be back soon and
either way, he ought to recondition himself a bit in terms of pain and sexual arousal.

The current correlation between the two might prove a bit inconvenient if this is to continue for any length of time.

(It will have to, Sherlock knows. It will have to, because it's the only distraction currently potent enough to distract--)

(It will simply have to.)

Chapter End Notes

Yes.

An entire chapter on Sherlock considering his own reactions and possibilities while standing by a bathroom sink.

It's what emerged as I finally began writing.

Sorry for the delay, by the way.

(Brain.)

Next up; more kink.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

For this chapter, I owe pagimag a lot.

The scenario she mentioned a few weeks earlier when we talked about this story has taken a slightly new form, but the idea remains the same.

Thank you!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sherlock is, and has long been, an observer.

Therefore, he knows that John is going to initiate an encounter several hours before it actually happens.

There are times when Sherlock almost regrets having cultivated his skills of deduction and pattern recognition, because there are now so very few things that are genuinely surprising. Things might be unforeseen, perhaps, at least when it comes to certain emotional motivations or social interactions, yet they're rarely surprising.

In this situation, however, Sherlock finds that being able to read John's glances, his slight restlessness, the set of his jaw as he's about to settle for a decision, does nothing whatsoever to decrease his own anticipation.

It's unusual, wanting something and not just reaching out to grab it, but instead waiting for it to come to him.

(In fact, it's one of the aspects where reality might differ from his own fantasies - in his fantasies, everything is immediate.)

Sherlock is an observer, but he's by no means a passive observer. No, he uses his observations to calculate the most effective way to play the game, striking almost before the opponent has a chance to finish their move.

Therefore, Sherlock takes advantage of his knowledge of where John's gaze tends to linger a fraction longer than on other places on Sherlock's body by exposing even more of his neck as he's leaning down to adjust the slide on his microscope. John is barefoot, but his footsteps still gave him away as soon as he approached the kitchen doorway.

John thinks that Sherlock is often too wrapped up in his own thoughts to take any notice of his surroundings, but there's a difference between not noticing and simply ignoring.

When fingers make contact with tendons, Sherlock doesn't startle. Instead, he keeps adjusting the slide, jotting down a few observations on a pad without even looking up.
“Busy?”

Sherlock only offers a noncommittal grunt, and John's fingers don't withdraw.

They're stroking lazily along Sherlock's tendons, up to the base of his skull and down to the notch of his first thoracic vertebrae.

There's no obvious tension to be felt in Sherlock's muscles, he knows, but that does not mean that he's relaxed. On the contrary; Sherlock is hyper aware of any minute shift in movement or intention that might occur in the hand touching him, knowing that the fingers that are currently providing a pressure that is just shy of painfully light and ticklish could shift into inducing sharp pain any given moment.

It's not that he fears pain. It's just that he dislikes the feeling of being startled, which is one of the reasons that he first began observing both his surroundings and the people around him with something akin to hyper vigilance.

It's only when he's certain that he's completely alone, with no risk of being interrupted, that he can sometimes manage to feel more fully at ease, or at least as much at ease as someone with his particular mind is capable of.

This, however, is nowhere close to being at ease.

After almost a minute of fingers grazing the sensitive skin of his neck ever so lightly, Sherlock represses the urge to tell John to just get on with it; that this petting business is not what either of them are here for. Instead, he settles for exchanging the slide he's been examining for another one, hoping that the gesture of obvious disinterest in the current proceedings will be just enough of a provocation to move things along.

Apparently, it isn't.

Against his will, Sherlock feels the muscles of his face tense up into a slight grimace, which John luckily can't see from where he's standing behind Sherlock, his hand… *caressing* Sherlock's nape.

It's completely and utterly absurd.

Imagining what they must look like from the outside: like an old, affectionate couple (no, worse; like Sherlock's own parents), Sherlock fights the urge to cringe beneath John's hand.

This, Sherlock thinks, is horrendous. And even worse; it makes absolutely no sense.

It takes effort to will himself to adjust the focus on the microscope, and to continue his examination of the sample on the slide, but Sherlock will not let John shock him into acknowledging… *this*. John should simply not be rewarded for this particular, ridiculous behaviour.

With that in mind, Sherlock returns most of his attention to his observations of the different tissues, gradually managing to pay less and less attention to the fingers that are now almost massaging his nape and shoulders with just a bit more pressure than before.

It goes on for minutes, or so Sherlock thinks, because he has never been able to tell time without visual measures, and it isn't until the microscope is being pushed aside by John that Sherlock becomes aware of what's happening.

Without his conscious permission, his muscles must have gone pliant, or at least pliant enough so that when John's hand began guiding Sherlock's chest slowly towards the surface of the table, it...
hardly registered in his mind.

His own muscles, his own perception, eluding him like this.

It's unacceptable, Sherlock thinks as he momentarily struggles with himself over whether or not to show some resistance.

The side of his face touches the surface of the table only a second after he makes the decision not to fight it.

It's not sudden or forceful, no, it's only a slow, steady pressure of John's hand splayed out over his nape and the back of his head that's pushing Sherlock's upper body down until his cheek makes contact with the surface just vacated by the microscope. The pressure on Sherlock's skull only eases once the side of his head is pressed against the worn, scratched wood, and then John's hand instead fists in his hair, the grip pinning Sherlock to the table whilst another hand comes to rest heavily between Sherlock's shoulder blades.

Positioned like this, Sherlock's line of sight is parallel with the tabletop, and so he can't see John, he can only see his recently abandoned notepad and the stacks of papers littering the surface. Against his cheek, Sherlock can feel a few sharp needle pricks that must come from some forgotten crumbles that are now stuck between his skin and the wood.

In his fantasies, things were never this real.

His awkward, half-lying position is pushing his ribs against the sharp edge of the table, and while Sherlock can't see John, John must be able to see every flinch on Sherlock's face as pain forces him to clench his jaw to keep from making any sound.

And Sherlock might be an excellent observer, but at times he fails to observe the difference between an imaginary experience and a real one.

In the imaginary ones, it's relatively easy to let go of doubts, embarrassment and to give up control.

In real situations, it turns out not to be quite as simple.

Chapter End Notes

(Yes; there's more to this scene...)
Pain.

In Sherlock’s mind, there are several different categories for pain. The categories are at times a bit blurry around the edges, as is any dynamic and useful categorisation according to neuropsychology, but the pain Sherlock’s currently experiencing doesn’t fall into the category of interesting ones, doesn’t even fall into the blurred edges of any such category.

Having the sharp edge of a table pressed into his ribs is nothing but dull, mechanical pain, and it overrides every other sensation, almost drowning out even the initial, distasteful sense of betrayal over the fact that his own muscles and neurons decided to allow him to end up--

A fresh thrill of pain flares from his ribs, and in that moment, everything goes blank and all Sherlock can feel is the metallic taste of intense, sudden anger, coming seemingly out of nowhere and rapidly rising like bile - like heartburn - in his throat.

“No,” Sherlock suddenly gasps, his eyes flying open as his hands seek purchase against the table, anything to--

Pushing himself up from his angled, crouching position, Sherlock can feel the resistance of John’s hands give as the grip eases and John must be attempting to take a step back to give Sherlock some space. But before John’s has a chance to do so, Sherlock’s already pushing him away whilst shifting until he’s standing almost upright, facing John with eyes still blurred by the pain and his breath heaving in his chest, his hands fumbling behind him until they find the edge of the table he’s now propping himself up against.

It takes Sherlock a moment to catch his breath. Inhaling shakily, Sherlock blinks until his eyes regain focus, and his gaze lands on John’s face, their eyes locking.

John looks almost as taken aback as Sherlock feels in that second, but then John averts his eyes, returning only as Sherlock's words break the stunned silence.

“I said,” Sherlock hisses, putting emphasis on each word as he spits them out, “‘make it interesting’.”

Sherlock regrets his words before he can even fully register what he’s saying and the further
implications of the words.

His pulse is still too rapid and his chest feels far too constrictive for the pounding in his chest. Neither the pain nor the sudden burst of movement seem to account for such ridiculous levels of activation of his sympathetic nervous system.

(This is not-- This was not the plan, he didn’t plan on breaking away from John’s grip and he didn’t plan on staring him down or telling him--)

John’s eyes go wide, and then he’s preparing to retreat, looking steadily at Sherlock but clearly about to step back from the entire situation.

Stupid. So, so stupid; totally undermining and deflating John just as John’s ventured so far out of his usual comfort zone as to do something like this, something that might have the potential to--

Assessing the situation quickly before deciding on his next move, Sherlock gives John a look that manages to stop John in his track just as he’s about to back off both physically and mentally.

“I didn’t say ‘stop’.”

Sherlock’s voice still a bit unsteady as he redistributes his weight until he’s no longer supporting himself with his hands, but instead half-sitting, half-leaning against the table behind him. With his now free hands, he smoothes out his lapels and adjusts the cuffs of his shirt, and he gets a faint relief of internal tension from the familiar and almost compulsive gestures.

“Ehm--” John begins protesting, clearly both confused and uncomfortable. His hand flies up to his neck, John’s nervous habits almost mirroring Sherlock’s own.

“I mean,” Sherlock attempts to clarify, as much to himself as to John, “that I didn’t tell you to stop completely.”

In the silence that falls between them, Sherlock can hear the sounds of both their breaths as they mingle and entangle until it’s almost impossible to determine which breathing is his own and which isn’t. It’s distracting, just like the tension that currently seems to be residing within the few inches of air that’s separating them.

It’s clear, however, from the expectant look on John's face that Sherlock might need to elaborate.

“I want you to use your hands.”

Sherlock does not particularly want to venture into further explanations of that statement, but given that John’s facial expression doesn’t change, Sherlock sighs and continues, putting himself out there by a very deliberate choice of words in hope of this verbal offering will even out the balance Sherlock’s managed to upset with his unforeseen little... outburst.

(Unforeseen even to himself.)

“I want you to use your hands when you hurt me. Not the furniture.”

John raises his eyebrows, and the shift in posture is almost undetectable, yet Sherlock can see the moment John is back; back in the space where they can play this game.

In the midst of the lingering confusion of the entire, unexpected ordeal, it’s a slight comfort to know that he still knows what it takes to get John’s recently discovered… ‘dominant tendencies’ to set in.
“That's what you like, is it?”

Tables turned, the game back on and John’s voice inquiring and yet teasing at the same time.

It hits a nerve somewhere, and Sherlock feels his peripheral blood vessels dilate once again, but this time, it has nothing to do with desperate anger.

(And why had there been anger, he still doesn’t understand quite what happened just seconds or minutes ago, and he needs to examine that reaction and--)

“And here I was, beginning to think you liked that riding crop for reasons unrelated to post mortem bruising, but that’s not it then, I take it. You prefer me to use my hands… *want me* to use my hands, and you want to be hurt. You *like* to be hurt. By hand.”

“I think we’ve already established that, so there’s no reason for you to state it several times. It’s getting a bit repetitive.”

It’s said with an impudent tone, but as he’s speaking, Sherlock’s lowering his head slightly, allowing him to continue to look at John just as airily as before, but now doing so through his lashes.

(A submissive gesture, calculated as to take some of the edge out of his words.)

“Hands,” John says slowly, clearly refusing to let Sherlock’s objections to repetitiveness stop him from doing this his own way, “are more direct, more personal.”

Resisting the urge to swallow, Sherlock only raises his eyebrows in return, waiting.

(This - the simple act of talking about… *such things* - shouldn’t affect him more than *doing* such things had done merely minutes ago.)

John steps closer until the distance separating them is so insignificant that Sherlock can feel the warmth of John’s breath in each of his own inhales.

It’s hard, in that moment, not to imagine there being another layer to the tension between them.

It's harder still when John continues to speak, invading even more of Sherlock's space.

“So that’s what you want? A hands-on approach?”

As if to illustrate John’s point, a hand reaches up and begins to stroke the side of Sherlock’s neck. Fingers slide up into his hair, carding through curls for a few seconds before closing around a handful of hair in a firm grip, pulling his head sharply backwards until Sherlock’s staring up at the cornice and the ceiling, his back arched and his neck twisted awkwardly to the side.

Sherlock manages to get his arms out to support him, balancing his weight on his elbows as John’s other hand finds his throat, fingers exploring the straining muscles as John leans in closer and Sherlock can feel the warmth of John’s breath against the skin just below his ear as John speaks, slowly and deliberately.

“I can work with that.”
Chapter 15

When it comes to pain, the effect it has on his nervous system will differ significantly depending on how it’s inflicted.

It will also, Sherlock knows, be far more effective in terms of temporary brain chemistry if he is mindful of its every sensation.

As he's supporting himself on the kitchen table beneath him, Sherlock therefore wills his body to relax a fraction despite the effort it takes to hold this position, willing himself to focus on the dual sensation of the the burning pain on his scalp and the almost sensuous touch of John's fingers.

John’s hand is sliding down the exposed skin of his throat. The fingers trace strained jugular muscles, following the tendons as they stretch out, struggling to accommodate the arch of Sherlock’s spine.

This is no caress. It’s an exploration of the physical manifestations of Sherlock’s submission to him.

It shouldn't register as erotic, the notion of John admiring the effects of his own ability to make Sherlock twist in his grip.

It shouldn't, but it does.

For a few seconds, the pain and the feeling of John's fingers sliding down - dipping into the suprasternal fossa and continuing down bare skin and then over the thin silk of the shirt - are all that Sherlock is conscious of. For two or three seconds there are no simultaneous thought processes, no distractions, no background noise in his mind.

A brief respite, and then Sherlock's awareness is once again split up between several different thoughts and perceptions, deducing, analysing and planning. With a slight shiver, Sherlock feels the noise return, and he twists his head a bit just so he can feel the renewed flare of pain on his scalp as John’s grip on his hair hardens.

John gives his hair an extra tug and then the hand on his chest to rest on the fabric just below the open vee of his shirt.

His body is still flooded with stress hormones after the... unsettling experience minutes earlier, not to mention the even more unsettling discussion that followed, and there’s a restless feeling in his bones that makes him want to pace and move his body, disallowing the unease to settle to deep.

At times, he can physically walk or shake it off. Not now, though, because John’s crowding his space, holding him there, and John’s hand on his chest is…

...oh.

A sharp, scurrying pain hits his sternum, and Sherlock gasps as he jolts, his body struggling to get away from the bright-hot sensation.

Somewhere in his mind - the mind Sherlock’s rapidly losing more and more control of - he registers the pressure against his legs as John moves in closer in response to Sherlock’s instinctive attempts to fend himself against the pain. Looming over him and immobilising Sherlock further, John continues to rub his knuckles against his breastbone.
John, Sherlock realises, is testing his pain reaction; performing a sternal rub as if Sherlock was an unresponsive patient whose level of consciousness he needed to assess.

‘Unresponsive’ is hardly the word Sherlock would use to describe his own current state.

The knuckles on Sherlock’s sternum alternates in pressure, allowing Sherlock brief respite in-between the overwhelming sensations that scourge through his body with every turn and twist of John’s hand. A few deeper breaths and a partial, quick unclenching of muscles before it surges through him again and it’s too much, too intense and Sherlock won’t be able to withhold a more vocal response much longer.

Breathing through the pain, Sherlock manages second by second, desperately trying to hold back any cry that threatens to escape him.

It’s one thing to ask John to hurt and control him.

It’s a whole other matter to let John see just how it hurts, or allowing himself to give up even a bit of his self-control.

Sherlock’s already lost that control once today. He’s not about to lose it twice within minutes.

Safewording would be preferable, if it came to that.

When John once again eases the pressure of his knuckles of Sherlock’s breastbone, Sherlock feels himself sag down further against the table, his arms aching from the position and pain radiating from where his elbows support his weight against the hard table.

John doesn’t remove his hand fully, but as Sherlock’s muscles shivers and shake under the strain of holding himself up, he allows his knuckles to only brush against Sherlock’s chest, a ghost of the pain stimulus Sherlock’s just endured.

For a few seconds, they stay like that. Then John’s grip on Sherlock’s hair shifts until Sherlock’s spine is no longer forced to arch backwards to accommodate, and Sherlock allows himself to fully slump onto the table.

He’s shivering, he realises.

It’s a physiological response, nothing more, nothing less. A combination of lactic acid, hyperventilation and tachycardia, all due to the strain on his muscles and his body’s autonomic response to pain.

His eyes fall half open, but his vision is unfocused and he feels rather than sees John come closer, until John’s supporting himself on his right elbow, his left hand still fisted in Sherlock’s curls.

A few breaths go by before John tugs at Sherlock’s hair, causing him to shut his eyes again, interrupting his attempts to get his breathing back under control.

The pain subsides once again, and it takes a second for Sherlock to realise that John is talking, his mouth only inches away from Sherlock’s ear.

“So this is why you keep your hair so long. I’ve always wondered.”

There’s a smile in John’s voice, and Sherlock thinks it’s meant to be both teasing and suggestive, but those things are never quite easy for him to tell without any visual input.

“With you, there’s always a reason.”
Sherlock blinks his eyes open, but the ceiling above him is just as bland and inexpressive as ever, and so he lets them drift shut again, finding it easier to focus on John’s voice without the light bleeding into his awareness.

“I just never considered this particular reason.”

It’s so easy to overlook things, Sherlock knows. To fail to take things into account when considering the reasons behind a certain phenomenon.

He’s done so himself.

“At least not until I saw the effects of you being beaten, very literally ‘beaten’, by Ms Adler, that is.”

John snickers slightly, and Sherlock suddenly needs very much to see him, to observe his face in order to be able to accurately interpret the situation and the words.

He starts to turn his head towards John, but before he’s even gotten John into his field of view, another sharp tug on his hair prevents him from doing so.

“You’re not the only one who can pick up on things, you know,” John says, the intent behind his words fairly obvious.

And that’s what Sherlock’s missed.

It’s so blindingly obvious.

*Intent.*

While the factors he’s previously taken into account - how the pain is inflicted, its intensity and whether or not it’s self-administered - are certainly valid, he’s failed to reckon the effect of such a raw, human factor as the intent behind the infliction of pain.

When he does it to himself, the intent is unambiguous. With John, nothing ever is.

Sherlock feels the heat radiating from John, but there’s an inch or so between them, and he can’t turn to look at John, knowing John will not let him. John wants to observe, and not to be observed.

The stimulating of nocioreceptors and altering of brain chemistry remains the end goal, but the process has been enhanced by the addition of something that is not as clear cut as Sherlock first had thought.

John’s intent.

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