Summary

After surviving the fall, Will finds he has far fewer hesitations about joining Hannibal than he would have guessed. Character death, but not Will or Hannibal.

Notes

It's been a long time since I wrote any kind of fanfiction, but I recently (finally) got around to binge watching this series and I couldn't help myself. Legal disclaimer - I own nothing and am not making money off of copyrighted work. Hope someone out there enjoys this as much
as I'm enjoying writing it!
Don't you know I care
Don't you know that I'll be there
As soft, as wide as air
Climb to the stars
Shine high up there

And fall into your stare
With all the colors I can wear
I'd touch you if I dare
And there'll be angels everywhere

And when our body is bare
And everything is soft and clear
As close as we can bear
And all our love goes everywhere

And I know I could be lost
And always too soon it's over
But there's everything to feel
And there's everything to discover

-Everywhere, Cranes

before

“Going my way?” he had asked, and Will had to admit he wanted to. Or, he had to admit he couldn’t think of enough reasons not to anymore. He knows he used to have several Very Good ones, rational reasons not to purposely forget his phone in the tumbled over transfer van, not to step over the body
Hannibal shoves out to make room for him, not to slide into the blood-soaked bucket seat of a stolen cop car. Maybe he does worry too much, but right now, this close to the edge - of the cliff, of the sea, of whatever this is with Hannibal finally being over in a burst of red - this close to so many edges, Will’s mind is blurring, finding it more difficult to hold onto those worries. Those reasons not to climb into a stolen police vehicle with the Chesapeake Ripper.

“A change of clothes, I think, before dinner,” Hannibal smiles at him benignly, and below them the Atlantic roars. “I’ve grown rather tired of this outfit over the past three years.” He plucks at the sleeves of the white jumpsuit with an amused little smirk. “You have a wardrobe here, as well, if you would like to change. I’m afraid the poor officer’s remains have stained your clothes.”

“I have a wardrobe here.” It isn’t a question, is almost sarcasm, harsh, amused.

The older man’s smile never wavers. “I took the liberty of procuring a few pieces I believed fit your taste at the time. It has been some years since, and I admit that some of them may have been bought more for my benefit than for yours, but they are blood free.” His smile widens, eyes bright. “So far.”

It doesn’t truly surprise Will to learn that Hannibal has a room for him in the beach house, complete with a closet containing more than “a few pieces” and a bottle of aftershave that doesn’t have a boat on it. It should surprise him, he reminds himself, this isn’t normal. Keep a hold of yourself, he repeats within his mind, but the voice is far away, muffled, unclear, like someone speaking underwater. Every moment of cogent thought is a triumph.

The room is furnished with a large bed, a desk and chair, an arm chair by the floor to ceiling window. There is a dog bed at the foot of the bed, and Will makes a strangled noise deep in his throat, not sure himself if it connotes heartache or revulsion. Perhaps it is both, or neither, or one in this world and one in another. Will’s worlds are overlapping. Everything that can possibly be, has to be. This has to end well, and it has to end badly, and Will is overcome imagining the many endings but unable to follow one thread of imagination to conclusion. He rifles through the closet Hannibal has prepared for him. There are a great deal more suits than he would have selected for himself, and no flannel, but there are also plenty of inoffensive button downs - compromise items, his inner voice says, from far, far away - and Will finds something to wear easily. He doesn’t feel like a doll, like a doll in a dollhouse, and the thought is ridiculous.

When he’s changed, Will splashes his face with cold water from the bathroom tap. It doesn’t do a lot to clear his mind, but it feels good. He dries his face on one of the impossibly plush towels and heads for the living room. The sun is setting quickly. Outside the expansive windows the sky is turning pink and purple as a fresh wound. Will finds Hannibal, who, having shed prison attire the way a snake sheds skin, appears fresher and younger in a grey sweater and slacks.

“Nice view,” Will understates.
Hannibal turns from contemplating the bruised sky, a smile blossoming on his face at the sight of Will wearing the clothes he’s picked for him. *Of course, the sight of his control over you is the view he prefers,* that drowning voice within Will intones. “I am happy to share it with you, at last,” Hannibal says, his voice uncharacteristically soft for the moment. “I’d hoped to bring you here, years ago. I often imagined the conversations we would have here, how they would span from sunset to sunrise. Sadly, I fear we will not have long to enjoy the view; the sun sets quickly here, and it is unlikely we will be here to see the sunrise.”

“And what makes you say that?”

“Quite simply,” Hannibal replies, taking a step towards him. Will resists the urge to step backwards. “Either you will watch the Red Dragon kill me, maybe even help him with the task, as I’m certain Jack and Alana have encouraged you to do, or you will find yourself unable to follow through with the plan you and Uncle Jack have put into place, and you will return me to the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane and our beloved Dr. Bloom’s care. Where you’ll always know where to find me.” Hannibal smiles, a hint of melancholy in his voice. "I think this time you’ll visit more often, don't you?" He is close enough now to smell, and Will scents him on his next shaky inhalation, a clean, sharp smell of quarantine and captivity, and beneath that, very faintly, the dark, hot aroma of night blooming orchids. “Haven’t you thought ahead, Will? What view do you imagine waking up to?”

His voice is unsteady when he answers. “You’re assuming I imagine waking up again.”

Hannibal’s smile softens. “Do you imagine the Red Dragon will kill you when he’s done with me? Or is it me you are afraid of?”

“I told you once,” Will whispers, “I doubt that either of us could survive separation.” He looks down, unable to meet those flashing eyes any longer. “I’m not sure I survived it last time.”

“Do you feel you’ve been living half a life these past three years, Will? A marriage and a child were not enough to assure you of your own survival?” There’s no malice, only amusement in his voice when he says, “You could have visited sooner, if you missed me so much.”

Will lets his eyes flit back up to Hannibal’s again, and he’s lost, immediately lost. He should have known he would be; it has always been like this. Why should things be any different now? There is amusement in that gaze, but there is pain, too, and longing, and something Will might term regret if he did not know better. It takes an effort to speak his next words, and they are scarcely audible when he does. “I *hoped* that they would be enough.”
Hannibal steps closer, and Will feels the darkening room spin. “There are other ways forward, Will, other paths you might take. Perhaps you’ve already considered some of them.” Hannibal’s presence is overwhelming, suddenly, like a black hole, drawing Will closer and radiating darkness and thrumming with energy. Just standing this close is making Will’s head spin. It feels like Hannibal is growing, widening, taking up too much space in the room, like he’s bigger than his physical body and there’s no room left over for Will. “You did not survive separation, because you did not experience it.” His fingers spread over the breast pocket of Will’s white dress shirt. Will’s heart beats into his palm, trapped, held. “My hand is always on your heart.”

Later he places his cheek against Hannibal’s breast, hears the heart beating there, slow and regular as a clock as they tip into the sea.

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after

Strong winds batter the sleek black car as it whips its way up the winding mountain road. It is 9am, bright but cold in the West Virginia morning. In the distance, grey clouds augur coming rain. The car turns off the main road, onto a side road so unused and inconspicuous it is barely visible amongst the trees unless one knows exactly where to look. The car moves quickly through the foliage, traversing the three mile driveway before coming to an abrupt halt in front of the massive lodge hidden within the dense wood.

Jack Crawford steps out of the car and removes his sunglasses, pinching the bridge of his nose to ease a growing headache. He’s been on the move since 4pm the previous evening, and hasn’t slept more than a few stolen minutes at a time in almost 48 hours. When the man serving as both butler and bodyguard greets him at the front door and asks if he wants anything after his journey, Jack says, “Coffee, and a glass of water with an Alka Seltzer.”

“No coffee and Alka Seltzer,” Alana’s voice chimes from the stairway, and Jack steps further into the foyer, removing his hat respectfully as his turns to face her. “Winning combination. What are you doing here, Jack? Is this an emergency, because I thought my request for privacy was clear.”

“I’m not sure what this is,” Jack replies, tone a little harsher than he’d intended it. He takes a breath, reminds himself why she’s out here, why she made him memorize the directions instead of writing them, why she made him promise only to contact her in cases of extreme importance. He speaks again, more gently now, “I thought you would want to know this without delay. I came here as soon as I could be sure there was no one following.”
“Can you be sure?” She lifts a graceful eyebrow. “What’s happened?”

“We’re not sure. They…disappeared.”

“I’m going to need you to be a little less vague about the details, Jack,” Alana says smoothly, accepting a cut glass tumbler of scotch from the guard, who has returned with their drinks on a tray. “My family’s lives are at stake.”

“And your own life,” Jack reminds.

“And that,” Alana agrees, in a voice that makes it clear that she never forgets. “Stop making me ask what’s happened.”

“Dolarhyde intercepted the transfer vehicles. Before we could stage the breakout, he staged one of his own. Overturned the transport, drove off in a police vehicle. We found no survivors. We didn’t find Lecter. Or Will.” Jack drops both white tablets into his glass, waits a moment, then knocks it back in one gulp and replaces the empty glass on the tray. He reaches for his coffee. “The vehicle Dolarhyde stole contained a police tracking device. We were able to monitor his movement. I told them not to close in on him right away. I thought,” Jack sips his coffee. “I thought he might lead us to Will.”

“And did he?” Alana asks, voice low.

“Yes and no. He switched the tracking device off, for a few hours, and then, for some reason, switched it back on just after dark. By then he was miles away, out by the ocean. We assembled a SWAT team and sent them in pursuit.

“When they arrived Dolarhyde was already dead. They found him gutted, with a ragged wound on his neck that Z reckons as a human bite mark. Looks like he was attacked by two people at once. The whole place was covered in blood. Three different types, and only one matches dragon blood.”

“I think I’m getting the picture here,” Alana interrupts. “They worked together. Will’s betrayed you. Again.”
“That’s where things get tricky,” Jack replies. “If they’d fled together, we’d have found blood elsewhere in the house. The amount we found in the backyard, there’s no way they could have left without leaving us some kind of trail. But apart from a splatter in the living room from an apparent gunshot that also broke the windows, the blood bath is located entirely in the backyard. It stretches right up to the cliffside. We think,” Jack swallows, “we think they jumped. Or fell fighting.”

There’s a long silence between them, as the reality of the situation unfolds within Alana’s mind. She feels hope, fear, confusion, and a surprising stab of sorrow she did not guess herself still capable of. At last, she says, “You said they disappeared.”

“We’ve been unable to find their bodies,” Jack replies, swallowing the last of his coffee. “We’re still looking. We have helicopters searching along the cliffside, and a team combing the beach.”

Alana considers this for a moment, then walks to the bar and pours herself another drink. “Hannibal could never let Will go,” her voice is low. “He turned himself in because he thought Will wouldn’t chase him. If he’d kept running I think he would have finally been surprised; Will would have followed him before long. He wouldn’t have been able to help himself. Tell me, Jack, do you think you’ll find their bodies?”

“I’m not sure there are any bodies to find.”

Alana takes a long drink. “Neither am I.” She crosses the room to stare out the window at the rain that’s begun to fall, bringing pine needles with it to the earth. “Thank you for coming, Jack. Please, don’t visit again,” she turns, face drawn. Her eyes focus on the quiet figure sitting at the top of the stairs, eyes wide, child clutched to her chest. “Unless it is absolutely necessary.”

“Don’t come here unless I’m coming to the rescue, you mean,” Jack says. “It’s possible we won’t find bodies because there’s just nothing left of them to find, Alana. The impact, plus their injuries, would almost definitely have rendered them unconscious, at least temporarily. It doesn’t take long for those waves to pulverize a body against the rocks.”

Alana fixes him with a cold stare. Jack can’t help but think of one of their first meetings, when she’d warned him - begged him - not to let Will get too close. It is a different voice than the one he remembers, when she finally speaks again: “Is that what you really believe? Or are you only hoping you’ve lost him to the sea, instead of to Hannibal?”

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When Frederick Chilton awakens he experiences the best moment of his day. It is a moment that comes only ever just upon waking - a moment that shortens with each experience, so that he fears the morning when he will wake without it. For that first brief and blessed instant as his brain returns to consciousness, Frederick forgets what’s been done to him.

The doctors have deemed his recovery, such as it is, miraculous. Frederick has heard that exact description before, too often to find any solace in it this time. He does not feel recovered. He feels flayed.

“Mr. Chilton?”

Frederick swivels his eyes to the orderly standing in the doorway. “Doctor,” he corrects.

“Oh, I’m not a doctor,” the idiot says. “There’s someone here to see you.”

Frederick raises what used to be an eyebrow. He’d had a few visitors in the first days after he came blazing like a comet into the parking garage, but not too many came back for a second look. Seeing Frederick was not a wholesome or popular experience.

He is all the more surprised to see who comes walking through the door a moment later. “Miss Lounds,” Frederick greets. “What a pleasant surprise.”

“I’m glad you feel that way, Dr. Chilton,” the reporter smiles. “I’m sorry, for what’s happened to you.”

“For my accident, Miss Lounds? That’s what one of the surgeons called it. An accident. Like falling down the stairs or being rear ended.”

“Hannibal is an accident,” Freddie replies succinctly.

“Hannibal didn’t do this. Will Graham did.” Frederick can still feel the weight of that hand on his shoulder. On what used to be his shoulder.

“I thought the Red Dragon did this.” It’s not quite a question, but Frederick answers anyway.
“Who do you think gave him the idea? I was set up. Will Graham knew exactly what he was doing. He was curious to see what would happen.” Frederick cannot keep the disgust out of his voice. He pauses to sip from the straw hovering a few inches from his mouth. His throat gets dry so easily; the doctors said he’d inhaled the fire till it scorched his esophagus. “Believe me, Miss Lounds, this is Will Graham’s design.”

“I don’t suppose anyone has told you, yet,” Freddie says, smoothing an imaginary crease from her blazer, “that Will Graham and Hannibal Lecter vanished last night, leaving a blood soaked beach house for the FBI to find?”

Frederick doesn’t bother asking for her source. As preposterous as Freddie Lounds’ little publication is, he has to admit that, when it comes to Tattlecrime leads, Freddie’s intel is usually accurate. He suddenly feels colder than he has since the accident.

Through his fear, Frederick realizes the reporter is still speaking. “The FBI will want to tell its version of this story,” Freddie is saying. “One in which Will Graham is a hero, or a victim. It’s up to the people who know better, who’ve suffered at their hands and because of the callousness, to make sure that’s not the only story being told.”

“People like us,” Frederick says.

Freddie smiles, the first smile Frederick has seen in weeks. It is a luminous, dazzling beacon as she reaches into her purse and extracts a dictaphone.

“Exactly.”

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The fire is low, crackling coals, a red glow within the iron stove. A child’s pale hand tosses a bundle of sticks into the flicker, and flames rise up, twisting with fragrant smoke. Beyond the sound of the fire devouring its fuel, Will can hear the gentle patter of rain, and although he cannot turn his head, he senses the vastness of the room at his back like a draft. The smoke curls like incense, and his nostrils flare at the aroma of forest and light.

“Apple,” a little voice asserts, somewhere out of sight. It is a child’s voice, a girl’s he thinks, accented and familiar.
“Guess again.”

Will hears a little sigh from the girl. A pause. “Hickory.”

“There are holes in the floor of the mind,” Hannibal says, the whisper warm against Will’s ear, though he cannot turn to face it. Lips brush the shell of his ear, breath hot, breathing hot words that sink into his skull. “All chambers are not lovely, light, and high.”

And then Will can turn his head, and instead of Hannibal he sees a girl kneeling by the fire - an expressionless little preteen with a black bob and a blindfold, and a certain firmness that he recognizes as Chiyoh’s. And to her right, a boy, Wally’s age, Will thinks, whose maroon eyes, drilling into Will with intense curiosity, can only be Hannibal’s.

Will blinks, startled to meet those scrutinizing eyes in so young a face. He searches for anywhere else to look. There is a window behind the boy, Hannibal, and through it Will can see Wolf Trap, covered in snow. Chiyoh and Hannibal appear again, in more familiar visage, standing amongst the trees.

“Between iron and silver,” Hannibal is saying to her. Will feels as if he has crept closer to the window, although he is certain he has not moved - cannot move. “Will you watch over me?”

“I will,” Chiyoh’s voice is only a whisper, as the snow laden trees around her begin to fade, and then she fades, too, and Will is left looking back at those singular red eyes, staring out of a face that darkens like night falling suddenly, like falling suddenly into a pool of ink, like pools of blood suddenly illuminated by moonlight.

“Will you watch over me? Will.”

“Will . . . Will?”

Will is certain he is underwater, but Hannibal’s voice is clear, and lacks the dreamlike quality it had a moment ago, coming out of that angular darkness. Will turns his head and vomits water through his sudden coughing, and knows that he is on something like land.
“Hand me those blankets. Will, do you hear me?”

Will grunts, coughs again, and realizes his entire body is shaking violently. He feels utterly wretched. His lungs burn. His esophagus feels raw and scraped. His limbs ache. His eyes sting when he opens them, pricked by the salt crystals drying in his lashes. The knife wound in his side throbs, red hot beneath the frigid water that has, thankfully, slowed his blood flow. He blinks rapidly, shakes his head to dislodge the water in his ears, and regrets the motion immediately as pain shoots through his jaw.

He’s never felt so alive.

Hannibal is in front of him, accepting coarse wool blankets from Chiyoh’s dark-gloved hands. All Will can see of her is those hands, two dark shapes reaching out of the darkness. This truly is the black of night, Will thinks nonsensically, shivering. He can see Hannibal, though, clearly illumined by the light of the full moon. He looks to be faring little better than Will - he’s just as soaked, just as blanched by cold. Will’s eyes dart to the spot below Hannibal’s ribs, where his shirt is torn and stained red.

Hannibal wraps the blankets around his shoulders, and Will can feel him rubbing warmth back into his arms, pressing hard to still his shivering. Gradually, it subsides, though Will still feels the cold clinging to him like a shroud. He grits his teeth to stop the chattering that ricochets like a bullet around his mouth. The wound in his cheek throbs, oozing blood slowed to sludge by the freezing water.

Will turns to his good side, and vomits onto the heaving deck of the sailboat a second time. Cold water rushes out of him. His mouth tastes of brine. Will retches and spits bile, with only a vague awareness of the hand stroking his back through the heavy blankets. A shudder breathes through him, and he tries to take stock of the situation. It is night, still. He is on a boat. Hannibal is here, and Chiyoh. He is alive. And Hannibal, Hannibal is alive, and they’re still free, and -

“Where are we?” his voice is a raspy whisper, a whistle of air through his torn cheek. “Hannibal-”

“On a boat in the Atlantic, a mile off shore,” Hannibal answers, hand still petting Will’s back. “You swam most of the way.”

Will closes his eyes and focuses on breathing. He feels the weariness in his limbs and remembers kicking relentlessly, one arm under Hannibal’s, Hannibal’s voice in his ear telling him to swim forward, towards nothing he can see, into the dark swells.
Another fit of coughing hits him, and when it's over, Will laughs brokenly into the wooden deck. “We made it.”

Hannibal pulls him to his feet, leaning into him, equally unsteady on the swaying deck. “It would seem that we, at least, are not to be lost to the roiling Atlantic,” the older man says in a voice that does not betray the pain Will’s certain he must feel. “Let’s get below deck.”

The boat sways, and Will can feel the hum of a motor working as he follows Hannibal down into the cabin. “Do we have a destination?”

“At the moment, Chiyoh is simply taking us someplace we’ll be unlikely to attract attention,” Hannibal answers. He leads them past the kitchenette and dining area, into the mid-cabin sleeping quarters. The wood-paneled walls slope towards each other, so the room gets progressively narrower. There’s a door in the far wall, to an en suite bathroom, Will guesses. It must be truly tiny. Set into either side of the wall is a narrow bed, sheets turned down with military neatness. Will sways on his feet in a way that has nothing to do with the soft swells of the night sea, and Hannibal pushes him down to sit on one of the low twin beds, before before vanishing into what Will has assumed is the adjoining bathroom. He is only out of sight for a minute or two, and realistically Will knows there is no means of escape through a sailboat’s lavatory, but for those minutes Will feels a stab of anxiety which, coupled with the blood loss and the lingering chill of the Atlantic ocean, has him dizzy and faint. He’s thankful he’s no longer standing; he’s certain he would fall.

When Hannibal returns a moment later with the first aid kit, Will sits silently and allows the doctor to tend to his injuries. His cheek hurts the worst. Hannibal saves it for last, pulling his shirt up over his head to patch the cut in his shoulder first. His hands move inquisitively over Will’s chest, arms and legs, checking for broken bones but finding only bruises and shallow cuts, which he treats with antiseptic, applying bandages with quick, efficient fingers. The little sound he makes tells Will there’s no serious damage, despite the pain that only intensifies the more his body thaws. Hannibal finally makes it to his cheek, and holds his chin in place with one hand so he can prod at the gash in Will’s face with the other. Will releases a noisy breath through his nose and the hands retreat. It’s dark in the cabin, the only light a dying bulb in an unshaded lamp. Will thinks the edges of his vision may be getting even darker.

“I’m going to need to reach inside your mouth, Will,” Hannibal tells him, sounding far away. “Will, are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” Will rasps. “Shouldn’t you take care of yourself?”

“I saw to my injuries in the bathroom. The bullet took some flesh, but it did not pierce anything
vital.” Oh. Apparently he was gone more than a minute or two. Hannibal lowers his face to peer into Will’s eyes. “Your pupils are dilated. Can you still see?”

“IT’s getting darker,” Will admits.

Hannibal stands and walks back towards the kitchenette. Will follows, spurred by a second sudden wave of anxiety. He has to brace himself against the walls to stay upright; room is blurred and spinning around him, but he knows with piercing clarity that he cannot bear to let Hannibal out of his sight. Not yet. Clinging to the doorframe, he finds Hannibal turning towards him from the small refrigerator. “You shouldn’t try to stand.”

“Stay where I can see you.” He knows it must sound pathetic and crazy, but he’s too worn to care. Hannibal just nods, leads him back into the sleeping quarters to his seat on one of the twin beds, and presses a carafe of orange juice into his hands.

The juice stings the inside of his mouth, but Will drinks half of it anyway in one long swig. The citric acid burns his salt-stung throat. Will doesn’t care about the pain, though. It’s tolerable. Or maybe he’s going into shock. He takes another, smaller slug of juice. “Open your mouth,” Hannibal says once he’s swallowed, and Will obeys, closing his eyes against the spreading dark. He feels Hannibal’s fingers pushing against the inside of his cheek, feeling at the edges of the cut with firm but gentle precision. Will fights back a shiver at the intrusive touch. For a moment he envisions snapping his teeth shut, imagines hot blood filling his mouth and soothing the sting in his throat, wonders if he has the strength to bite through bone.

Will remembers, as Hannibal stitches his cheek, the way the knife slid through his face, a sharp kiss, before his hand could commit to grasping his gun. The knife had surprised him, but what surprised him more than the shock of pain was the Red Dragon’s strength. He had known Dolarhyde was physically powerful, more than capable of following through on his promise to sever Will’s spine with his bare hands, but knowing and experiencing were vastly different. Will recalls the fleeting panic he’d experienced at the realization of Dolarhyde’s capabilities, the jolt of fear as he, hooked and dangling like a trout, kicked uselessly at the air. The strength of the Dragon had been astonishing.

So, too, had his own strength.

“Done,” Hannibal murmurs, and Will releases his breath, suddenly aware he’s been holding it. What strength he had seems vanished now, his mind and body heavy with exhaustion. He lets the other man press him back to lie on the bed, feels the blankets pulled up around him, scratching at his bare chest. He keeps his eyes open in small heavy slits, watches as Hannibal moves the medical equipment onto the bedside table and rises. Will’s body tenses as Hannibal walks towards the door, but he stops, one hand on the doorframe, seeming to reconsider, before turning back and climbing
into the twin bed on the other side of the mid-cabin. Will lets his eyes close, lets a last rasping relieved breath escape his gritted teeth, before sinking into unconsciousness.

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“Something you need to see.”

A little black rectangle thuds onto his desk, and Jack fixes his red rimmed eyes on Zeller. The younger man frowns. “Jesus, Jack, when’s the last time you got any sleep?”

Jack dismisses the question with one of his own. “What is this?”

“VHS tape found at the crime scene,” Z answers. “There was a camcorder, huge, clunky old machine, set up on the bar, pointed out the busted window. I thought you’d want to see this before anyone else got a hold of it.”

“You’ve seen it?”

“I - yeah,” Zeller shuffles, pulling a flash drive from his pocket. “Just me, though. I copied it onto this, to make it easier. This is the only copy.”

Jack takes the flash drive with fingers that feel too big and heavy to operate correctly. Sleep is in his near future, but he owes it to Will not to give in to weakness yet. If there’s any hope of saving his protege, it’s stronger now than it will be in a day or even a few hours. He plugs the flash into his laptop and clicks the icon that pops up. There’s just one file, and he selects it after the briefest hesitation. Zeller coughs, shifts his weight, remains standing where he can’t see what only he has viewed already.

The video opens on Hannibal, crumpled against the bar, one hand cupping what looks like a gunshot wound in his side. The camera is steady, and from the angle Jack thinks it must be resting on the ground. Hannibal is the only person in the frame, and he’s saying something, his eyes on someone behind the camera and to the right. There’s no sound, but Jack can see the man’s chest rising and falling rapidly, his eyes flickering between something directly behind the camera and something slightly to the right. On screen, Hannibal’s eyes widen, as if in surprise. Jack’s not sure he’s ever seen Hannibal surprised before. The man on screen turns his face, intently watching something that is happening behind the camcorder.
Then he rises, with more ease than Jack would have predicted considering the blood weeping through his shirt, and lifts the camera. The room spins for a second, then stabilizes again. A new angle, as Hannibal places the camera on the bar, pointing it towards the darkness beyond the shattered window. Jack can see movement beyond the broken glass, and then Hannibal’s face fills the screen, his lips curled in a crooked smile. Jack jerks backwards in surprise, and Hannibal’s mouth moves, silent but easy to read.

“Hello, Jack.”

Jack can feel his molars grinding so hard he’s certain they’ll crack.

“I edited the video,” Z says softly, “so you’ll be able to see better through the dark. It’s not my area of expertise, but…”

“I’ve seen enough,” Jack answers, without moving his eyes from the screen. Hannibal is staggering through the window, and Jack can see Dolarhyde roaring soundlessly over Will’s kneeling form. Their battle is brief. Dolarhyde is strong, but it’s obvious he doesn’t stand a chance once Hannibal enters the fray. Jack watches, mouth dry. Their movements are so coordinated it’s nearly impossible to believe they aren’t planned out, choreographed and practiced. Preordained, Jack thinks deliriously. He’s beginning to question how well he knows Will, has ever known him, and whether the younger man needs saving at all. Jack pushes these traitorous thoughts to the back of his mind the moment they appear. He put Will in this situation; he can get him out again.

The video is short, not even five minutes, and difficult to make out despite Z’s editing tricks. Still, Jack sees the embrace, and the drop off the edge of the cliff, their bodies disappearing mere moments before the scene is illuminated by the SWAT team, wielding flashlights and guns as they sweep the area for survivors and find none. He sees himself rushing into the frame, and he feels like he’s been watching much longer than four and a half minutes.

It’s quiet as he watches the mute home video, and quiet after the video ends. On the other side of the desk, Zeller stands, watching his shoes and waiting.

“These are the only copies.”

Zeller nods.

“Let’s keep it that way. And let’s keep these out of the evidence locker for now.” Jack rises. His
body is stiff, his eyes dry. He looks down at his desk, at the black rectangle he’s not sure how to interpret. It’s been a long time since he slept. “I’m going home, Brian,” he says. His voice sounds like it’s a hundred years old. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

Zeller nods again. “I’m sorry.”

Not as sorry as I am, Jack thinks, but he just says, “Thank you.”

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Freddie Lounds’ pulls up to the beach house at a quarter past four in the morning. The scene is dark, and Freddie fishes a diminutive flashlight out of her glove box. There are no other car parked outside the house. Freddie bypasses the police-taped front door to walk around back, where, after photographing the mess she finds, it is easy enough to crawl beneath the tarpaulin covering the broken window and into the still house.

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At the top of the cliff, Will is gripping Hannibal so hard his fingers ache. Every part of him aches, every bone, every inch of skin, even his heart. His breath comes faster and faster, and he swallows the sob welling in his throat.

“It’s beautiful.”

Hannibal’s body is firm and human against him, no demon, no beast, just warmth and solidity. It seems strange, in all this time, to never have embraced one another before. They’ve been so close he’s forgotten who is who at times, has seen his own face staring back at him, has heard Hannibal’s voice in his mouth and felt the presence of the other man’s mind like a brand on his own, but they’ve never cuddled. It’s almost a bigger shock than being gutted. It feels like the snap of a taut rubber band. Years of tension break abruptly, like a teacup shattering or a body breaking. And by embracing Hannibal, Will knows, he is choosing at last to embrace himself, to acknowledge and accept those parts of himself he’s so long denied. He could stand like this, thinking this way, for a long time. But then.

The sound of the helicopter, faint over the roar of the sea, and the flash of light reflecting on dimmed headlights. His face pressed against Hannibal’s chest, Will can see the SWAT van jerking to a stop beside their stole police car.
Now he has no trouble imagining what will happen. Hannibal will kneel, like he did on that night three years ago, when Will had walked away, unable or unwilling to watch, disgusted with Hannibal and Jack and with himself, most of all. This time he will watch. Hannibal will allow himself to be led away, back to his cage, where Will can always find him but never touch him. Jack will congratulate him, tell him to go home to Molly, knowing full well he won’t be able to go home. He won’t ask why Will didn’t stick to the plan, and if he happens to see this embrace he’ll pretend he only believes it is Will attempting to apprehend Hannibal and keep him for escaping. Alana won’t mention the plan either, and they’ll all quietly agree to pretend that Will hasn’t crossed any lines, that everything he did was above board, a dangerous and heroic ploy to bring down a violent killer. And in time, there will be another monster like the Dragon, and Will will return, either on his own or because Jack comes for him, and he won’t be able to resist. He’ll spend his life staring through glass, speaking in riddles, stepping on his own throat. They’ll both be in prison, then.

Will has no intention of seeing either of them imprisoned a second time. And he recognizes the sound when the bolt of his fate slides home.

* * * * * * *

Hannibal is not in the room when Will wakes up. Will forces himself up, rolls his shoulder experimentally and then winces in pain. That anxious feeling is back, and Will heads for the door, in search of Hannibal. He’s impatient with his own concern; hadn’t he once professed not to want to know where Hannibal was, or what he was doing, to have no connection whatsoever to the man who’s been omnipresent in his mind for the past five years? Now it seems he can hardly stand to be one room apart. He wishes he had the decency to feel ashamed about it.

He doesn’t have to hunt for long. It’s not a big boat, Will would guess thirty feet at most. He finds Hannibal sitting at the table in the little kitchen and dining area, clean and relaxed and reading a book that looks like it was pillaged from a monastery. Will bets it’s handwritten in some creaky old font, in a language no one’s spoken for a thousand years but that Hannibal undoubtably knows how to speak. It figures that their rescue boat comes equipped with a medieval library. Hannibal looks up in greeting.

“Good morning, Will. There is coffee, if you’d like.”

Will pours himself a mug. He feels steadier than he did last night. His vision has cleared, too. But the lightheaded fainting feeling he’s had since going behind the veil is still there. The elation. The power. Will sits across from Hannibal, and wonders if his nerves will ever stop humming with electricity. He wonders how much longer his body can stand it. His hand on the mug shakes, barely.
“How are you feeling?” Hannibal asks.

Will snorts a laugh, because it’s such an innocuous question - the kind that gets asked a million times in a lifetime - but the way he’s feeling he can’t even begin to describe. “I feel high. I feel like my brain is on fire again.”

“Do you feel powerful?”

Will nods. “Yes. Oh, yes.”

Hannibal smiles. “I am happy you chose a different path for us, Will.”

Will laughs again, feeling it in his stitched up cheek. He must look like Frankenstein’s monster, and in a way he supposes he is. “I don’t know where this path is leading. I keep expecting you to disappear.”

“I assure you, I have no intention of leaving, Will. I’ve waited too long for this not to see it out,” Hannibal’s dark eyes sparkle redly as he speaks. His voice is steady and calm, but there’s an intensity to his words that Will can feel like a physical caress. “Your path leads wherever you choose it to. Tell me, do you finally know what it is you want?”

Will nods, once. “Revenge,” he breathes. “And… this power. This feeling, this aliveness.” He is practically hissing, unable to contain the words or the desire they signify. “I want this.”

Hannibal exposes his crooked teeth in one of his rare grins. He’s practically beaming. He reaches across the narrow table, and places his hands over Will’s where they clasp the coffee mug. Will’s skin prickles with heat. “We will take your revenges, and let the world tremble to know we walk together at last,” Hannibal promises, voice low, and Will feels the words in his blood and bones more than he hears them with his ears.

All his nerves sing. Will is on fire at a cellular level. He feels reborn, a new being born of blood and salt and moonlight. He swallows, tensing and relaxing his jaw, holding Hannibal’s gaze for impossible long moments. The world will tremble, and he trembles with it, or perhaps it’s a vibration of energy, a blood buzz building in his sinews and marrow. Perhaps it is not fear and anxiety humming within him, but excitement and appetite. The path they’ll take will be of his design.
And Will knows just where to begin.
Pandora

Chapter Summary

Will shares some post-fall goals with Hannibal.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone who has taken the time to leave a comment or kudos; I appreciate it! :) 

I want to take a second up front to say that I borrow lines from the show and Thomas Harris' novels, obviously, and also draw on Aeschylus, Euripides, Shakespeare and a variety of other sources that seem like the fit the general vibe of the show. I considered trying to end note every time a piece of dialogue alluded to another work, because I'm the kind of nerd who would enjoy doing that, but ultimately that just seemed like too much. Maybe at the end I'll make up a list of quotes I drew from or something. For now, the only one I'm going to bother attributing in these notes is this passage from Ecclesiastes, which is quoted on the last page of Red Dragon and which I think just beautifully describes Will:

"And I gave my heart to know wisdom, and to know madness and folly: I perceived that this also is vexation of spirit."

Anyway, hope you like the second chapter. The third one will be up next weekend.

******

Chiyoh maneuvers through the busy street market, dodging dog-walkers, tourists, and families obliviously devouring fresh ice cream, her black canvas tote bulging with fresh produce, jars of preserves, and other sundry items. Cinching her dark jacket tighter around her slender frame, she makes her way towards the butcher, her final stop before heading back to the marina.

On her way to the butcher’s stand she stops, however, unexpectedly arrested by the sight of a glossy picture, printed beneath a headline in garish font. She approaches the newspaper stand, and makes her purchase. She’s known Hannibal long enough to know the kind of thing that amuses him. It is always a good idea to keep him amused, lest he grow bored and go about seeing to his own entertainment.

Smiling softly to herself, Chiyoh continues on her way, unaware of the woman watching her from
behind an elegant pair of tapered tortoise-shell sunglasses. The corners of Bedelia’s mouth twitch and her heart hammers like a bird dashing itself against a gilded cage. But she breathes a slow, heavy breath, and forces herself to be still. What she feels is an amalgam of excitement over the cleverness of her discovery, and fear over what it is she has discovered. Fear is the logical reaction to this situation, she tells herself. But she’s survived this far, and that’s no small feat. She has every intention to carry on surviving.

Bedelia trails at a safe distance, careful to keep to the shadows and behind groups of tourists. She follows Chiyoh towards the marina, and watches from the sidewalk as Chiyoh descends to the dock and winds her way assuredly through the moorings. Undetected, Bedelia allows herself her own small smile.

*****

The shower feels amazing. He’d been so exhausted the night before that he’d fallen asleep in his wet slacks, and woken up crusted with salt. He stepped into the hot shower still half-clothed, allowing the hot water to loosen the uncomfortable fabric until he could peel it off. Will rubs his salt caked hair, letting the water fall over his bruised and weary muscles and form little waterfalls in his curls. There’s a unlabelled glass bottle of shampoo that Will is sure costs a fortune. He pours a generous amount into his hands and works it through his curls, sighing at the feeling, the heat, the smell. Will does his best to lose himself in the myriad sensations; his mind is trying to go in too many directions at once, and he forces himself to focus on what he’s experiencing physically rather than on the clamor in his brain. It’s not hard to do; he’s still experiencing the hypersensitivity he felt the night before, although the edge is starting to dull a little, and he can feel himself floating gently back to normalcy.

Will lets his thoughts flit past, regarding each before letting it pass by, until he finds one he wants to examine more closely. His thought is this: He supposes he has actually finally run away with Hannibal Lecter. Strangely, that thought is less interesting than the one that arises immediately after, which is that he has run away with himself, that running away with Hannibal will allow him - has already allowed him - to experience himself as a whole being at last. He breathes shakily, dipping his head to rinse the suds from his hair.

Even though the rush of hot water over his body feels like it’s giving him new life, Will finds himself hurrying through his wash in the end, anxious to get Hannibal back into his line of vision. He can’t begin to explain the surge of nervousness that swells in him any time the other man is out of his sight for too long, and he’s thankful that Hannibal isn’t making him try. He’s graciously accepted that Will is going to follow him into and out of any room except this one, and their living situation is currently contained enough that it hardly matters, anyway. Will dresses in the clothing he finds on the foot of the bed when he returns to it, towel slung about his waist. Trust Hannibal to always think ahead. He probably has a change of clothes for the two of them in every country on the planet.
Out in the main cabin it’s obvious Chiyoh has been back at some point, though she’s currently absent again. She seems determined to give them as much space as possible; possibly she is afraid of getting between them, unsure where their relationship currently stands. Where does it stand, Will wonders. Hannibal is elated over the ingredients he has spread out over the counter. Will can see his cogs turning as he surveys what Chiyoh has brought them. It’s been three years since he’s been able to indulge in this avocation, Will reminds himself. Of course he would be excited.

“Planning lunch?” Will asks, leaning against the counter.

Hannibal smiles warmly at him. “I find I am overwhelmed with options and ideas. Perhaps I will starve while I stand trying to make up my mind.”

Will snorts. “I, on the other hand, know exactly what I want.”

“Well, Will,” Hannibal’s smile brightens, “I hope you won’t mind my saying, it’s about time.” He selects a few of the wrapped parcels on the counter, arranging them in small piles, then rearranging, completely ignoring the withering look Will shoots him. “What is it about which you are so certain?”

“I want...” Will begins, and then abruptly stops, noticing the paper on the counter for the first time. The Tattler’s usual lurid font spells out the headline: Murder Husbands’ Beach Home Hide Away Discovered! Below is a picture of the blood drenched cliffside, and an inset of both his and Hannibal’s mugshots. Cannibal Consorts take on Tooth Fairy, a dramatic subheading reads. Will flips through the paper to find the rest of the article. He frowns.

“The Federal Bureau of Investigation mishandled justice again this week,” Will reads, “when they sent former FBI Agent and behavioral analysis consultant Will Graham to oversee the transfer of renowned psychiatrist and serial killer Hannibal Lecter from the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane to a Federal Institution in Maryland. Graham helped bring about the capture of Dr. Lecter, alias the Chesapeake Ripper, after a long association between the two that has often been questioned by journalists as well as officers of the law.” He pauses to roll his eyes, continuing his reading with a sigh when Hannibal looks up, looking ridiculously expectant.

“The Bureau has released a formal statement admitting the escape of Lecter, as well as the disappearance of Graham and a police vehicle. It is unclear exactly how the escape was allowed to take place, but what is known is that Lecter, and presumably Graham, were the only ones to walk away alive from the scene of the escape.

“‘Will Graham is alive,’ a source close to the case told this reporter. ‘He is alive because Hannibal Lecter likes him that way. And Dr. Lecter is free because that’s how Will Graham likes him.’
Further evidence that the pair fled together was discovered when the FBI were finally able to track the whereabouts of the stolen police car to a remote house overlooking the Atlantic. The house shows signs of cohabitation,” Will quirks and eyebrow, remembering the room that was so clearly meant to be his, “and police were shocked to discover the body of Francis Dolarhyde, alternatively known as the Tooth Fairy or Great Red Dragon.”

Will carries on reading, deadpan. Freddie manages to heavily insinuate that he masterminded Hannibal’s liberation and brought the armed guard and police escorts down on his own, without ever outright saying it’s true. She’s aided in her work by this mysterious source close to the case. The article ends with an appeal to the FBI to stop protecting their pet psychopath and come clean about the threat to the public he poses.

“Well, that didn’t take long,” he says, tossing the paper back onto the counter.

“The public will be in an uproar,” Hannibal says merrily.

“They’ll be looking for us, even if they half-believe we’re dead.”

“A good time to lay low,” Hannibal suggests.

“I’ve no intention of laying low,” Will growls, and Hannibal, considering a crimson Roma, smiles appreciatively. “We can stay ahead of them. At least until our work is done.”

“And what work is that?” Hannibal asks.

“Judgment,” Will says. “Cleansing. I have unfinished business before we can leave this place behind us. There are accounts to settle,” Will frowns, “debts. There will be killing till the score is paid. And to begin? There’s someone I’ve encountered in the past few years who deserves punishment, someone I’ve regretted sparing for several years.”

“It’s not me, is it?” Hannibal asks playfully.

Will looks down at the counter, unable to quash his smile. “Second guess?”
Hannibal hums. “Clark Ingram.” It shouldn’t surprise Will, anymore, that Hannibal can do this, read his mind like this sometimes. It still does, though. The expression on his face must be all the confirmation Hannibal needs, because he doesn’t wait for a verbal response before asking, “You know where to find him?”

Will nods. He thinks about the creased copy of Ingram’s profile, home address and phone in the upper right, about the amount of times he had touched its folded edges in his wallet, not needing, any longer, to unfold it to read what it said. On nights when Molly fell asleep before him, leaving him to linger, sleepless in a sleeping world, on many nights, Will unfolded it anyway, and thought about the young man who had, as Peter had predicted, fooled all the right people in the end.

“I know his address.”

Hannibal puts down the bottle of wine he’s been pretending to examine. He crosses the kitchenette in two steps, coming to stand beside Will. He’s serious at this moment, the waggish jokes suspended for now. “You know, Will, you’ve never pre-meditated a murder before, not in earnest.”

Will swallows, and forces himself to meet Hannibal’s eyes. “You’re not including yours.”

Hannibal blinks. “Alana once told me she worried a door in your mind had been opened and no one knew if it had shut again. If you open this door, Will, there will be no closing it. How does it feel?”

“Like it did then,” Will says, voice low. “It feels righteous.”

******

Freddie arrives shortly after visiting hours begin, coffee in hand. But none for him. Of course, it’s not like he’d be able to drink it, he reminds himself. She reads him the article, and asks more questions, with her little microphone recording away. Frederick’s grafted skin itches. Her skin is rosy pale, smooth, supple. He envies her.

“So you’d say there’s absolutely no way that Lecter would have killed Will Graham?” Freddie is asking. Frederick forces himself back into the moment.

“That’s right. Hannibal saw Will as a friend, as his only friend. Even when he left him holding his intestines on the kitchen floor, he had no intention of letting Will die. Hannibal has proven time and
again that what he wants Will Graham for, he wants him alive for.”

“Would you describe their relationship as romantic?”

Trust Freddie to ask those hard-hitting questions. “I would describe it as passionate,” Frederick answers. “And indecent.”

“That’s even better. Let readers draw their own conclusions. Makes them feel smart.”

“Do you feel smart?” Frederick asks, through the clack of his teeth. “Have you considered what will happen to you, if they’re alive? You’ve pestered and harassed Will Graham for five years, called him a lunatic, a murderer, a psychopath. What do you think he’ll do to you, now that he’s gotten in touch with his true self?”

Freddie smiles. “I don’t think he’ll do anything to me. Will Graham and Hannibal Lecter are too smart to draw attention to themselves, if they are alive. The world is half convinced they’re dead; all they need to do to confirm the belief is simply not refute it.”

“Those two,” Frederick clatters, “are madder than they seem. I wouldn’t count on their rational thinking saving you.”

“The public deserves the truth,” she says. “Jack Crawford is sure to do whatever he can to protect his man.”

“Will’s Hannibal’s man,” Frederick corrects. “They’ve drunk blood by moonlight, now. There’s no sense in pretending Will’s coming back from it this time. In the long run, I might consider myself as having gotten off lucky, knowing those two.”

Freddie’s smile brightens. “Can I quote you on that? I’d like permission to tell your story - a follow up to the interview that lured the Red Dragon out of hiding, a prelude to the story of Will Graham’s own transformation.”

Frederick would smile if he still could. “Is it too early to talk about co-authoring, Miss Lounds?”
“Please,” she says. It might be the cocktail of painkillers and antibiotics they have him on, but Frederick can see flowers blossoming behind her copper curls, hummingbirds rising from the petals to flicker around her head like a halo. “Call me Freddie.”

*******

The candles are almost guttering. Soon, the room will face an abrupt darkness. Before that can happen, Alana traces her hand down Margot’s back, illuminated in the warm light. Her fingers trace the scars there lovingly. Most nights, she looks at Margot and thinks how fortunate she is to be here with her, snatched from the jaws of death, as it were, and delivered into domestic bliss. But tonight, tonight she can’t stop thinking how everything in her life is something Will Graham touched, too.

“I should be there,” Alana mutters. “Jack will need me.”

“No, I need you,” Margot sighs, rolling over against Alana’s hand, bare skin brushing against her palm. Alana smiles and cups one of Margot’s soft, high breasts, eliciting a soft little moan from her wife. “You should be here. With us. Where it’s safe.” She arches her back, curving into Alana’s touch, eyes peering up from beneath thick lashes and heavy lids. Alana thinks about how easily she could be broken, how easily she could lose everything she loves.

“Nowhere is safe,” Alana tells her, bending to kiss the perfect sharp clavicle flickering in the candlelight. “Not until they catch him. I could help them catch him.”

Margot frowns, sits up in bed to look Alana in the eyes. “You can’t be serious,” she says, furious at the determination in her wife’s gaze.

“It’s the only way I can protect you and Morgan.”

“We aren’t the ones who need protection, Alana, you are. You’re the one he’s after, and you propose to place yourself directly in his path.”

Alana sighs, stands, walks to the decanter of scotch on the table and pours herself a drink. She can hear Margot wrapping her robe around herself and standing to follow her, but she does not turn around. She does not say what Hannibal told her, when last she saw him, when he was still held in her careful keeping - oh God, how has she been foolish enough to let him loose? He had even warned her - what he said about Alana’s family belonging to him. She knows how easily they can be taken from her, how he could kill them just for getting in the way. Would he kill Morgan, she
wonders, would there be something - morality, pity, compassion, fondness, politeness - that would hold even him back from harming a child? When Margot’s arms wrap around her waist, she releases a tense breath.

“Aren’t you scared?” Margot whispers in her ear.

There is another version of Alana, an older model, and that Alana is scared. That Alana is so frightened she can barely speak above a whisper, or keep her body from quaking. The terror is a dark wave crashing over her, but she carries on being brave. The Alana she is now knows what that terror is, has drowned in and drunk from the sea of horror, filling her body with that thick, black fear.

“Yes,” she breathes. She feels Margot’s arms tighten. She squeezes back. “But I know Will. If he’s alive, if he’s with Hannibal, he won’t let anything happen to us.” To me, she thinks.

“That’s a lot of ifs,” Margot scoffs against her nape. “If he’s alive, if he’s with him, if he can control what Hannibal does. If he even wants to.” Margot’s hands force her around, turning her to face that concerned pout, those wide eyes. Poor Margot. “How much can you trust him, Alana?”

The answer is not at all. But Alana says, “Not entirely.”

*******

There’s not much to do on a boat when it’s not at sea, Will learns. When he’s not sailing or fixing, being on a boat is a lot like being in any room or any cage. There’s not a lot to do except plan Clark Ingram’s murder.

Fortunately, planning Clark Ingram’s murder turns out to be something they can both enjoy.

“How will you do it?” Hannibal asks, sitting on his twin bed, back to the wall, legs apart, elbows on knees as he leans forward intently to hear Will’s answer.

“I want to cut him,” the admission is heavy, but unfettered by awkwardness. Hannibal’s eyes gleam in the dim light. “I want to feel his blood flowing out of him, hot and fast. I want to see his eyes when he realizes…” Will trails off, licking his lips. A frisson of excitement travels down his spine, spooling at the base, at the place where the Red Dragon promised to snap him and then didn’t. “I felt something, killing Dolarhyde with you.”
“What did you feel?” The dark intensity dripping off Hannibal and hanging in the air around them feels cloying, suffocating.


“And you hope to recreate that feeling.”

Will does. The buzz that had lingered through the morning of the following day is dissipating now. His nerves still vibrate with the lingering intoxication of the kill, and his brain is flooded with enough dopamine to dull the pain of the injuries he sustained fighting Dolarhyde and tumbling them both into the ocean. But that bright exultation that irradiated the landscape in the moment of Dolarhyde’s transformation has faded.

“Oh, you noble thing,” Hannibal breathes, appreciative of the look in Will’s clouded eyes. “How long I’ve waited to see you at peace with yourself.” Hannibal leans further towards Will, red eyes focussed steadily on the man in front of him. “It’s beautiful to witness, Will.”

His voice is sincere, reverent, almost awed. Will grunts, unsure of how to respond when Hannibal says things like this, things that send tendrils of warmth and elation/excitement/embarrassment/fear curling through his stomach. “You’ve seen me at what’s either my best or my worst,” he jokes to diffuse the tension.

Hannibal, naturally, refuses to let things dissipate so easily. “I have witnessed your becoming.”

Will snorts. “I’d say you were an active participant, not a witness.”

Hannibal’s smile is small and self-congratulatory. “Do you think you will ever find it in your heart to be grateful for my participation?”

Will swallows the fury that crests within him at the audacity, the arrogance of the question. He knows that anger is what Hannibal expects. He is hoping to provoke. Will forces his voice to sound calm. “We’ve done a number on one another,” he says, slowly. “Still, we will let all this be a thing of the past. I am…making an end to my anger.”
Hannibal smiles wider. “It does not become either of us, unrelentingly, to rage on,” he says smoothly, “I trust you. Will you trust me?”

Will considers telling Hannibal he’s an idiot for trusting him, but Will did just help him escape from federal custody, more or less. He wonders how far Hannibal knows he orchestrated their escape.

“I trust you aren’t planning on eating me,” Will says. It’s a start.

“Oh you can trust me further than that,” Hannibal vows languorously. “I have your best interests at heart, Will, always.”

“Except that time you attempted to cut my skull open and eat my brain.”

Hannibal’s smile is sickeningly jubilant. “Except for that one small lapse in judgment.”

This should be a serious conversation about forgiveness and the past injuries they have both inflicted. It’s almost distressing how easily Hannibal is ready to forgive. But the knot of their mutual betrayals and abuses is too complex to untie, and maybe Hannibal has the right idea in just cutting straight through that messy past to make way for the glorious present.

Will can tell that prison has changed Hannibal, and not in the ways one might expect. The man’s always known how to enjoy life to the fullest, but now there’s no point in disguising that delight. It’s a transformation Will could sense during his visits with Hannibal at the BSHCI, and now that they are both on the same side of the glass Will is even more struck by the change. Maybe, Will thinks, he really does just need to relax with himself.

“Have you thought about what you’ll do after Ingram is dealt with?” Hannibal asks, pulling Will out of his revery and back into the moment. The question comes with the same flippant intensity Hannibal’s been employing throughout their conversation, but Will knows what it is he’s really asking.

“I have a moderate to-do list, after Ingram,” Will says, side-stepping. It’s Hannibal’s turn to feel annoyed at being kept in the dark, Will decides.

But the other man just smiles beatifically. “Anyone who might surprise me?”
“Well you weren’t surprised when I wasn’t actually planning to watch you die,” Will answers, “and you weren’t surprised when I threw us both off a cliff. You weren’t surprised when I lied to Jack and Alana, or when I helped Dolarhyde facilitate your escape,” Will smiles, bitterly, “so I have to wonder if anything would surprise you.”

“Your devotion has never surprised me,” Hannibal says, with less jubilance now, “only your betrayals.”

Will frowns. “Have you thought of what you’ll do,” he asks, “now that you’re out? You must have given it a lot of thought over the past three years.”

“I spent my incarceration in my memory palace, reliving the past, rather than planning for the uncertain future,” Hannibal informs him.

Will wonders which of them will broach the subject of their alliance and what it may entail first. For now, he brings them back to the murder at hand. “Do you feel up to finding Ingram tonight?”

“Are you that eager, Will?”

Will licks his lips, not wanting to admit how desperately he wants to rekindle the fire that hummed through him, how scared he is that it won’t feel the same. How scared he is that it will, and of what he’ll become if it does. What he’s already become, to be having this conversation at all.

“Our injuries from the Dragon shouldn’t be enough to endanger us against Clark Ingram,” Hannibal’s voice holds disdain as he speaks the man’s name, and Will sneers at the sound of it. “And we were fortunate to avoid the rocks when we fell. Thank heaven for erosion. Still, in taking Clark Ingram we will almost certainly be revealing to the FBI that we are alive, and that will pose a bigger risk than just one sadistic social worker. I recommend waiting another couple of days at least; it would really be best to wait longer, but I suppose it can’t be helped.”

Will huffs, impatient but acknowledging the truth of what Hannibal is saying. His body feels like it’s healing at an accelerated rate, but he’s still slower than he should be. A day or two will just give them more time to plan.

“If we catch him at home it will be best,” Will says, watching the burn start again in Hannibal’s eyes as he speaks. It’s a heat like desire, and Will forces himself to look away. “He lives alone. It’s a
condo, shares one wall with the next unit. If we gag him, or do it quickly, the neighbors won’t hear.”
He chances a look back at Hannibal’s face, and is nearly undone by the expression he finds there.

“You’ve put some thought into this,” Hannibal breathes, voice reverent and low.

“One of us had to spend the last three years planning,” Will tells him, and looks away again before the fire rising in Hannibal’s hungry eyes can consume him completely.

********

At first, Jack refuses to count Will’s loss in anything larger than hours, and refuses to finish many of his thoughts on the case. It’s been three hours since we lost contact with Will Graham; his cell phone was discovered near the wreckage of the transfer van, just outside the back doors, suggesting it fell or was removed from his pocket after he had exited the vehicle, involuntarily or. It’s been twelve hours since we lost contact with Will Graham; blood at the crime scene was a positive DNA match, and his finger prints were found throughout the house, including in a room containing a closet of clothes too small for Hannibal Lecter but not for. It’s been eighteen hours since we lost contact with Will Graham; Z. brings a video that shows Will falling into the sea, but they still haven’t found a body. It’s been twenty-four hours and Jack finally calls Molly, irrationally irritated by the break in her voice but trying to be compassionate because he was her husband, after all. It’s been seventy-two hours and there’ve been numerous reports of people in and around Baltimore seeing Hannibal, or Will, or both of them, but none of the reports turn out to be true so far, and Jack puts a team of interns on sorting the incoming sightings into three categories: No, Definitely Not True, and Maybe. He stops counting in hours when he reaches ninety-six. It’s been four days since we lost contact with Will Graham, Jack thinks to himself.

He thinks about the tape often. It puzzles him for many reasons, not the least of which is the ending. All the evidence, celluloid and cellular, indicates that Will and Hannibal fell off the cliff. Still every instinct in him says that they’re alive. It would be so easy to close the case - the pressure is already on him to have them both declared dead and ease the publics’ fear - they stampeded, as predicted, the moment Freddie Lounds and the other journalists started reporting that the FBI had lost their pet cannibal.

If they were dead, he’d know. If Will were dead. They aren’t dead.

And if they aren’t dead, that means that either Hannibal has abducted Will and is holding him somewhere against his will, or they’ve separated and Will is wounded or otherwise unable to contact him. Either way, he needs to keep searching. Will needs him. After all the times he’s led Will into danger, all the times he’s refused to believe him or respect his boundaries, Jack needs to do this for him. He needs to bring Will back.
There are…other possibilities. It’s possible that Hannibal died, and Will lived. It’s possible Will’s fed up with everything and has just turned his back on them all, taking this opportunity to walk away while the world mourns his death. It’s possible he’s lost his memory - it’s possible they’ve both lost their memories. Jack tries to imagine that - Hannibal and Will washing ashore and not knowing who they are. He wonders how they’d get along, if presented to one another as tabula rasa. Maybe they’d get along? They’d probably get along. Look at them now, barely able to resist each other even after all the agony they’ve caused for themselves. They’d probably get along like a house on fire if they woke up with amnesia.

“I know you don’t want to consider this,” Price tells him, on the evening of the fourth day since they lost contact with Will Graham, “and God only knows why I’m the one who has to tell you, but they really might just have run off together. That is, if we’re still refusing to accept that a fall from that height into the freezing cold Atlantic Ocean and a medieval dungeon pit’s worth of jagged rocks, not even accounting for their previously sustained injuries, is almost 110% fatal.”


Price scoffs, flicking one hand at him dismissively. “Come on, Jack. I’m the only one you can’t scare. We’ve known each other too long for that gruff FBI badass routine to do any good.” Jack glares. Price’s voice softens, “I know, Jack, I do. I don’t want to consider it any more than you do.”

“Then don’t consider it,” Jack says. “We doubted him once, when he needed us to believe him, and look what it cost us. If we’d listened then we wouldn’t be here now.”

“Just because we should have listened then doesn’t mean we ought to listen now,” Price says, confusingly. “I’m headed to the cafeteria. You’re coming with me. You’ve been here for nine hours and I haven’t seen you eat.”

Jack stumbles to his feet, not wanting to admit Price is right about anything right now, but knowing that he’s at least right about this. Maybe after he’s had something to eat he’ll be able to examine the evidence with a renewed sense of clarity. Price claps him on the shoulder and leads them towards the door.

“Plus did you hear,” he chirps, “they just installed a frozen yogurt machine!”

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The days shuffle passed, and Will grows more restless with each passing one. There is little to do on board the boat besides heal. Periodically, Hannibal forces Will to stretch and exercise lightly with him, testing the progress of the wound in his side. Will suspects, secretly, that he may be fulfilling some type of samurai master fantasy, forcing Will to unlock his true self through the ancient mystic practice of light stretches and physical therapy.

Most of the time there is nothing to do except think, or talk, or watch Hannibal cook and lament the smallness and simplicity of their kitchen. He still manages to produce an impressively plated and wildly creative array of seafood dishes. Will eats each one ravenously, and nothing has ever tasted as good. The taste seems more vivid somehow than tastes used to. Will can taste the sunlight that nurtured each plant, the nutrients passed to them from the earth. He can taste the cold ice water quickness of the fish, the haze of the deep sea.

“This is delicious,” Will says, savoring the taste of the fresh scallop Hannibal has served up, still in the shell and resting atop a bed of actual twigs from some kind of conifer, the modest kitchen clearly no deterrent to his craft.

Hannibal pours him a glass of white wine, unsmiling but plainly elated by the praise. Of course, he must have missed impressing people while incarcerated. Will’s sure Hannibal had plenty of fan mail, somehow, but he supposes that would have been poor comfort, after the life Hannibal had once led, a life filled with constant praise and admiration. Now all he has is Will, the rest of the world having turned in horror - though, Will supposes, their horror is its own kind of admiration. “You may notice a slight taste of juniper,” he tells Will, “if your palate has developed far enough.”

Will closes his eyes and imagines smoke drifting up from the little juniper branches, fragrant and thick. The bivalve has been cooked nestled against the low fire within the bunch of juniper, and if he imagines hard enough, Will can just about taste it.

“You are more aware of your physical body, of bodily sensation,” Hannibal observes. “Tell me, can you feel the pressure of the air on your skin?”

Will frowns. “Are you about to give a lecture on the somatic sensory system, Dr. Lecter?”

“Certainly not,” Hannibal replies, eyes twinkling redly. “That sounds like an excellent way to spoil an otherwise enjoyable meal.”

“For once,” Will smiles slightly, “we are in complete agreement.”
“I find that we are in agreement with increasing frequency, these days,” Hannibal says. Will takes another bite of his food, marveling silently at the flavors and textures running over his tongue. “Don’t you?”

He licks his lips, considering the question. He hadn’t considered it until now, but it should have been obvious; when has Hannibal ever before surrendered control of the circumstances so completely? Will hears Bedelia’s voice, Alana’s voice, warning, don’t fool yourself into thinking Hannibal isn’t in complete control of the situation. “You’ve been very quick to acquiesce to all suggestions,” Will replies carefully.

“And now that it’s occurred to you, you’re invariably worried what it must mean,” Hannibal smiles at his plate - at his own damned cleverness. He looks up, locks eyes with Will, and leans across the narrow table with a conspiratorial grin. “Fear not,” he whispers, voice mocking but fond, “it’s mostly just that I find your suggestions utterly captivating.”

“Mostly,” Will presses, and Hannibal’s smile broadens.

“Not entirely.”

“No.”

“No, I must confess,” Hannibal says in the least contrite voice Will can imagine, “to a certain fascination in watching what you’ll do.”

“That’s hardly a new development,” Will points out. “Or is this more of a professional curiosity, Doctor?”

“I have always been curious about how you will react to stimuli set out for you to encounter,” Hannibal says, voice pleasantly analytical, as if he is explaining the rules of a game or the life cycle of an aphid, rather than discussing casually the delight he derives from dissecting Will’s mind and responses. “However, what you are embarking on now is wholly different. In the past, you have acted on stimuli, and now, Will, see you are in the director’s seat. You are setting up your own scenes, planning for yourself how they will play out. I sense a remarkable change in you - have sensed it since you stood before me and asked me to play along with your truly ludicrous plot to bait the Red Dragon. Oh yes,” Hannibal breathes a soft laugh at Will’s expression, “I suspected you had designs of your own, separate from our dear Jack and Alana’s. I could smell it on you.”
“Is there some kind of divination related to scent?” Will inquires sarcastically.

“Clairalience,” Hannibal says, infuriatingly smug.

“Of course there’s a word for it and of course you know it.”

“Yes,” Hannibal sighs, “but that’s hardly what I meant. I merely meant that it was evident something had changed in you, to make you suddenly so possessed of a singular determination to fly in the face of rationality.” Hannibal stares across at him, garnet eyes flashing. “What changed for you, Will?”

How is he supposed to answer that? Hannibal already knows that Will couldn’t go back to his little pre-made family again - he had known that would be the best possible outcome when he gave Dolarhyde Will’s home address. How is Will supposed to explain how it felt to leave Hannibal for what he’d thought would be the final time? How he walked out the front doors of the hospital glancing over his shoulder to make sure he was alone, then regretting the empty space where he could have sworn someone was standing? He couldn’t go home, he couldn’t stay, and there was nowhere to go and nothing left to do. How is he supposed to say that he’d stood on the sidewalk, suddenly unable to take a deep enough breath, and regretted not leaving with Hannibal years ago when he’d had the chance, knowing it was too late now, that all his chances had been spent long ago? How to tell how his heart had stuttered, how he had known he could not survive leaving one more time? All the times he’d turned Hannibal away, each one harder than the last. How can he say what he can scarcely allow himself to feel?

And then the Red Dragon had come back from the dead, and an opportunity had presented itself.

He can’t say all that. So he just says, “It was too good a chance to pass up,” and spares Hannibal a quick glance before returning to his plate. Hannibal is contemplative for a moment more, then from the corner of his eye Will sees him smile. They eat in companionable silence for the rest of the meal.

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They wait for five days. It feels almost excruciating, but Will supposes that five days is not actually a very long recovery period, considering what they’ve been through. His body feels like it is healing at an accelerated rate, and by the morning of the fifth day he is ready. He wakes up knowing it is finally time, and opens his eyes to see Hannibal, laying on his side on the opposite bunk and gazing back with an expression Will knows must mirror his own. He wonders briefly if the determination he woke up feeling was even his own, and then decides it hardly matters, because even if it didn’t
They spend the day like caged lions, pensive with anticipation. By the time the sun sets, Will feels close to panting. They leave the dock once it’s dark, and flag down a cab. It's a Friday, and the streets are beginning to crowd. Will recites the address for their driver, and they move swiftly through the city.

As he’d expected, Ingram’s condo is empty when they arrive. It’s ten pm on a Friday night; he’s probably out somewhere murdering some girl. And covering his tracks better, Will thinks bitterly, can’t have anyone getting as close as they did the last time. It’s easy to get inside - Hannibal picks the lock in a matter of seconds - and Will is happy to wait a little longer.

Clark Ingram certainly doesn’t seem to sense anything amiss when he walks through the front door, throwing his jacket onto an arm chair as he walks through the living room and towards the kitchen. He’s home later than Will had expected; it’s almost two am.

When he flips on the light, Will is leaning against the kitchen island, looking right at him. Ingram’s eyes widen as he recognizes Will, and Will can’t help but smile.

“Hello, Mr. Ingram,” Will greets, pushing himself fully upright and taking a step towards the terrified social worker. “I read about your acquittal. What a relief that must have been.”

Ingram moves suddenly, darting towards the right, in the general direction of the front door, only to collide with Hannibal, whose right arm shoots out quickly to thrust the blade he’s holding up and into the soft place below Ingram’s right arm. Ingram draws in a breath to howl in pain, but Hannibal clamps a heavy hand over his mouth before sound can escape him, and wrenches him around to face Will again.

Will’s heart is thudding, steady but calamitously loud. Ingram’s eyes are wild, knowing, and Will feels like he’s falling off the cliff again, all the air rushing out of him as he steps into the inevitable. There is a shivering energy building in his limbs, but his hand is steady when he lifts it and presses the knife he picked from the block on the counter firmly into Ingram’s throat. He draws a dark line from one corner of the jaw to the other, hearing the flesh rend like wet fabric being torn, and the wound gapes back at him like a grin. There’s a gurgling sound coming from Ingram’s throat. Hannibal’s hand pulls back against his mouth, forcing Ingram’s head back further, further. Ingram’s body jolts, jerking frantic in Hannibal’s merciless arms and showering Will in a hot fountain of blood.

Knowledge pours, drop by drop, into Will’s heart, by the awful grace of God, pours and overwhelms
the vessel of his mind. *And I gave my heart to know wisdom*, he thinks, mind racing, eyes wide. Will heaves, pitching forward to grip onto Ingram’s collar. The fountain is beginning to taper, though an unexpectedly strong heartbeat sends a final jet of blood over his face. He can’t think straight, senses flooding. He locks eyes with Hannibal as the shudders begin to course through him, and his breath turns ragged, the dying man grasped tight between them as his life bleeds out in burning bursts and Hannibal’s hand catches whatever final pleas he utters. Will can feel the body going slack against him, supported only by their gripping hands. He feels the moment running through and over him, like water overflowing a cistern, and he is lost in elation, in Hannibal’s thirsty red gaze. Will clutches at the corpse he has made, breathing so hard he feels himself begin to hyperventilate. He forces his eyes closed, unable to speak his distress in anything beyond a moan.

“Stay with me, Will,” Hannibal’s voice echoes through him, and between them Ingram’s body drops to the floor as Hannibal lets him go. Will is too lost in the shattering sensation coursing through him to notice. He opens his eyes at the touch of Hannibal’s fingers on his jaw. “Stay here, in his moment, don’t hide from what you’re feeling right now. Don’t go inside.”

Will tries to open himself to this moment fully, but he’s breathing so hard he thinks he may swoon. It’s too much, frightening in its intensity, maybe because it comes so soon after Dolarhyde, kill stacking on kill, or maybe because it is something he has thought of so often without ever admitting, an unfinished deed that hung over all those innocent moments with Molly. Will puts a hand on Hannibal’s forearm, gripping hard to keep himself upright. The room tilts, and Will bites his tongue to keep from screaming in fear and ecstasy.

And then Hannibal’s left hand slides into the hair at the back of his neck and tugs, hard enough to ground Will in the pain and pressure, and it’s bearable, if just barely. He hisses, turning his attention to the pain and feeling the room steady beneath him again. Will holds his breath, head wrenched back by the hand in his hair, letting the shudders that wrack his body pass. He can feel something unfurling within, and the sensation climbs through him, spreads throughout his nerves and blood and bones. When he can open his eyes again, Will sees only Hannibal, blurred by a sheen of tears that refuse to fall.
The water rushes over him, soaking his hair and filling his mouth. Droplets of blood sluice off of his skin and clothes, and dye the white porcelain of the shower a pale pink. The blood flows off him. He closes his eyes and tilts his face up against the spray, ignoring the itch that rises in his cheek as the hot water irritates the wound. He remembers the stinging cold water of the Atlantic washing the Dragon’s blood off of him, and it feels impossible that it was only last week that he had a completely different life.

In his other life, Will Graham was a husband and father. It was, of course, preposterous. Jack had played along nicely with Will’s fantasy of normalcy, but when he’d seen Alana the amusement on her face had been clear, and he’d known she was right, even if he hadn’t wanted to admit it to himself. He was hiding in a borrowed life, playing the role Wally’s father had left behind when the cancer had taken him. He was her sweet man, even though nothing about him has ever been sweet in his life.

He’d let her believe he was good; it was easy, because it was what she wanted to believe. He told himself he was reforming, taking her needs and emotions into account when he told her a heavily abridged version of his past. But the truth was he just wanted the new sensation of being stable and happy, a good man, sweet, even. It was a costume he had enjoyed, while it lasted. It made the days easier to endure, though at night he’d still had his dreams to swallow and be swallowed by.

The water is a comfort, a pacifying sensation on which his overstrung nerves can focus. He feels each drop hitting his body, the water cascading seemingly in slow motion so that his body can have time to record each motion. He sighs, tilting his head so that the water runs through his hair. Every touch feels amplified, as if he’s missing the top two layers of skin, nerves across his whole body exposed and hyper-sensitive, every sense more attuned to the material world, to the way the light bends around his fingers as he raises them into the spray of the shower.

When the world had finally stopped quaking around him and he’d been able to open his eyes, he was staring into Hannibal’s blood-soaked face, Hannibal’s blood-colored eyes. Hannibal’s hand gripped the back of his neck, forcing his gaze. And Will had rejoiced, as the fecund earth rejoices at spring rains, at the new-born things blossoming within him, watered by the shower of Ingram’s steaming blood.

Hannibal had forced him, fully clothed, into Ingram’s shower, held him under the spray of water until it was clear that Will wouldn’t collapse if left to himself, and his mind was starting to clear, even if his body and blood still shrieked with euphoria.

Alone now, Will isn’t sure how long he’s been standing in his soaking clothes beneath the jet of hot water. He peels his clothes off carefully, vaguely horrified by the erection straining between his
thighs, and rinses the rest of the gore away. When he steps out of the shower, he sees that Hannibal has laid out a change of clothing. He finds a clean towel in the cabinet and leaves his wet clothes on the shower floor. The Chesapeake Ripper never left evidence, but Will isn’t nearly that uptight. He’s not worried about evidence, he realizes, because he wants Jack to know he’s alive, that he’s finally made a choice he can’t step back from. Maybe when Jack knows, he thinks, and when they’re finally on opposing sides and not in some uneasy half-alliance, he’ll be able to relax a little with himself.

He’s feeling more relaxed, already.

In the living room, Hannibal nonchalantly studies the contents of the duffle bag he’s brought along with them. He’s still wearing the same blood soaked shirt, now also damp from the shower so that it clings to his chest and stomach as he moves. Will watches him for a moment, enjoying the disheveled luxuriousness of Hannibal, drenched in carnage and utterly in his element.

“What do you intend to do about the body?” Hannibal asks, without ceasing to rummage through the bag. “If you want to cover our tracks, divert suspicion, we could make this look like a burglary gone wrong.” He looks up at Will, a lock of greying hair tipped in red falling across his forehead.

Will frowns. “I don’t intend to cover anything up,” he says, not missing the glint of approval in the other man’s eyes. “Quite the opposite, actually, I was thinking we could…make an announcement.”

Hannibal studies him, his expression carefully neutral, but Will can tell he’s pleased. He wonders for a moment if he’s not playing right into Hannibal’s hands, falling for some trick of the doctor’s. He decides it doesn’t matter; he feels too good for anything else to matter.

“If that’s what you want,” Hannibal answers. “What is it you plan to announce, Will?”

Will smiles.

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If she were anyone else, Freddie would have screamed. Because she is Freddie Lounds, she takes pictures, does a quick, sensational write up, and then calls Jack Crawford. She uploads the photos and article to Tattlecrime while she waits for him to arrive. She works on her laptop in the bedroom, because even with all her ambition, it’s uncomfortable being in the same room with it.
When Jack arrives, accompanied by Price, Zeller, and a couple grim faced men in FBI windbreakers, he looks worse than Freddie has ever seen him. And then he looks even worse when she shows him what she’s found in her living room.

“Jesus,” Price exclaims. “And you didn’t hear anything in the night?”

“I’m often asked how I sleep, and the answer is soundly,” Freddie tells him.

Zeller shoots her a look. She smiles back at him sharply, and he looks back to his camera, snapping several pictures in a row.

The body isn’t anyone she recognizes, and for that Freddie is profoundly grateful. It’s hard to tell the age, after what’s been done to it, but she can tell it’s male, white, and she’d guess mid-thirties. In life he was probably in good shape. In death, sitting on her couch, he’s not a shape nature intended.

“Body appears to have been bisected post-mortem,” Zeller dictates. “Knife wounds to the left latissimus and across the throat were probably the cause of death, the killer…” he stares through the camera for a long second, “the killer probably used some kind of table saw to get the body to cut this easily. It’s…similar to what happened to Beverly.” He swallows thickly. “Body was sewed back together with red wire thread. Stitches look surgical.”

“Does he look familiar?” Jack asks. “It’s hard to tell with…” he gestures, indicating the general state of the stitched together corpse, its features crossed by a drastic red line that runs from his hairline to groin. The corpse is clean and unbloodied, apart from the thick blood-red line of thread. The pallor of death has settled over its features. Still. “I think he looks familiar.”

“I’ll run the prints and we’ll see,” Price chirrups, sounding far more chipper than the circumstances warrant.

“You do that,” Jack replies with a deal less mirth. “Zeller, I want copies of those pictures ASAP. There’s someone I need to talk to.”

The mutilated body presides in silence over the tense room. “I wonder what you’ll discover missing when you open him back up,” Freddie muses. “You know as well as I who did this. Your pet bloodhound turned out to be a wolf, Jack.”
Now the tension is palpable, thick as fog. Jack’s every muscle is tense beneath his suit, and Price and Zeller have stopped their work to stare at her. Finally, Jack asks, “Is that what the Tattler will run?”

“It’s what it’s already running,” Freddie tells him, “online. The paper copies will be a day behind the breaking news, but I still imagine they’ll sell.”

“If I were you, I’d consider why they chose you,” Jack warns in a strained voice, fury barely in check, “why you’re the one waking up to one of their transformations.”

Freddie smiles placidly, and watches as a muscle in Jack’s jaw twitches in response. “I’m not worried, Jack. I know exactly why they chose me, and I think you probably do, too. But if you need a second opinion, by all means, go get it. And when you’re done, try doing something to stop them because we both know this means they have no intention of stopping on their own.”

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It seems far easier for Hannibal to settle on what to cook now that he has his main ingredient. Will’s stomach tilts a little at the smell of garlic and cinnamon, like it’s unsure whether to choose hunger or disgust. He already knows there’s no point in pretending to himself that he won’t eat whatever Hannibal serves him. After all, it’s a little late now to stop.

Will watches him cook. Hannibal’s shirt sleeves are rolled back above the elbow, exposing finely muscled forearms. There’s a vein in his arm that stands out slightly when he wields the knife to remove the remaining arteries and excess fat from the heart. Not that there’s much fat to trim; Ingram was in excellent shape.

“You’re doing exceptionally well,” Hannibal tells him, even though the only thing Will is doing at the moment is sipping a glass of wine and watching Hannibal cook them supper. Or is it breakfast? The sun was just starting to peek over the horizon when they’d staggered back on board, having left most of Clark Ingram for Freddie to find. Will knows he should be tired, and he will certainly collapse soon, but at the moment his body and brain are humming with energy. Besides which, he’s still reluctant to let Hannibal out of eyesight, and Hannibal clearly intends to remain in the kitchen. He’ll get some rest after breakfast (supper?).

“What exactly is it I’m meant to be doing well?” Will asks. He takes another long sip of wine.

“Resisting your natural inclination towards panic,” Hannibal answers pleasantly, as if he hasn’t just payed Will the most backhanded compliment Will’s ever heard. The annoyance must read on his face, but Hannibal doesn’t amend his statement, just smiles beatifically over the button mushrooms
“It’s just always such a tremendous relief when I’m not the one you’re carving for dinner,” Will rejoins.

Hannibal chuckles. He spares Will a smoldering glance, his lips parted just enough to reveal sharp teeth, eyes heavy lidded, darkness rolling off him like smoke off a pyre. Will squirms, just a bit, hoping Hannibal won’t notice. “Living you shall be my feast,” he says, dropping his eyes back to the heart on the cutting board, “not slain at the altar.”

Will isn’t sure what to say back to that. He knows Hannibal must be quoting something old and dignified, but he’ll be damned if he’s going to ask what. The words themselves send a tremor up his spine. “Good to know,” he finally says. He can hear Hannibal chuckling softly, but stares resolutely into his wine glass, at the ruddy reflection frowning back up at him. It’s as if his face is stained and dripping with blood, as if he’s gazing at his own corpse.

“You could kill me any time you want,” Will says, voice soft, speaking down into the reflection that whispers back. He’s aware that Hannibal has stopped moving in the tiny kitchen. He’s watching Will intently, radiating curiosity. Will knows just how he’ll look if Will decides to raise his eyes from his the distraction of his own likeness. He does not decide to do this. “You could change your mind; you’ve changed it before.”

He can feel the other man regarding him for the space of several silent moments. “Never without provocation,” Hannibal says. “I’ve never behaved capriciously towards you. You’ve made far more attempts on my life, Will, and exhibited a much more volatile nature.”

Will can’t deny that there’s a lot of truth in what he’s saying. Hannibal has been consistent - perhaps even loyal - as far as Will is concerned; it’s Will who has played fickle all these years, speaking out of both sides of his mouth, never fully willing to commit. Until now, he thinks. Still, the acknowledgement of his hypocrisy does little to dull the fear that creeps into him at times like this one, over what Hannibal could do, might do. No amount of forgiveness could ever erase the memory of Hannibal’s hands, firm and graceful, exsanguinating him.

“You used to tell me you imagined killing me with your bare hands,” Hannibal reminds him, his voice fond. “How would you kill me now, Will?”

“I wouldn’t,” he frowns. “I didn’t know…”
“What didn’t you know?” Hannibal prompts him after he trails off. “What knowledge stays your bare and righteous hands?”

“That great truth beyond us,” Will says, finally lifting his eyes to let them flicker over Hannibal’s form and face, “the unattainable greatness which only the mad know.”

“The mad,” Hannibal answers, holding Will’s gaze with a look so intense Will swears he can feel the brush of Hannibal’s hand on his cheek, even though they are standing feet apart. “And those who listen to the mad, and then believe.”

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She makes him schedule an appointment in order to see her. The days of her sitting in interrogation rooms, she’s decided, are over. If they insist on involving her, she can at least ensure it is on her terms.

“I wish I could say it was lovely to see you,” Bedelia tells him. “What are you hoping I’ll do for you?”

“I need you to profile someone,” Jack answers, shifting uncomfortably in his chair.

She quirks an eyebrow. “That’s not my line of work.”

“No, but in this case, I think you’re uniquely suited to the task.” He produces a plain white envelope from his jacket pocket and places it on the low table between them.

She can tell the envelope contains photographs the second she picks it up, and she can guess what she’ll see. “Hannibal’s escaped,” she says, envelope cradled in her hands.

“You don’t sound surprised,” Jack accuses. “It’s surprising news.”

Bedelia shrugs. “Not if you know Hannibal.” She opens the crisp envelope and pulls out a stack of crime scene photos. She keeps her expression neutral as she flips through them, and hopes he cannot hear her heart pounding. God, it feels like a sparrow is trapped in her ribcage, frantic to get out, like
her heart is beating through her chest. She forces herself to breathe deep and slow through her nose, letting her eyes cross slightly so the images in the photographs begin to blur and double. When she is once again certain her voice will be steady, she says, “You want me to tell you what this monument means.”

“I’d like your opinion on what’s going through his mind,” Jack agrees.

“You think this is Hannibal’s work, but he’s not the only one who escaped, is he, Agent Crawford?” The look on his face amuses Bedelia.

“What is this monstrosity supposed to signify, Dr. Du Maurier?”

“Unity,” Bedelia breathes, “this isn’t Hannibal’s design; it’s an ode to him. You can see the precision typical of his handiwork, and it’s certain he helped, but this isn’t the work of his imagination.” She studies the photographs for a moment. “Will Graham has felt pulled in two directions for as long as you or I have been aware of him. He’s played both sides, fracturing his personality, never wholly certain for himself which master he serves. It must have felt,” she sighs, “like he was being torn in half. Split right down the middle. But, it seems, he no longer feels that way.”

Silence. Then, “I’d hoped, if it ever came to this, Will would convince him to give up killing.”

Bedelia scoffs. “Hannibal sacrifices to no god save himself - and to his belly, greatest of all deities.” She enjoys mapping the look of horror which spreads over Jack’s countenance at her words. He’d eaten at Hannibal’s table quite often, she recalls. “Will Graham is whole now, Agent Crawford, they’re whole, two halves of one complete creature joined together at last. And they want you to know. Will, I think, especially wants you to know. Hannibal would let this be his idea, let him make this declaration to you, and, in so doing, to Hannibal as well.”

Bedelia can see Jack’s jaw working, silently, as if he is physically chewing his rage. This is and has always been his worst case scenario, she realizes, losing his luminary to the pull of the beast. “A man like Will Graham,” she continues, slowly, watching his expression shatter with a secret, torturous delight, “should never have gotten so close to the darkness.”

“I will find them,” Jack grits, voice unyielding.

“Be ready to kill them both, then.”
“If it comes to that, I will.”

Bedelia has her doubts about Jack’s convictions, but none at all that it definitely will come to that if Jack ever again manages to get in between Hannibal and Will Graham. “Hannibal has waited a long time for this,” she warns, “too long to let anyone get in his way. He doesn’t form attachments easily, but in this case I believe him to be,” she inhales deeply and fixes Jack with her sharp gaze, “territorial.”

Jack plucks one of the discarded crime scene photographs off the table and studies it for a long time, as if he’ll find something he likes better if he looks hard enough.

“A man is like the company he is wont to keep,” Bedelia can’t keep herself from adding. She can remember being a gentler version of herself, a version who wasn’t always ready with the perfect, painful bon mot in ever instance. She wonders, sometimes, where that person went, and when it was she left. Maybe that night she found him stepping out of her shower when she came home, she thinks, maybe the moment that she lowered her gun.

“You used to keep his company quite often yourself,” Jack answers in a rough voice. His frustration with her is palpable. Bedelia finds she often has this effect on people, now.

“So did you,” she says.

Jack glares mutely for an extended moment. Finally, he stands. “I have to try,” he says, “I owe Will that much.”

“Soon,” Bedelia tells him as he walks towards the door, her eyes resting on the photograph he’s discarded, and the thin stitch of red bisecting the frame, “all you will owe him is awe.”

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The dream is a deep one, thick and dark as treacle or tar, and he drags his way back into consciousness, limbs still aching with the weight of sleep. He senses it is later than he would have expected to awake, but it’s hard to tell without a good source of natural light. Hannibal is sitting upright in the opposite bed, back propped against the wall. At first, Will thinks he is reading, despite the dim lighting, but then he sees that Hannibal’s hands are empty. His eyes are closed, but Will can tell he’s not asleep. There’s an alertness, a presence that gives him away. Will doesn’t think he’s seen Hannibal asleep, but he supposes that eventually he will, especially if they’re going to stay on this
boat for much longer. Although, it’s been days now and Hannibal hasn’t let his guard down enough to be caught in even a light doze. Meanwhile, Will can’t fall asleep without keeping Hannibal in his line of vision until the last blurring blink of his eyes, and he’s almost always in the room when Will wakes, is often even the first thing Will sees and is consciously aware of upon waking. It’s disconcerting, but so is almost everything about Will’s life now.

Will rises, stretching until his back pops. He feels radiant, despite the lingering throb in his stomach and cheek, and the dull ache of the bruises he sustained in the fall. He wonders if this is how Hannibal feels all the time. In his head, there’s the echo of Hannibal’s voice, six years younger.

“Killing must feel good to God, too,” Hannibal says, his voice overlapping with the one in Will’s mind. Will blinks at him, dazed by his clairvoyance. Hannibal just smiles. “When I was incarcerated, I visited you often, in my memory palace, in those rooms we share.” Hannibal looks up at him coyly from beneath the short fringe of his bangs, and Will’s heart hammers, knowing what question will come next. “Did you ever sense it?”

It is difficult to swallow. How to speak of what he felt, lying awake at night, losing the rhythmic sound of the dogs breathing - of Molly breathing, once he found her - as reality would melt away? Or sometimes, in the day, as he worked on repairing a motor or took his coffee on the cold porch, how his consciousness would suddenly bend, light streaming in and suddenly that voice, thickly accented and husky from disuse, echoing within the chambers of his mind. *Hello, Will…*

“Sometimes, I felt like we were doing the same thing at the same time,” he admits, finally, voice low. *As if I was his shadow, Will thinks, or he was mine.*

“Even in my memories, you would not speak to me,” Hannibal confesses, sadly. “But I hoped you would hear me.”

Will wants to ask him what it is Hannibal hoped he heard, but a part of him is still afraid to hear out loud what he’s only heard whispered through the dome of his over-active imagination. And what if it is the same? What if Hannibal really can reach into his mind? “What you’re suggesting is irrational,” Will tells him, voice little more than a hoarse whisper.

“Aw, but you and I understand that the universe must allow room for the irrational, in healthy balance with the rational.” Hannibal peers up at him, eyes dark and reflective. “Did you hear something, Will?”

He swallows, closing his eyes against the swell of music lifting in the back of his skull. He feels sunlight on his skin, can smell the candles burning. Within the chambers of his mind, beneath the
vaulted ceiling of the Cappella, Will keeps his eyes closed and listens unavailingly for a whisper.

It frightens him, this subtle seeming-confirmation of Hannibal’s divination, of his witchcraft. Will feels the fear slip through his body, a warm panic spreading through him, a sensation not distant enough from lust. Not distant enough at all for his peace of mind. He opens his eyes at the touch of Hannibal’s hand on his face, immediately sinking into his own reflection in the mirrors of Hannibal’s eyes.

“Don’t leave me again,” Will breathes, trying hard to keep his voice free from desperation. The hand on his face caresses his bandaged cheek gently, fingers skimming his cheekbones in veneration, and his wound throbs at the touch.

“Foolish boy,” Hannibal replies, “how could I possibly let you go after all of this?” Will feels the sink of the hook in him at the words. This is truly and finally it; he will be with Hannibal until he dies. He knows that any attempt to leave now won’t be met with tolerance or understanding; Hannibal is his end. There’s a terrifying comfort in the awareness of being so utterly possessed.

Will wishes he could just stay quiet, but he can’t dam the flood of his words. “You know I didn’t intend to kill us in the fall. Or to watch you die.”

Hannibal smiles, cupping Will’s face. “You mean you didn’t intend to watch the Great Red Dragon change me?” His thumb strokes distractingly close to the corner of Will’s mouth. “I know. It’s important to you that I know, that I trust you.” He cocks his head to the side an inch, the gesture - and their proximity - so familiar, so reluctantly missed all these years. Will can hear his heartbeat drumming in his ear. “You worry I won’t ever trust you again fully, after you’ve betrayed and rejected me time and again. I told you once, I don’t need a sacrifice. You provided one nonetheless.”

Will swallows, willing his words to come out clear and steady. “You’re referring to Dr. Chilton.”

Hannibal looks so satisfied, so content holding him there in a state suspended between revulsion and desire, Will is convinced that if the man could purr he would. “That was a very nice gesture, Will.”

Will says nothing, but manages, finally, to tear his eyes away from Hannibal’s, fixing them instead on Hannibal’s sharp smirk.

“Like Helen, Will, the dowry you bring for yourself is destruction. It is one thing that cannot be resisted.”
“One thing you can’t resist, anyway,” Will rejoins, still fighting for composure as Hannibal fondles his burning face.

“Can you?” Hannibal lets his hand drop, and Will has to stop himself from taking a step closer. He sways, unsteady for a moment, his eyes fixed on Hannibal’s curled fingers. “All those times you imagined yourself in someone else’s mind, always holding yourself back, allowing yourself only those small tastes.”

“I missed even those, after I left the bureau,” Will admits. “But I wanted to forget.”

“Abigail once told me that she felt most alive helping her father trap his prey,” Hannibal says, brushing his hand over Will’s arm at the indrawn breath that accompanies her name. “How do you feel?”

“You know how I feel,” says Will, breath shaky. This is too much, this, plus the pulse of energetic awareness he feels with every beat of his heart. It’s all too much.

“Tell me anyway.”

“Free,” Will says, “I feel like you feel. I feel free.”

“But you’re not free, Will,” Hannibal tells him calmly. “You belong to me.”

Will can’t speak. His heart is hammering in his throat, as if he’s just swallowed it whole. As if it was his own heart he ate, instead of Clark Ingram’s. Or maybe it is Ingram’s heart, come back to life and pounding in his guilty throat. Standing this close to Hannibal, he is losing their boundaries. He’s becoming uncertain, again, about which feelings are his, and which belong to the man across from him.

“I need to be able to trust you, too,” Will tells him, fighting the wave of emotion rising within him. “Our betrayals weren’t exactly one-sided.”

“No,” Hannibal concedes, “though I never rejected you. But very well, you have a point. You’ve made your offering, after all, it’s only fair that I requite the gesture. What would you suggest, as an
“act of contrition?”

Will lets the wave crash against him, a deluge of stunning awareness of the consequences his next words will have. He smiles through the rising dread. “You did not require a sacrifice,” he says, “but maybe I do.”

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The sensation of the floor swaying gently underfoot at all times, that motion that is not quite rocking but is not the stillness of earth, is not one that Hannibal has experienced often in recent years. He is grateful, but not surprised, to find that his constitution is still not given to sea-sickness. On the contrary, he finds the groundless feeling a pleasant one, and useful. He is able to concentrate on the minute motions beneath his shoes to center himself, as Will explains what it is he wants.

Hannibal has difficulty keeping his face neutral as Will describes the oblation he has chosen. It isn’t that he disapproves. In fact, he approves with such singular delight and excitement that he finds he must make a conscious effort not to show the exact extent of his willingness to oblige Will’s desire. Concentrating on the tiny liquidity of the wood floor helps, though he can feel his nostrils flaring as his body suddenly craves air, and he knows the effect Will’s words are having must be apparent to the other man.

“I think I should be surprised to find you are a jealous God after all,” Hannibal says at last.

“You say you should be, does that mean you aren’t?”

Hannibal allows himself a small smile. “We’ll need to relocate,” he says, sidestepping the question because it hardly bares answering. Will knows what he meant. “While an admirable get away vehicle, our little ship cannot accommodate your needs in this matter.” Will frowns in concern over this, which just makes Hannibal want to smile more. “Fortunately, I retain an apartment in the city, under an assumed name, of course.”

Will looks startled for a fraction of a second. Then he laughs. “Of course you do,” he says, fondly, Hannibal thinks, “you’ve been in a hospital for the criminally insane for the past three years, and in Florence for the year previous to that, but of course you still have a secret apartment in Maryland. I’ll bet it’s suitably ostentatious.”

“When we have completed your sacrifice, Will, please remind me to thoroughly explain aesthetics
Will snorts. “In other words, yes it is. Is this your only secret apartment?”

“It’s my only secret apartment in Maryland,” Hannibal answers, unable to keep the amusement from his voice. “You might find yourself grateful for my foresight, someday.”

“I suppose I’m grateful you had the foresight to arrange for a boat.”

“It was fortunate I was able to predict you in that instance,” he says. “I can’t always. I couldn’t have predicted this request, for example.”

Ever the pessimist, Will is frowning again. “Is that a ‘no,’ in that case?”

Hannibal wonders what Will would do if he refused his request. He’d like to find out, to watch Will negotiate his limits and worth while trying to maintain an expressionless demeanor. He wonders if Will would try to convince him, or bargain, or if he would act on his own. Would he perhaps even try to leave? Hannibal doesn’t think so. Sadly, he’s far too amenable to Will’s idea to play any games with him. It’s something he’s wanted for a long time, and the fact that Will is the one asking him for it now is almost too much to process.

“It’s not a no,” he says after a pause. “I’m surprised, but not disappointed.” He smiles again, showing crooked teeth this time. “Never disappointed.”

“Not never,” Will corrects him.

“Never again,” Hannibal amends. Will is silent. “We should move tonight.”

“Packing should be a breeze,” Will jokes. “Do I have a wardrobe there, too?”

“You’ll have to wait and see,” Hannibal tells him. “You can’t expect me to spill all my secrets at once.”
“Well, I’ll need something to wear to dinner,” Will says. “I think this warrants formal wear, don’t you?”

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Frederick is having the most amazing dream about Freddie. Or, more specifically, he is having the most fantastic dream about her skin. Her body is miles wide, supple and pristine and practically pore-less, and he crosses the white expanse of her hips in a worshipful daze, like a pilgrim crossing the desert. Since his accident, Frederick finds he notices other people’s skin with far more interest than he used to, and Miss Lounds’ is especially lovely. He wishes he could lay one of his withered hands upon it, or be embraced by her, wrapped in that glowing softness. In his dream, he walks across her barefooted, so he can feel her with every step.

Sadly, his dream is cut short in an alarming and unpleasant manner when someone slams a heavy fist down on the table by his hospital bed. Frederick splutters awake, coughing. It takes him a few moments to remember how to breathe, and then a couple more to remember how to speak. At last he says, “Hello, Agent Crawford.”

“Chilton,” Jack’s voice is icy. He raises a fist, and for a second Frederick thinks Jack is about to punch him - which would be insane - but then he sees the crumpled, glossy paper in his grip, and he can infer fairly easily what’s going on. “What on earth were you thinking?”

“I was thinking that Will Graham is a dangerous sociopath who has doubtlessly aided Hannibal Lecter’s escape, if not outright orchestrated it,” Frederick answers. It’s not like there’s anything Jack can do to him. That anyone can do to him. Fear the man with nothing to lose, he thinks, a touch hysterically.

“You’re interfering with an ongoing investigation,” Jack growls at him. “This libelous garbage - “

“Just because you’re unwilling to believe it doesn’t make it untrue, Jack,” Frederick interrupts. “I’ve always said that you underestimate Will Graham’s capacity for violence. That doe-eyed empathy disorder routine gets you every time. But that’s not the face he shows everyone, Jack, it’s not the face he showed me.” Jack’s eyes dart to his peeled, fleshless remains. Frederick knows what a sight he is. The freshly grafted skin looks too pale and pink against the rest of his roasted soul case, he knows. He swallows painfully. “You would have made him out to be a victim in all this if we’d let you.”

“He is a victim,” Jack grits past his clenched teeth.
“What was done to Will Graham,” Frederick says, “does not excuse what he has done in turn.”

“You can’t give anymore interviews.”

“You can’t do anything to stop me,” Frederick tells him, simultaneously experience the first real moment of joy he’s had since he last saw Freddie. *Smooth and white like a snake’s love,* Frederick sighs inwardly to himself. “Thanks for stopping by, Jack. It’s always nice to see a well-wisher.”

The hospital door is fixed open with a heavy magnet, and watching Jack try (unsuccessfully) to slam it behind him gives Frederick a second, even more exhilarating, spark of happiness.

*****

She’s not stupid enough to think she could ever kill them in a fair fight. She wouldn’t even be able to defend herself, if she was unarmmed. Graham is a lunatic; she’s seen that frantic energy dancing in the black of his eyes every time she’s spoken to him. It was a distant thing, at first, a shimmer somewhere far below the surface when she’d visited him in the BSHCI. She’d known she’d seen something, though, had snuck closer to his bars to see exactly what, and there it was, just the faintest shadow of madness in those persistent blue eyes. Now, she knows, that shadow must burn with vital fire, no longer restrained but blazing like twin flames out of his skull. And as for Hannibal…

Hannibal is far more controlled. *Every time he touches it’s intended to convey his strength to the touched,* Bedelia thinks. Every embrace, every time he held her against him in a waltz or cradled her skull and neck in his palm to wash her hair, even the light pressure of his hand when he’d unzip her gown upon returning home after an evening out - all of it just a little bit threatening, as if he wanted her to know, as gentle as he was being, that he could snap her in half without trying if it ever suited him to do so. He could reach into her back and pull her spin taut like a bow. Those gentle hands could crush her skull.

If she waits long enough, they’ll come for her.

Bedelia knows her only chance for survival lies in taking them unaware. Or in hiding, probably forever, and she’s not willing to do that. She’s had her fill of hiding. She has an advantage, in that she knows where they are and they do not know that she knows. She had considered telling Agent Crawford, but she no longer possesses any faith in the FBI as an organization, or Jack Crawford as an individual. If she had told him, it would only have resulted in more deaths. And worse, they would have gotten away, and her one advantage would be lost.
She’s never been especially brave. She’s relied on her cunning more than her courage, but now bravery is required, and Bedelia tries desperately to find it at the bottom of her second glass of scotch. She has to be careful; it wouldn’t do getting too brave. She needs a clear head every bit as much as a bold heart.

She takes a cab most of the way, but walks the last block and a half to the marina, keeping to the shadows. She flips the collars of her coat, her head down and hands in pockets, like a spy in a black and white movie. The thought is indulgent, but it gives her some comfort. Her right hand brushes against the handgun in her pocket. That gives her comfort, too. She would never win in a fair fight, but she doesn’t have to, because being cunning and sly is better than being strong or brave.

_Better to be all at once_, Bedelia thinks to herself, and frowns within her upturned collars. Hannibal is stronger, braver, and smarter than she or anyone else can ever hope to be. Her only chance lies with surprise; he doesn’t know she knows, and he wouldn’t expect her to walk towards him either way. She wouldn’t expect it herself, and that’s the thought that gives her the most comfort of all, because if she’s surprised by her own actions, surely Hannibal will be surprised as well. _Surprised_, she hopes, _and unprepared_.

The marina is silent when she arrives. It’s nearly midnight. The reflection of the waning moon floats peacefully upon the surface of the calm black waters, the only sound the soft slap of water on the breaker. She takes stock of the scene, from where she stands in the shadows above the dock. Their boat is right where she remembered it, lightless and silent. And inside…she closes her eyes, attempting to prepare herself for what she’ll find. She’s hardly walking into a charnel house. She knows what it’s like to live with Hannibal; whatever _idiosyncrasies_ he might indulge in, his aesthetic is pretty distant from Ed Gein’s. There’s unlikely to be anything visually horrific down there, though she imagines seeing Hannibal free again will frighten her more than any amount of molding dismembered bodies possibly could. _Nothing he does is more terrifying than he is himself_, she thinks, _than the knowledge of what he could do - would very much like to do - to you_. And she’s afraid, oh, so afraid, to go inside.

She remembers a long, long time ago, back when Will Graham was only a pair of words, only a vague concept of a person discussed before sharing an amicable glass of wine in her living room. She remembers herself when she had the privilege of being gentler. She remembers Hannibal, the way he used to seem to her, and she’s astounded that there was ever a time when she didn’t realize he was dangerous.

Her steps are light; she’s opted against heels, for once. In her right jacket pocket, her hand clasps firmly over the firearm. She rehearses. She will enter the cabin and scan the room. She’ll shoot whomever she sees first through her coat, then throw herself down and to the side and take aim on the other one. Then she’ll shoot them each in the head, just to be certain. She plays it in her mind, trying different slight variations, preparing herself so that she will not hesitate. There won’t be time for hesitation. The slightest pause could mean her death. It’s important she not be more surprised than they are, after all.
But she is surprised. She is extravagantly, horribly surprised, because the cabin is empty, and bedroom and bathroom are empty as well. She knows she hasn’t made a mistake. They were here, even if there is nothing here now to indicate their presence. She tries to determine if she is more disappointed or relieved. And then she hears footsteps, descending towards her.

*****

Forgotten isn’t something Molly thought she would be.

He’d told her he would be different when he got back, but he hadn’t said anything to imply he wouldn’t come back at all. After that horrible night she and Wally spent running for their lives, Molly hasn’t known for certain whether she’d be able to let Will back into both their lives, but she’d certainly expected to get the chance to consider or deny him.

She can’t bring herself to accept that he’s - what? - run off with Hannibal Lecter? He’s just a name to her, just blurry photos over garish headlines, just Will’s raspy half-confessions when she’d wake up to an empty bed and track him down to the living room or kitchen or front porch and extract the details of his dreams. Maybe not all the details, she thinks now. But she also can’t accept that Will is really dead. So what does that leave her?

Apparently, it leaves her nine dogs to feed, and even though she knows it wasn’t the Chinese dog food that poisoned her pack before, she’s still too stung by guilt to do anything other than mix it fresh herself, like she’s seen him do a hundred times. The dogs will appreciate it, but she supposes they shouldn’t count on it for much longer. If she’s really about to be a single mother - again - then preparing dog food out of fresh ingredients for nine dogs doesn’t seem like it will be a practical use of her time.

She’s thinking that maybe she can get Wally to do it, as one of his chores, and spooning the last of the food into one of the stainless steel bowls on the porch - where one of the dogs gobbles it almost before it can hit the bowl - when the sound of a car startles her into looking up.
“Hello, Bedelia,” Will says, pacing down the last shallow steps into the cabin, apparently unconcerned by the gun Bedelia has trained on him. He is wearing a suit that might be navy or might be black; it’s too dim inside the boat to tell. Blue, she thinks, Hannibal would want it to match his eyes. He looks damned good for a man who survived both the Red Dragon and Hannibal Lecter, but there’s a dark red line twisting across one cheek. “What a fortunate surprise. Would you believe it, I was just about to pay you a visit myself. And here you are.” There’s an edge in his voice that she hasn’t heard often. In fact, she thinks the only time he’s sounded like this was during his final appointment with her, when he’d told her she should leave town.

In retrospect, she probably should have listened to him.

Her mind is a blank white luster of fear. Only by whispering can she keep her voice steady. “Where is Hannibal?”

“Why don’t you shoot me and see if he shows up?” Will asks, and she realizes immediately that he’s right.

She lowers the gun, but keeps it in hand. “Hiding behind your boyfriend’s reputation?” she smirks. “How…dangerous of you.”

“Just trying to save you some trouble,” Will takes a step forward. “As much as you would enjoy killing me right now, you’re smart enough to know I’m right. Being smart spoils a lot of things, doesn’t it, Bedelia?”

“It certainly spoiled being the bride of Frankenstein,” she rejoins, “at least, it did for me.” She steps backwards, further into the cabin. He’s in between her and the only exit. She can’t kill him - not without being able to immediately dispatch Hannibal as well. He won’t come for her right away; if he’s near by - which, she thinks, he almost certainly is - he won’t come rushing now. He’ll take her
at some later date, and they’ll find her, a piece of breathtaking artwork, her flesh spread out like a halo around her ribs and hips, her face serene atop a skeleton shrugging out of its skin, preserved in perfect precision in a block of clear ice, like the treacherous sinners of Judecca, the innermost ring of Dante’s Hell. He’ll scrawl, “Vexilla Regis prodeunt inferni,” in her blood over the ice, and after they find her he’ll kill them all, one by one, till he’s the only human left alive. The banners of the King of Hell draw closer. Just like Lucifer, Hannibal will devour and excrete them.

No, she can’t kill him and reasonably expect to live, but maybe she can wound him, and escape. If she can make it to the main street she can take shelter in a crowded bar, call Jack Crawford, call the police, call a cab and ask the driver to take her to the airport, buy a ticket to anywhere else in the world.

“So,” she says, stepping backwards again, even as Will takes another step towards her. “Hannibal finally convinced you to rid yourself of temptation by yielding to it.”

“So it would certainly seem,” Will says, stepping closer to her again. Bedelia decides not to give ground this time, and Will smirks in sick amusement at her determination.

“I wonder,” she smirks back, her finger stroking the trigger as she shifts her weight, preparing to run, “what else you’ve yielded to recently.”

He moves before she can raise her arm, like a blur, advancing passed her and wrapping one arm around to pin both her arms against her sides. His other hand darts up and she feels the prick of a syringe in her neck.

The room spins, edges whitening. For all her cleverness, for all her bravery, Bedelia is falling, into a blank void, the last thing she’s aware of the sound of heavy footsteps descending towards her.

********

The kettle whistles, and Molly pours the steaming water into Alana’s mug and then her own. She sits opposite her guest, holding her cup under her chin and closing her eyes. She inhales the scent of lavender and chamomile, and smiles softly. At her heart, Molly is a happy person. Circumstances in her life have often tested that core, but she’s remained optimistic nonetheless. She thinks it comes from being practical; she knows how to focus on what needs to be done, and that gets her through the worst of things.
It’s one of the many things Will had told her he loved about her. Her smile falters, and she opens her eyes.

“I’m sorry for coming by unannounced like this,” Alana says. “I wasn’t sure how to contact you, and to be honest, I prefer not to telegraph my movement. It’s unsafe for me, at the moment.”

“I’m sorry,” Molly tells her sincerely, and Alana smiles a little sadly.

“Thank you,” she says. “How are you?”

Molly breathes out heavily. “Confused, mostly,” she says, telling the truth. Something about Alana compels her to be honest, though she’s always been given to frankness. Maybe she feels an affinity for the woman, knowing that she had also once loved Will and been unable to pull him back to stability and safety. Will had told her before that Alana used to be a very different person, before Dr. Lecter finished rearranging her. Molly wonders how similar they might once have been.

“I imagine you have a lot of questions,” Alana says. “That’s part of why I’m here. I doubt Jack will have thought of giving you time to ask.”

“Not as such,” Molly agrees, “though to his credit I think he’s lost more sleep over this than I have. Resiliency runs pretty deep in my blood.”

“In Will’s, too.”

Molly’s face darkens. She’s resilient, and optimistic, and practical, but this is hard. It’s been hard and getting harder. She sent Wally to visit his grandparents (her late husband’s parents) in Oregon before she even left the hospital. An FBI agent in shades and a dark jacket drove her son and walked him to the boarding gate; Will was unaccounted for.

“So I can just ask you anything and you’ll answer?”

“If I can.”

“Okay,” Molly frowns, blows on her tea. “Is my husband alive? In your opinion,” she hastens to
add, at Alana’s raised eyebrow.

“In my opinion,” Alana says, “almost without a doubt, yes.”

“And…Dr. Lecter?”

“I’m certain Hannibal is alive,” Alana says, “and I’m equally certain he would not let Will die.”

“But why?” Molly blurts. “Will always told me they were enemies, that Dr. Lecter was an obsessive maniac who repeatedly tried to kill him.”

“He told you the truth. Or part of it.”

“But they aren’t enemies?”

“There’s not a word for what they are to one another, for what they have been or for what, I think, they are becoming.” Alana sips her tea. “Nemeses came close once, maybe. But for most of their association they’ve each had their own conceptions about what they are to one another. What’s different now, and what makes this a particularly dangerous time for Will, and for all of us, is that their images of what they are to one another have begun to correspond.”

“No offense,” Molly says, “but this is all actually just making me more confused.”

“Why don’t you tell me what Will told you?”

So Molly does. It’s a simple story, although as she repeats it now she realizes there are holes she never noticed before, incongruities she should have noticed - why didn’t she notice?

“He said that he met Dr. Lecter while working with the FBI on the Minnesota Shrike case, and for several months they worked together. Then, Will realized there was something off about Lecter, and Lecter retaliated by attempting to frame him for murder. Will said you didn’t believe him, at first,” she watches Alana’s face, but there’s no change in the doctor’s expression. “He said you and Lecter were friends,” more than friends, “and old colleagues, and Lecter had a natural charisma that Will noticeably lacks, so it was easy for him to convince everyone Will was an unstable murderer. After
he was cleared of the charges, Will told me, he managed to expose Dr. Lecter for what he was.”

Alana sips her tea. “So in this version of the events,” she says, “Will and Hannibal have a strictly professional relationship that becomes animosity after Will discovers the truth?”

Molly nods. There’s a sinking feeling beginning in her chest. How did Will convince everyone? And how did he realize the truth? And why would Dr. Lecter target Will so specifically and relentlessly, as Will had told her he had? And why hadn’t she thought to question any of these things before? She’s not a stupid person. She doesn’t generally accept without question. Why had she allowed herself to in this case?

“How would you describe their relationship,” Molly hears herself asking, but she isn’t sure she wants an answer.

Alana regards her calmly, seeming to sense her fears. Finally she answers. “Intimate,” she says. “No one has ever known Hannibal as well as Will Graham does. And Will…”

“No one has ever known Will,” Molly swallows, “except Hannibal.”

Her guest says nothing, but the look she gives Molly through the steam rising from their mugs is all the confirmation Molly needs. There’s pity in her eyes, which stings almost as bad as knowing how wrong she was, how blind. “He told me what he wanted me to believe,” she says, “and I believed him without question.”

“People like Will and Hannibal,” Alana says, and Molly flinches at the easy way the other woman assigns them to the same category, “are good at getting people to believe them.” There’s a pause, and then she adds, “You can’t blame yourself. Even when you’re very smart, they know how to make you overlook things.”

“I don’t blame myself,” Molly says, “I blame Will.”

“That’s appropriate, but you might also consider his motives,” Alana says. “I doubt he meant to hurt you.”

“No,” Molly agrees, “it was probably just easier not to tell me the truth. But it was unfair. He put me and my son in danger. And now where is he? Maybe I should just trust the Tattler; it seems I
should’ve been putting more faith in the tabloids all along.”

“What he did to you was unforgivable,” Alana says, “but it’s understandable, too. He thought he could free himself from that life with you, and the truth wouldn’t matter anymore. It would just be a distractor. It would have hurt him to tell and confused you to hear, and what difference did it make if he was determined to lead a good, sane life? He almost did it, too. If Jack hadn’t come for him, I think he would have been happy here for the rest of his life.”

Molly is silent. “Am I in danger?” she finally asks.

Alana’s expression is appreciative, as if she’s happy that Molly is finally asking the right questions. “I don’t think so,” she answers, tilting her head slightly. “With them it’s best to be a little over-cautious, but Will isn’t a bad person.” Molly scoffs at that, “for all he hid the truth from you, he really is the man you married. Or at least, a part of him is.”

“Hannibal sent the Red Dragon to my house,” Molly says, rather than commenting on what Alana has just said. “Shouldn’t I worry about his attention, more than Will’s?”

Alana shakes her head, brown bob glistening in the sunlight streaming through the kitchen windows. “He’s not interested in you,” Alana says, “now that he has Will.” Molly tries, and fails, to hide her flinch. Alana graciously continues without commenting; Molly doesn’t think she can bear comfort or kindness from this woman right now. “He won’t want to risk losing Will by targeting someone close to him needlessly. And there’s no need, any longer, to target you.”

That’s hardly a comforting thought. It only helps Molly remember how much she’s lost. She gazes out the window at the snowy yard, where the dogs have finished their lunch and are sniffing about, digging holes in the snow. “I don’t think I need to know any more,” she says.

“You can still help him,” Alana says, abruptly, and Molly’s eyes shoot back to her. “Will still loves you, he just has never been very good at controlling himself as far as Hannibal is concerned. But his relationship with you helped him keep himself together for years. When I saw him for the first time last month I was struck by how good he looks, and that’s your doing. If we can remind him, he’ll come back to us. Come back to you, Molly.”

She frowns, and considers the doctor’s words. This is so messed up. Molly’s lived through losing the man she loves to cancer, and starting her life over with a baby and a fear of the dark at twenty-eight. She had lived through a lot, more suffering than a lifetime needs, before she even met Will Graham. Now, what’s happening to her now, what Alana Bloom is asking of her, is the most messed up thing of all.
“I don’t want him back,” Molly says, after a long silence. “Maybe if it was just me I would, but I have to think about Wally, too. Still,” she says, and Alana’s disappointed expression shifts, “I love Will. I want him…I want him to be well.”

She gazes out the window, at the trees, and the snow, and the dogs. Buster is flopped on his back, wiggling happily in the powdery snow, as if he is making a snow angel. His tail wags a semi-circle clearing beneath him. Behind him, three of the other dogs race back and forth, struggling over a large, forked branch. When she closes her eyes, she can see Will out there, part of the pack, smiling back at her.

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“Are you drawing us?”

“Does it look like I am drawing us?”

Will frowns. It definitely looks like them, in some kind of ancient Grecian-looking uniforms, with a legion of similarly clad soldiers depicted behind them in less detail. However, if he says yes, Will feels certain Hannibal will just say something like, “How interesting,” and imply that it’s in Will’s imagination, instead of something he is obviously doing to evoke a response. So Will says nothing, and watches Hannibal, head bent over the paper on the desk. The secret apartment Hannibal owns under an assumed name has turned out to be the penthouse of an extremely upscale building, accessible by private elevator. The study in this alternate apartment lacks the familiarity of the old one, the one in which Will remembers spending hours losing his mind, but there is still something nostalgic about this new room. It echoes the place Will remembers, furnished, as it was, with the same hand. It smacks of Hannibal, of Hannibal’s presence, his style, and Will feels a stab of longing for that distant past, those past versions of themselves traversing a distant landscape of subterfuge and discovery.

The silence stretches on a moment, and then Hannibal says, “I am representing the Sacred Band of Thebes,” as if this is something Will should immediately understand. He searches his memory for any knowledge of the reference.

“I think I have a couple of their albums,” Will jokes, to buy time, and maybe draw Hannibal into saying something that will jog his memory.

“The Theban Band,” Hannibal says, apparently choosing to ignore Will’s comment entirely, “was a
4th century army comprised entirely of lovers.”

Will frowns. “Like an orgy army?”

Hannibal’s teeth show in his annoyance. If Will were anyone else, he’s pretty sure Hannibal would be contemplating dinner recipes at this moment. Actually, there’s a good chance he’s thinking about it anyway, even if Will’s pretty sure he wouldn’t go through with it over something so minor. If Hannibal is going to become homicidal over every bad joke Will makes about his weird pretentious interests then they’re going to lead an especially fraught existence.

“Not like an orgy army,” Hannibal replies, “though what an intriguing idea. I would love to hear more about what you imagine that would entail.”

Will can feel his face heating up. “You were telling me about the Sacred Band or Theban Band or whatever your band is called.”

Hannibal smirks, a little lasciviously, Will thinks. “Another time then. The Sacred Band of Thebes, also called the Theban Band, was an army made up of pairs of lovers,” Hannibal clarifies. Will can feel his traitorous face reddening under Hannibal’s penetrating gaze. “They were a nigh unstoppable force, for generations. Love brings out the best in both the lover and the beloved. What man would not die a thousand deaths, rather than abandon his beloved to danger, or be seen by him behaving dishonorably or with cowardice?” He pauses to shade in the beard on the figure he is drawing - the figure Will still feels, with increasing discomfort, looks an awful lot like him. “In order to finally defeat the Band, Phillip of Macedonia had to bring down every man, for none would yield. When he realized who they had been that he had killed, he wept.”

Will’s mouth has gone dry. Hannibal isn’t looking at him anymore, but he still feels skewered by that gaze. He can feel his pulse beginning to quicken, and drops his eyes to rest on the pencil Hannibal is moving deftly across the paper. He can hear the scrape of the graphite over the page.

“If Jack Crawford thinks he can stop either of us,” Will says, “he’ll have to be prepared to stop us both.” He swallows laboriously. *It might be better,* he thinks, *just to leave it at that.* But some traitorous part of him carries on speaking, “But we aren’t lovers.” And then suddenly the atmosphere in the room changes, and there’s no longer enough air to get a full breath.

“Every heart sings a song, Will,” Hannibal says, face inscrutable and accent thick, “incomplete until another whispers back. I knew from the moment I met you, that I would find my answering whisper in you.” Will’s heart thuds riotously within him. His blood is pumping so quickly he is lightheaded, and his ears fill with white noise. A few drops of sweat snake their way down the nape of his neck to
vanish below his collar. He sees Hannibal raise his head from the page, and cannot stop himself from looking up and into Hannibal’s magnetic red stare.

When Hannibal speaks again, his voice is the one Will heard in his dreams and waking reveries, that echo he turned from during three years of aching self-imposed torment. “I love you, Will,” Hannibal says.

Will chokes on air. He is momentarily unsure whether the Hannibal in front of him is real, or some ghost reaching out across time the way Hannibal had reached with his mind, with his imagination, all those years Will managed to keep himself away. If he reaches out to touch him, will Hannibal dissolve like smoke at his finger tips? He wonders, but coherent thought, and breathing, comes with a struggle.

Hannibal allows him to splutter and cough in an undignified manner, watching him with with a silent inscrutability Will’s seen often enough over the years. Will can feel himself starting to panic as his lungs struggles to take in a full breath, and his crashing heart accelerates the blood shooting through him. He snatches the glass of scotch from where it is set, forgotten and sweating, at the corner of the desk. The amber liquid burns warmly in his belly, and he takes a deep and shaking breath. Stay calm, he tells himself, before realizing just how late it is for that.

“You aren’t capable,” he says, when he at last can breathe again, and his composure has begun to sneak back.

“Of all the people in your world, I am the only one capable,” Hannibal contradicts. His voice is even, emotionless, without a trace of anger. There’s a heaviness to it, however, a fire burning behind the cool weight of the syllables uttered in Hannibal’s courtly accent. Will knows he should be wary of that tone; it is too like the way Hannibal’s voice sounded as he stood over Will in his kitchen in Baltimore, long ago, watching Will bleed out at his feet.

Will supposes Hannibal could mean love in a safer, platonic context. There is nothing, after all, about his tone or expression to imply a romantic interpretation of the word. But Will is not going to comfort himself with a forced misunderstanding. It would be a dangerous tactic, likely to irritate Hannibal, who knows that Will understands exactly what he means.

“No one else knows you, Will,” he says, voice quieter now, but no less terrifying, not least because of what he is saying, “just as no one but you knows me.”

Will swallows, fixing his eyes on Hannibal’s shoulder with a frown. He feels the need to break the intensity of the moment, still unable to breathe properly in the thick airless atmosphere crackling
between them. “How long?” he asks, already knowing the answer, but hoping Hannibal will just indulge him and answer. *I know because he told me, because I heard his voice in my head,* but even just the thought of it is too ridiculous to bear contemplation.

Hannibal smirks, and shows mercy. “Since the moment I met you,” he answers, and again, hearing these words out loud is so different that Will’s body reacts, intense and immediate. “I knew, from that first encounter, that you were one who would be able to understand me. That I would be able to understand you, and that you desperately needed to be understood. You - magnificent, stifled creature, a wolf muzzled like a dog and used like a bloodhound. It was clear they had never, could never see you. Do you know why, Will?”

He shakes his head, swallowing again. His mouth has gone so dry it’s almost painful; he can feel his lips chapping slightly.

“It is because you are the answer to Samson’s riddle, Will, the honey in the lion. The Philistines have no reference point to allow them to understand you, but to me you are so obvious. What is stronger than a lion? What is sweeter than honey? What else, but you?”

Will says nothing, just focuses on letting his eyes glaze and trying to breathe evenly (which has become shockingly difficult). He’s not certain how much longer his legs will hold him, so he lets himself sink into the chair opposite Hannibal’s desk.

Hannibal smiles, not unkindly. “You’ve known for a long time, Will. Is hearing it now really such a surprise?”

“I don’t,” Will says, finally. His voice rasps out painfully, “I don’t feel that way, I couldn’t. After everything you’ve done…”

“Dear boy,” Hannibal says, seemingly unaffected by Will’s words. If anything, he sounds amused by them, by the vehemence of Will’s denial. “What do you imagine love is?”

There’s a sound from the other room, and Will turns towards the door, even though he knows he won’t see anything there. When he turns back, Hannibal is still staring at him. He swallows, and purposefully looks anywhere other than those eyes. “I think our guest must have awoken,” Will says, glad of the distraction, even though it means the beginning of trouble.

He can sense that Hannibal is still watching him, and Will dares a glance up from beneath his lashes.
Hannibal looks distinctly un-rejected. In fact, he almost looks pleased. Christ, what a maniac, Will thinks, averting his gaze again quickly. He hears Hannibal stand, and exhales the breath he didn’t realize he’d been holding.

“I’ll see that she’s comfortable,” Hannibal says. He pauses, before leaving the room, and Will looks up again to see what’s wrong. Hannibal is wearing a different expression altogether now, brows slightly drawn and mouth creased in a remote frown. He seems hesitant, as though, for once, he is not quite sure of what he has to say next. Will raises an eyebrow, curious at the sudden shift in attitude. Finally, Hannibal murmurs, “You don’t have to be there, Will. You’ve shown amazing progress. But this will be different than what we did to Ingram or the Dragon.”

Battling to keep the incredulity off his face, Will forces himself to consider what Hannibal is offering, rather than rejecting it outright. This is going to be different, in more ways than one. He can’t pretend he isn’t scared. He has no idea what his response will be, and, he realizes, this is probably why Hannibal is so concerned, too. Killing murderers has felt righteous. What he’s preparing to do now - what he’s practically demanded Hannibal do - is a far cry from righteousness. No, this is closer to something Hannibal would do, Will thinks, hurting someone over an irritation rather than out of any ethical justification. Granted, Bedelia has been a massive irritation, and she’s apparently added attempting to murder them to the list of her poor qualities, but she isn’t a bad person. Or she wasn’t before Hannibal reshaped her. Without virtue as an excuse, and without passion to blind him, can Will tolerate this level of cruelty? Or, will he balk, run back to the moral high ground?

Only one way to find out, Will supposes. “No, I want to be there,” he says. “I can help…”

“Very well, then,” Hannibal says, stepping around the desk and momentarily - and almost definitely on purpose - invading Will’s personal space on his way toward the door. “I’ll make the preparations. Would you mind fetching the bag that’s on the bed in the master bedroom?”

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Hannibal walks out of the room, and Will watches, feeling conflicted. On the one hand, he’s desperate to be out of Hannibal’s intoxicating presence for a moment, so that his head can clear and he can think critically about what’s just taken place between them. But on the other hand, he still feels a stab of anxiety anytime Hannibal is out of sight for too long. Hannibal’s - suitably ostentation - secret hideaway is a good deal larger than their little boat had been. Will remains seated, forcing himself to be calm before he stands. He takes one more look at the pencil sketch Hannibal’s left on his desk, and it is undeniably them. The one that is clearly Will even has a faint scar across his cheek, an optimistic prediction of what the wound will look like a year or two into the future.

I should probably be more upset by this, Will thinks, but he can’t conjure much disgust. Hannibal is right, of course, he’s known for years how the other man felt, long before he’d gotten confirmation
from Bedelia, some part of him had always known. And at one point - at one point a long time ago, there might have even been a moment when Will imagined a very different sort of future involving himself and Hannibal. He remembers the look in Hannibal’s eyes, when Will had entered his office behind Jack Crawford, after Tobias Budge’s death.

“I feel like I have dragged you into my world,” he’d said, leaning against Hannibal’s desk, looming, a little, maybe, and completely unaware of how wrong he was. Hannibal’s eyes had been rapt, his expression awed, as if he were seeing Will for the first time.

“No,” he’d said. There was a drying trickle of blood on his chin, and Will had forced himself not to lean down to wipe it away with his thumb. He’d imagined, though, the way Hannibal’s skin would have felt against the rough pad of his thumb, the way his lower lip would have moved. “I got here on my own. But I appreciate the company.”

It’s laughable now, to think of how protective he’d felt towards Hannibal at that moment. How he’d worried about dragging that radiant creature into his world of murderers and death, not realizing it was Hannibal who was drawing him into a world of nightmares, and not the other way round. A look had passed between them, both slightly overwhelmed with gratitude at seeing one another alive, as if they were seeing one another clearly at last (although, in retrospect, that hadn’t been the case). Maybe they were both just seeing for the first time how important their friendship had become. It had seemed inevitable then that they would become more to one another than what they had been, and in a way that’s absolutely what did happen. But at the time he hadn’t foreseen the fevers, the nightmares, waving a gun in Hannibal’s face, laying corpse’s at Hannibal’s feet, pouring his life out at the touch of Hannibal’s hands. He’d just seen someone whose face he’d wanted to touch. It could have been so simple. It seemed like it would be. But it hadn’t been.

Now, Will runs a shaking hand over his face, gripping the back of the chair for balance as he stands. He’s always known, and so Hannibal’s confession changes nothing, but at the same time it changes everything. He did it for a reason, confessing as a catalyst to set some larger scheme in motion, surely. In order to decipher his goals, Will knows he has to determine what it is Hannibal wants.

There’s only one thing he can think of in answer to that question, and it’s the same thing Hannibal’s always wanted: him.

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It’s too dark to see, when Bedelia wakes. She tries to sit up, but it’s made more difficult by the fact that her wrists and ankles are bound with what feel like zip ties. She can feel the plastic biting into her flesh when she twists, but if she lets herself remain limp the bonds are tight enough not to cut off the flow of blood to her hands and feet. The darkness is disorienting. It feels like the room is swaying around her, and there’s no visual reference point to ground herself with. Her head doesn’t exactly
hurt, but there’s a fog she can’t shake, and her thoughts feel slow and hazy beneath the lingering drugs and the fear flooding her mind.

And there is an awful lot of fear. It’s hard to breathe through the horror. Bedelia thinks of the teen scream queens from movies, those excessively bloody ones in which half the dialogue is shrieking. She thinks of their faces, lengthened by their wailing, thinks of the kind of terror that could make a person scream so uncontrollably. To scream like that indicates a loss of self, a loss of clarity. She has never been given to panic or hysteria.

Now, though, she feels a scream, deep within her, that could rival those of the theater. Buried inside her is the possibility of losing all control, in the face of this great fear. And that prospect is the most frightening thing so far.

The opening of the door distracts her from her thoughts. He enters the room on the shaft of light from the hallway, his silhouette distressing in its familiarity. No, her heart beats frantic in her brain, no, no, oh please.

“Good evening, Dr. Du Maurier,” he says, in that languorous accented voice she’s tried hard not to hear in her dreams, or even in place of her own internal monologue. He’s just a dark shape moving towards her through the dim light. Please, no. “It’s a pleasure to see you again. Not a sentiment you share, I imagine.”

She swallows, trying to keep her eyes focused on him as he moves closer. It forces her neck into an uncomfortable position. At first, she considers how to answer him, but finds that, in this moment, unexpectedly, she does not know what to say.

“You’re probably wondering what happens next,” he says, and stops, looming over her. His face is a blank black space above her, barely distinguishable from the darkness all around it. It is horrible to see, but Bedelia finds it difficult to close her eyes. And then he turns on the lights - bright, hot lamp light right above her - and her pupils shrink so quickly it is painful, and she finds that she can see him, and it is much, much worse than any dark looming phantom could ever pretend to be.

Through the terror that’s gripping her, she hears herself speaking: “No first class flight to Europe, this time.”

He arches an eyebrow, amused. “No, I’m afraid not,” he says. “Your jet set days are done, my dear doctor.” She shuts her eyes at the words, careful of the tears that brim beneath her lashes. Now at last, there is no out thinking the monster, no hope of any kind, and still my mind cannot conceive defeat, she thinks. It’s hard to admit when one’s beaten; even in the face of insurmountable
evidence, we want to believe there’s a way out. We know, of course, there isn’t. It’s a room with no
doors, filling steadily with poisonous gas, and there is no way to get free, no way anyone could
possibly help in time. And yet the knowledge of it is not the same as belief.

“Are you curious what I’ll make of you?” Hannibal asks.

She exhales something that’s almost like laughter. “I can’t say that I am.”

“Pity,” he says. “I was quite looking forward to showing you.”

Her eyes fly open at that, brow knitting in confusion. What does he mean? What can he mean? What
new terror?

There’s a sound at the door, and then Will Graham is there, scowling down through the bright lights
and drug haze clinging to her. She shrinks, involuntarily, against the mattress, heart hammering.

“Sleep well, Bedelia?” Will asks, archly.

“She like the dead,” she tells him.

Will smiles that deranged smile. God, how did he manage to pull the wool over Crawford’s eyes for
so long? How does he still manage, really, since the man still seems confused about whether he’s
trying to apprehend or rescue Will. He’s terrifying, the violence in him so conspicuous it may as well
be a flashing neon beacon. “Not quite like,” he says, then turns to Hannibal, hefting a heavy looking
doctor’s bag of caramel colored leather. “Where do you want this stuff?”

“On the table, there,” Hannibal gestures to something out of her line of vision. “Pull it closer to the
bed. And, Bedelia,” he reaches out to touch her, and she can’t help but recoil, despite the uselessness
of the reflex. She doesn’t want to feel his careful hands on her, gently insinuating the damage he
could do her. Is about to do her. He ignores her flinch, placing one hand under her shoulders and the
other over her hips. “Forgive the intrusion,” he says, hauling her closer to the edge of the bed. She
fights her instinct to struggle against him, and wins. But barely. Whatever death awaits her, she is
determined to meet it with all the dignity she can. Her life may end in unreasoning screaming, but it’s
too early to begin the screams just yet. She feels it, waiting in the pit of her stomach. “Much better.”
He lifts a drip bag from the bed above her head, hooks it to a little metal stand he wheels into view.
The room is looking more like a hospital than a slaughterhouse, but she’s not sure that’s something to
feel optimistic about. What is he planning to do?
"I don’t want you to be alarmed, Bedelia,” he is saying, his hands dexterously preparing the IV, “once you are hooked up to this solution, you’ll lose all feeling below the waist. The effect is temporary; there’s no need to panic. It merely mimics paralysis."

She gives a hysterical laugh at that - there’s no need for alarm, says the beast as he bolts down your blood - but silences when he presses the needle into the vein at the inside of her elbow, the effects almost instantaneous. The numbness is strange, almost like a limb going to sleep. Hannibal puts an arm behind her shoulders again, pulling her forward and arranging the pillow behind her so that she reclines at a forty five degree angle. She can see her legs now, but she can’t feel it when Hannibal pinches and prods at them. His eyes study her, watching for a reaction, until he is satisfied that none (besides the look of frightened confusion) is forthcoming.

Then he sits on the edge of the bed, and plucks a felt tipped pen from the low end table Will has dragged closer to the bed frame. He places his index and middle finger against the curve of her patella, and draws a line two inches above her kneecap. She feels her sinking heart beat a fraction faster. “Why don’t you sit on the other side of her, Will? You can help best from there.”

The bed dips beneath her chest and shoulders, but she’s too captivated by what’s happening to her knee to look up. Hannibal is drawing on her, drawing a fish-mouth shaped curve across her thigh. She watches, curious, dreading, as he replaces the pen on the table, and selects a scalpel instead. Her stomach flops. Is it time for the screams yet? Her breath hitches sharply as he leans down, hands by her calves, out of sight, slicing, and she feels nothing. When he sits back up she sees he’s cut the zip tie binding her ankles, and her legs are free now, spread slightly beneath the skirt that’s riding up her hips. She’d worry about indecency if there wasn’t currently a deranged sadist crouched above her with a scalpel.

Why don’t they just kill me? she wonders, still struggling to keep her breathing and heart rate steady. It’s a battle she’s losing; she already sounds like she’s just climbed five flights of stairs, and her heart is hammering in her chest. She’s vaguely worried about that, about her heart pumping too fast, about blood flowing too quick and free out of whatever hole he’s planning to dig with that little blade. But then again, she has the notion that in a very short amount of time she’ll begin to view death as a mercy. Which, perhaps, is the answer to her question, and would also explain why Hannibal hasn’t chosen to sedate her.

He might just be amusing himself, she admits, forcing herself to think critically about what is happening, and why. If she’s going to survive, she will need to wield her mind like a weapon; it is, after all, the only one that remains to her. Breathing hard, she forces herself to think through the stunning terror of the situation. It seems like there’s more to it than just a whim. Hannibal is certainly capable of this degree of cruelty, but he is also courteous. They’ve been friendly. It seems somewhat out of character. The real question, she thinks, is what is Will Graham doing here? Or, is that the answer to why Hannibal is doing this to her in this fashion? Is that why she fears him, almost more than Hannibal? Her heart thuds, dully, in her ears.
The first cut he makes is shallow, and she feels like she’s watching it happen to someone else. Someone far away, whom she’s never met, will never meet. She can hear the thudding of her blood so loud in her temples, it sounds like the ocean roaring inside her. He retraces the line of the incision with his scalpel, pushing deeper to cut, slowly, into the layer of fat below. Bedelia can see the viscous yellow tissue opening up at the pressure of his hands and the bite of the blade. It’s surprisingly bloodless, at least so far. She closes her eyes, focusing aggressively on her breathing, forcing herself to count between inhalations. *Oh God, oh God.* At first she can barely count to two between exhalations. *Even now - the feeling of disbelief, the sense this can’t be happening, not to me.* Eventually, however, she’s able to count all the way to five. It’s easier with her eyes closed, easier to block out what she can’t see or feel happening.

Until she can smell it.

Her eyes flutter open at the smell of burning meat, and immediately blow wide at the sight of her leg, flayed open, the flesh sagging like a loose garment around the open wound. Will pulls the excess flesh back with a pronged retractor, while Hannibal has both hands working within the sunset-colored mess of skin, blood, fat and muscle. It’s hard to see exactly what is happening, but there’s a faint wisp of smoke escaping from his hands, and she realizes he’s using a handheld cautery wand to cut and burn through the muscle tissue around the bone, layer by layer laying her open.

The terror is abrupt and overwhelming. Her lower half is immobile, but she lurches as best she can with her torso, tilting forward towards Hannibal. “Whoa there,” Will chides, voice distant below the fog the drugs have sunk her in. His hands are on her shoulders, pushing her back into the pillows and holding her there. She’s annoyed to realize what little effort it takes for him to restrain her.

“Careful, Bedelia,” Hannibal warns. “You don’t want me to slip and damage your femoral nerve.”

Her response is somewhere between a sob and a laugh. The full knowledge and reality of what is happening hits her like a fist to the chest, knocking all the air from her lungs. *They’ll keep me alive, she realizes, keep me fresh, pluck from me as needed, as one would from an herb garden. They’ll enjoy me gradually, watch me dwindle till I’m nothing. Oh Christ, I’ll go mad.*

What they’ve already done is atrocious; she knows she couldn’t get up and walk away on the mess they’ve made, even if it weren’t for the drugs deadening the half of her they’re currently removing.

That scream lodged within her feels closer to the surface now, yearning for release. She forces the urge to subside, but can’t ignore it much longer. All she has left is her mind, and if she starts screaming now she knows she won’t be able to stop until they sedate her, not because they’re worried someone will hear her - she knows no one will - but because they’re annoyed and bored by
her. The only way one survives Hannibal is by amusing him; she hopes the same will prove true of Will Graham. She knows better than to appeal to his mercy. Of course, Will’s never found her half as interesting as Hannibal does. What is it he’d said to her? That no one would be able to say she didn’t have it coming?

Closing her eyes against the sight of Hannibal working, Bedelia forces herself to breathe as evenly as possible. She doesn’t try to block out the sound and smell of his work, just processes. It’s clear they don’t intend to dispatch her just yet. If she can make it out of this building - out of this room - or make contact with someone - Crawford, the police, enthusiastic but misguided bounty hunters - she stands a chance at survival. In this moment, survival is all there is. She’ll be down a limb, but mourning it now will serve no purpose but to slow her wits and keep her from escape. She needs to remain calm - or appear to remain calm. She needs to regain her composure, to think outside of what is happening to her body, to notice what is happening around her.

She knows she needs to think quickly, because God knows how long this amputation will take, or whether they expect her to remain conscious for the entirety of it. She’s their third victim, unless there are some the FBI isn’t aware of yet, but she thinks she’s likely just the third. If there were others they wouldn’t try to hide it. They’ve had some experience killing together by now, but what they’re choosing to do to her is different. In all their time together, Bedelia never saw Hannibal toy with his prey like this, though she’d known it was a possibility based on his past crimes. The ones she read about in tabloids she leafed through but never purchased, walking through the streets of Florence with his grocery list memorized and the instinct to flee growing fainter every day, as he’d trained her to ignore her natural inclinations.

“To think,” she says, satisfied with the relative evenness of her voice, “I thought I’d seen your cruelest edges.”

“You knew better,” he says. It’s strange to know he’s touching her without being able to feel it. She keeps her eyes closed. She’s not ready to face taking a better look at what he’s done, what he’s doing. Not yet, not yet. “Even if I never let you see for yourself.”

“All that time behind the veil with me on the other side, Bedelia, and you’re still surprised?” Will’s voice comes from above her, cold and sneering. He’s still restraining her, his fingers pressed into her shoulders and clavicle as he keeps her back against the pillows. Her skin crawls where he’s touching her.

“I’m certainly surprised to wind up in bed with the two of you,” she says, archly, barely able to hear her voice above the rush of terror-stricken blood through her head. “Or at least, I’m surprised you’re here,” and she looks up, meeting Will’s tempestuous glare with a smirk. There’s a look on his face that could be anger or embarrassment or jealousy or all three. It’s definitely not entertainment, however.
From further down her body, Hannibal laughs with what sounds like genuine mirth. It’s a terrifying noise.

“You can let her go, Will,” Hannibal instructs, sounding charmed. “She’s regained herself enough not to do anything foolish, haven’t you, Bedelia?”

She knows he expects her to look at him, and at his busy hands, before giving confirmation, and she steels herself before complying. She drags her gaze down slowly, fighting to control her expression when at last her eyes focus on the excavation sight her left leg has become. Her stomach clenches, suddenly queasy. She looks like a diagram of the layers of the earth in a science textbook; her layers are exposed. Pale skin gives way to a thin line of scarlet, the dark red bleeding lighter into orange, yellow, and eventually, at the center, white muscle fiber, stretched by the forceps Hannibal uses to grip the tissue as he sluices through it with the cautery pen, slowly burning down to the bone. The wound is deeper, deeper than she would have guessed possible without having come out the other side already, and she has a sense, for the first time, of the physical space her body occupies. Less space soon, she thinks feverishly, less and less all the time.

From where he’s busy dismantling her, Hannibal looks up for her answer. Bedelia nods, slowly so that it won’t just look like quaking. “Yes,” she breathes, voice only steady enough for the single syllable.

But Will’s ghastly hands don’t budge from her shoulders for a long moment, and she finally lifts her eyes to his face again, to see him staring intently at Hannibal. If Hannibal notices the look he gives no indication, though, simply says, “Tighten the upper retractor, please.” And Will releases her to assist with the surgery.

“Hand me that thread,” Hannibal says. One of his hands is holding a small pair of forceps somewhere within the wound too deep for Bedelia to see clearly. He passes the forceps to Will, though, guiding the younger man’s hands to take his place within the pile of gore. “We need to ligate all the large blood vessels,” Hannibal tells Will, voice so low and intimate that Bedelia feels as though she’s listening in on something very private. “Cut, right there, yes - don’t lose hold of the vessel - good.” His hands move dexterously, tying a knot with the thread in his hands, around something too small for her to see. Will trims the extra length of cord.

“Just like tying your lures,” Hannibal smiles, and Will smiles back, hands still buried in her fat and muscle. Bedelia wishes she would just pass out; she can’t understand how she hasn’t already done so. The force of her fear is so great she can scarcely breathe. Her heart pounds so hard and fast that the room seems to swirl at the edges. She forces herself to speak through the fear, to keep probing for reactions, information, any knowledge she can use to save her life.
“Is forcing me to watch you flirt an intended part of the torture?” she asks, voice shaking badly now. She’s inwardly pleased at the way Will’s cheeks redden, the way he ducks his head to focus on where Hannibal is pointing out the next vein to ligate. That’s an interesting reaction. It steadies her a little. She pushes. “Or are you both just so enamored you’ve forgotten I’m here, having to endure those ardent looks of longing you keep casting at one another?”

“Trying to get under my skin, Bedelia?” Will asks acerbically, hands working.

“Just trying to make conversation,” she replies, shakily.

“You have always been very clever,” Hannibal says. He’s burning through the pale ochre tissue again, heating the air with the faint scent of something burning. “But cleverness is not the same as wisdom,” he says, and pauses in his cauterization to dig into the gore with his forceps and grip the exposed nerve. It’s thick and opaque as a udon, and from the way it moves in the grasp of the forceps it must be tough. She closes her eyes, briefly, as a wave of dizziness floods her, and she feels the screams waiting in the back of her throat.

I should have run, she thinks, I should have hid. In the fairy tale Hannibal is telling monsters always win. They will eat me alive.

“You really should have taken my advice about leaving town,” Will says, as if reading her mind. She opens her eyes to see him cutting through the nerve Hannibal is gripping, then moving to ligate the side still embedded in her thigh, fingers somewhat hesitant, but with the clear muscle memory of many tight and artful knots tied. Oh God. “I took yours.”

“To crush the next time you had the instinct to help?” she asks, keeping her voice low to keep it from breaking. Once I start screaming I won’t be able to stop. My only hope is to stay clear headed. But… what good can it possibly do? What escape can there be? “How does it feel so far?”

“It’s an immense relief,” he says, laughing softly. “You’re an excellent psychiatrist.”

“I do my best.” She looks down to see Hannibal has reached the bone, and for a moment she forgets how to breathe. She wishes one of them would hit her, or cut her somewhere above the waist. Watching her body stripped away from the skeleton but not being able to feel it is making her nauseous and lightheaded. She strains her wrists against the ties until the skin tears, and opens her eyes to the sight of Hannibal scraping at the bone with a flat metal utensil, pushing all the remaining tissue out of the way. She can feel the vibration traveling up her skeleton, to the parts of her that can still feel.
“Almost done,” Hannibal murmurs - to her, or to Will, or to himself, she’s not sure. He places the forceps on the table, runs the back of his left forearm across his forehead to wipe the drop of perspiration beading there. Damn but those lights are bright. The heat they give off is infernal, and suddenly it’s all Bedelia can think of. As if all of this would somehow be bearable, were it to for the horrible heat. “Hand me that towel.”

She watches, her neck beginning to glisten with sweat and her mind feeling hot and distant. Hannibal pulls the towel through the wound, between her bone and the carnage of torn tissue beneath it. She looks at her own skeleton, and wonders what it would be like to try to walk, now. The thought brings her close to vomiting. Her body gives one fruitless heave, a spasm in her diaphragm.

The mass of torn and tattered gore on the bed in front of her resembles cooked meat in some places, where the cautery pen cleaved it. Dead meat, she thinks.

Hannibal picks something up off the table, stretching it between his hands like he’s winding yarn. It glints between his fingers, a length of bright and deadly piano wire. Bedelia feels her heart rate increasing, cantering frantic, feels herself losing control of her emotional responses, losing control of her facial expressions. He winds the wire under her bone, and grips the handles on either end of the garrote. She sees the muscles in his forearms and shoulders strain slightly as he begins to saw, slowly, pulling upwards against the bone.

She can hear the scratching friction of her bone against the wire. It’s oddly loud above the pounding blood in her ears; Will and Hannibal’s voices sound like they’re coming from a different room, muffled and indistinct but for the occasional snippet of their conversation that manages to filter through her frightened daze.

“…roast marrow with rosemary and garlic, spread over crisp baguette de tradition française…”

“So fancy toast?”

“Do you have a preference you’d care to express?”

“I don’t know. I’ve always been partial to barbecue.”

Her body jolts slightly as Hannibal’s wire reaches her marrow and slides too quickly with the force he’s applying to saw through the bone. She feels a sting at the corner of her eyes, and sighs as the
grating sound of the wire resumes.

I should have pulled the trigger that night I found him in my home, she thinks. I should never have asked him to tell a version of the events regarding Neal that deviated from the truth; he thrives in shadows and half-truths. I should have run when I had the chance, but it’s too late now to ever run again. They’ve caught her and her mind is very close now, to realizing and recognizing what she already knows objectively: he is giving her her ending.

Her body jerks on the mattress a second time, and she opens her eyes, suddenly aware of the tears covering her cheeks and chin, running into her hair and tickling the shells of her ears. Hannibal is crouched above her, one knee drawn under himself on the bed. In his hands he holds her leg. It’s still connected to the rest of her, by a flap of ruddy skin, fat, and muscle. The angle he’s holding it at is all wrong though, the bone just out of line. She can see where she’s been separated when he shifts, and as he begins to rend her leg from her thigh, Bedelia screams.

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She awakens at the dinner table, alone. The table is set for three, and already burdened with an elaborate and aromatic roast. The smell of the meal steaming before her fills her with the strong urge to vomit, or begin shrieking anew. She takes a steadying breath, and moves quickly, concealing her snail fork beneath the napkin in her depleted lap.
Enyos

Chapter Summary

Thank you so much to everyone leaving kudos and such incredibly kind comments. You guys give me a reason to smile. :)

This chapter was going to be a good deal longer, and might be a bit rough. My apologies; it's been a crazy work week, but things should slow down soon.

As always, thank you for reading.

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She keeps one hand clutched around the two-pronged snail fork hidden in her lap, and rests the other on what remains of her abbreviated leg. She forces herself to take stock of the situation, to analyze her surroundings. The room is dark, lit dimly by the white taper candles that flicker within the alcoves along the wall. Thick tussore-silk curtains block out a pair of windows, but Bedelia suspects the sky beyond them is as dark as the room. She must have been out for an entire day, then, or just about that long. She feels the itch of lace on her skin, and notices for the first time what she's wearing - some gaudy cobalt gown she can perfectly imagine Hannibal selecting for her. Her skin crawls when she imagines his hands on her body, gentle and efficient, pulling garments off and on. How he loves to dress his toys. The gown is scant, cut so low the neckline practically reaches her navel, but the fragrant air is hot on her exposed skin. There’s heat coming from the table, in fact, from the the steaming roast center piece - a piece of meat too long to be beef or pork or lamb. The smell of roses and smoked meat drifts through the air, at once appetizing and revolting.

The table is set for three, and piled with fruits and flowers in addition to the roast, which is wrapped in a banded row of leafs. Near her seat sits a platter of garlic roasted snails, still in their shells. She assumes this is the closest Hannibal comes to mercy, allowing her an option other than eating her own limb. She can just eat something else while she watches them eat her.

Think, she commands herself, when she feels panic beginning to stir in her again. They’ve rendered her immobile, more or less. She won’t be able to make it from the room - from the table - much less from the house, or apartment, or wherever it is they have her. Escaping on her own is out of the question, which leaves only calling for help. It’s an equally unlikely plan, though. There’s little possibility of Hannibal having something as convenient as a landline, even if she could make it to the phone unaided. She could possibly try to steal one of theirs - if they even have phones to steal.

If she can’t run, and she can’t call for help, the only option left is to fight. She’d never win in a fair fight, and they aren’t offering her one. The odds are stacked so far in their favor that attempting to
fight at all seems a little like suicide. Asking for death might be better than waiting to see what they’ll do next, she considers. How long will it take them to finish consuming me? Will they keep me awake, every time, make me watch as they carve me and cleave me in twain? She’d rather take her chances fighting than live that slow death. She might at least be able to drag one of them into death with her. It’s not ideal, but as far as revenges go it’s a good one, separating them permanently now that they’ve finally achieved unity. Her lip curls slightly at the thought of what anguish the survivor would feel.

Then again, they might have taken all they want from her. They might intend to release her, after the meal is finished and the plates are cleared. If she attacks, she risks her life. If she does not, she risks being dismembered and devoured alive. It’s not a great set of options. She hears his voice echoing in the dark chamber of her skull: *What have you gotten yourself into, Bedelia?*

She’s weighing her odds of survival when the dining room door opens, and Will enters, with Hannibal close behind. Hannibal is as impeccably dressed as ever. His suit is a shade of blue that compliments her gown, and his folded pocket square is typically outrageous. She remembers, when they were in Florence, watching his slender hands as they dexterously folded the fabric, in movements too quick for her eye to follow. Will is dressed in black, like the goddamn grim reaper. His face looks like it’s trying to smile and frown simultaneously. Bedelia exhales heavily, feeling her heart begin to race.

Hannibal moves to stand by the head of the table, and Will trails to take his own seat to the right. Their expressions could not be more dissimilar; Hannibal wears a look of benign amusement, with more than a trace of pride, no doubt over the sumptuous feast he’s prepared. He might as well be preparing to host a dinner party, so coiffed and calm she can scarce believe he is the same man who knelt above her and ripped off her leg. Will, on the other hand, looks even more deranged than usual, in Bedelia’s opinion. He’s better groomed and better dressed than she’s seen him before, but his eyes are wide and wild. He sits, darting a hateful glance at her before turning his gaze resolutely to the simmering center piece.

And for a moment, no one speaks.

Finally, Hannibal addresses her. “How do you feel, Bedelia?”

It’s a clinical question, but she knows it’s said with curiosity. She breathes deep, tracing the prongs of her hidden fork with one finger. “Numb,” she answers, “except for dreading the loss of numbness.”

“Any pain?” he enquires, ever the diligent physician. When she fails to answer, he merely adds, “I took the liberty of administering something for the pain. You will let me know if it is not enough?”
She stays silent. It’s not exactly that she’s at a loss for words, more that she’s hoping to see what effect her silence will have. Information is her only currency, her only weapon. If she can survive long enough she can make it out alive; it worked before. *Then again, she thinks, how much will I have lost this time, before I can escape?* There won’t be an escape this time. Some part of her recognizes it, but the fighting spirit is still strong. There’s a way to turn this situation, if not to her advantage, then at least to the degree of disadvantage she chooses.

Hannibal steps towards the roast, preparing to carve. “I suppose that nothing is so painful to the human mind as a great and sudden change,” he says, and for just a second she sees him cut his eyes to meet Will’s. Then his attention returns to the epicurean delights once more. “Nothing like a good meal to chase those blues away.”

“What have you made of me, Hannibal?” she arches a challenging eyebrow. He smirks.

“Traditional Kalua style pit-roast,” he says. “Surrounded by tropical fruits and wrapped in ti leaves, simmered on a bed of coals. I’ve added something special to the presentation as an homage to you. See, here,” he indicates what appears to be a long pile of hand-chipped ice. She can see now that the roast and this snaking mound of sweating ice lie atop a bed of low embers, slowly roasting the meat right on the table. “Lake Cocytus, Dante’s frozen lake, created here for you among the fire.”

“Here at the center of hell,” she sighs. “How extremely appropriate.”

Will gives what might be a snort of laughter. Hannibal ignores her, begins carving the roast. “It was a delight to have access to a full kitchen again,” he tells her. “One of the hardest parts of my incarceration was definitely no longer having the freedom to cook and feed myself. You know better than almost anyone, how particular I am about what I put into my body. Did you get my cards?”

She shivers, remembering the last one, for seared foie gras, which arrived on her birthday. “Yes,” she breathes.

“Did you ever consider trying one of the recipes?” He takes her plate, drawing close for a moment. Her thoughts flounder. *Should I - is this a good moment to -* her hand clutches the fork, under the napkin. She’ll only get one chance.

Hannibal moves away from her, back up the table so he can prepare her plate. *When he comes back, should I - dare I - do I take this chance or wait?* She watches him, arranging her on her plate, easily selecting which fruits and flowers look best to aid in the presentation.
“I’m afraid my culinary abilities are not on par with yours,” Bedelia answers him, a touch shy of hysterical, “and of course, it would be difficult to enjoy a meal knowing it was one you intended to make out of me.”

Hannibal smiles, clearly pleased with her answer. She has always been good at pleasing him. It’s not something she tried to do, at least not at first. She has to admit, however, that when she’d first noticed it she’d found his pleasure - his fascination - profoundly gratifying. She still finds it so. What is it about him that inspires such devotion, she wonders, not for the first time. Even facing death at his hands, I am happy to elicit that smile, even as my heart pitches, my stomach turns. She knows it is more than a survival tactic.

Maybe, she thinks, as he finishes preparing her plate and begins to walk back towards her, it is because his approval is not easy to obtain. He is interested in everyone - in dissecting them, in discovering their secrets, in removing their hearts and replacing them with something tainted and foul- but he reserves his approval. If approval is the right word - his affection, perhaps. That light in his eye when he looks at something he owns and is happy to own.

He sets the plate in front of her, looming down as she looks up, both hands in her lap. She’s breathing heavily, working hard not to pant, but smiles thinly at the blank intensity of his expression. The prongs of the little fork dig into her palm. She can’t. She’d never manage it. He might even know what she’s thinking.

Then he’s moving away, back down the table, to prepare Will’s plate, and then his own, and the moment is lost. She exhales in a long sigh. Before her, fragrant steam is rising from her plate. Her stomach pitches, bilious at the scent of her own cooked flesh. She resolutely refuses to look at the portion of her body sitting on the plate before her.

“It’s a pleasure to be able to cook in a proper kitchen again,” Hannibal reiterates. He raises his wine glass, still standing at the head of the table. “To Bedelia, for making my first proper meal in three years a truly significant one.”

Will raises his glass, shooting a sardonic look at Bedelia. She finds she only has water. As if circumstances weren’t bad enough.

“I’d like a glass of wine,” she says. “Please.”

“I’m afraid that wouldn’t be wise,” Hannibal replies.
“Alcohol doesn’t interact well with your pain medications,” Will adds, voice mocking. He sounds strangled, bitter. She watches as he spears a piece of her leg with his fork and lifts her to his mouth. Her heart rate rockets. She watches, horrified, as her body slips passed his lips, into the dark cavern of his mouth, watches him chew and swallow her, smiling.

“Delicious.”

Hannibal smiles, looking outrageously pleased with himself, lost in self-congratulation for a second. She watches him eat her, eyes closed, savoring. “I’m inclined to agree. It is as if all the longing for sensual stimulation I experienced over the past three years has been translated into the dish.”

Will takes another bite, popping a raspberry into his mouth as well. “You really must try yourself, Bedelia,” he says, sipping his wine.

She decides.

“I would very much like a glass of wine,” she says, voice higher. She doesn’t have to force it to break; she just doesn’t try to stop it. Let them hear the hysteria, the fear.

Hannibal sighs, and locks eyes with Will. Finally, his face adopts an indulgent look. “Oh alright,” he concedes. “But only a little.”

It’s Will who stands, and walks the bottle down to her to pour. Good. She can hear her heart pounding, loud and suddenly slow enough to breathe between. Wait, she thinks, be sure.

When he’s close enough to reach, leaning down slightly to pour, she makes her move. Her hand lashes out, suddenly, aiming for the jugular, the fork sinking into flesh with a burst of hot blood.

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Will sees her hand flashing towards him and twists, dropping the wine bottle to shatter on the floor with a crash of glass and a spray of red. He feels the thin prongs sink into his trapezius, a white burst of pain. It focuses him, pulls him from the dream place into which he had briefly been sinking. He pulls the fork from his shoulder with a grimace, pressing his hand against the wound. It isn’t deep; she hit nothing vital.
“That’s really special, Bedelia,” he starts to say, turning back to face her, but stops when he sees Hannibal advancing down the side of the table with menacingly purposeful steps. His approach is unhurried but inevitable. Will sees Bedelia’s sky blue eyes widen in fear, and then he sees Hannibal’s thumbs sinking into those skies, tearing the lenses and pushing in till blood and vitreous humor run down her cheeks like tears. She’s wailing again, high and horrified, but Hannibal cups her skull with his hands, hooks his thumbs into her orbital cavities, and pivots her head almost an entire 180 degrees.

It’s all over very quickly. Will can feel his heart thudding. It happens so fast, he hardly has time to register what he’s seeing before it’s over, and Hannibal withdraws his fingers from the blank black sockets with a sick squelching noise, releasing Bedelia’s head to hit her plate with a smack. Will watches, eyes widening, as he lifts one gory thumb to his mouth and sucks it. He’s gazing back at Will, eyes smoldering, and Will feels the air catch in his lungs, finds himself stuck again between disgust and desire, physically incapable of averting his gaze.

Hannibal retrieves Bedelia’s napkin from where it’s fallen on the floor, and uses it to clean the thumb he isn’t fellating clean. Will swallows, with some difficulty, around the discomfort and excitement unwinding within him. He can feel the heat coming from the table more potently than he could a minute before. Hannibal’s eyes close in that reptilian way he has, and his tongue collects the last traces of blood and jelly from his skin, his thumb resting briefly on the sharp point of a crooked canine.

“Jesus, Hannibal,” Will finally breathes, voice shaky. “I don’t think that was totally necessary.”

“She made an attempt on your life,” Hannibal answers, returning to his seat and rinsing his mouth with wine.

“Hardly a very serious one,” Will scoffs. “We could have restrained her easily.”

“Perhaps,” Hannibal replies, “perhaps I overreacted.” He sighs in exaggerated, mock regret, then picks up his fork and knife.

He’s acting so casually about it, Will isn’t sure what to make of the response. “I’m sorry,” he says, sincerely, “I hadn’t intended for you to have to kill her.”

“I was always going to kill her,” Hannibal says, lifting a bite to his mouth, “eventually.”
“Right, but, you liked her, I guess,” Will fumbles for words to make sense of his feelings of shock and remorse. “I wasn’t asking you to kill her for me.”

Hannibal swallows, eyes boring into Will, who stares at Hannibal’s throat instead, watching the muscles there work, pulse tapping lightly. “You didn’t need to,” he says at last. “Sit down, Will. Finish your dinner.”

Will shuffles back to his seat, casting a glance at Bedelia’s body, slumped over her plate, face down in her own cooked flesh. He didn’t kill her, but watching Hannibal do it was thrilling in a way both similar to and different from killing someone himself. His heart is racing, veins abounding. The flames flickering in the alcoves and upon the table seem brighter, the shadows around them darker. Will licks his lips, tasting Bedelia’s carcass. Already, he feels the horror of the situation becoming mild, the darkness light. He yearns, momentarily, for the yank of Hannibal’s fingers nestling in his hair, for his closeness and the way he overwhelms. Will wants to go to pieces, wants to be allowed to sink into brief catatonia as he did after murdering Clark Ingram, but Hannibal isn’t allowing it. Will gets the sense he’s being told, subtly, to pull himself together.

He takes a long drink of wine to steady himself before picking up his fork and resuming the meal. When he does, he finds that the meat is even more delicious than before.

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It really has been a long day, Will reflects, sipping scotch by the fireplace in the study when dinner is done and the dishes - and leftovers - are dealt with. Or, rather, a long day and night. They left the marina over a day ago, and haven’t slept since, yet he feels lucid and alert. He and Hannibal are in danger of becoming nocturnal. Outside the sun hangs low in the east, its light leaking into the study around the edges of the coarse, smoke-colored curtains. It feels like an eternity has passed since they left the marina, with Bedelia propped between them like a passed out drunk. Now, her body is scattered, spread unevenly between fridge, freezer, and belly.

The thought makes him frown. He’d known, of course, that he was risking her life when he’d made his request to Hannibal. It’s not as if he feels bad for her, either; she’d played the game so well and so long, always weighing present gains against future costs, mindful of the fact she’d be obliged to settle up one day, and pay the many pounds of flesh she owed. Still, he hadn’t intended for her to die today, just donate some flesh to the cause of proving Hannibal’s dedication. Perhaps they should have made that clearer to her; she might have behaved more reasonably.

“I’m sorry about Bedelia,” he says to Hannibal, who is sitting by the low fire, glass of wine in hand, face an unreadable mask illuminated by the firelight flickering over it.
“I’m not,” Hannibal says, “and you really needn’t be either.”

“I didn’t mean for you to have to kill her, though,” Will restates.

“Maybe not,” Hannibal replies, voice typically inscrutable, “but I don’t believe you feel genuine regret over the situation, and nor should you.”

Will frowns. “I wanted to see what you’d do for me,” he says, “a sign of your earnest devotion. But I hadn’t meant to ask this much of you. I know she was your…that you were friendly.” It feels too strange to refer to anyone as Hannibal’s friend. Bedelia was many things to Hannibal, he’s sure, but friend seems the wrong terminology. Will frowns again, remembering something she’d said. *I’m certainly surprised to wind up in bed with the two of you...at least I’m surprised you’re here.*

“We were friendly,” Hannibal agrees, “to a certain extent. I do not mourn her loss, though. Our relationship, and any pretensions to friendship, had long run their course.” He smiles at Will sharply. “Her loss is no greater tragedy to me than the loss of Beverly was to you.”

Rage floods him so fast he speaks before thinking, before he can recognize Hannibal’s obvious attempt to elicit just such a response for his own perverse reasons, his own perverse amusement. “I cared,” he spits, vehement, “I still care.”

“And yet you forgave me, long ago.”

He can feel the anger pounding in his temples. And the guilt that snakes through him as something in him agrees with the accusation. Still, “She was my friend,” Will insists, “the only person willing to consider my word against yours.” But he is beginning to worry it’s only himself he is speaking to.

“Yet were you to consider the cruelties I’ve inflicted on you,” Hannibal says, “and I grant you, there have been many - my killing Beverly wouldn’t be anywhere near the surface of your mind, had I not just reminded you of it.” He pauses, to watch the look of consternation forming on Will’s face. “The truth is you don’t really care. Just as I do not really care that Bedelia is dead.”

“That’s not true,” Will insists, feeling a familiar surge of violent rage and disbelief rushing through him. An image comes into his mind, unbidden, of himself, digging his thumbs into Hannibal’s eyes as Hannibal has so recently done to Bedelia. He imagines the way they’d feel, popping under his nails, the hot jelly inside flooding around his cuticles and knuckles, and the thought steadies him. “I
“Not enough to do anything,” Hannibal responds, infuriatingly calm, and just infuriating in general. “Not enough to deprive yourself of this partnership, such as it is, or what I can offer you.”

“What is it you’re offering me?” Will hears himself, somewhat breathless with rage and incredulity, and a sudden longing he’s reluctant to name.

“Exultation,” Hannibal purrs, and Will drops his eyes to the floor immediately, before he’s lost in those blazing red eyes for good, burned alive like a saint at the stake. “Self determination. The freedom to fall, Will, and the ability to freely choose to fall. I’m offering you myself, which is the only thing you care about.”

Will arches an eyebrow. There’s a long silence.

“When the gods fight,” Hannibal says, and at first Will assumes he is changing the subject, “the mortals they love are often forfeit. The immortals move their devoted like pieces on a chessboard, lovingly, carefully, but always prepared to sacrifice. You cared for Beverly - and Alana, and Jack, and even Abigail - even your wife, Will - but they are not what’s important to you. You moved Beverly like a knight on the board, sending her into my path, fully aware of what consequences would likely befall her. They have never been important to you, Will. How could they be? They are only mortal.

“I recognized you from the moment I saw you,” Hannibal says, and Will occupies his sight with the way the other man’s hands stay so still against the velvet arm rests, the way the shadows moving over them make them seem less still. “Immortals are never alien to one another. I am not sorry to lose Bedelia. I should be sorry to lose you. I am the only one capable of loving you, Will, and you are the only one I am capable of loving.”

Which would, by extension, make you the only one I am capable of loving in turn. Will shivers. This conversation has taken a turn too intense for his raw and fraying nerves, which sing and sting with days and days of heightened stimulation. His eyelids flutter.

“Perhaps we should consider sleep,” Hannibal says, after a lengthy silence in which it becomes painfully clear that Will has nothing whatsoever to contribute to the conversation at this point, too locked inside his own thoughts, contending with his own angry guilt. “The guest bed will likely need changing before you’ll be comfortable there,” Will shivers again, imagining sleeping in the stained sheets they performed surgery upon the night before. “The sofa in here is quiet comfortable, and likely long enough to accommodate you.”
Will frowns. This is the moment he’s been dreading since they left the boat, where it had been so easy to keep an eye on Hannibal without appearing too obvious. Not that his paranoia could possibly have escaped Hannibal’s notice, of course, so he supposes it doesn’t really matter except that now, if he wants to continue keeping a constant eye on the man, he’ll have to admit his intentions out loud.

He supposes, after the display with Bedelia, he should be more trusting. But it’s not exactly distrust that inspires the stab of anxiety he feels at the thought of sleeping anywhere he can’t open his eyes and see Hannibal. It’s not just that he worries Hannibal will leave, although that fear is present, ringing deep in his mind like the reverberation of a bell; it is more of a general fear, borne from the relief he feels at being reunited after three years of isolation. It was Hannibal who was isolated, Will thinks, but the lines are blurring again. We’re both alone, without each other.

“You are, of course, more than welcome to share the master bed,” Hannibal says, sounding entertained, and doubtlessly deriving immense enjoyment from the flush that rises to Will’s cheeks, the look of perplexed concern that must be writ large across his features. “Or to sleep on the chaise or armchair in the bedroom,” he adds, showing mercy. For once, Will thinks, and it probably isn’t really mercy at all. It’s probably just another form of manipulation, intended to masquerade as mercy.

Regardless, Will jumps at the suggestion of sharing the bedroom but not the actual bed. “That would be, uh, great,” he says, and Hannibal smiles.

The master bedroom is immoderately large and excessive. There’s a fireplace large enough to fit several human children; Will could fit into it himself, he thinks, if he crouched down. And if there were not currently a fire burning low within it. The air is warm, and Will shrugs out of his suit jacket - then stares resolutely into the flames as Hannibal shrugs out of more than that. He looks back to finish surveying the room when he sees the other man’s blurry figure climb under the sheets in his peripheral vision.

There’s a chaise lounge at the foot of the bed that might not be too bad. The bed is enormously wide - so wide it is actually ridiculous that Will is refusing to sleep in it at the first place - and the chaise is nearly as wide. He might not be able to stretch out fully, but he’ll fit comfortably if he curls up on his side just a little. But he can’t bring himself to sleep at the foot of Hannibal’s - enormous - bed. His mind flashes back briefly to the dog bed at the foot of the bed in the room that would have been his if he’d just agreed to leave with Hannibal years ago.

The other option is the armchair by the fire. That might not too bad. Will drags the chair as far from the fire as he can. He settles on a spot where he can stretch his legs out in front of himself and keep his eyes on Hannibal, who looks luxurious and sedate, and a good deal more comfortable than Will. He’s staring back at Will with a look so content it borders on smug. Will finds it is suddenly
impossible to look away from that gaze.

Will untucks his shirt and undoes the top two buttons of his shirt, keenly aware that doing this while staring into Hannibal’s eyes must appear more than a little seductive, but no longer entirely certain whether he approves or disapproves of that idea. He drops into the arm chair and lets his legs stretch out in front of him. It’s not the most comfortable of sleeping positions, but Will suddenly finds he’s exhausted.

He keeps Hannibal in his vision, never breaking contact with that maroon gaze till his eyes close at last.

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The neon Coors sign flickers in and out on the wall above the booth, casting a blue-white glow over the three slightly hammered looking faces below.

“I heard he was was a product of human experimentation in the Soviet Union. Some kid they injected with snake DNA and tortured till he lost his mind.”

“Nah, I heard he was ex-CIA, worked on MK-ULTRA.”

“You’re both barking up the wrong tree, gentlemen. He’s some kind of Eastern European royalty.”

“If he’s so royal, why’s he out there murdering chumps?”

“And if he’s so Eastern European, what’s he doing in America?”

“Had to flee the police over there, didn’t he?”

“Well, I heard he was lost in the Amazon as a child, because he was on vacation with his parents and their plane crashed and he was the only survivor. I heard he was raised by a tribe of cannibals that had never even seen a white person before, and they taught him their ways.”
“Then how come he speaks English?”

“He was rescued, obviously, but by then he’d already started liking the taste of humans.”

“I heard he killed at least twenty more people than the FBI even knows about. Homeless guys, mainly, I heard. And get this - after he killed them he made them into soup and served it at a soup kitchen.”

“That’s a load of bull.”

“Well anyway, I’m glad he’s dead.”

“Yeah, I’ll believe it when I see a body. Till then he’s just missing, and I don’t know about you but that doesn’t make me too comfortable. A guy wants to be able to have a drink and walk home without having to look over his shoulder too much.”

“You really think he’d hang around here, if he did make it?”

“I’ve seen this guy, past few nights, wandering around down by the docks. Big tall guy, like he looks in the papers, always has his hood up, always skulking about down there.”

“Probably just some bum.”

“Well that’s what I figured at first, too, but I caught a look at his face the other night as I was walking home from the bar. You know, last Tuesday when I beat Norm at pool three times?”

“You cheated on that last one. Don’t think I didn’t notice you nudging that eight-ball.”

“Yeah, whatever, you owe me fifty bucks. Anyway, as I was saying, it was after that I was walking home, right? Passed the docks. And I see this guy, who’s been lurking around for the past few days, and I figure he’s some poor schmuck who found a safe place to sleep around there. But then he passes under a street light, and I see his face under the hood and it’s him.”
“No way.”

“No I swear - he looked just like he does in the papers.”

“You were drunk.”

“Always are.”

“If you want proof we can go down there right now. He’s probably still creeping around, looking for his next victim.”

“Uh, are you for real? You want us to go looking for the Chesapeake Ripper?”

“You too scared? Have you seen the reward for finding this guy.”

“You could finally pay off all those gambling debts!”

“Hey, screw you, Norm. Do you guys want to go find him or what?”

“Well, I sure ain’t chicken.”

“I’ll go, but just so I can watch you eat crow when this guy winds up being some poor homeless guy who spooked your drunk ass.”

It’s quiet by the docks, apart from the occasional soft slap of water on the hulls of the boats moored in the marina. The three men blunder drunkenly, too loud, too distractible. One stops to pee off the boardwalk with an exaggerated sigh of relief. Another shoves him, so that he stumbles against the railing and has to catch himself with his hands to avoid toppling over. He cusses, wheeling around.

But the third man is shouting, pointing towards a tall shape, obscured by a dark cloak. Its moving towards them, and does not respond to their demands that it stop and reveal itself. Instead, it strides steadily on, growing closer, larger. The three friends stand, frozen in place.
Then one of the men moves, rushing to close the gap between them and the figure, fist drawn back. The other two grow bolder at the sight of their friend careening into danger, and hurry to help. Their fists rain blows, and it’s over in a manner of minutes. The figure lies motionless, blood seeping, black and thick in the street light, in a pool around its grotesquely flattened hood. And all is still again.

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He can tell it’s still night when he wakes. The room is darker than before, the fire mostly embers, now, and he rolls his neck, feeling a twinge of pain, the result of sleeping upright. The chair is comfortable enough to doze in, but it’s not a good bed.

Will lets his eyes adjust to the dim light. Hannibal is a still shape under the sheets. Will can barely make out his face. His mouth is open slightly, his breaths coming slow in sleep. *If he really is asleep. He could be faking. He’d do it just because he found it diverting, just to see what I would do if I woke up. He probably doesn’t even need to sleep. He probably just sleeps in his memory palace as a form of sustained meditation.* Will feels his thoughts pushing towards unhinged, knows he’s being paranoid. He’s already run off with the man; sooner or later he’ll have to decide to trust him, too. After all, hadn’t he named the price of his confidence and been paid?

He stretches legs out and reaches down for his toes, hearing pops coming from his vertebrae and knees simultaneously. He sighs, rubs a hand over his face. The room is cooler now that the fire has all but burned out, and Will finds that, since recovering from encephalitis, he is more prone to waking up cold than in a hot sweat, especially when he falls asleep at his desk or reading on the couch.

He reflects on how stupid it is that he isn’t sharing the bed with Hannibal. *Any rational person would either share the bed or take some blankets and sleep on the couch in the study. Fish or cut bait.*

Only Will could possibly find himself caught in the middle and unable to decide. He had thought all the hard choices had already been made, that he’d already decided what it was he wanted, when he’d climbed into the bloody passenger seat of the stolen police car and met those searching red eyes, when he’d told the Dragon how to find them, when he’d lied to Jack Crawford for the final time - to say nothing of the deciding he did out there on the cliffside, when he’d moved like Hannibal’s shadow, or like Hannibal was his, or like they were double shadows of one object lit by two sources of light. How he is *still* undecided about anything between them is an utter mystery to Will.

Because, he supposes, he is undecided. Whatever he said to Hannibal, with whatever vehemence he rejected him (again), he isn’t sure, any longer, how he feels. He wants to be close, he wants to remain distant. Life was easier when there was a sheet of bulletproof glass between them, something
he could press against without breaking, something to dampen the sensation of being so engulfed.

He hadn’t looked rejected, when Will had told him in no uncertain terms how unlovable he found him. *Probably because he didn’t feel rejected. Because really, this isn’t what rejection looks like.* Right now Will isn’t totally certain what it is he’s doing, but it’s definitely got to be sending some mixed signals. All he knows is he needs this - needs to be with Hannibal more than he needs a plan or certainty. He’ll be alright waking up not knowing where - or if - he’ll fall asleep, every day for the rest of his life, as long as he has this.

“What do you imagine love is?” Hannibal had asked him that, and he’d been spared from answering. Now, Will forces himself to consider the question. He hasn’t had a lot of experience using the word. He supposes there’ve been people he’s felt attached to and comforted by, people he felt protective of - Alana, Beverly. Abigail. People he’s wanted to please, like Jack. And of course there’s Molly and Walter. He’d built a life with them, made of laughter and gentleness and easy closeness. That, surely, must be love. *And yet how easy it was to leave them,* he thinks. He’s hasn’t even really thought of them till now, not in any real way. Even now, he supposes he is only considering them in order to assess his feelings for Hannibal.

*It was easier to abandon my wife and son than I’ve ever found it to walk away from him. Every day for the past three years, haven’t I felt the tug of that invisible wire that connects us, like a hook behind my ribs, threatening to snap and gouge me? What do I imagine love is?*

He doesn’t know.

Will stands, stretching his arms up, fingers clasped. Though his body is stiff, he feels a sense of elated excitement. It won’t keep him from sleep, he knows - at this point, nothing can - but it might seep into his dreams, make them faster, brighter. He forces himself to move without thinking, so he can’t think his way out of moving. He sees his hands pull back the bedding. The bed is so large he thinks they might actually be lying further apart than they were on the boat. Or maybe not, he decides as he slides into the bed and feels abruptly overwhelmed by the closeness, by the fact that they’re sleeping in the same bed. *Sleeping together,* his brain unhelpfully supplies.

Will props himself up on an elbow, peering through the darkness to examine Hannibal’s sleeping face. Or un-sleeping face. Will supposes it doesn’t really matter.

Even this close, he can’t turn away from Hannibal for the time it takes to slide back into sleep. Instead he rests on his side, and falls asleep blinking slowly at Hannibal’s peaceful and unmoving form in the dark.
If Jack is surprised to see Alana walk through his office door, he’s even more shocked when Molly enters the room behind her. For a moment he has a sinking feeling that they’ve come to pass judgment over him for his crimes, the two women who’d cared for Will and pleaded with Jack not to break him. Recklessly, Jack had ignored their entreaties, and driven Will right to the edge he flung himself off of. Briefly, he sees the two women before him, not as they are, but robed and hooded, holding scales in one hand and swords in the other, preparing to weigh his heart against a feather and sentence him for the misdeeds he’s orchestrated. Then he sees the pragmatic look in Alana’s eyes, and knows that judgment isn’t why they’ve come.

“I’m surprised to see you here,” Jack says, speaking to both women at once. “Alana, are you sure it’s…safe, for you to be here?”

“Jack,” Alana greets him. “My safety, and my family’s, is why I’m here.” She looks at Molly, expression soft. “It’s why we’re both here.”

“I’m so sorry,” Jack says, looking to Molly but speaking to both of them again. “How you must hate me for putting him in this situation.”

“I told him to go,” Molly says. “I told him it was the right thing to do, to help you with the case. And beyond that, he made his own choices. But I do hate you, some, yeah.”

“None of us currently have the luxury of giving into guilt or grudges,” Alana says, before Jack can reply. “When this is over we can divvy out the blame, but for now we need to focus on fixing the mess, rather than on indicting someone for it.”

He’s grateful for the reprieve, even if the tone of Alana’s voice tells him that some day they will sit down and talk out their sins. Both our sins, Jack thinks. She’s contributed to the construction of their current predicament, even if Jack still holds himself primarily responsible.

“How do you propose we go about fixing?”

Alana slips into the chair across from his desk, and Molly mirrors her. Jack, who’s been looming over his desk, his weight resting on the knuckles of the closed fists he’s placed on the desktop, sinks into his chair as well. “We catch Will,” Alana says, and he notes her verb choice. Not rescue, he thinks, not save. “If we have Will, Hannibal will come for him.”
“If the FBI brings in Will Graham,” Jack says, “he’ll get the death penalty this time as a certainty. They both will.” He pauses, watching a muscle in Molly’s jaw work. “Hannibal weakened his insanity defense with that article he published refuting Chilton. Even if they can’t retry him for his past crimes, he’s committed enough in the twelve days since his escape for the court to hang him. And if we drag Will in kicking, screaming, biting - Alana, there’s a real chance that Will could get killed, or kill an agent or police officer himself in a confrontation. He won’t be able to claim coercion or abduction after that.”

“We might find a psychoactive cocktail in his bloodstream,” Alana notes.

“We might not.”

“No,” she agrees, “we probably won’t. Capturing Will with a SWAT team would be tantamount to killing him ourselves, and probably a couple of innocent people besides. He can’t be captured or held by any conventional methods without great risk to both himself and others. But that’s not what I’m suggesting.”

“What then?” Jack raises his eyebrows. He glances at Molly, already feeling dread creep up his spine.

“Hey,” she says, raising her hand in a mocking half-wave, “that’s where I come in.”

“If you or I go to him, he’ll run or fight. If we can catch Will off guard by presenting him with someone familiar but non-threatening, Jack,” Alana rushes ahead, no doubt sensing his reluctance and hoping to quash it before it has time to fully develop into outright rejection, “we can get him unawares, sedate him, and take him back to the BSHCI without the FBI knowing until after we have him in custody.” She smiles. “I know a top security cell that’s currently available.”

“And once we have him, we alert the FBI and call for guards, surround the place and wait for Hannibal to come running?”

“Exactly.”

“You really expect him to do that? Rush right back into the cage he just escaped?”
“Under any other circumstances, probably not,” Alana admits. “But I held him for three years, Jack. I watched him, studied him, learned him. For Will Graham, Hannibal will come rushing right back to the cage.”

He sighs. “There are a lot of risks here. Not least to your safety and well being, Molly.”

“I’m prepared for that,” she says. “I’m not scared to take risks, when I choose them myself.”

He doesn’t tell her that she should be scared. “Have you thought about what will happen to Will once we have him in custody?”

Alana shifts in her seat, eyes and voice steady. “I believe he can be reasoned with,” she says, “once we separate him from Hannibal.”

This is something Jack desperately wants to believe, but he’s not certain he trusts that Alana actually believes what she’s saying. She’s a shrewder person now than she was half a decade ago, and what she says doesn’t always reveal the full truth of her mind anymore. Jack is certain Will’s wife believes that he can still be saved, but she doesn’t know him as well as Alana and Jack do. Still, he’s willing to risk it. If they can trap Will, at the very least it may mean an end to the murders.

“We should act as soon as possible,” Jack says. “They’ve killed once already, and it wasn’t a random killing either. Will went for Clark Ingram - you remember, that guy we questioned after finding a dead woman sewn inside a horse?” Molly inhales sharply in alarm. He ignores her, pressing forward. “That was almost definitely Will’s choice of prey. He was so upset when Ingram walked.”

“The longer we leave him with Hannibal,” Alana says, “the harder it will be to bring him back to himself.”

“And there’s another thing,” Jack tells her. “The fear in this city is palpable, and growing daily, with the way Freddie Lounds is fanning the flames. She’s got Chilton giving interviews and serving as a poorly disguised inside informant. People are scared, and scared people are foolish people. Last night, we responded to a report from three pickled vigilantes who claimed they’d apprehended Hannibal Lecter on the boardwalk by the docks. When law enforcement arrived they found these three halfwits posing for cellphone photos over a deaf homeless man they’d beaten to death.”

“Christ,” Molly breathes angrily.
“It’s not the first false sighting,” he continues, “we’ve been getting dozens of reports daily. Three people were injured this week in Ripper-related panics. One young man was sneaking back into his parents’ house, after sneaking out to attend a party, and wound up with a bullet lodged in his left femur when his mother mistook him for Dr. Lecter arriving to harvest the family’s entrails.” Jack swallows, not liking what he’s about to say. “And I worry about copy cats,” he finally adds. “With the Ripper on the loose again, receiving this much media attention, the possibility is too high.”

“It’s not going to come to that,” Alana assures him. “We can catch Will, if we can find him. And once we have him, we’ll use him to draw Hannibal to us. And no one else will get hurt.”

“That’s uncharacteristically optimistic of you,” Jack says. “It would seem the only thing left to put this plan into action is for me to find Will.”

“Don’t take too long,” Alana says, rising. Molly stands as well, and moves for the door.

“Stay a moment, Alana,” Jack calls after them. “I’d like a word with you alone.”

A look passes between the two women, and then Alana shrugs, and Molly casts one confused and hurt look back at Jack before leaving. When the door has clicked closed behind her, Jack gets up and walks around the desk to stand closer to the doctor.

“We have got to stop using people as bait,” he tells her, voice low. “Don’t think it didn’t occur to me to involve Molly Graham in this investigation. I just rejected the idea as unnecessarily cruel.”

“Whereas I see her involvement as a necessary cruelty,” Alana rejoins. “She’s our best chance. You know it. You just don’t want to get your hands any dirtier than they already are.”

“I have enough blood on my hands,” Jack agrees. “And so do you.”

She shrugs again, shifting her weight from one leg to the other. He notices, sometimes, that she still isn’t as steady as she was before her fall. She doesn’t need a cane anymore, and the years of physical therapy have made her more than capable of performing the daily functions doctors had once warned her might never be possible again, due to the extent of her injuries. Still, despite the incredible extent of her recovery, he knows she’s been wounded in ways that will never truly heal.

“You knew she was the way to go Jack,” Alana says, meeting his eyes with a compassionless stare.
“But you couldn’t do what you knew you needed to in order to catch Will. That’s why I came back, why I needed to come back. We need to catch him, Jack,” she whispers, peering up at him imploringly.

He says nothing, because she’s right, and there’s nothing to say in response.

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The news renders Fredrick momentarily speechless. The thought of Hannibal and Will arriving in her apartment while she slept, death in their hands, sends a cold stab of fear shooting through his body. That they left her alive sends him a different sort of thrill.

“They want us to keep talking,” she says, voice fast and high with excitement. “They won’t hurt me because they want the world to see the truth, now.”

Fredrick would frown if he still had lips. His torso and limbs have begun to show improvement, thanks to the donor skin that’s been grafted there. His body is stippled with latticed skin, flesh colored lace growing into the desiccated wreck he’d been when they wheeled him in. His face, however, is still a lipless, milky-eyed nightmare. Now that the medical staff attending to him believes he’ll survive, they’ve brought in a plastic surgeon to begin reconstructing his face.

“And so we’re playing right into their hands,” he says, “doing exactly what they want us to.”

“They’re insane,” Freddie points out, dismissing the accusation in his voice. “That they want to be exposed just gives further evidence to that fact. We’ll help them reveal themselves, and they’ll thank us by leaving us alive, and because of what we publish they’ll be captured and brought to justice in due course.” She sits back, looking satisfied. “Jack and his team can’t defend Will Graham when he’s leaving corpses covered in his fingerprints and DNA at a journalist’s doorstep.”

“Or in her living room,” Fredrick says. “The thought of them lurking in your home while you sleep would give me hives if I still had enough of my own skin to produce them.”

“Feeling protective?” She smiles, not unkindly. One upside to having been flayed: it’s much more challenging to blush. “You don’t need to worry about me.”

“I suppose my worry would accomplish little, in any event,” he concedes, “but let me serve as a
living reminder to you, should you ever forget what they’re capable of doing just for the hell of it.”

She pats his hand, gently so as not to hurt the burned and patched skin. It’s the first skin to skin touch he’s felt since the Red Dragon clamped his hands over Fredrick’s shoulders and his teeth over Fredrick’s lips. No latex, no clinical physician’s fingers, just casual human contact. She doesn’t flinch at the smooth rawness of his flesh, either. He finds himself unable to speak.

“She’s so clever and so good, Fredrick beams inwardly at her cunning. Beautiful, brazen girl, he thinks, nothing gets passed you. “Jack and Dr. Bloom encouraged certain factual inaccuracies,” he confirms for her. “They felt it would be best if Hannibal Lecter was declared insane, and placed in their keeping.”

“Your book,” Freddie continues, her soft hand withdrawn now, resting in her lap again, “the one you wrote about Hannibal after he was captured, was instrumental in strengthening his insanity plea. I read it. It was an extremely compelling read.”

“Thank you so much,” he says.

“Yes, it conveyed to the public what a monster Hannibal is, convinced them of the need to contain him, even as it comforted them by giving to him a label that distances him from the rational and sane. It answered the question, How could anyone do what he’s done? Only someone clinically insane would be capable.”

“That was my intent,” Fredrick answers.

“But I wonder,” Freddie continues, carefully, “how much of it was true? I lived through the investigation. I was intimately involved in portions of it. And some of what I read in your account seemed…unfamiliar.”

“It’s certainly worked out well for Dr. Bloom,” Freddie says, “but what did Jack get out of it?”

“He got Will Graham,” Fredrick answers with a clack. “He got a story that exonerated his pet psychopath. Something dark and sensational enough to drown out those murder husband headlines you were publishing.”

“Good move,” she smiles. “Want to tell the truth now?”
“If I expose myself as a fraud,” he says, “why would anyone believe me a second time?”

“Because you willingly exposed yourself in order to expose the people who coerced you,” she answers, “and because you’re working with me now.”

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It’s dark in the bedroom when Will wakes up, and the other side of the bed is empty. There’s a thin slice of light leaking into the room from beneath the bathroom door and, on the other side of the door, the sound of water running. Will wakes to find himself curled on his side, one arm flung across the mattress, onto the cool sheets that still smell faintly of Hannibal. Oh God. Back at the cabin he’d shared with Molly, Will had found it wasn’t unusual for him to wake up with one arm around his wife, his chin nestled against her shoulder or against the top of her head. Please tell me I didn’t unconsciously cuddle with the Chesapeake Ripper.

“Would you prefer to be awake for it?” Will’s head jerks upwards, eyes searching the darkness. He flicks on the lamp on the bedside table, blinking into the dim light until the figure sitting in the armchair he abandoned last night comes into focus.

“Shouldn’t you be making yourself at home in some miserable corner of Hell?” Will rejoins, sneering at the ghost across from him.

“What makes you think that’s not exactly what I’m doing right now?” Bedelia says.

“Doomed for all time to dispense counsel to the man who murdered you.”

“You didn’t murder me,” she says, “Hannibal did. Do you feel guilty for the crimes he commits?”

Will always has, even before he knew it was Hannibal committing them. “You have no idea,” he tells the memory of Bedelia he’s imagining in the chair across from him.

“If you’re going to feel guilty either way,” she sighs, “you may as well participate. Not, I think, that you need any encouragement there.” She raises one perfect pale eyebrow, and suddenly the eyes beneath them lose their blueness, becoming dark holes that Will still can’t bear to meet for more than
a second or two.

“I guess not,” he agrees. “You practically told me to do it, in one of our last sessions. What else was that crushing baby birds analogy? There’s no point feeling bitter that I bothered to take your advice.”

“You are a bird I should have stepped on, instead of trying to help,” she says. “The rest of us are sparrows and doves, gentle creatures, and he trains us to ignore our instincts to help rather than hurt. But you,” her voice is low, full of emotion, “you are a different kind of bird.”

“What am I, Bedelia?”

The ghost draws a deep breath, as if filling herself with the strength it will take to tell him. “You are a bird of prey who needs to be trained not to ignore its instinct to ravage and slay,” she says, “a raptor whose natural inclination towards violence needs only to be honed, developed, and guided towards loyalty.”

“Like a falconer would train his hawk,” Will says, unsure how he feels about the metaphor. It’s demeaning to be viewed as a belonging, as something dehumanized and trained to meet the needs of a master. But at the same time, there is something about the analogy that sends a subtle thrilling zipping along his spine.

“Like an australinger would train his hawk,” Bedelia corrects. “Falconers train falcons.”

The needless pedantry annoys him. “Whatever our relationship,” he says, “I think we can both agree it’s safer to be a hawk than a sparrow. Just look how all that gentleness and natural aversion to violence worked out for you.”

“Do you think your fate will be so different?”

“You were a diversion,” Will says. He lets the unspoken conclusion of his thought hang in the air between them. He doesn’t have to say it out loud; she knows the difference between them. You were a diversion, but he loves me.

“You think you’ll be able to live his lifestyle, then,” she continues, after a brief silence. “You think you can become him.”
“Becoming him is what I’ve always feared,” Will answers, “the fate against which I’ve fought so hard all these years. I thought I needed to save myself from it.”

“You’re not the one who needs saving anymore,” she whispers, and her voice and image are lost, her ghost fleeing as the bathroom door opens and Hannibal enters the room. He’s wearing a pair of fitted black slacks without a top, a few drops of water from the shower still clinging to the hair on his toned chest. He rubs a towel against his damp hair.

“Sleep well?” he asks. Will feels himself flushing, remembering again that there’s a good possibility Hannibal woke up with Will attempting to spoon him in his sleep. The fact that he’s in the bed at all is a little awkward; he’d been so reluctant to be that close the night before.

“Great,” Will says, fluttering his lashes and trying to find something other than Hannibal on which to focus his eyes. He settles on the painting of the Bridge of Sighs that hangs on the wall across from the bed. “You?”

“I always sleep well,” Hannibal says. Will can hear the smirk in his voice, even if he’s choosing not to look for visual confirmation. “There’s a clean towel on the counter for you. I’ll have breakfast ready when you’re done.”

Will hears a drawer being opened and shut, and the rustle of fabric. When Hannibal’s steps lead him down the hallway and grow fainter, finally fading to nothing, Will at last dares to look away from the painting and release the breath he’s been holding. He flips back the duvet, and the bedding releases Hannibal’s scent in a burst of lavender and sage, with the sweet earthy scent of raw ambergris floating up last to flood his nostrils. Scent is tied to parts of the mind that access memories, and the memories that wash over Will now are as faceted and dark as the image of his face reflected in broken mirrors.

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“Hey, Molly, got a minute?” Alana smiles a purposeful smile. She wills her face to express a casual, amicable warmth she hasn’t felt in years. “How are you hanging in there?”

Molly breathes a shaky exhale, pausing in her mission to flatten out her dollar bill enough for the hot chocolate machine in the Quantico hallway to accept it and spit out a drink that will almost definitely be too hot and too sweet to drink more than half of. Alana can tell that the other woman likes her, and better than that, trusts her. She’ll answer honestly. She hasn’t yet learned to do anything else.
“I’m, you know, hanging,” she says. “It’s not easy.”

“No, I imagine not,” Alana replies. She hands Molly a crisp dollar bill and watches the other woman smile in thanks, then feed the dollar to the machine and punch a couple buttons. There’s a chiming noise, and Molly reaches into her coat pocket to fish out her cell phone. Alana notices the lock screen is still a photo of Molly, Will, and Walter, the little family smiling big camera ready grins.

“I keep expecting it to be him, whenever my phone dings,” Molly says, after reading the text and replacing her phone. “I suppose if it ever was him I’d need to tell you or Agent Crawford, wouldn’t I? Or the police?”

“You would,” Alana agrees. “That’s probably one reason he hasn’t texted you.”

“He used to call me his pretty baseball wife,” Molly says, voice and eyes distant. “When Wally’s father passed, the grief was so huge I thought it would crush me for a time,” Molly says, addressing the words to the flat circular surface of the styrofoam cup of hot chocolate now cradled in her hands. “We knew it was coming for a while, but even five months of warning isn’t enough time to get used to the idea of losing the person you love, the person you built a life with, the father of your child. I met him on the school bus,” she says, almost in a whisper.

“I’m so sorry,” Alana says, her voice a careful study of compassion and sympathy, “you’ve had to endure so much.”

“It taught me to value the days,” Molly says, “gave me that hard-bought knowledge that time is luck. You relish every second of it. Then, when you lose something - someone - you don’t have to worry about not having appreciated the moments you had with them; you know you were present and tuned in for every one.”

“Does it make the loss easier?”

“Not really,” Molly sighs, passing a hand over her face in a motion so similar to one of Will’s that it unsettles Alana for an instant. “I’m sorry, I’m rambling.”

“It’s alright,” Alana tells her, and means it. “You’re mourning. It’s natural.”
“What about you? He was one of your close friends, wasn’t he? How are you hanging in there? I feel selfish for not asking earlier.”

“Don’t,” Alana tells her, smiling softly. She can see why Will was so drawn to this person, how he was able to find comfort with her. “I’ve mourned Will before. This isn’t the first time. It gets a little easier.”

“I only intend to do it once,” Molly says. “And it’s hard. With Wally’s father,” Alana notices that Molly never refers to her first husband by name, now, only as Wally’s father; she wonders how the grieving widow will term Will in future conversations about her past, or if she’ll own his presence in her life at all, “there was nothing anyone could do. He fought hard for a while, and then when the doctors told us it would be best to just make the most of the time left, we grieved together. I wasn’t angry with him for leaving us. But Will,” she sighs, “I’ve never felt this angry at a person before, and I don’t like to feel angry. I thought, after Wally and I made it away from the cabin that horrible night, that I couldn’t possibly be more angry - at Jack Crawford, at Will, at this person who’d never met me but sent someone to execute my son and I as casually as you might swat a fly. And now, I feel so much angrier than I did then.”

“Anyone would be angry at being abandoned,” Alana says, noting the way the word makes Molly flinch, “it’s a hard thing to learn that the person you were willing to work for can just walk away from you without any preamble.”

“And not just walk away without a word,” Molly says, voice uncharacteristically bitter, “but walk away with the person who tried to kill Wally and me. Wally called him dad, for God’s sake, and he can walk away with the person who sent a lunatic to murder his son.”

“Hannibal promised to kill me,” Alana finds herself saying, her voice lower as she confides. “He gave me the chance to walk away, once, and I didn’t take it. I have a child, a family,” she thinks of them, hiding in the house amongst the great green trees, “and like you I know that my time is luck. My life ended years ago, when I rejected his offer to run.”

“No wonder you want to catch him so badly,” Molly answers her.

“Will was one of my closest friends,” Alana continues, choosing not to respond to Molly’s observation about her motives. “Hannibal is only alive today because I made a bargain to save Will’s life. By extension, the only reason my life continues to be in danger is that I felt compassion for Will. If Hannibal kills me,” when, “or my wife or son, it will be because I wanted to save Will.” She swallows, and stares deeply at Molly as she speaks again. “Knowing this, Will still made the choice to go with him.”
She reaches across the space between them, placing her hand on Molly’s shoulder. “You aren’t the only one he betrayed.”

“No,” Molly says, shakily, “it seems not.” She brushes her hand over her face again, massaging her temples for a moment. “I’m sorry. This is a lot to take. A month and a half ago if you’d told me what my husband was capable of doing I wouldn’t have believed you.”

“I know,” Alana says. “I know it’s a lot. I’ve been there, believe me. You aren’t alone in this.”

“Thank you,” Molly says, and places the hand that isn’t holding her hot chocolate over Alana’s. Her easy kindness is difficult to accept, but Alana forces herself to smile back at the other woman. She knows what she’s asking of Molly, even if Molly herself hasn’t yet realized what her involvement in this case will mean for the safety of her mind, body, and soul. I was like her once, Alana thinks, and squeezes the shoulder her hand rests on reflexively. I didn’t know the danger I was in, either. She wishes someone would have warned her, then, apart from Will, whose warnings were so easy to write off. But she doesn’t warn Molly, and she knows she never will. Knowledge will come, harsh and terrible, on its own.

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“What you’re doing is dangerous,” Margot says, voice tiny and far away as it comes through the phone, “and unethical. Have you given any thought to the position in which you’re placing her?”

“I’ve given it lots of thought,” Alana answers, her voice harsher than she intends it to be, “and this is the best chance we have of catching either of them.” She closes her eyes, willing the sick feeling in the pit of her stomach to subside. Her guilt isn’t strong enough to stop her, not when she knows that as long as Hannibal is free, her family will always be in danger. When she opens her eyes again, she’s standing in their bedroom and Margot is there in front of her, face drawn with worry and love. “What would you have me do?”

“Come back,” Margot says instantly, tilting her chin. Her eyes are wide and bright, exuding the strength she’s had to learn over the course of her tortured lifetime. “Come home to us. You’d be safe here.”

“I won’t be safe anywhere till Hannibal is behind bars again,” Alana disagrees, but Margot just scoffs.
“You’d be safer hiding with us than you are laying traps for Hannibal,” she insists. “I know it’s not ideal, not what either of us would want. But we could have a life together, the three of us. This is a safe place. It’s good here. There’s a beauty in the trees. We could rest here for a while, and then move somewhere else where no one knows us, change our names, keep a low profile.”

“You could be happy like that,” Alana questions, “spending our lives on the run?”

“I could be happy with you,” Margot says, voice soft and younger than her years. “Please. I’ve lost so much; I don’t want to lose you.”

“That’s why I’m doing this,” Alana says. “I want to make this world safe for you, for us and Morgan. Trust me; I know Will well enough to know how to catch him.”

“So you’ll use Molly Graham as bait to catch Will, and then use Will to catch Hannibal,” Margot says. “It’s not just your life you’re risking, Alana.”

“You’re safe where you are. If he manages to kill me,” she swallows, meeting Margot’s wide wet eyes, “he won’t bother coming after you or our son. If I die there will be no point in injuring you; he’d only do it to hurt me.”

“That’s a noble sentiment, but I wasn’t talking about Morgan or I. I, for one, feel very confident in our hideaway, and in the men we’re paying to protect it. I mean, have you actually thought about what will happen to Molly - or Will, for that matter - if you manage to stage an encounter?”

Alana makes a face. “Will wouldn’t hurt Molly.”

“Wouldn’t he?” Margot raises an eyebrow, tossing her head so that her copper curls swing around her face for a moment. She’s taller than Alana, but so slight and delicate, her eyes so large and childlike in her heart shaped face that she seems much smaller than she is. Especially now, with fear written across her features, Alana can’t help the wave of protectiveness she feels for the other woman. But there’s more than just fear in Margot’s wide gaze; Alana sees the accusation there, the disgust at what Alana is doing, at her increasing willingness to endanger another in order to protect herself and those that are hers.

“I won’t let him,” she says. “Molly knows the risks.”
“Does she?”

“Well enough.”

“Will kept her uninformed for years,” Margot points out, “feeding her a version of events it benefitted him to have her believe. How is what you’re doing any different?”

“My version is closer to the full truth,” Alana says.

“Closer to, but I get the feeling you’re leaving out a few very relevant details.”

“You aren’t seriously suggesting Will would kill his own wife,” Alana retorts.

“A week ago you told me Will Graham would protect us from any attempt Hannibal would make on our lives,” Margot says. “That’s clearly not something you still believe, or you wouldn’t bother trapping him. You can’t predict him any better than I can. Don’t pretend you’re sending her into a controlled situation. He’s as likely to gut her like a fish as he is to fall on his knees asking for forgiveness.”

“I’m expecting a response somewhere between those extremes,” Alana answers.

“But you don’t know what to expect.”

“No I don’t,” Alana finally admits, sounding more annoyed than she had realized she would. This conversation is getting to her more than she wants to confess to herself. “But I still think it’s the best chance we have.” She takes a step towards her wife, wanting so badly to enfold Margot’s slender frame in her arms. “Our worlds have been dangerous since before we met,” she says. “Let me do my best to protect us, please.”

Margot reaches for her, but Alana abruptly finds herself back in her motel room, alone. Her right hand clutches her cell phone against her ear. “Please be careful,” Margot says, voice small and distant.

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It’s a quarter past eleven pm when they sit down to breakfast at the thick oak dining table. Hannibal has laid a column of beeswax candles down the center of the table, and a pleasant aroma fills the air as the candles melt into one another and heat the wood beneath. The smell mingles with the taste of the scrambled eggs with shaved tongue Hannibal has prepared, imparting a sweetness to the dish that makes Will close his eyes in pleasure. He’s not usually this sensitive to tastes, things usually tasted either good or bad, before. They didn’t have nuances and shadows like they do now.

“Maybe we should try going to bed at a normal time tonight,” Will says, sipping the coffee Hannibal pours for him. “I mean, unless there’s a reason we’re impersonating vampires.”

“In that we are awake during the night and sleep during the day,” Hannibal asks, “or in our predilection for human blood?”

Will shudders, suddenly far too aware of what - who - he’s forking into his mouth. The vampire analogy is a little too on the nose, actually. “In that we are awake during the night,” he says, voice dry. “Shouldn’t we try, I don’t know, repairing our circadian rhythms?”

“What would be the purpose?” Hannibal queries. “It’s hardly as if we are operating under conventional circumstances at the present moment. We’ve no jobs to get up for, no appointments to keep. It’s certainly safest for us to move around during the night.”

“Those are…actually really good points.”

“Although,” Hannibal continues, “it may not be that safe for us to move around, regardless of the time of day.” He sighs heavily, Will assumes for theatrical effect. “Our disappearance and the materialization of Clark Ingram’s body in Miss Lounds’ apartment have caused the public a harrowing degree of alarm, I’m afraid.”

“What are you talking about?” Will asks. He pops another bite into his mouth, relishing the burst of flavor as his teeth sink into a crisp bite of bell pepper. Hannibal plucks a tablet from the chair beside him, brings the screen to life and passes it to Will, who frowns abruptly at the headline. *Ripper Madness: Drunks Kill Disabled Homeless Man in Case of Mistaken Identity.* He scans the article quickly, his glower growing as he reads.

“Idiots,” he mutters, setting the tablet down a little harder than he’d intended. It clunks against the wood table as he lets it drop. “What a pack of fools, to think they could take you in the first place.”
“I’m flattered by your confidence,” Hannibal smiles.

“No you’re not,” Will says, “I’m not flattering you; I’m stating the facts. Three inebriated imbeciles with a hero complex are not a formidable threat to either of us.”

“A fair point,” Hannibal concedes, lifting his coffee in a conciliatory gesture, “though I still would have been out numbered.”

Will snorts. “And because of these…these cretins, an innocent man is dead.”

“Let’s not make any assumptions about a stranger’s innocence,” Hannibal replies, smirking against his mug.

“You know what I meant,” Will huffs, impatient.

“The damp floor of the internet is sprouting theories about the two of us like toadstools,” Hannibal says, hiding his elation poorly. *Which probably means he isn’t really trying to hide anything, Will thinks. “More people have sighted me this week than have sighted Elvis all year.”*

“You sound very proud of yourself,” Will accuses. There’s a note of affection in his voice that surprises him, but Hannibal registers no astonishment at it.

“It’s nice to know I’m inspiring the imagination of the common man,” he replies.

Will scowls again. “These particular common men,” he says, drawing the words out slowly and gesturing back at the tablet in reference to the article Hannibal had shared. “They’ve behaved rather appallingly, wouldn’t you agree?”

Hannibal raises an eyebrow, countenance neutral but with a flicker of mirth dancing at the corner of his mouth. “Oh certainly,” he concurs. “First, in taking their aggression out on entirely the wrong target, and second, in their hubristic belief that they would be any match for their intended target.”

“Maybe we should test that second part,” Will says. “They seemed eager enough to meet you when you were a helpless vagrant. Maybe we should let them take a crack at the real deal.”
Hannibal smiles, and Will feels himself falling into that expression. He’s not sure what he’s doing, but it feels good, letting himself tilt into the gravitational pull of Hannibal. *If I’m going to feel guilty anyway, he thinks, I may as well participate actively and earn that guilt.* He smiles, and meets Hannibal’s eyes, feeling a curl of warmth ascending through the center of his body.

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Jim Barnes had considered himself lucky when the judge had set a reasonable bail. He had thanked his lucky stars that he’d get to spend the next month awaiting trial in his own home, rather than in jail. However, as the room swims back into view and the darkness in his head clears, Jim starts to question his good fortune.

“Good morning, Mr. Barnes,” Will says to the man they’d bound and gagged in his own living room. Hannibal had picked the lock easily, and they’d found Barnes inside, passed out on the couch in front of the weather channel. He’d woken briefly, but Will had cupped a chloroform soaked rag over his mouth and nose until he’d dropped back into unconsciousness. The hour he’d been knocked out had given the two men ample time to prepare.

Now, Barnes thrashes against his restraints ineffectively. His breaths are swift and shallow, his nostrils flaring. The gag in his mouth feels like it’s choking him. His eyes water.

“I’m going to take the gag off, Mr. Barnes,” Will says, using the same soothing tone he would to calm a stray dog, “and we’re going to have a conversation about what happened the other night by the docks. If you scream for help, no one will hear you, but it will annoy me.” He pauses, knife raised and resting between the fabric gag and Barnes’ cheek. “You don’t want to annoy me,” he says, before cutting through the gag.

Barnes heaves a set of deep, panicking breaths, until he’s given himself hiccups. “You could try holding your breath to inhibit diaphragm activity,” Hannibal says, “or we could try to scare them out of you.”

“Now there’s an idea,” Will says, still looming over Barnes with his knife in hand. The blade is a wickedly sharp six inches, and shines brightly in the dim light of the muted television. Wordlessly, Will drags the blade across the bound man’s arm, above the elbow, just firmly enough to draw a shallow thread of blood across the skin. Barnes heaves, still hiccupsing violently with fear.

“I want information,” Will says, voice dark. “If you give it to me right away, this will be over very
quickly. If, however, you choose to drag things out, I’ll find some way of getting what I want.”

Hannibal takes a step closer. “Please choose to drag things out,” he entreats, pleasantly. Will smiles.

“What do you want to know?” Barnes manages to speak through his hiccups. “And what’s with the suits?” he asks, eyeing the matching clear plastic jumpsuits the men are wearing. They give him an edgy feeling.

“I want to know the names and addresses of your two friends,” Will says, “the men who helped you beat Murray Gibson to death. I want to know where I can find them, since, unlike you, they weren’t obliging enough to give interviews to the Tattler that included revealing their identities.”

Barnes splutters. “What do you want with them?”

“That’s really not any of your concern, Mr. Barnes,” Will says, kneeling down before the couch so he can make eye contact with the bound man. It’s not as uncomfortable a thing to do, under the current circumstances, he finds. Barnes’ eyes are bloodshot and dilated with terror. He reaches out to rest his left hand gently over Barnes’ right one, stroking the top of his hand soothingly. “But, since you ask, we want with them exactly the same thing we want with you.”

Will’s hand grips the fingers he’s been soothing, holding them so tightly he can feel the bones straining in his grasp. Barnes sucks in a lungful of air, but doesn’t scream until Will’s right hand reaches up, and drives the first half inch of his blade under the nail of Barnes’ index finger. “I’m going to need those names, now,” Will says, when the screaming becomes thin and brittle enough to be heard over.

Barnes gives up the information without a whole lot more persuasion. When he’s given them what they want, Will smiles tightly, withdraws the knife and releases Barnes’ hand. It stays where it is, fingers curled with pain. Three of his four remaining finger tips ooze blood. Will wipes the blade off on Barnes’ shoulder, then hands it to Hannibal. “Your turn.”

“Well Mr. Barnes,” Hannibal says, “you wanted to meet me, and I certainly hope the experience is living up to your expectations, but now I’m afraid that we really must be on our way.” Barnes breathes a shaky sigh of relief. “There’s just one more thing we’ll need before we go,” Hannibal says, and drives the knife into the center of Barnes’ chest, dragging it downwards to split him down the center of his body, from nipples to navel. Barnes screams, flailing against the ropes holding him in place, but it’s no use. Will can see the blood pouring out of him. He can smell it. Hannibal reaches into Barnes’ chest cavity, burying his plastic clad arms in the man’s body and cutting with careful movements. How he can tell what anything is through the veil of blood is beyond Will, but it’s only
a minute’s work before Hannibal is withdrawing his hands, cradling a wet kidney. He sets the organ in the waiting styrofoam ice chest, then beckons for Will to come closer.

“Give me your hands,” he says, voice rough, and Will does. Hannibal guides them inside the screaming man’s gut. He steers Will’s hands through the entrails and blood. Will can feel Barnes’ hot heart beating in the tissue and veins around his arms. Barnes’ screams and pleas are far away from him, as he digs deeper into the man. He feels his heart beat, steadier than the frantic pounding surrounding his hands. “Here,” Hannibal says, and Will feels him conducting his hands to clasp around the second kidney. Will withdraws it carefully.

Barnes’ screams have quieted into groans. Hannibal reaches back into Barnes’ gut to tear the iliac arteries and release a hot stream of blood. The groaning subsides rapidly after that, and soon they are alone in the hot, blood scented room.

Will is breathing hard and ragged. His hands and vision are smeared with red, heart thudding thunderous but steady in his chest. Hannibal, covered in gore, appears far more composed. Calmly, Hannibal approaches him, walking closer until he’s close enough for Will to feel his breath on his face. Blank-faced, he reaches one blood soaked hand out to skate across Will’s cheekbone, leaving a streak of red in its wake. “It would be impossible to know you, in any meaningful sense,” Hannibal breathes, voice rough despite his cool demeanor, “without seeing you like this, Will.”

Will exhales hard. “Without seeing me in a saran wrap murder suit?” he asks, smiling unsteadily. He knows he must look completely unhinged, but that’s not exactly an unfair description.

“You make jokes when you want to distance yourself from the intensity of the moment,” Hannibal reprimands. His voice is fond, though, his fingers traveling gently over Will’s face again, painting him crimson. “Tell me honestly if you disagree. Would it be possible to know you, the real Will Graham, without knowing how this makes you feel?”

“I don’t know,” Will sighs, leaning into Hannibal’s touch without a thought. “I don’t disagree.”

“What is it,” Hannibal says, his thumb skirting Will’s chin, “you don’t know or you don’t disagree?”

“I don’t disagree.”

Hannibal smiles, then. Will blinks rapidly, unable to look away from his face. “You’ve had to hide
for so long, Will, even from yourself. What a sensation you must be experiencing now, as you finally
meet yourself and shake off the disguises and masks. How victorious you are, Will, how wonderful
to witness.” He brings his other hand up, cupping Will’s face between them. Will imagines how he
will look when Hannibal moves away from him again, with twin red handprints across his cheeks
like some sort of warpaint. He can feel Hannibal’s breath falling warm across his lips. “No one
knows you but me,” he breathes, voice low and burning, words lost in the space between them. “No
one will ever know you but me. Our state cannot be severed.”

“Maybe,” Will manages breathlessly. “But also maybe this is all I want, just the way we are now.
Maybe I’m not interested in anything else you might offer.”

Hannibal smirks, once again failing to look properly rejected. “Is this all you want from me, Will,” he
asks.

“Did your parents never talk to you about respecting boundaries, Hannibal?”

“My parents were killed by a German dive-bomber when I was quite young,” Hannibal replies.
“Consequently, we never had an opportunity to discuss respecting boundaries as a family.”

“Well,” Will says, and then stutters to a stop, unsure of what to say next. Hannibal removes his hands
from Will’s face, letting his thumb pet Will’s stubbled cheek for a moment before he takes a step
back. Will frowns, and then schools his face to look neutral when he notices the smug look on
Hannibal’s face at his evident disappointment.

“We should get going,” he finally says. He drags Hannibal’s duffle bag onto the couch alongside
Barnes’ body and rifles through until he finds the bone saw.

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They leave the body in the park across from Quantico, three hours later. With the hood pulled up like
it is, it will be easy to mistake Barnes’ for a bum who’s decided to sleep upright on the park bench.
Will wonders how long it will take for someone to notice there’s something off about the
presentation, or whether anyone will first try to peak inside the gift box resting in Barnes’ lap.

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Some hours later, he slides into the bed, still wearing his slacks and shirt, without looking at Hannibal. It doesn’t seem worth it to hem and haw over the decision; Will figures that after caving the night before there’s no real point in making a show of resistance now. And besides, the bed really is mammoth. They’ll just each stay on their respective halves, like mature adults, and Will can continue keeping a hawkish vigil over Hannibal at all times. Like a complete lunatic.

Except that he currently can’t stand to look at Hannibal. He can feel the other man’s eyes on him, can see him staring - smirking? - from the corner of his eye, but he keeps his eyes trained on the ceiling. At last he hears a soft sigh. “Good night, Will.”

“Good night.”

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There’s a flat pit of oil, dark and vast as the void between the stars, and Will falls in. Jack is shaking his hand, clapping him on the back, laughing and nodding, his voice like the static between radio stations, senseless words leaking through occasionally. His mouth is too wide, opens too large. Will doesn’t smile back.

He knows, in that intuitive dream logic way, that he’s turned Hannibal over to the FBI and his good name (was it ever good before?) is cleared. He’s a hero. He’s redeemed. He looks away from Jack, to where Alana is tying Hannibal to the breaking wheel from his display in Florence, and when he looks back Jack is gone, and Molly is there in his place. Her eyes and mouth glint at him, reflective and sharp. She can’t really smile, but he knows that she’s happy, her faith in him restored. Looking at his reflection in the mirrors of her eyes and mouth, Will feels as though he’s swallowed glass.

He catches sight of the breaking wheel in her shattered face, and then he’s within the reflection, and Jack is smiling a too wide grin and hefting an iron bar, testing its weight in his hand before testing it against Hannibal’s long bones. Hannibal hangs on the wheel, and Will recognizes the look on his face as the same one he’d seen looming above him as he died. Jack swings the bar, aiming to break Hannibal’s right leg. Will closes his eyes, but feels the blow landing and realizes he’s the one wielding the bar, and he’s the one being broken as well.

Will sits bolt upright in bed, struggling to catch his breath against the sob shaking him. He gasps, and shivers hard, clenching his teeth to keep them from shattering. His nerves are humming, and there’s a red light behind his eyelids when he closes them, as though the blood is glowing in his brain.

When he opens his eyes again, he sees Hannibal is staring at him expressionlessly, propped on one elbow. God knows how long he’s been staring, or what it is Will said or did in his sleep to deserve
his stare. Will can’t do much more than grit his teeth and glare back as his body tenses and tenses.

And then Hannibal moves, and one hand is carding through Will’s hair and one is stroking his back, his face resting atop Will’s so that he can speak directly into his ear, voice low and soothing. “It’s alright,” he says, “tell me what you saw.”

Will shudders for air, another dry sob choking him as Hannibal’s hand tugs lightly at his curls. The feeling steadies him, but he still can’t speak. “I - I - I don’t want to say,” he finally stammers. He runs a hand over his face, breathing a little calmer now. He can feel Hannibal staring, knows he’ll be expected to reveal his secrets. Hannibal will out wait him if he tries to resist. “God, fine, I had a dream that I…gave you up.” Will flutters his eyelashes, reluctantly meeting Hannibal’s eyes. They’re dark, unreadable, but Will doesn’t think they look angry. He’s still holding Will, one hand against his back and one in his hair. He hasn’t gone tense at the confession, which Will thinks must surely be a good sign.

“Gave me up how?” Hannibal presses. Will rolls his eyes.

“Gave you up to Jack Crawford,” he clarifies, tone exasperated. “Turned you in and cleared my name. They…they tied you to a breaking wheel, and when they started to beat you I realized I was the one bearing the rod, and I was the one tied to the wheel as well.”

“Both the executioner and the executed,” Hannibal says, and Will nods, exhaling noisily. The hand on his back begins to trace shapes against his shirt again. “What curious visions you have.”

“You say it like I’m some kind of prophet,” Will snorts. He raises a hand to press against Hannibal’s shoulder, not pushing him away, just back enough for Will to see his face through the darkness. The shaking in his chest and limbs is all but subsided now. “Like I’m experiencing visions of the future.”

“Most oracles experience at least a temporary madness,” Hannibal says. “Your fits and dreams, your intuitive leaps, Will, are not so very different from that. In another age you might have found yourself living in a monastery or temple, speaking on behalf of the divine.”

“Well that should make you worried then,” Will notes, “since my vision involves betraying you in this case.”

“You see a version of the future,” Hannibal says. “How did you feel, in your vision?”
“Sick,” Will says.

“You broke your own body in the end, when you let me be tied to the wheel. Since absconding your previous life with me, you’ve given no thought to betrayal. You’ve spared no thought to the consideration of what would happen should you attempt to hand me over to Jack Crawford and the FBI, clear your name, return to your old life.”

“How can you be sure?”

“This dream proves it,” Hannibal answers. “Since your waking mind refuses to consider the possibility, your subconscious must bear the burden by examining the scenario through your dreams. Your vision is of a possible future, the future as it would be should you choose to break faith, a future in which you have broken yourself.”

Will isn’t sure what to say to that. He feels like water poured out, like all his bones are out of place, his heart like wax melting within him. Here, now, and always he knows he can never escape the force of Hannibal’s love for him, or the ache he refuses to let himself examine. He isn’t sure what to say, so he says nothing, just lets Hannibal draw him down to lie against him, his cheek pressed against the firm contours of the other man’s chest as Hannibal strokes vague patterns across his back, and sleep comes back slowly. He is not visited by visions; he does not rave.
Jack wishes he had a thousand eyes. He would scatter them throughout the city, unblinking as cameras but smarter, able to interpret information and relay it to his brain instantly. He wishes he could see everywhere, into the shadows and around the edges, able finally to discover. To see and understand, as he has been unable, so far, to do.

Then again, it’s hard to look out the world with just two eyes; if he had to gaze on it with a thousand, he just might lose his mind.

“This is bad, Jack,” Alana says. She doesn’t need to say anything.

The park is quiet in the early morning light. A couple of interested onlookers cling to the edges of the ring of crime scene tape, a jogger or dog walker stopping now and then to ask the stone-faced agents what’s happening. They don’t get any answers, and Jack hopes they aren’t able to see around the screens he’d insisted the response team erect immediately around the display that’s been left for them. For him. The last one was for Freddie, but this one was delivered to the park across from Quantico; he has no illusions about the intended recipient.

The corpse sits on the bench, hood pulled up but too flat and low to look normal. Zeller flicks the hood back using a ballpoint pen so he won’t have to stand any closer, and the fabric slides off to reveal a stump of flesh, vertebrae jutting from the tatters of skin and sinew. Price raises an eyebrow, and Zeller curses. Alana inhales sharply.

There’s a box in the body’s lap, a brightly colored gift box. Jack gestures towards it. “Lift the lid,” he orders, knowing someone will obey. After a second’s pause Z does, reaching for the lid with a hesitant grimace. Jack is mindful of the hesitation, of the unusually tense atmosphere. They’ve all seen their share of murder scenes, of masticated, mutilated, leftovers, the wrappings the Ripper leaves for them. But it’s different, now. Knowing, not suspecting or trying to accept, but really knowing that the body in front of them was left for them by Will. He knows they’re all trying not to think about him. Jack, especially, finds it difficult not to imagine Will here with them, working with them as he’s done so often in the past.

It’s a large box, and Jack isn’t completely surprised to see what looks like the top of the victim’s missing head once Zeller has finished removing the lid. The crime scene is practically gift wrapped for us, Jack thinks. There’s an itching sensation at the edges of his memory. Where had he heard those words before? The first copycat killing, the first time Hannibal tested the limits of Will’s
empathy. This is symmetry, this is returning to the beginning with new eyes. Will can see him clearly now, and wants to be seen in turn. They aren’t hiding anymore. So why can’t I find them?

“This is so bad.”

“That’s not helpful, Alana,” Jack snaps. “Jimmy, any prints?”

“None so far,” Price says, continuing to look at the bench, the body, the box, anywhere but at Jack. “This is much more of a traditional Ripper style case. No evidence.” He doesn’t say what they all are thinking, that they don’t need prints to know who did this. Still, some evidence would have been good, some trace fiber that could have led Jack to them, helped him end the madness spreading, not only through himself but through the whole city.

“There’s a midline incision, a little crooked. This guy was opened while he was still awake and fighting.”

“Christ,” Alana breathes. Jack shoots her a look of exasperation, but her expression is fearful and far away. He should feel sympathy for her, he knows. Knows too that she sees herself on this bench, sees her own head cradled in her hands. Still, his strongest emotion is annoyance. He needs them all to be level headed, needs them all at their best if they stand any chance of stopping this before another person dies.

“Victim is James Barnes,” Price reads, leafing through the police report. “Hey, this guy is one of those three inebriates who tried to trade the wrong body for the reward on Hannibal Lecter.”

“That’s the connection, then,” Jack says, looking to Alana. He wants to shake her when she doesn’t jump in. I need that sharp mind, he thinks, don’t get lost in your fear. “Lecter probably saw their violence as sloppy, and their assumption that they would have been able to apprehend him as vain.” And Will? Did Will have a motive? Was this justice for the man Barnes and his friends killed? Or was that just an excuse for violence? Jack no longer questions whether Will had any involvement. Not since finding Ingram. It’s simply not productive. He needs to prepare himself for what’s coming, when they have Will in their custody and can begin to untether the hooks in his brain.

“We should assign a team to watch the other two,” Alana says, finally. “They’re likely the next targets.”

“Make it happen,” Jack snaps at a startled looking agent. “I want a vehicle staked outside Michael
Barker and Frank Duffy’s houses.” He grips Alana’s elbow and pulls her to the side. “Are you starting to question your plan yet?” he whispers, voice harsh but low enough that only she can hear. “I want to believe Will can be brought around as much as anyone - more - but this doesn’t look like the work of someone who’s just a little confused or lost in the moment, Alana.”

“We’ll see when we catch him,” Alana says. “You have to find him first.”

“If we can catch him,” Jack corrects.

“What other choice do we have here, Jack? We’re in this mess because you trusted Will’s fake prison break plan. At least you know I’m not planning to double cross you. What, are we just going to wait until they tire themselves out? They don’t look like they’re slowing down to me. We have to catch them, and Molly is our best shot at Will.”

“I hope you’re right,” Jack hisses, “because if this goes wrong, you’re the one who’s going to have to live with it on your conscience.”

“I’ll come to you for advice on dealing with the guilt,” Alana snaps, and walks back towards where Price and Zeller are photographing the scene and trading barbs and bad jokes, before Jack has time to respond. He can feel the blood pounding in his brain, hot rage running through him. He forces himself to breathe slower. He knows she’s right - they have to stop this before more people die. He trusted Will, and he wants to believe that Will was telling him the truth, that it was all some horrible accident, but he knows that, where Hannibal is concerned, Will has never been able to exercise good judgement. And Jack had pushed him, goaded him along, encouraged him to seek Hannibal’s aid, knowing the risks he was taking. He’s always been willing to risk Will’s well being to save lives, always been confident in his ability to snatch Will back from the edge of insanity at the last moment. He’s covered Will’s body and mind in scars over the years. How he must hate me, Jack thinks.

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The kidneys, faded to a pinkish gray now that the blood has been washed off and they’ve been out of the body for a few hours, sit on the counter in a bowl of cold water, smelling slightly of vinegar and lemon juice. Will doesn’t bother offering to help as Hannibal prepares the counter, laying out the ingredients and tools he’ll use as efficiently and clinically as a surgeon would prepare an operating theater. He sits on the stool by the stainless steel counter, sipping the glass of wine Hannibal poured for him when he’d followed him into the kitchen.

Hannibal has never been one to press for needless talking; he’s perfectly willing to let silence stretch between them. Since they spend what amounts to all of their time together, Will is grateful for the
comfortable silences. They give him time to think. He wonders if his inclination - his need - to trail Hannibal from room to room would lessen if he wasn’t able to do so without maintaining a constant conversation. Following the other man feels akin to being alone. When Hannibal rises to leave one room, Will mirrors without thinking. It’s as if they’re one person, he thinks. He wonders, if he left a room, if Hannibal would follow him, too, drawn in the same way that Will is. He thinks he’ll have to test the theory, when he gets a chance. After all, their codependency has never been one sided.

Will takes another mouthful of wine, letting the dry, oaky flavor coat his tongue and cheeks before he swallows. The taste and aroma ground him in the moment, in a way that feels both more and less solid than repeating his name and the time used to. He is grounded in sensations, in the experience of being alive. This is what Hannibal has always offered him, to feel his own existence through sensation, even (especially) when that sensation is pain. No one and nothing else in Will’s life has offered him proof of his own existence.

He closes his eyes for a long moment, remembering the sensation of Hannibal’s body pressed against him the night before. He feels his face heating at the memory of how he’d let the other man guide him into the embrace, and hopes it will just look like a reaction to the wine. Honestly, what the hell am I doing? Unstable isn’t even the right word for it anymore; he’s downright messy.

“We will need to exercise more caution, going after the next two,” Hannibal says, his casual voice interrupting Will’s thoughts. “Uncle Jack will infer our intentions. He’ll know where to watch for us now.” Will frowns. Hannibal isn’t looking at him, just laying out ingredients on the kitchen counter. His body and voice are relaxed, but there’s an aura of tense expectation about him that makes Will nervous. “A greater degree of care will be necessary, to avoid capture. Provided, of course, eluding captivity is what you desire.”

His voice is almost expressionless, but Will is familiar with him enough to hear the nearly imperceptible upturn at the end of the sentence. “Are you asking?” he says, letting a hint of annoyance sound in his voice.

“Do I need to ask, Will?”

“No, you don’t. Of course you don’t. You said yourself, the thought hasn’t even crossed my mind this whole time. Why would you even think that?”

Hannibal says nothing in response, just hums and attends to drying the kidneys. Will watches, surveying the carafe of cream, the amber bottle of Cognac, the tiny bowls of salt and pepper, the chopped rosemary. The scent of the herb wafts through the air, soothing Will’s troubled thoughts. He takes another drink, keepings his eyes on the way Hannibal’s careful hands handle the meat. He knows he should leave it alone, just let the matter drop and lapse back into comfortable silence, but that’s never been the way things are between them. The urge to vex Hannibal is overwhelming, and
Will surrenders to it after another sip of wine.

“What would you do if I did?” Will asks, letting his eyes flicker up to Hannibal’s face, watching for a shift in the passive facade.

“If you did what?” Hannibal asks, voice even.

Will makes an exasperated sound. “You know,” he says. Then, when Hannibal neither answers nor looks up from his work, “If I got us caught on purpose. If I turned you in.”

“What an interesting question,” Hannibal says, slicing through the first kidney. He bisects it with one smooth stroke, then begins chopping one inch cubes. “I have no intention of being captured, so you would get yourself caught on purpose, not the both of us.”

“You’re so sure I couldn’t manage it?”

“You are very clever,” Hannibal admits, voice like silk, “but not quite that clever, I think. You would be turning yourself in, nothing more. Is that something you think about? Do you feel such guilt that you crave punishment, Will? Do you find yourself yearning for someone to hold you accountable? Long to see justice done?”

Will shivers at the words, at the way Hannibal is saying them in that low, smooth voice. The sound feels as if it is stroking his skin, the way Hannibal had stroked his face red the night before. “No, of course not,” he manages to say, voice irritated. “Of course that’s not what I want. But what would you do if I did?” He can’t help pushing. He’s never been able to help himself. He licks his lips, which have gone dry rather abruptly. He can feel his heart speeding up as Hannibal finally looks up from the cutting board, eyes blazing.

“No prison cell could protect you,” he promises, and his voice sounds adoring. “I would get to you, and dispense my own justice, before any court had the chance.”

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“You know, Will, all your talk of betrayals and breaking wheels makes me think of the story of Christman Genipperteinga, the 16th century bandit. Are you familiar with the legend?”
Will finishes the creamy bite of kidney on his fork before he answers. “Am I familiar with the legend of a 16th century bandit,” he intones, staring at Hannibal with amusement. Hannibal smirks.

“I will tell it to you then,” he says, turning his eyes back to his plate. “I think you’ll find it interesting. Genipperteinga lived in a cave furnished like a house, according to accounts from the era. He killed over nine hundred people over the course of thirteen years, and was rumored to participate in witchcraft as well as cannibalism.”

“He sounds like your sort of person.”

“You are my sort of person,” Hannibal points out, sounding fond. Will darts a glance at him, but Hannibal is looking at the bite of meat he’s loading onto his fork. “In any event, it wasn’t uncommon for frightened townspeople and travelers to speculate that bandits and other criminals met with the devil or devoured infants. In Christman’s case, the rumors may have had merit. They would explain his incredible strength, if nothing else; he was reportedly able to dispatch traveling parties of four or five men, single-handedly.” He pauses to take a bite of his meal, savoring the taste of Jim Barnes. “Of course, as is so often the case, he was ultimately undone by love.”

Will raises an eyebrow. “This doesn’t sound much like a love story.”

“It most assuredly is not,” Hannibal agrees. “Genipperteinga became infatuated with one of his intended victims. Taken by her great beauty, he insisted the woman return home with him and become his wife. Naturally, he couldn’t trust her, and kept her in chains whenever he left the home.”

Will can feel himself flushing, but he isn’t sure why. Too much to drink, he thinks. “So what happened to them?”

“Genipperteinga kept her for several years, and sired six children, all of whom he immediately slaughtered. Finally, she convinced him to trust her enough to let her visit a nearby town on her own. Perhaps she meant to keep faith with him, but upon seeing other human beings for the first time in years she broke down, weeping, and eventually told the town’s authorities of the tortures she’d endured. So they concocted a plan to take him unawares. It still took thirty armed men to bring him to heel.”

“He must have been furious at the betrayal,” Will notes.
“Oh indeed. According to documents of first hand accounts, Genipperteinga turned on his wife when the men burst in, calling her a faithless betrayer and whore, and saying he should have strangled her long ago. Evidently, the pain at being betrayed was exceeded only by that of the execution that came after. He endured the breaking wheel for nine days before finally expiring.”

“Jack Crawford should count himself fortunate he only has to deal with you,” Will jokes.

“True, I’m not quite as violently impressive as Genipperteinga,” Hannibal concedes. “When the authorities questioned him about his crimes he stated that if he’d reached his goal on 1,000 victims he would have been happy with that number. I have a ways to go. But, on the other hand, I’m still alive, and make wiser choices regarding my companions.”

Will isn’t sure if this means Hannibal thinks him more loyal than Genipperteinga’s wife, or if he just means he’d never choose to give Will the chance to betray him. “Oh certainly,” he agrees, because Hannibal is probably right, either way. “Don’t worry. You’ll get to 1,000 one day.”

“There’s hope, at least, with you here to help,” Hannibal flashes the smallest smile. It’s genuine, Will thinks.

“You’re more like Mickey and Mallory Knox,” Will says, after taking another bite. “You go for quality over quantity.”

“I am unfamiliar with these people,” Hannibal says, and Will smirks. Of course, he thinks, you’ve probably never even seen a movie.

“They were a married couple who went on a killing spree in the early nineties,” Will says, trying to keep the mirth from his voice. It’s rare to know more than Hannibal about anything; he has to savor the experience while it lasts. “They killed 54 people, including Mallory’s abusive family, before being captured. Then, after spending a year imprisoned apart, they were declared insane, staged a massive prison break, and escaped together, never to be seen again.” Will takes a drink of his wine, smirking against the glass. “They always left one witness alive,” he adds, knowing that this detail will be too much for Hannibal to accept, “to tell their story.”

“Is this a true story, Will?” Hannibal asks, as predicted. “It sounds extremely far fetched.”

Will snorts. “Does it, now? And no, it’s not a true story. It’s a movie.”
“Ah.” Hannibal sips his wine. “Of course. The public’s fascination with crime romances would produce such a film. A modern day Bonnie and Clyde. Couples like that win the public’s favor, even as they strike fear, typifying, as they do, a romance beyond the laws of rational society.” Red eyes twinkle at him over the table. “It would certainly explain the lucrativeness of those Murder Husband articles.”

“Don’t get any ideas,” Will says jocularly, realizing that he is a little more drunk than he had thought. His face feels warm.

“I assure you, I have no plans to propose to you.”

“Well, good,” Will says, deciding to continue drinking, despite the swimming feeling in his head he’s suddenly become aware of. He pours himself another glass and takes a sip. “I’m already married, after all.”

He regrets the words, which he’d intended as lighthearted, the moment he says them and sees Hannibal’s expression shift. It wouldn’t be evident to anyone else, but to Will it’s obvious, a dark thread of annoyance even Hannibal can’t hide. The mood between them shifts abruptly, no longer playful or easy. “I’m well aware,” Hannibal says, voice carefully neutral. Still, Will hears a note of anger. “You are, after all, still wearing your wedding ring.”

Oh. He’d forgotten about that. Will twists the silver band around on his finger, but doesn’t take it off. What kind of gesture would that be? What would that mean, if I took it off just to please him? The ring means little to Will now, just a reminder of all the time he spent trying to convince himself he could be someone other than he is, but he keeps it on, because removing it would symbolize too much now. He wishes Hannibal hadn’t said anything, that he could have remembered he was wearing it on his own, someday as he washed blood from his hands, maybe. He wishes he could have been afforded the opportunity to remove it with as little thought as someone brushes dirt from their clothes when they notice it there. It had become meaningless, until Hannibal imbued it with significance once more. Now the little band of metal means something again - the wrong thing - and it will have to mean something when Will chooses to remove it.

I should leave it on forever, just for spite, Will thinks. His voice is incredulous when he speaks. “Don’t tell me you’re feeling jealous.”

“Don’t worry, Will,” Hannibal answers, his voice dangerously smooth. “I’m not planning to ask for any sacrifices like the one you requested I make of Bedelia. Your borrowed little family is of no interest to me.”
Will swallows. He supposes Hannibal is right; of the two of them, he’s the one who has demanded Hannibal dismember a former partner (friend? lover? Will still isn’t sure what the correct word is, knows only that whatever she was, Hannibal intended her to act as a substitute for him, the way he’d tried to use Molly to fill the aching spaces left inside him when he’d told Hannibal he didn’t want to chase him anymore). If Will is really honest with himself, he knows some (most) of the animosity he’d felt towards Bedelia was due to the fact that he viewed her, at some level, as competition. Asking Hannibal to take her apart and cook her was asking for a display of loyalty, true, but it was also a way of eliminating a rival.

Still, it hadn’t occurred to him that Hannibal would ever ask the same in return, or that he was setting a precedent with Bedelia on how to handle former entanglements. He hasn’t thought much about Molly, but the idea of hurting her, or of Hannibal hurting her, makes his lip curl in disgust.

“Were you jealous when you sent the Great Red Dragon to my house?” Will asks. He’s unable to keep the irritation from his voice. “You certainly seemed interested in them then.”

“It seemed like a good way to encourage you.”

“Encourage me to do what, exactly?”

Hannibal’s eyes blaze. “To do exactly what you’ve done since,” he says. “Tell me Will, would you be here now if I hadn’t seen to it there was no other home to which you could return?”

The anger scorches through him like a flame traversing an oil slick. The bottle of wine he’s had with dinner lubricates the rage. Would I be here if you hadn’t forced my hand, you mean, he thinks, would I have chosen you if you’d left me anyone else left to choose, if you hadn’t worked so tirelessly from the beginning of our relationship to alienate me from everyone else in my life? Would I still have felt that magnetic pull to you, if you hadn’t worked so hard?

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Hmm,” Hannibal hums, considering him from beneath heavy lids. “Are you pleased with your current situation, Will?”

Will snorts. “Pleased?” He arches an eyebrow, considering Hannibal across the table for a long moment. The other man is regarding him with an expression of intense curiosity. There’s a cockiness in his voice, but Will senses hesitation as well. Almost, he thinks, unsure. “I suppose I feel a sense of
“So you are happy with your decision, then,” Hannibal presses, “happy to be here, with me, rather than there, with them.”

Will’s heart beat resonates within his aching chest. This is what it comes down to, he reckons. Am I happy with the choice I made? He isn’t sure happy is the right word. He isn’t sure he can put it into words at all, but he’s had enough to drink that he’s willing to try anyway. “I’d never have gotten here without you pulling and pushing me along,” he says, “never would have come to you willingly. You guided us here, guided me. It hurt so much. But God only knows where I would be without you.” His voice sounds wondering, awe-struck, and the sound surprises him. Across the table, Hannibal wears an expression of complete enthrallment, eyes flickering in the low light. There’s a long moment of silence before Hannibal answers, as if he is waiting for Will to say more.

“The worm that destroys you is the tendency to fight against your own instincts, Will, to agree with your critics, with the ones who would restrain the natural delight you are uniquely capable of experiencing. Not everyone has it in them to experience reality in the way that you and I can. What one cannot experience, one cannot understand, and suspicion follows as a natural consequence. You are not insane, Will, anymore than more than I am insane. It is them, the common hordes, who suffer from insanity, from delusions, from dampened senses, an inability to register the world as it really is.”

“I was so hesitant,” Will breathes, “I expected to still waver, to feel strangled by the guilt.” He chuckles. “To feel strangled by you.”

“What do the means matter, Will,” Hannibal asks, voice low and fervent. Will feels the sound like a caress over his warm skin, a touch he can’t shrug away from. “If I led you here by ensuring there were no other paths left for you to take, what does it matter, if you’re content with the results? You chose to engage in our old games when you asked for my help on the Red Dragon case. The moment you walked through the BSHCI doors - the moment who said yes to Jack Crawford, knowing that instant would lead you back to me - you put your family on the table.”

Will can’t answer. A part of him can’t help but agree with Hannibal’s words. He had known when he’d agreed to help Jack that it would lead him back to Hannibal, and that he wouldn’t be able to return to his life as it had been after that. He had known there was a chance he wouldn’t return to that life at all. Hannibal had warned him, after all, in the letter he’d sent; had Will honestly expected him to show any mercy, to him or his family?

“They don’t really matter, Will,” Hannibal breathes, “not the way I matter to you.”
And his voice is as cocksure and un-rebuffed as always, but Will can hear the question in his words, the desire in his voice, and knows that Hannibal is wanting, but not expecting, some sign of confirmation from him. *It would be a perfect moment to take off the ring,* Will thinks, *and lay it on the table between us.* He imagines the way Hannibal’s eyes would sparkle at all the latent meaning behind such a gesture, the way his long fingers might pluck the little band of metal off the table to slip it over his own digit. Assign it some entirely new but entirely familiar new meaning. Will leaves the ring, strangling his finger, where it is.

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The scent of coffee fills the vehicle, masking other, less pleasant odors, that might otherwise have lingered there. Molly imagines she can still detect the hint of bitter sweat under the rich hot smell of the coffee Jack pours from his thermos into her styrofoam cup. She’d normally take milk or sugar, or just have tea or hot chocolate instead, but she doesn’t ask for things she know he can’t provide her in this moment.

“Thanks,” she says, instead, sipping the hot biting liquid. The heat brings a measure of comfort; the parked car is cold, and Molly’s skin prickle under her layers of sweater and jacket.

She huddles deeper into her bulky clothing, and quaffs the coffee despite the unpleasant taste and the way it scalds her tongue and clings to the inside of her mouth, welcoming the burn traveling down her throat and spreading through her belly. Across from their car, the little house they’ve been watching for three and a half hours is as silent and still as it has been since they arrived. Inside the freezing car, they are silent and still, too.

There’s not a lot to do besides think, and periodically accept the coffee Jack offers from his seemingly bottomless thermos, as they stake out Frank Duffy’s dark little bungalow. Molly feels like she’s had too much time to think, lately, and far, far too much to occupy her thoughts. She wishes she could just turn it off for a while, the noise roaring in her mind like waves against a rocky shore. She lets her mind return to the thought she’s been turning to for comfort with increasing frequency since the night she and Wally had run through the snow in their night clothes. It’s a big old house in southern Oregon, with a field of sun bleached grass for a yard. Her former in-laws sent a picture this morning, of Wally grinning atop a tawny coated pony in that yard. *Soon,* she tells herself, *when this is all over, I’ll go there, too.* She and Wally had spent months in that house after her late husband passed. She’ll go there now, to rebuild her heart again.

Molly tilts her head back, letting it relax against the headrest, and closes her eyes. She knows she can’t fall asleep, but she’s so tired. In the darkness behind her eyelids she lets herself remember the three of them, dozing against one another on the sofa one night after dinner. She lets herself remember the happiness she’d felt then, lets the warmth of the memory spread through her.
“Don’t fall asleep on me,” Jack says, pulling her from her thoughts. She blinks her eyes open, realizing that the cup of coffee in her hand has tilted dangerously close to spilling. “I’d let you take a nap,” he says, voice carefully jovial, “but nothing knocks me out faster than hearing someone sleep breathe.”

She laughs softly. “Yeah, I know just what you mean,” she says. “Don’t worry, I’m awake.”

The corners of his eyes crinkle when he smiles back at her. “Good. Listen - ”

He stops abruptly, his entire body tensing, and Molly follows the line of his gaze. Jack stares at the house they’ve been watching for hours, at the bright blue door that’s remained closed until now. Now, there’s a dark line widening between the door and the frame as someone pushes it open cautiously. Molly holds her breath, her heart hammering a sudden staccato against her ribs. Any second now, she thinks, bracing herself, every muscle and tendon in her body tensing, any second it’ll open all the way, and he’ll be there, Will will be there, back from the dead, looking back at me. And then -

She doesn’t get to imagine what will happen next - couldn’t imagine it anyway - because the door swings open further in that instant, and there’s a blur of movement in the moonlight as an orange tabby escapes across the lawn. Molly releases the breath she’s been holding.

“It’s just a cat,” she laughs, but stops when she sees the look on Jack’s face, and understands. The cat is what pushed the door open, but the cat couldn’t have unlocked or unhooked the door. Despite the hot coffee she feels herself growing colder.

“Wait here,” Jack says, swinging his door open. He pauses, poised to spring out of the car, and turns back to her. “There’s a gun in the glove box. Take it out.” She does, the smooth weight of it foreign in her hands. “You know how to use it?”

It’s too late now to teach her if she says no, she knows. She also knows she isn’t going to shoot Will, no matter what he’s done. “I think I can manage,” she says. “I have the sedative, after all.”

Jack nods, leaping from the driver’s seat, his own weapon in hand. The door slams closed behind him, and Molly watches his back as he crosses the lawn and disappears through the front door.

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It’s dark inside the house. Jack keeps his gun raised in front of him, sweeping his eyes across the room. He steps through the kitchen, empty except for an overflowing garbage bin and a stack of dishes in the sink. There’s a lamp glowing in the next room, and Jack moves cautiously towards the light.

“Mister Duffy?” Jack calls, standing in the doorway between the kitchen and living room and surveying the dark corners of the room as best he can. There’s a figure sitting on the chair in the far corner, shoulders slumped and face obscured by shadow. It doesn’t move when Jack calls again.

Jack steps closer, keeping his gun raised as he grabs the lamp with his other hand so he can drag it closer to the figure in the corner. “Jesus Christ,” he breathes, gripping the neck of the lamp harder to keep from dropping it when he’s close enough to see Frank Duffy’s body, slouched against the wall, neck flayed to the bone. Jack nudges the murder weapon with his foot, and the sharp edged, broken beer bottle rolls across the floor, leaving a red scrawl of blood behind.

He sweeps his gun around the room, searching for them, but he finds nothing in the living room. The bedroom and bathroom are clear as well, and Jack, realizing he is alone in the house, thinks immediately of Molly.

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Will stumbles after Hannibal on heavy feet. He can feel the ground beneath them with each thudding footstep as he struggles to keep up. He knows Hannibal is saying something to him - likely it’s a stern command to pull himself together - but the words are lost in the pound of blood in his ears. The night air smells like damp earth and motor oil.

Will looks down at his hands. They should be stained and tacky with drying gore, but he finds them clean. All the blood is contained in the plastic murder suit Hannibal provided for him, shoved into a plastic ziplock in his backpack. He’d scoffed when Hannibal had offered him the strange garment, but he has to concede its usefulness. His hands are clean and shaking as he holds them before his eyes. He wiggles his fingers in the cool air. He runs them through his hair.

When he looks up, Hannibal is gazing back, his mouth moving over silent syllables. Will blinks. Sharp edged reality shifts around him as his imagination consumes the fuel of sensation. Hannibal is dressed in bronze, with helmet, greaves, and panoply of some archaic Grecian warrior. The armor gleams in the streetlight, sending bursts of light sparking off his shoulders and chest. Will looks down to see himself in matching raiment. We could be soldiers, he thinks, his mind a fog of too much clarity, we could be members of the Sacred Band; no one could ever stop us.
“Stay close to me,” Hannibal says, his lips pressed against the shell of Will’s ear and Will isn’t sure whether he hears the words or feels the vibration, but he understands the message either way. He nods, blinking at Hannibal’s strange clothing and strange expression. Of course he’ll stay close; that’s all he’s tried to do since that night on the cliff. Separation is death. He shakes himself, shaking out his leaden feet in order to keep pace better. But over Hannibal’s shoulder, across the street, Will sees something that makes him stop.

“Molly?” He sees her standing beside the black sedan, the hem of her gown trailing in the dirt, her shoulders bare in the cold. She gazes back, face like a mask, and he resists the sudden urge to step closer to the dream of her and ask some questions. He finds there are things he wonders about her, suddenly, though perhaps they are more like things he wonders about himself. Did you ever see holes in the disguise I maintained so carefully? Are you going back and noticing some now, cursing yourself for not seeing sooner? His eyes flicker over her glowing shape, sees the net gripped tightly in her hand, the thick rope wound in her fist. He can imagine the way the coarse fiber would bite into his skin so vividly he feels a burn forming on the insides of his wrists. In her other hand she holds an axe, keeping it low to the ground, partially concealed by her shin, as if she half intends to hide it, is hoping maybe he won’t see.

Her hands aren’t red yet either, but he knows that if he stays here long enough, or gets within the reach of her net, they soon will be. Will watches her through wide, staring eyes, and allows Hannibal to take his hand and drag him towards safety, away from the mirages fading in the flickering street light.
The wind and scenery whip passed, and Will digs his fingers tighter into Hannibal’s leather clad waist as the Ducati careens fleetly over the curving off ramp. He can hear his heart and the sound of nighttime traffic pounding in his ears. The hum of the engine vibrating through the bike between his legs. The scent of Hannibal’s body as he clings to his back, the sensation of tilting velocity as they speed back towards the penthouse - Will’s head spins with the flood of sensation and awe rushing through him.

*It’s like a dream*, he thinks, but it’s not like the thick, heavy nightmares that wake him in a sweat. This is lighter, softer, as wide and omnipresent as the air surrounding him. It’s like the air itself, something he’s breathing, something he needs. It’s like the blood burning through him, like the caress of air on his skin, blood through his veins. He closes his eyes and lets his cheek rest against Hannibal’s back, unmindful of the tension in the other man’s lean muscles. *I’m alive, I’m alive*, he thinks, and it hits him that for a long time he was maybe a little less than certain. He feels giddy, forced to grasp at Hannibal in a way he normally wouldn’t have the inclination (or is it courage he lacks?) to do. But it feels right, to be this close, in this circumstance. Something about it reminds him of the night they killed Dolarhyde, of the way he had reached for Hannibal, had clung to Hannibal’s lean frame and surrendered to the moment and to the knowledge of what they would become.

*What we have become*, Will thinks, and smiles against Hannibal’s shoulder, his bared teeth pressing against soft leather. The Ducati makes a sharp turn and then they’re sliding into the parking garage beneath the apartment, and Hannibal kills the engine and stalks off the bike, breaking Will’s grasp on him and leaving the younger man blinking dazedly after him as he walks at a clipped pace towards the elevator. He doesn’t look back. Will hurries to catch him, rushing into the private elevator just as the doors begin sliding shut.

“What the hell, Hannibal,” he starts, but finds himself at an abrupt loss for words and breath as Hannibal wheels on him and, moving too quickly for Will’s eyes to track him, slams him against the steel wall of the elevator hard enough for the little box to shake on its wires. The escalating room sways around them, and Will gasps, even more confused by Hannibal’s rapid shift in attitude than he had been a second before.

Hannibal’s face is a placid mask of tranquility, but the look in his deep crimson eyes brings a whimper to Will’s lips. He bites it back in the nick of time, but can’t manage to slow his breathing as
Hannibal presses him more firmly against the wall, eyes flashing fire behind his cold, impassive face.

“I’m done playing these games with you, Will,” Hannibal says, voice a low rumble that Will can feel through his whole body, pressed flush against one another as they are. He frowns, and opens his mouth to say that he isn’t playing either anymore, but before he can speak the elevator doors have slid open and Hannibal is stalking quickly away from him and into the expansive apartment.

“Hey.” Will calls after him, stepping into the kitchen in time to see Hannibal’s back slinking away from him, towards the bedroom, and, when he follows him, towards the bathroom. That final bastion of privacy. “Wait, dammit!”

“Sober up,” Hannibal says, coolly, without turning around. The door clicks shut behind him, the small sound somehow conveying greater displeasure than a slam could, and in a few minutes Will hears the shower running, and lets himself breathe again as the cold feeling of abandonment settles over him.

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“He looked confused,” Molly says, accepting with a grateful smile the mug of tea Alana hands her. “Like he didn’t know where he was.”

“That’s good,” Agent Crawford says, too quickly. The look Molly gives him must be beyond annoyed, because he rushes to explain himself. “If he’s confused, there’s hope he isn’t consenting to this in his right mind. Lecter could have him drugged with the same psychoactive cocktail he used on Miriam Lass. If that’s the case, all we need to do is separate the two of them, let the drugs work their way out of Will’s system.” Molly hears the hope in his voice, the part he’s not saying. *We’ll have him back, it will all just have been a mistake.*

“I-I don’t know,” she says. “He saw me - he said my name, I think - but he still left with…”

“If Hannibal has him drugged, then he might not have known whether what he was seeing was real or not,” Alana says, slowly. “He’d be highly susceptible to suggestion. Did it look like Hannibal was talking to him?”

Molly nods. She remembers them, standing across the street from her, moving from shadow to shadow, remembers Will’s eyes, wide and startled like she’d never seen before, and the other man - Hannibal Lecter? - had leaned into him and brought their faces close to say something in his ear. The
memory brings her no comfort, even if it does lend credence to the theory that Will is not acting of his own volition. The energy evident between them from the way they moved, the way they touched, couldn’t have been induced by psychoactive drugs or hypnosis. Thinking of it, Molly wants to cry. She wonders how long it will be before she can go back to her motel room and crawl under the covers for a few hours.

“There you go,” Crawford says, sounding like this is all the proof they need. “He reacted when he saw you, Molly, if we can get him to see you without Hannibal there to interfere you can get him to come to you.”

“We know where they will go next,” Alana says. “You’ll need SWAT units around Michael Barker’s house. Scatter them through the neighborhood, and you and Molly get as close as you can.”

“We’ll need to be somewhere with a clear view of the house,” Agent Crawford agrees, “eyes on every entrance so we know as soon as they arrive. Then, Molly, you’ll need to go in ahead on your own. We’ll do our best to pinpoint Will’s location, try to catch him when he’s on his own, or draw him off somehow.”

Molly just looks at him. It seems less and less like protecting Michael Barker is a priority for them. “His hands were clean,” she says, finally. “Not a drop of blood on him.” On either of them, she thinks, but pushes the thought away as quickly as it appears, anxious for anything that could exonerate her husband.

The silence filling the office presses like a heavy stone on her chest. She can feel the air being pushed out of her. And she knows, bloodless or bloody, redhanded or with clean hands, Will is guilty, and even if they capture him, he’ll never be the man she remembers, but he’ll always be the man she loves.

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She speaks at a rapid clip, her glossy lips moving over the details of chapter titles and dust jacket photos. The latter topic she is carefully diplomatic in approaching, but her shrewd mind won’t allow her not to broach the subject. He understands her immediately; using an outdated photo might be the more comfortable choice, but a photo of him after his accident will sell more books, and earn him both sympathy and trust. A man who’d show you his face looking like that surely wouldn’t bother hiding anything else. Would I lie to you? Just look at this face!

It’s scintillating to have company he can match wits with. Her cleverness and beauty are unparalleled, in Frederick’s experience, and her bravery makes him want to be brave, too. She is
undaunted by fear. She isn’t scared of what might happen to her - but then again, it hasn’t happened to her yet. Frederick has lived through the worst three times now. If there is a worse worst than this one, he doesn’t want to know. But he can’t look at her, brazen and unassailable, and say no.

His skin grafts are progressing well, and the first meeting with the plastic surgeon ended on a hopeful note. The surgeon was optimistic about Frederick’s face. In time, he would even be able to smile again. For now he settles for baring his toothy rictus at Freddie, and hopes she reads the smile in his cloudy eyes.

Frederick has seen the powers of plastic surgery before, and they are truly impressive. He is feeling more optimistic himself these days. The Dragon flayed him to the bone, but even so he shall endure. Already, he has suffered greatly, and toiled to recover from the pains and terrors of his myriad misfortunes; let this latest atrocity be added to those he already bears. No longer forlorn about his external beauty, Frederick turns his energy to considering strength.

He’s never been particularly tenacious. His body before the accident was acceptable but soft. He’d felt it in his thighs and chest when he’d climbed above two flights of stairs, and been unable to defend himself every time it could have made a difference. He is a prey animal, and he is tired of his position on the food chain.

He watches Freddie’s mouth move, one part of his mind tracking what she is saying while the rest of his trauma fractured psyche wanders and seethes. They’re starting him on physical therapy in a week, and he resolves now to leave the hospital walking, unaided by the cane he’d leaned on for both stability and fashion in his previous life. He will recover, and more than recover. He wants to be strong now, in a way he never has been before. By each bloody link in the food chain, Frederick intends to ascend.

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Hannibal takes his time. When he does emerge from the bathroom at last, clad in soft grey pants and a cobalt sweater, his hair still soft and damp, Will is standing directly outside the door, leaning against the opposite wall with his arms crossed over his chest and an expression somewhere between confusion, indignation, and pitiful sorrow. Ordinarily, Hannibal would find the combination delightfully diverting, but at present he remains unamused. Raking his gaze coolly over Will’s exasperated frame, Hannibal makes his way towards the study. He doesn’t need to hear the footsteps behind him to know he’s being followed.

“Are you expecting me to know why you’re so upset?” Will’s voice comes from behind him. Hannibal makes himself busy stacking the papers on his desk into neat piles. “Because I really don’t.”
This is a great deal to take, even from Will, who has shown himself capable of remarkable obtusity over the years, despite his empathic gifts and natural cunning. Hannibal forces himself to continue the mundane task of organizing the desk as he replies, forces himself to divert his attention lest the rage swimming in him become uncontainable.

“I don’t appreciate whatever game you are playing, Will,” he says, voice meticulously calm. He’s certain Will can hear the anger buried within the words, though. “I refuse to believe you are that oblivious.” But Will’s look is one of genuine and complete bafflement, and forces Hannibal to reconsider his conviction. “No, you aren’t so indifferent as that, but you aren’t lying either, are you?”

Will huffs at him, squeezing his eyes shut and then blinking in rapid exasperation, in that curious way Hannibal has come to cherish over the years. “I’m honestly at a complete loss,” he says, running his hand over his face and looking piteously forlorn. “Everything seemed fine - better than fine - and then we got back here and…” He waves a hand, unable to articulate through his frustration. Hannibal feels himself softening, slightly, cold rage partially replaced by curiosity.

“So something else, then,” he says, voice low. “An extreme difference in perspective, perhaps. Tell me, when we left Mr. Duffy’s home, what did you see?”

Will blinks at him. He has his arms crossed over his chest again, his posture guarded and wary. “You,” he says, “leading me away.” He frowns. “Only you were dressed differently, and so was I. It was like I was moving through a dream. And,” he pauses, his frown deepening.

“Go on,” Hannibal urges, keeping his tone low to avoid startling Will. “Tell me what you saw.”

“You were talking to me,” Will whispers, voice scarcely more than a breath, and Hannibal steps closer to hear him better. “But I couldn’t hear what you said. I knew I had to follow you though, even though my feet felt like they had concrete shoes on them. And then I looked across the street, and I saw Molly.” He swallows, voice catching. “She was dressed strangely, too, all three of us like something from a different era.” He chuckles mirthlessly, grimacing as he meets Hannibal’s eyes. “I’ve always had an active imagination, you know.”

Hannibal blinks back at him, a slow and conscious movement. “You believe you hallucinated while we were escaping,” he states, after a long silence.

“Well, obviously,” Will rasps gruffly. “I knew it couldn’t be real, even when it was happening; I have an abnormally high amount of experience with hallucinations, after all.” He gives another short,
bitter laugh. “Unless you’re about to tell me that we really were dressed like Athenian soldiers and Molly really was standing across the street dressed like Helen of Troy and hefting a hatchet and a net.”

“You saw her holding an axe and a net?” Hannibal asks, fascination edging out anger bit by bit. “That would make her more accurately Clytemnestra, Helen’s sister.”

“Helen, Chlamydia, whatever,” Will waves a dismissive hand in a gesture so rude Hannibal sucks an involuntarily breath past his teeth. “None of this explains why you are suddenly so hot under the collar, Hannibal.”

He stares at Will for a long moment, calculating what would be best to say next. Will clearly believes that they escaped the scene without being seen, and that he’d only imagined his wife staring at them from beneath the street light, and Hannibal is tempted to keep the truth to himself. But the inclination is borne more from habit than practicality, and eventually he speaks. “She wasn’t wearing a chiton.”

Will blinks back at him. For several seconds, his face is a mask of perplexed concern that Hannibal is tempted to term endearing. Finally, understanding settles over his features. “You mean - ”

“You didn’t hallucinate your wife, Will. It seems your loose ends have come looking for you. And you certainly gazed back with a convincing degree of heartfelt longing.”

Will has the good sense to flush at the harshly uttered words. “I didn’t - ”

“Oh, let me assure you, you did.”

“Well, I didn’t mean to.” Will fixes him with an affronted glare. “Feeling jealous again, are you?”

Rage wins out over Hannibal’s fascination with the inner workings of Will’s mind, at least for the present moment. “I do not envy your wife, anymore than I would envy any other piece of the disguise you’ve been wearing since I met you,” he retorts, unable to keep some of the bite from his carefully steady voice. “I do not need to be some lovelorn rube to feel justifiably frustrated by your reaction to seeing her, whether you knew she was real or not.”

“You aren’t honestly still thinking I’m about to betray you, are you?” Will snaps testily.
“About to betray me, again,” Hannibal corrects, voice smooth. “And you sound like you think that would be an utterly ludicrous concern.”

“Well, it is.”

“Let’s examine our evidence, Agent Graham,” Hannibal replies with unusual quickness, no longer devoting any time to previewing his words before speaking them. “You’ve made a career out of betraying me. You claim to have left all that to the past, but display an alarming preoccupation with the consideration of how I would react were you to betray me again. You are noticeably jittery when confronted with the subject of your family. You continue to wear on your finger a symbol of your lifelong dedication to a woman you’ve abandoned. And when challenged with the sudden and unexpected appearance of this woman your reaction is to walk towards her until dragged away.”

He pauses, unsure of his ability to keep his voice even much longer. Already, his voice sounds rough with growing intensity to his ears, and he can feel his pulse twitching rapidly in his throat and hands. He forces himself to be still, focussing on the length of each breath and the feeling of the floor beneath his shoes. Will waits motionlessly, somehow aware that Hannibal isn’t finished speaking, yet. At last, when he has let all expression bleed from his face and he’s certain his words will come out unbroken, Hannibal says, “It’s only rational that I be alarmed by this behavior, Will. Perhaps you would care to explain?”

He takes a step towards the younger man, invading his space. Will doesn’t step back, just splutters inelegantly until Hannibal can’t help but sneer. “Maybe you weren’t ready,” he says cruelly, and thrills privately at the broken look that streaks across Will’s face, even as it turns his stomach to keep speaking. “I should have left you to her, instead of hauling you away.”

Will’s face is drawn, jaw and mouth tight and eyes tempestuous, as he turns and exits the study. It’s the first time Hannibal can remember seeing him walk away since they entered the prison transfer vehicle. Hannibal doesn’t follow.

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He’s known since they arrived that the penthouse had a room outfitted just for him, designed and curated years before, by a version of Hannibal who found it far easier to trust Will’s good intentions. He’d taken a shower that first morning and found a suit cut to his measurements waiting on the bed for him when he was done, and he’d known that somewhere in the apartment there was another closet filled with things Hannibal had hoped to one day see Will wear. He’d certainly had to wait long enough.
Will finds the room easily. He’s been there once already, after all. It’s a door down the hall from the master bedroom, and it’s furnished very much like the one he’d found in the cliffside house two weeks before. Will notes the rank smell, the coppery stain on the sheets, remembering that they haven’t yet gotten around to changing the bedclothes after their surgical forays with Bedelia. It hadn’t felt like a pressing issue, after all. He doesn’t bother exploring, just lobs himself onto the bloodstained bed and kicks off the rancid sheets. He sprawls amongst the numerous pillows, his head spinning.

For a minute or two, Will watches the door. He hadn’t slammed it, hadn’t even bothered to shut it completely. It rests ajar, a slice of hallway visible from where he lies on the bed. He waits, but won’t admit to himself what it is he is waiting for. At last, when nothing happens and the hallway beyond the door remains empty and silent for too long, he sighs, and swings his legs so that he can sit up and rest against the headboard.

There’s a lot to analyze in what’s just transpired. Will closes his eyes and tries to think clearly through the buzz of bloodlust vibrating through his bones and sinews. It’s strenuous to follow any thought for long, through the hum or energy pounding through him, the flood of sensations, smells, colors invading his senses. He closes his eyes and breathes deep, forcing himself to focus on the first image that comes into his mind.

Hannibal had stood so close, eyes like black mirrors showing him nothing but his own disappointment and trepidation, and his voice had shook with such passionate bitterness that for a moment Will had been frighteningly certain Hannibal was about to stab him again. He’d worn the same passionate but statue-like countenance right before exposing Will’s intestines to the kitchen floor years before.

It’s funny to think, how at the time, Will had been sure that Hannibal was about to kiss him. His look of unreadable intensity, the way he’d stroked Will’s face and curled his fingers in his hair, had all seemed like precursors to something much more pleasant than disembowelment. Even after he’d traced the blade of the curving linoleum knife along Will’s stomach, after Will had collapsed against him and he held Will, dying, in his arms, a part of Will’s mind remained convinced that Hannibal was going to kiss him. It had seemed right, somehow, to die with Hannibal’s mouth on his, Hannibal drawing his breath away from his body, devouring his last gasps for air; it felt right to let himself slip away from himself, the sensation of Hannibal’s hands on him chasing him into the afterlife, and a part of him had ached for it, even as his body and mind struggled against the growing death wish.

He’d let Hannibal guide his body, pull him close, not expecting the rush of burning pain at being stabbed. He hadn’t expected the pain that scorched through him days later, either, when he awoke from dreams of rivers of blood and found that Hannibal had gone, taking Bedelia with him. You were supposed to leave, he’d thought to himself, over and over, as he failed to find sleep in his hospital bed. I could have followed, later. After I’d had time to think. After I’d decided.
Will supposes he can’t fault Hannibal for his jealousy without being a reproachable hypocrite himself. And he has to admit, if only to himself, that Hannibal has some right to his anger, apart from any jealousy he might also be experiencing. It looked suspicious, and over the years Will has certainly given him plenty of reasons to be cautious.

What was Molly doing there, anyway? Will wonders. They’d known Jack was watching the house - his car had been staked out across the street in a stunning display of conspicuousness - and they’d hurried through their work before rushing out the back door, hopping the fence and heading for the Ducati Hannibal had hidden behind a dumpster two blocks down. But there’d been no reason for Molly to be there, no explanation for her presence. Had she gone looking for him? She couldn’t possibly be that foolish.

Her presence must be connected to Jack, Will reasons, but he can’t fathom why. It’s getting easier to think, but the external world still floods him.

He lets himself imagine what it feels like to be Hannibal - always a task he aches for and avoids in equal measure. Hannibal, who has declared his love in uncharacteristically staunch and unambiguous language, who has met each of Will’s denials with a calm smile and a refusal to show dejection. Hannibal, who touches his face and insists that he matters more than anyone to Will. Hannibal, who delivers self-assured declarations that are actually questions. They don’t matter the way I matter to you, he’d said, but he’d really been asking. And Will had ignored the question, and then at the first opportunity to demonstrate the loyalty he kept professing he instead chose to stagger after his spectral wife.

It was beyond stupid, really, a mere accident, a comedy of errors. If he hadn’t thought she was a figment of his imagination he never would have allowed himself to approach her. Whatever her presence at the crime scene means, it’s not a good omen. His subconscious must have wanted to relay that information, outfitting her with weapons and snares as it did.

Will opens his eyes again at last, blinking until the dim room comes back into focus. He glances to the door before he can stop himself. He can’t stop the rush of disappointment at seeing the empty slice of hallway beyond the half open door, either. Sliding off the bed, Will crosses the room and pulls the door the rest of the way open.

He finds Hannibal still in his study, seated behind his desk with an unopened book in his lap. His unflappably cool facade seems somewhat askew. “Hey,” Will greets, stepping into the room. He knows he doesn’t need to announce his presence for Hannibal the way he would for a normal person, but it helps dispel some of the awkward tension. Hannibal regards him expressionlessly. Of course he wouldn’t try to make this easy. When has he ever let anything be easy? Will chews his lower lip with contemplative bites. It had seemed important to come and apologize promptly, rather
than allowing the situation to fester. But now that he’s standing in front of Hannibal, feeling the anger that still rolls off the other man in waves, he finds it far more challenging to make the simple apology he’d imagined in the bedroom.

“Was there something you wanted, Will?” Hannibal finally asks, when the silence has stretched for too long between them. His voice lacks the customary amalgamation of fondness and amusement it holds when addressing Will.

“Listen,” Will tries again, “I need to apologize.” Hannibal’s pale eyebrows shoot up at that, and Will feels the hot brand of anger on his brain. He forces himself to ignore it and forge ahead. “I asked you to trust me, but I haven’t done a decent job of earning that trust so far. I can’t fault you for feeling frustrated.” He spreads his hands in an open, conciliatory gesture. “But I need you to know, Hannibal, I didn’t know she was really there. This isn’t going to be a repeat of anything we’ve done before, of anything I’ve done to you before.” He pauses to exhale noisily, struggling to continue meeting Hannibal’s glowing red gaze without growing tongue tied. Hannibal waits.

Will wets his lips. “I know, the things we’ve done to one another make it…challenging to trust completely. Believe me, I have my own fears about this situation.”

“What is it you fear, Will?” Hannibal is predictably quick to pounce on that new bit of knowledge. “Do you worry you will lose yourself completely? That you are betraying yourself along with your precious morality? Or do you suspect you are already lost to the world of the decent and good?”

Will gives a rough burst of laughter. “You know I’m not afraid of that,” he says, smiling with calculated vulnerability.

Hannibal smiles back, his posture losing some of its tense hostility. “I know.”

Will is overcome by a strange urge to pet Hannibal, as if he were a large cat. He pictures himself running his open palm over Hannibal’s face, from the top of his head down over those stunning cheekbones. He imagines how Hannibal would close his eyes. Will takes a step close to the desk Hannibal is still sitting behind, but does not touch him.

“What are you afraid of, Will?”

He gives another huff of laughter. “You held me in your arms and tore my guts out, Hannibal,” he answers, his smile a grimace. His tone is defensively jocular. “You tried to cut my skull open so you
could eat my brain. It’s hard to forget things like that.”

“Those actions were regrettably impulsive,” Hannibal concedes. “Though they did not occur without provocation, Will.”

“Precisely,” Will answers. He wants to drop his gaze, but he forces himself not to, and takes another step towards Hannibal, stopping when his thighs are almost touching the mahogany desk and Hannibal has to scoot his chair back and lean back to continue making eye contact. “You act impulsively when hurt. I’m done running from you, Hannibal. I’m done fighting. But I don’t know what you planned for us in your mind beyond this moment, whether you envisioned us as allies, or as each other’s ends, or…” he trails off, willing himself not to flush. Hannibal’s eyes rake his face with intense scrutiny, and he can feel his face reddening traitorously. “I’m not trying to hurt you,” he continues, finding himself slightly breathless when he speaks, “but that doesn’t mean I won’t provoke you on occasion, whether I intend to or not. Case in point, tonight.” He lifts an eyebrow. “How do I know you won’t behave in a regrettably impulsive manner next time the hot hand of anger rests on you?”

Hannibal regards him coolly, his neck angled to gaze up at Will’s face. At great length, he says, “I have no reason to hurt you anymore, either. Do I, Will?”

Will smiles. “No,” he says, voice warm. “You really don’t.”

He moves to stand on the same side of the table as where Hannibal is sitting, and, knowing the action will vex the other man, half sits upon the desk. He’s transported abruptly to the memory of Hannibal’s old office, to a time long before they became so entangled into one another’s minds and souls. He remembers himself, leaning over Hannibal, seeing the other man’s blood for the first time and wanting to reach out and touch it with a desire so fervent it all but strangled him to resist it.

“You’re here,” Hannibal says, voice wondering and so quiet Will isn’t sure Hannibal means him to hear. Perhaps he simply needs to say it out loud in order to make it real. Will’s heart twists inside his chest.

“Yes,” he whispers back, and heat flares in Hannibal’s eyes as they gaze up at him. It would have been so simple to cross the distance between them, once, but it felt so hard. It’s not simple anymore. Will stays put.

“Are you hallucinating frequently these days?” Hannibal asks, into the pooling silence of the moment. Will almost laughs at the question, seeming to come out of nowhere as it does, stealing in to invade the emotionally fraught moment.
“I’ve been,” he shrugs, “overwhelmed.” He licks his lips, watching Hannibal’s eyes darken. “I’m sure you’ve noticed.”

“Describe how it feels for me,” Hannibal orders, typically imperious. “What is it, to be overwhelmed, Will?”

“You know,” he sighs, “you of all people must surely know. It’s a…heightened sensitivity to the world around me. As if I had previously experienced reality through a veil or filter, and, that barrier now removed, I find each sense strengthened and sharpened. It’s as if the world is moving in slow motion, at times, and I can breathe in the space between my heartbeats.” He breathes deeply, pausing in his words. Hannibal remains silent, waiting. Will studies him, then continues, “Every sound, every smell, every taste, touch, each color and line - all of it feels realer, more vibrant and intense. The world is,” he thinks for a moment, “radiant.”

Hannibal’s eyes gleam across the slight distance, but he says nothing. Will smiles, faintly. “You asked me if I’m happy to be here,” he continues, into the contemplative silence of the moment. “I don’t know that happiness is quite the right word; euphoria, perhaps. I have never felt like this before, and I would never take it back or trade it for something safer or more prosaic again. Not now that I’ve seen fully what it is you’ve been offering me all this time.”

The look Hannibal gives him is dazzling. Will stumbles on, his voice growing rougher, unaccustomed to delivering so long a speech, with such emotion. “You told me to sober up before,” he says, not quite a question.

“I did,” Hannibal answers.

“You knew how I was feeling, how this energy overfills the body and brain.”

“I know how it feels for me,” Hannibal replies. “I suspected you experienced something similar, and were finding it difficult to control yourself in the face of it.”

Will chuckles. “My lack of self control is most often to your advantage,” he says. “Sober is a good word choice. I feel intoxicated.”

Hannibal hums contemplatively. “It will grow easier to manage in time,” he says. “You already know how to use that exuberance to gain dominance over your prey. It’s beautiful to watch you
work, Will. I am truly honored to witness it.”

Will says nothing, but feels his face engulfed in fire.

“Do you find the elation brings you any peace?” Hannibal asks.

“I suppose,” Will says. “It settles things, at least, makes it impossible to hide what I want from myself. That in itself is peace. And,” he pauses, brow furrowing as he reflects on his words, “the feeling is so large, so expansive, it drives out smaller emotions of distress.”

“Yes,” Hannibal breathes, voice low and adoring, “this is what I’ve wanted for you, Will, that you would choose to live that wonderful life that’s within you, to be always seeking new sensations, and to fear nothing. You’ve agonized for so long,” he smiles, not unkindly, across the small distance between them, and Will feels the air crackle as if lightning could strike in doors. “Nothing will cure your soul except abandoning yourself to sensation.”

Will exhales loudly. “Right,” he says, “well, it’s a little…overpowering.” He catches the glint in Hannibal’s eyes, feels his mouth drying like clay in the sun. “It’s as if the stimulation is gluttoning my imagination. It’s only been that one time, I think, that I got confused.” He swallows. “And I’m sorry.”

“You have nothing to apologize for,” Hannibal replies, voice devoid of anger now. “I should have remembered how easy it is to lose one’s self to these new experiences. You’re feeling for your limits. I shall strive to be better at helping you find them.”

Hannibal’s voice is pitched low, and positively dripping with suggestion. Will feels his already glowing face catch fire anew at the heat in Hannibal’s words. He coughs. “Well, I can understand why you got upset, anyway” he gasps.

“A simple misunderstanding.”

“And we got through it without any bone saws,” Will jokes, doing his best to mask his discomfort at the intensity of the moment with humor. “I’ve a renewed sense of faith in our alliance, or at least in my ability to survive it.”

Hannibal regards him with an ardent gaze, a faint smirk hiding at the corner of his mouth. He looks
like he’s evaluating, weighing how far he can push the situation before Will breaks. “Hateful to me as the gate of Hades is the man who hides one thing in his heart and speaks another,” Hannibal says, at long last. His voice, though, contains none of its earlier ire. “The wise are cautious, Will, but you have always made me reckless.”

Will can feel his chest beginning to rise and fall more rapidly. He forces himself to hold his breath on the next inhale. He can feel himself reacting to Hannibal’s words, his body responding the way it would at at Hannibal’s touch. Are his words alone that powerful now? Will remembers the light trace of Hannibal’s bloody hands, the heat of his fingers through the plastic gloves as he’d held Will’s face and breathed against him. He remembers the way Hannibal pressed against him in the elevator a few hours ago, holding their bodies flush as he’d pinned Will in place with one arm. He exhales, feeling the blood rush towards his groin with such sudden intensity his vision shakes with a sudden brief dizziness. He reels, ever so slightly, grateful for the desk, upon which he is leaning most of his weight. He’s not sure he could stay upright without it.

What the hell, Will thinks, not sure if he should feel more shocked or angry. He chooses to brush passed the feelings entirely, and examines the new turn of events with analytic curiosity, rather than allowing his emotions to gain dominance. Hannibal has always made him feel sharper and brighter, both energized and consumed. Now, with his every nerve alight and dazzled by existence, Will supposes it’s only natural that he’d begin to empathize even more powerfully with Hannibal. All his senses are turned up, and of course this peculiar sixth sense of his must surely be no exception. It makes sense that he would begin to mirror Hannibal’s emotions and reactions - Will frowns, noticing for the first time the way Hannibal has crossed one leg carefully over the other, the pale flush along the even paler column of his neck. Oh. Of course. He swallows, unsure how to proceed with Hannibal’s maroon eyes burning into him.

“I trust your recklessness,” he manages, finally, sounding half strangled to his own ears. “It’s gotten us this far, after all.”

“We got here together,” Hannibal reminds him. “Me leading you, you leading me. It’s always amounted to the same thing, in the end.”

Will nods, no longer trusting himself to speak even a single syllable. Between the blood pounding like a bass drum in his ears, and the blood gathered in his rock hard cock, he’s amazed he is still upright, even with the desk’s obliging support. He closes his eyes against Hannibal’s stare, letting the air escape him in a sigh. He knows he must look somewhat shameless, with all his heavy sighing and fluttering lashes, embarrassingly like something from a cheap harlequin romance, but he can’t be roused to care about it. Not when each new moment brings a fresh wave of undiminished sensation flooding over and through him, a fresh wave of lust wafting off of Hannibal and clinging to him, like smoke off a campfire.

“Discounting your brief foray into holy matrimony,” Hannibal continues, and Will can feel the
velvety sound of his voice stroking over his skin like a touch, “there is no facet of your personality that does not fascinate me, Will.”

“You know, you don’t need to feel threatened,” Will says, swallowing the lump in his dry throat, and smiling slightly to soften the words, “by Molly and Walter, I mean. They don’t...” He hears Hannibal’s voice purring in his ear, almost feels the hot breath of it on his skin. They don’t really matter to you, Will, not the way I matter. “They aren’t you,” he concludes, letting his eyes flutter open to meet Hannibal’s, knowing he’s toeing a line he’d told them both he wouldn’t cross.

“Who’s threatened?” Hannibal queries, raising a sardonic eyebrow in Will’s direction. “I’m certainly not threatened by your failed social experiment of a family, Will.”

“Spoken like someone truly unthreatened,” Will rejoins, his smile broadening as a rush of sincerity cascades over him. He feels himself relaxing, the tension breaking enough for him to breathe again. In the newly relaxed atmosphere Will lets himself quietly cherish the gentle fondness on Hannibal’s face.

“Find something quiet to do, tiresome boy,” Hannibal says, benignly. “You’re distracting me from my book.”

Will considers pointing out that Hannibal had been contemplating the plain leather cover of the book when he’d arrived, and has yet to open the exceedingly old and excessively dull looking tome. But, he mercifully decides, he has vexed the older man sufficiently for one day. He selects a book at random from the nearest shelf, and settles into one of the armchairs by the fire, peering over the top of the book to examine Hannibal and smile.
A dead psychiatrist is better than none at all, Will figures. It’s unlikely he’ll get better help than this, after all.

“We spoil ourselves with scruples when things are going well,” Bedelia’s dark-eyed ghost whispers breathily to him as he sits, watching her over the pages of the book he’s pretending to read. Hannibal is still at his desk, but has abandoned the pretense of reading in favor of his art. Will listens to the rasp of graphite over paper and tries not to wonder what the doctor is drawing, or whether it has anything to do with him, or them. “But laws and morals are not intended for the times when it is painless to follow them. Rules are for the times when we are tempted. When we need something stronger than our own principles and convictions to keep us from doing irreparable harm. What do they mean if we observe them only when it is easy to do so?”

Will closes his eyes, answering her in his mind. “Maybe they never mean anything.” Somehow he can see her better with his eyes closed. Everything about her is true to life - her perfectly coifed blonde hair, her smooth and tailored dress suit, her missing limb, the empty sockets in her skull. “It’s a little late to avoid irreparable harm, don’t you think?” Will asks, considering her eyeless, lifeless, incomplete visage. Her chest rises with her heavy inhalation, just as it would have in life. Though her eyes are hollow caverns, he can sense her gaze and it feels familiar.

“What is it that holds you back, then?”

“I wasn’t aware I was holding anything back anymore. I certainly didn’t with you.”

“Maybe not,” she says, “but you are reluctant to let a part of yourself go, or perhaps more accurately, to acknowledge certain aspects of your personality. Even now, after all you’ve become,” she tilts her head at the word, sighing, “there are pieces of yourself you still want to pretend aren’t there.”

Will knows this to be the truth. She wouldn’t be here, continuing his therapy, if it wasn’t. Of all the people his mind could conjure for this conversation, Bedelia makes both the most and least sense. “Were there pieces of yourself you wished you could remove?” he asks, raising an eyebrow at her.

“You removed more of me than I would have wished,” she breathes. “What part of yourself are you hoping to sever?”
“I think you know.”

“Yes,” the ghost moves in her seat, watching him through the blank black holes in her face. “Are you truly free if you can’t speak what you want, though?”

“I’m not sure what I want,” Will answers, but he’s not sure that’s true. “Are any of us free anyway? Was it free will that got me to this point?”

“What else would it be, but your own conscious choices? Unless you believe you were coerced or manipulated into this position.”

“It wouldn’t be a baseless fear,” Will says, “but no. Only that perhaps something rides us - all of us, you, me, even him - maneuvers us into place.”

“Fate.”

“Something like that. Maybe our choices are ours to make, but the way we’ll choose is never truly in our control. Too much conditioning, too many conditions. I made my choices, but were there ever any real options? We’re shown two doors, but before the choice is presented our decision is already forgone.” He thinks of the dark twisting dread that escalated into terror, the sense of loss, of devastation, of the necessity and futility of resistance, as Hannibal had revealed him to himself. He’d known what he was in the instant he watched the life bleed from Garrett Jacob Hobbs’ face. That stillness, that sway; he had known he could - he would - I did - rail against the truth of who he was, but all his choices would only lead him to himself. Every door he opened would only take him deeper into his own darkness, guided by the force of predetermination towards the center of his own violent heart.

Now he worries what else he may find there, at the heart of his being, and be unable to resist.

“Hannibal would say that the mind is no more free than is any other organ of the body. Do you believe our choices are all due to genetics and chemistry?”

“From the moment I was born,” Will sighs, “maybe I was always walking to this place.”

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The shower is running, and Hannibal’s side of the bed is warm but empty when Will awakes the next morning. This has become a part of his daily routine, as reliable and uninteresting as brushing his teeth. Usually, he lies abed until the water shuts off and Hannibal returns, and immediately begins ordering him around in that subtle, domineering way and shooting him passionate but inscrutable gazes. Today, though, Will feels different. Energized by the wildfire in his nerves, or by the intense emotional openness of the previous day, he springs from the bed almost at once, stretching languidly until he both feels and hears his vertebrae snapping into place.

Rolling his shoulders, Will makes his way to the hallway in just his grey undershirt and boxer briefs. Both items are ones Hannibal had presented to him wordlessly, and Will had accepted them just as mutely. It bothers him to think about the financial disparity that exists between them, and will doubtlessly continue to exist for the duration of their lives, so he does his best not to think about it. There’s no changing the way things are, after all. Hannibal would only call him frightfully dull if he shared these concerns, and, he supposes, that’s not an inaccurate assessment. In their world of viscera and magic, what does money matter, besides providing an easier means to an inevitable end? If they lacked it they would acquire it jointly. Hannibal’s wealth merely simplifies matters, even if Will does feel a frightfully dull twinge at the thought of how financially beholden he has and will become.

It’s always been obvious that Hannibal had money, and had grown up around money, but the extent of his wealth had never fully occurred to Will before arriving at his secret cliffside house. That Hannibal owned property like that beach house, just to use it in secret on rare occasions, rewrote the understanding Will had of Hannibal’s wealth. And then, arriving at this place. Will wanders across the gleaming hardwood floor, his footsteps muffled by the thick Persian carpets, into the expansive sitting room. An artful arrangement of velvet sofas and armchairs fills the room, and Will’s mind spins at the fact that Hannibal’s secret hideaway is equipped to host a party of two dozen people or more.

There’s a harpsichord in the corner, the twin of the one back in Baltimore. Will walks over to the instrument. It’s similar enough to the out of tune piano he’d kept back in Wolf Trap, for those nights when he’d have a few too many drinks by himself and sing out of tune ballads to the dogs’ howling accompaniment. He lets his fingers dance over the keys, the motions feeling unfamiliar in sobriety as he plucks out a wrong sounding and abrasive version of Oh My Darling Clementine.

There’s a soft noise from the other end of the room, and Will looks up from the keys to see Hannibal watching him expressionlessly. He moves to close the keyboard cover, but Hannibal makes a noise of disapproval, and slides across the room like quicksilver, stilling Will’s hand with his own.

Keeping his left hand where it rests over Will’s, Hannibal uses the fingers of his right to bring a much sweeter sounding rendition of the song ringing from the instrument. His fingers dance over the keys like soft rainfall, and Hannibal finishes the simple verse with a baroque flourish and a smirk. Will can’t quell the startled laugh that bursts from him at the exaggerated showmanship, at Hannibal’s unexpected playfulness, at his own surprise. He can see the gleam his joviality brings to
Hannibal’s eyes, and warmth floods through his belly like a shot of liquor. And then he can’t say exactly what causes it, other than the latent longing riding them both, but the tension between them is suddenly too thick to bear and he’s breathing harder, suddenly, for no good reason, and Hannibal’s hand is tightening over his and he’s moving, almost at precisely the same moment Hannibal does, and they crash together, Will’s hip colliding with the keyboard in a bruising cacophony as Hannibal claims his mouth.

Will pants against Hannibal’s lips, abruptly out of breath. Hannibal’s fingers are crushing one of his hands against the wooden keyboard cover, as if to keep him from escape. Will buries his other hand in the soft material of Hannibal’s sweater. He clenches the fabric in his fist and uses it to drag the other man closer, feeling Hannibal stumble slightly, bringing their chests flush, apart from where Will’s fist is trapped after he forgets to release the sweater he’s gripping. He parts his legs unconsciously, and Hannibal steps into the space he creates, not quite bringing their lower bodies together but pinning Will against the instrument at his back.

He’s imagined kissing Hannibal before. Before that day in the Hobbs’ bloody kitchen, when he’d interrogated Hannibal amidst the fabricated crime scene he’d see so many pictures of in the days to come, before he’d begun to truly glimpse Hannibal, he’d allowed himself to imagine it quite often. It had felt harmless back then. It would have required a deal more self assurance than kissing Alana had taken, but it had seemed like a plausible alternative. Hannibal certainly hadn’t worried much about his instability.

After that day, he’d tried not to imagine what it would be like to kiss Hannibal, but he’d gone back occasionally to update the fantasy as new information presented itself. Even recovering in the hospital, after they’d told him Hannibal had fled the country and Abigail was dead - truly dead this time - he’d still found himself cataloging the memory of Hannibal’s fingers gripping the hair at the nape of his neck. He’d been disgusted with himself, but not enough to make him stop.

Now Will can’t muster any disgust with himself, and he certainly isn’t stopping. The reality of kissing Hannibal is so different from the image he’d had in his head, so different from anything Will has previously experienced, in fact, that it’s difficult to wrap his head around what’s happening. It isn’t the mechanics of the action but the resulting fire climbing through his body and threatening to annihilate him. He is struck most of all by the sense of twoness, of his awareness of Hannibal as a being separate from himself, of Hannibal’s body as a solid thing similar to but different from his own, with its own scents and tastes. So often they seem to blend together, becoming one face, one voice in Will’s mind, the awareness of them as two distinct bodies able to come together in this way is momentarily overwhelming. Will feels a hand pressing beneath the hem of his shirt, Hannibal’s palm pressing flat against the softest part of his stomach, and his vision goes white.

He hears himself gasping against Hannibal’s mouth, and feels the tip of Hannibal’s toothpaste flavored tongue darting over his lips. Beneath him the floor seems to be tilting dangerously. The hand Hannibal isn’t using to restrain his hand slides up his torso, skirting between Will’s skin and shirt till it rests in a firm press over Will’s hammering heart. He remembers. The setting sun beyond the cliff. The weight of decision bearing down on him. His heart beating against Hannibal’s hot
palm. My hand is always on your heart. Will's groan interrupts the rhythm of their heavy mingled breaths, the sound low and uncontainable against the other man’s tongue.

The sound is like a trigger being squeezed for Hannibal. Will feels Hannibal’s hands move from his chest and wrist, feels them clenching at his hips, hard enough to bruise. He pushes Will back against the harpsichord, creating a discordant burst of keys as he proceeds to ravage his bruised mouth, as uncaring of the expensive instrument as Will would be of a couch or counter top. He pushes against Will, his tongue mirroring the motion of his hips, and Will feels the hot brand of Hannibal’s erection pressing against his thigh and his mouth falls open.

“Hannibal, God.”

Hannibal swallows the words. His tongue is warm and wet and utterly glorious as it slides over Will’s open lips and into his mouth. Will groans again, and, in a sudden surge of boldness, sucks Hannibal’s tongue, letting his teeth drag along the soft flesh. Hannibal’s fingers tighten over his hips, and Will can feel two strings of bruises forming beneath his skin. By evening they’ll be visible, violet dots across the canvas of his flesh. Heat spreads from through him, thinking of Hannibal leaving marks on him. He’s certainly left plenty before, Will thinks, and wonders how else Hannibal may choose to distort him.

He doesn’t have to wonder long, though, before Hannibal lifts one bruising hand to bury it in his hair and encourage his head back, baring Will’s throat to his hunger. Will’s moan catches, a strangled noise escaping him as Hannibal’s mouth closes over him, teeth scraping none too gentle along the column of his throat and lips sucking hot bruises against his skin. He can feel the marks forming in a sweet ache as Hannibal’s crushing jaws traverse the smooth expanse of his neck.

“Everything I have and everything I am,” Hannibal breathes, his lips pressing against Will’s ear and his teeth bared against the delicate flesh. Will can feel Hannibal’s heart pounding against his fist, and finally relaxes his hand, smoothing it against the center of Hannibal’s chest, over the dull thud of the organ pumping within. He bites his lip to stop a moan at the words, at the intensity with which they are spoken. “My freedom, my life, Will, you can ask nothing of me I have not already given willingly. If I had more to give, more would be laid at your feet.”

“All to get to this,” Will rasps, as Hannibal sucks the lobe of his ear, holding it delicately between pointed teeth. He turns his head, lifts a shaking hand to touch Hannibal’s cheek, gingerly, like he’s trying to tame some feral creature.

“I would have done anything,” Hannibal says, eyes wide and pupils large. His face, so close to Will’s that the air they breathe is shared, is more open than Will can remember seeing it before. It’s easier to read him, like this; even someone less attuned to Hannibal than Will is would be able to gauge his emotions clearly in this moment. The force of his desire, of his love, is so starkly plain that
Will balks in the face of it, stiffening in Hannibal’s arms without intending to.

“I don’t love you,” he blurts, fear making his voice rougher than he’d meant it to sound. He’s abruptly aware of his position, pressed between Hannibal’s hard body and the harpsichord that gives a complaining chime every time he moves against it, his hands on Hannibal’s chest, caressing his face, Hannibal’s teeth making indentations in his skin as he smiles. Will pulls his hands back to himself, shifting his weight to create some distance between their bodies. His right thigh brushes the keys, eliciting a high C.

He doesn’t push Hannibal away, can’t quite bring himself to do so - maybe almost hopes that Hannibal won’t accept his attempts to slow the force building between them - but the other man steps back obligingly, his face shifting into a mask of annoyed amusement. Will mourns the closeness and heat of Hannibal’s body against him, even as he breathes a sigh of relief into the expanding space between them.

“You’ve made that abundantly clear a number of times already, unless I’m mistaken,” Hannibal says, voice low. He’s still near enough to smell. Will steadies himself with a hand on the hood of the instrument behind him, fighting the urge to erase the scant distance between them.

He clears his throat. “I just don’t want any confusion.”

“I’m not confused, Will,” Hannibal says, a smirk tugging at the corner of his lips. Will wishes he’d get angry, or at least call Will out on his own erratic and contradictory behavior. “Are you?”

For the second time in as many days, Will elects to allow Hannibal out of his sight and retreats to the other bedroom to collect himself. The bloody sheets lie in a crumpled pile on the floor, and he reflects that they should probably just throw them out at this point. He doubts any amount of laundry detergent can save them, although if anyone knows how to remove caked and dried blood from designer sheets it’s bound to be Hannibal. Will rests on the bare mattress, hands clasped behind his head, legs crossed at the ankles.

He closes his eyes, and lets his mind turn inward, towards the first image that appears. It’s the memory of seeing Hannibal in his office, in the hours after Tobias Budge’s death. That first look at Hannibal’s blood where it streaked across his chin, and the needle of desire that pricked him at the sight. He imagines the two of them there again, alone this time, and the vision of himself leaning down to taste Hannibal’s blood in a slow, messy kiss immediately causes his dick to stir.
That’s what it’s always been, he thinks, forcing himself to remain critical, not to give into the impulse to either shut out the surge of desire or to reach down and wrap a hand around himself, violence and desire. One always seeming to lead to the other, the two always seeming to coincide, building like an endless feedback loop.

The thought of love, of loving Hannibal, make Will’s mouth twist. It’s too daunting to consider, so he sticks to the simple facts. Well, to the facts, at least; none of this is simple. He wants Hannibal; that much he can’t deny, to either himself or Hannibal, evidently. If he was fooling either of them before - and it’s likely that he’s only ever managed to deceive himself on this matter - he certainly won’t be able to after what’s just transpired in the sitting room. He’s willing to admit to himself now that he’s always desired Hannibal on some level, not just in those first weeks when he’d considered Hannibal his handle on sanity, but throughout all the twisted, horrifying darkness of their association; the more audacious, and in particular the more violent, Hannibal’s behavior has been, the more Will has had to push images of what he’d like to do to that smug mouth out of his mind over the years. Now his own behavior has become as appalling as Hannibal’s, and the more he surrenders to the baser instincts Hannibal has fostered so patiently in him, the more he wants to bury his hands in that pristine hair and mess up that perfect countenance a little.

He’ll let me. The thought makes his breath hitch. He knows it’s true the second it occurs to him. Even after declaring his lack of love, Will hadn’t been able to illicit more than a familiar level of fond irritation from Hannibal. The other man hadn’t been quick to remove himself from Will’s personal space, either. The look on his face had said plainly that Will’s ardent rejection would not be enough to stop Hannibal, if Will himself didn’t want him to stop. Maybe it’s not important to him that I reciprocate. He certainly doesn’t consider it a prerequisite of living with him, sleeping in his bed; maybe it’s not a prerequisite for anything else either. In which case...

Will eyes the closed door, tempted to barge back through it and into the sitting room, pictures himself returning with all the aggressive self assurance he’d lacked when retreating red-faced and flustered before. Hannibal would let him pick up where they left off without so much as a word, without so much as a raised eyebrow or an amused smirk. He pictures hands tearing at clothes, shredding fabric, shredding skin. Would they go back to the bedroom, or would Hannibal want him there, thrown over one of the low couches or clamoring against the harpsichord? He thinks they probably wouldn’t get very far.

“No more talking,” he’d say. “No more heartfelt declarations. If you want this then just take it.”

“I know what I want,” Hannibal would say, and Will would cover Hannibal’s mouth with his own before he could ask if Will knows what it is he wants.

Of course, he doesn’t.
He’s wanted companionship throughout his life, but rarely romance, though he’s often used the latter as a bridge to the former. Sometimes he’s wanted sex, but that’s been an easily controlled desire throughout most of his life. After Hannibal had turned himself in to the FBI, he’d wanted something to convince him he could get better. Was it love? He’d been sure of it. He knew he was using her, but he told himself he wouldn’t marry her if he didn’t at least love her. He wouldn’t risk her like that - risk her heart as well as her safety, because he’d known when he popped the question, over breakfast one morning when Wally had been at a friend’s, that he was asking her to endanger herself and her son in a way he hoped she’d never realize she’d agreed to. He wouldn’t do that to someone if he didn’t at least love them - though what kind of thing is that to do to someone you love? he asks himself now.

If Hannibal is right in his insinuations about what love is, then Will supposes love does not preclude deceit and injury. He lifts a hand to the bruised flesh of his throat.

A noise coming from the vicinity of the closet draws his attention. It’s a small sound, similar to that of the squeaky dog toys well-meaning acquaintances used to sometimes give him, though he never allowed his pack to play with them due to the choking hazards they pose (and the obnoxious noises they produce). He almost convinces himself he’s imagined it - almost worries that whatever is happening inside his mind will lead him to tearing through walls to rescue imagined animals again - when it sounds a second time. Which doesn’t necessarily mean it’s real, he reminds himself, but approaches the closet doors anyway - cautiously, because who knows what surprises Hannibal may have left for him in there.

He opens the door slowly, jaw clenched in preparation for what he might discover. But he’s not prepared. The moth is immense, and flies directly into his face. Will catches himself mid yell, his mouth producing a strangled half-yelp as he springs back, out of range of the moth’s furry wings. It flutters about him for a moment, avoiding his instinctive attempts to swat it, before gliding across the room to alight on the lampshade by the bed.

“Christ,” Will exhales shakily. Now that it’s no longer batting its wings against his face, Will is relieved not to have killed the creature. He creeps across the room towards it carefully, slow enough not to startle it from the lampshade. Its furry little legs carry it around the upper rim of the shade, circling and circling the light burning within its circumference. Its body is as long as his index finger, its wings trailing behind, like a dusty brown and white cape. Will takes a last look, and spares a moment’s thought in wondering how a moth this size wound up living in Hannibal’s secret penthouse hideaway in Baltimore in the midst of a particularly cold spring. He lets the thought go and unplugs the lamp, plunging the room into darkness. He’s seen moths fall dead on the his porch many times, drawn too close to the lamplight and burned alive against the hot surface of the bulb. This insect looks large and solid enough not to perish at once, but he’d rather not risk it damaging itself.

He can hear it moving in the darkness, still circling the lampshade, around the cooling dark bulb, its
heavy wings rustling. Alone in the dark with only his thoughts and a moth for companionship, Will considers his present situation one more time. In the past month, in no particular order, he’s helped to kill five people, removed and eaten pieces of four of them, abandoned his wife following an attempt on her life he supposes he’s partially responsible for, and helped break the Chesapeake Ripper out of a maximum security hospital for the criminally insane. He’s forcibly amputated his psychiatrist’s leg and then fed it to her. He’s betrayed and endangered his closest - only - friends without a second - or first - thought. But of all the things he’s done, nothing has unsettled him as deeply as what he and Hannibal did this morning against the harpsichord. Considering it that way, Will feels a little foolish, though no less shaken by the experience. He reckons he can’t spend the entire day hiding in an unlit room that still smells faintly of blood. They have Mike Barker’s murder to arrange, after all.

Will makes his way to the door, silently hoping that the moth will eat holes in all the suits Hannibal has purchased for him.

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“After last night I believe a slight change of plans is in order,” Hannibal says, shifting the logs on the fire with a pair of wrought iron tongs. The logs crackle as the fire rushes through the new crevices and tunnels he’s created, devouring fuel. He’d had coffee waiting when Will walked into the room, and handed him the mug without mentioning the earlier events of the day. “Our intentions must be obvious, even to Jack Crawford. They’ll be waiting for us at Mr. Barker’s house, in numbers too great to slip away from, this time.”

Will frowns. The strength of his displeasure at the thought of being unable to exact justice (vengeance?) surprises him. “We can’t very well go out in public to find him elsewhere,” he replies. “Are you suggesting we just…let him go?”

Hannibal watches him closely, no doubt noting the incredulity and disappointment in his voice and bearing. “Of course not,” he says at last, “but we’ll need to be smarter than the FBI in order to avoid being caught. Remember Will, they know who they are looking for this time.”

“But not where to find us,” Will reminds him, “as long as we don’t walk directly into any obvious traps. And since when has being smarter than the FBI posed any sort of challenge for you?”

“Or for you?” Hannibal replies. The flames now leaping in the hearth scatter his stark face with shifting shadows, a jungle of dark leafs his red eyes peer through. “How would you propose to go about bringing judgment to Michael Barker?”

Hannibal has a plan, Will knows. He always has a plan. “Why don’t you just tell me what you’re
“Because I want to know what you think.”

“Hmmm,” Will hums, considering. He can feel the force of Hannibal’s eyes on him as clearly as he’d felt his hands, his mouth. His brain stutters, clouding with a momentary spike of desire for more that breaks over him like a wave, sucking pieces of himself back with it when it recedes. “We can’t take him from his home, and we can’t take him from any public location where we’d be recognized. Concerned citizens are killing themselves, thinking it’s you; we don’t want to present them with the actual you.”

“They wouldn’t be able to kill me,” Hannibal says, eyes sparkling mirthfully though his face remains blank, “or you either. But I agree; it would be unwise to draw that kind of attention.”

“Then we need to bring Barker to us,” Will concludes. He can tell from the twitching corner of Hannibal’s mouth that this was his design as well.

“But how to convince a man to meet his own demise?”

Will closes his eyes, remembering. The dim room, weather channel running on mute in the background, Barnes tied to the chair, fighting screams, blood dripping from three finger tips as Will places the blade against the base of one more, Hannibal, stood to the side and watching, watching intently, weather girl predicting incoming cloud coverage, Barnes’ voice wailing, giving up names but still pleading, Not him not him please he has a family -

He gasps, opening his eyes with a shiver. “His family,” he says, and even though he can hear himself speaking and knows he should feel more ashamed of what he’s proposing, he can’t feel or think of anything except Hannibal’s adoring gaze, “we threaten his family.”

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A second night of scalding coffee and poor small talk in a sour smelling Sedan with Jack Crawford, Molly thinks to herself. “This is some second date, huh?”

Crawford jerks slightly in his seat, snapping his eyes towards her before he laughs. “I don’t get out much since Bella died,” he says, “married to my job, as they say.”
“Work makes for a shoddy second wife,” she rejoins, holding her cup out for a refill.

“Made for a shoddy mistress, too,” he says, pouring the steaming liquid from his thermos. The car fills with the scent. “If anyone actually wanted to date this aging widower they’d probably wind up right where you’re sitting.”

“How did she pass?” Molly asks. Then adds, “I hope you don’t mind me asking.”

“How could I mind?” he says, and she hears the unspoken *after everything I’ve done*. “Cancer. Lung.”

“That’s a shame,” Molly says, sipping the beverage for the heat that spreads through her with each swallow. “Walter’s father had stomach cancer. It moved fast.” She doesn’t add that the speed had been both a blessing and a curse.

“You always want more time,” Crawford says, his eyes fixed on Michael Barker’s house, across the street. “But the quality of time isn’t worth maintaining. At least, that’s what Bella used to say.”

“Prolonged pain management,” Molly says, and Jack snaps his head back to face her for a second time at the words.

“That’s exactly what she called it,” he says, and she smiles softly.

“It’s what we called it, too. Must be one of those phrases you pick up when you’re seriously ill, or when someone you love is. I thought we came up with it on our own, but maybe we read it somewhere. Maybe a doctor said it to us. Although, how grim if that’s the case.”

“It’s a good description.” There’s silence, for a while. Across the street the little house is quiet, too, one window lit. It’s passed midnight, and the lights in Barker and his children’s bedrooms were extinguished hours before. Only the kitchen light remains. Molly can see a dark silhouette through the gauzy kitchen curtains. Michael Barker, sitting at his kitchen table, unable to sleep. She can’t say she blames him.

The warmth of the coffee spreading through her chest and belly, Molly says, “I was so grateful to
have Walter. I might not have been able to keep going for myself, but for him, anything.”

“Children give us a reason to continue, a vision of a future beyond ourselves,” Jack says, slow and deliberate.

“Do you have children, Agent Crawford?”

He shakes his head, smiling. “Not as such,” he says.

There’s silence in the car, a quiet that stretches long enough for Molly to finish her coffee, grow cold again, and extend her cup for another refill. Crawford is pouring for her when the light in the kitchen window goes out. He stops, passes her the half full mug.

“You might want to drink that fast,” he tells her. She doesn’t say what she’s thinking, that Barker has probably just given in to exhaustion or decided to lay in the dark beside his wife until the sun rises. Will had told her the students at Quantico had called Crawford “the guru;” he might lack Will’s abilities, but he is perfectly capable of making his own uncanny intuitive leaps. She drinks the beverage obediently, scalding the inside of her mouth in her haste but enjoying the blossom of heat in her belly.

Sure enough, in a matter of minutes the automatic garage door lifts, and a car peels out of Barker’s driveway, speeding into the night. The sound of the engine accelerating down the block is so loud that Molly sees the lights flicker back on in the Barkers’ master bedroom, and then Jack sends them hurtling after the vehicle.

They don’t speak. Jack’s face is a mask of dire concentration as he follows Barker’s car. He gets on the radio with the SWAT vehicles laying in wait throughout the neighborhood, but they can’t all pursue the car and still remain unnoticed. Molly watches the taillights that seem to pull further and further ahead of them. She can’t tell where Barker is leading them, but Jack obviously has some idea, because he carries on racing through the quiet, dark streets even after the headlights vanish around a corner and it seems they’ve lost the trail. She doesn’t ask him if he knows where to go, or how he knows, trusting that famed intuition and concentrating on not losing the coffee sloshing around in her stomach as they whip around another corner. And she isn’t disappointed, because, when Crawford finally pulls the Sedan to a halt outside the observatory, Barker’s car is there, keys still in the ignition, one door ajar.

He rounds on her before he’s removed his hand from the wheel. “This is your part, Molly. I need to know you’re still up to it.”
There’s an urgency in his words that makes her understand why it was so difficult for Will to walk away from him, from the work he did with him. “I’m up to it,” she says, feeling anything but.

“You have everything you need,” he says. “I’ll give you five minutes, then head in and trail you. Stick to the shadows, try to draw Will out on his own, do not engage with Hannibal Lecter.” Jack looks at her, his expression an unreadable mix of emotions. “Trust me, you do not want Hannibal in your head.”

She thinks maybe he’s already there, making a home for himself amongst her happy memories, like a filter overlaying all the images she has of her sweet man - Will helping Wally assemble a remote control car he received for Christmas last year, the three of them throwing sticks for the dogs, his face on those rare occasions when he managed to fall asleep before her. All of it is ruined now, and will remain so, unless she walks into hell and brings him back.

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It’s darker than she’d expected, once the door swings shut behind her, and Molly fishes the penlight from her pocket before the panic gripping her has time to grow. Already she can feel her heart pounding so hard she feels dizzy. “Okay, okay,” she whispers, to herself, and breathes a long exhale, listening through the darkness for some sign of where to go.

There are footsteps somewhere, muffled and moving further away. Molly swings the little light around, and the room is illuminated in pieces. It’s hard to tell, but she thinks the room is smaller than it looked from outside, dominated mostly by the telescope in the center. The light catches on something towards the back of the room and Molly steps towards it, a doorway with no door, and beyond it, stairs leading from one darkness into another even more total one.

She’s been anxious, but now she is truly afraid. She forces herself to think of that night she and Walter fled from the Red Dragon. It stands out in her memories, a surreal and misplaced moment in the journey of her life. She turns to it now, pulling on the reserves of calm and calculation she’d relied on to get them through that night. It had been for Wally that she’d held herself together then. Now, she thinks, she needs that courage again, to save Will.

But she is frightened. Frightened of the darkness, and of what hides within. She and Crawford had arrived after Barker, and wasted precious moments discussing their plan after parking. By now he could be dead, or dying. Molly shudders to think what she will find with the searching light of her little torch.
Crouching beneath the floorboards in the cold, watching him from below, his face shadowed in the moonlight, how terrifying she had found the Great Red Dragon. How much more terrifying, she wonders, would it be to meet the man who sent him. Alana and Agent Crawford have both assured her repeatedly that Lecter has no reason to target her, but it occurs to her now to wonder whether or not she’s giving him one by being here. She isn’t a timid person, but she doubts her bravado and brash speech will go far if she encounters Lecter without Will. Or…

She forces herself not to consider that next thought. Forces herself to begin descending, her sneakers muffling her steps as she sinks herself into the darkness of the observatory basement. She’d read about the violent crimes that transpired here, long before she met Will, and wonders now if any ghosts linger in the lightless cavern she’s entering.

The figure moving quietly towards her when she reaches the bottom step isn’t a ghost, though.

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The stone leaks cold into the air around him. Stone walls, stone floors. If he could reach high enough his fingers would brush against stone ceilings overhead. The plastic jumper does little to protect against the elements, and the cobalt blue suit beneath it lets too much of the frigid air seep in to raise bumps like braille along limbs. He shivers, but finds there’s something pleasant about the discomfort, another sensation to delve into and catalogue, now while his nerves are most finely attuned. He feels the cold, but not the pain of it. Deep inside his body, Will’s heart burns.

He thinks of the future, of a few short minutes from now, when Hannibal will have finished taking the pieces of Mike Barker he wants - he’s been uncharacteristically secretive about it, saying something about surprises and sending Will to wander in the darkness of the observatory basement on his own, with only his imagination and memory for company. Will imagines the supple texture of Hannibal’s leather jacket pressed beneath his fingers, and knows he won’t have to only imagine it for long. They’ll be heading home in a few minutes, the roads and lights blurring beside the racing bike. He thinks of the smooth slide of Hannibal’s lower lip, pressed beneath his finger, and knows he doesn’t have to only imagine that either.

They’d made quick work of Barker - quicker and more merciful than Will had intended, but in the moment he’d found himself unable to stop, or even slow. The look in Hannibal’s eyes as Will’s knife buried itself in Barker’s soft belly and the pressure of Hannibal’s hand over their victim’s mouth certainly hadn’t helped. Will had imagined that hand pressing over his mouth instead, holding in all his words and sounds more effectively than the bite mask had. He’d imagined grazing his teeth against Hannibal’s palm, and the image had pushed him further, faster, his hand on the knife jerking up to gut Barker like a trout. The man’s entrails made a wet sound as they hit the stone floor.

Will hasn’t been down here since Jack brought him to see Beverly. He remembers his shock, the feeling of almost unendurable loss at the disappearance of his last true ally, remembers, too, what it
felt like to shift into Hannibal’s mindset, the quiet feeling of power he’d recognized too well. Now, Will sees Beverly standing in the darkness, the separate layers of her flesh coming together again to unite into a whole being who stands before his dazzled eyes.

“Will?”

It’s not Beverly's voice that calls to him from the figure standing at the dark archway at the base of the stairs. Will blinks, and the vision of Beverly wavers briefly, like an image viewed through rising heat. This, he knows, cannot be real. Beverly is gone, and perhaps it’s time to admit to himself that as angry as her loss made him, as angry as the thought of it still makes him, it’s not enough to stop or even dull the force of his desire. Nothing is.

Safe in the knowledge this is all in his head, and curious what the ghosts of the past will say with their mismatched mouths and voices, Will steps closer to the apparition. He wants to tell her how sorry he is, both for what was done to her and for what he’s done since, but he knows that it would be a meaningless gesture, that it would only benefit him. Beverly won’t hear. She’s not really here. He elects investigation over apology, running his eyes over her as he draws closer and noticing the stitches running in thin red stripes down one half of her face and neck and disappearing into her collar. He lets his fingers trail over them, when he is close enough, and feels the pucker of thread between the smooth planes of her face, the ridges of her cheekbone, a stray strand of soft dark hair. It’s more intimate than any touch they shared in life. He can feel the guilt in him running through his arms and out of his fingers, spiraling away in shimmering filaments that frame her puzzled face.

She doesn't matter to him. Not really. Not the way Hannibal does.

“Oh, Will.”

It’s not Beverly’s voice, and her face waivers a second time, shifting beneath his fingertips to become not Beverly’s face. Will freezes, hand still outstretched to touch someone who isn't there - touching someone entirely different by mistake. He’s no longer certain whether this is real, or partially real.

“Sheart,” Molly says, and he can feel the hot tears on his fingers. The feeling is too concrete, and he snatches his hand back at the sensation.

“You need to leave,” he says, glancing towards the back room of the basement, where he can hear Hannibal’s footsteps. If some part of this vision is real, Will senses things are about to go very badly. “Right now.”
He thinks, at first, that she’s about to hug him. She raises her arms as if in preparation of an embrace, and his mind is racing too fast for him to react to the gesture. He’s trying to decide whether to shove her back towards the stairs, or take her hand and drag her away - a frighteningly large part of him is imagining how her countenance will break if he just grabs her right now, how she’ll struggle against his arms as he pulls her towards the back room and those approaching footsteps. For an instant her eyes are broken mirrors, and he sees the flash of his gritted teeth and furrowed brow as the needle slides into his neck, and the sound of approaching footsteps grows louder and faster, seeming to come from every direction at once as the dark room dims further. His last sensation is the jolt of his knees colliding with the concrete floor. He’s gone before he finishes falling.

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He’s aware of the pain in his head pounding in time with his heart before he even opens his eyes. For a moment, he thinks he’s going to be sick, and his eyelids flutter and clench tighter reflexively. He gives a shuddering breath, his nostrils flaring, and groans. But the wave of nausea passes, leaving a sharp pain in his head that is scarcely bearable, but bearable nonetheless. Will opens his eyes.

The room is familiar, burned into his memory from his several visits, but he’s only seen it from this angle once before. Or maybe, more accurately, never from this angle, not precisely. He swings his legs over the side of the low cot and eyes the toilet standing two feet away, wondering again if he’s about to vomit. But, deciding he’s fine, he pushes himself unsteadily to his feet and approaches the glass. He sees himself standing on the other side, one hand pressed to the cold barrier, sees the longing and denial in his own eyes, the soft defeated parting of his own lips. Will lifts his hand to place it against the glass, pressing his palm against the walls of his memory. His head throbs.

The dark wood doors swing open before he can even begin to process where he is and what it means to be here, and Will snatches his hand back from the glass as if it’s been burned. Alana clicks towards him on modest heels, her hips swaying in a way that might appear seductive or affected to someone who didn’t know it was merely a symptom of her left hip healing improperly after her fall. She’s able to walk - even to wear the kind of short heels she’s sporting now - but that night in Hannibal’s Baltimore home changed her in every way that counts.

She sways her way towards the glass, tight expression coming into the light. “Hello, Will.”
This chapter and the next couple ones may be a bit shorter and rougher than usual. Apologies; I just moved and now I’m going to be traveling, but it felt like a better plan to keep updating with smaller and slightly less polished chapters rather than taking a break for a few weeks. And thanks as always for taking the time to read.

“Hello, Will.” Alana watches him through the glass, her face a carefully neutral mask. Red lips, blouse cut nearly to her navel, bits of smoke and mirror intended to draw attention away from those cautious, cunning eyes. There’s a touch of success in the curve of her crimson lips, but her expression is otherwise controlled and her voice betrays nothing. Even so, Will thinks he can smell her self-congratulation and pride, the way Hannibal might do, and he’s determined to break them.

“Hello, Alana,” he answers, “what the hell do you think you’re doing?”

She inhales sharply at the coldness of his tone. Truth be told, he’s shocked by it himself; he doesn’t recognize the icy, angry voice coming from him, or the feeling of gelid hatred gripping him by the guts. He knows he should feel otherwise; she’s his friend, after all. But he can’t curb the tide of anger rising in him. He’s sure it must show on his face, but she has the audacity to try to speak to him, even so. “Will - ”

“Shut up,” he interrupts, noting with a small measure of satisfaction the flinch she tries to hide. “Let me out.”

She shakes her head, looking for a moment like the ghost of her old self, like the woman he remembers she was when he knew her before. Her voice sounds strangled when she speaks, wet and thick as a forest floor. “You know I can’t do that.”

“I know you know keeping me here will kill me,” he scoffs in that unrecognizable, commanding tone. “What do you think you’re doing, Alana?”

“Saving you,” she hisses, her indignation overwhelming her shock. He hears her voice break as she continues, smells the saline of the tears gathering at the corners of her eyes. Her words come with obvious pain, but she forces them out, passed her gritted teeth. “Say he forced you.”
Will cocks his head, considers her without expression as she crumbles in front of him. “What am I saying he forced me to do?” he asks, as the tears slide down her face, over her quivering chin. “What am I being accused of, Alana?”

“You know,” she says, and her voice shakes badly. After everything, all the infinite changes they’ve both endured, it’s still hard for her to acknowledge what he’s capable of doing. Of enjoying. She’d far rather they both pretend, as they’ve been doing for years. Will stores that information. “Please don’t play this game, Will. We just want -“

“You just want to help,” he spits. She flinches again, and he smiles, a bitter grimace. “You’ve been so good at helping, you and Jack both, always keeping my best interests at heart.”

“I have,” she protests. “You want to be mad at Jack? Be mad at him. I’m mad at him. I’m furious.” Her face is flushed, the pink of her cheeks clashing badly with her bold red lips. She must not blush often anymore, he thinks, with a rising sense of contentment as he pushes her further past her calm, further out of the shell she’s built for herself. A little more, a little further.

“Let me out of here, Alana,” he commands, pitching his voice to the low timber he would use on his dogs. He sees the twitch in her mouth, feels her wanting to obey. Knows he has to apply just the right amount of pressure. “Whatever plan keeping me here fits into, you know it won’t work. Look at you; you’re so scared. But you don’t need to be.” His voice slides between them, low and smooth, a current dragging at her. Her hand is shaking. He can hear her breath catch. “Let me out. Give me the gun you’re carrying. I’ll use you as a hostage to get out of here. No one will get hurt. You can tell them I faked an allergic reaction to the tranquilizer and overpowered you when you tried to administer first aid. You’ll never hear from either of us again. I’ll tell him you helped me.”

Too far. He sees it in the instant the last words leave his mouth, in the straightening of her spine and the flash of her teeth when she speaks. “So if I help you escape federal custody you’ll be sure to intercede on my behalf,” she spits. “And if I don’t help you, what then? You help him kill me? Cooperate or die?”

“I can hardly do that from in here,” Will replies, acerbically. Alana scoffs.

“Did you spare any thoughts for me at all, Will? Did it occur to you even once in the past three weeks? You’ve obviously renewed the intimacy of your relationship. Unless I’m misreading the bruises and bite marks all over your neck.” His heart speeds at the words, but he forces himself to remain outwardly unaffected. Any blush or flinch, any sign of regret or shame, will show the kinks in his armor at once. He purposefully does not allow himself to imagine Zeller and Price photographing and cataloging the marks. Alana’s increasingly irate tone provides a decent distraction from the mounting embarrassment. “Surely the topic of what Hannibal promised to do to me, threatened to do to my family, must have come up.”
“It honestly didn’t,” Will says, watching her jaw clench at his words. He remembers her standing on his porch in Wolf Trap, telling him she’d been surprised by his true nature, that she’d misjudged him. She’s not going to let him out, but he can still push her passed rationality, and maybe she’ll slip, or let something slip. “I’m sure we would have gotten around to you eventually.”

“I’m your friend,” she says, voice trembling but firm. “You’re not yourself.” She sounds like she has more to say, but he cuts her off before she can.

“Oh I’m more myself than I’ve ever been,” he says, and her indrawn breath sounds like a sob. “You’re not going to find any psychoactive in my blood, Alana, or any fever in my brain. There won’t be a convenient medical excuse this time. I’m not going to recover if you keep me quarantined long enough.”

“What’s going to happen, then? Have you thought about that? You’ll stand trial. We can help you, if you want to be helped. If you want to avoid the federal death penalty.”

Will cocks an eyebrow at her determined stance, her upthrust chin. “Cooperate or die?” he asks, voice bitter but appreciative. “You think you’re, what? Going to trap him somehow? The old box on the stick, and I’m the lure? Funny how you and Jack always come back to that tired routine. You think you’ll make yourself safer, doing this Alana, but you’re just making things worse.”

She shakes her head, looking down, away from him. He finds he doesn’t have as much of a problem meeting her eyes as he once did. It seems the shoe is on the other foot now; she’s looking anywhere but back at him when she finally speaks, her voice little more than a whisper. “What happened to you?”

“Nothing happened to me,” he says, “I happened.”

Alana blusters wordlessly for a moment, doing little more than making exasperated sounds and gestures towards Will where he stands behind the glass partition. Finally, she manages to verbalize her thoughts once more. “We bring you in,” she breathes, “and find Mike Barker hollowed out like a drum in the back room when we search the conservatory. We bring you in and you’re wearing a plastic suit and raving in your sleep about needing to see Hannibal. We bring you in covered in bruises that look an awful lot like hicckeys, Will, and those photographs will show up in court, I can assure you. The last time I saw you you were on your way to dispatch justice on both the men responsible for the attack on your wife and son. What the hell have you been doing?”
He crosses to the back of the cell without looking at her. The cot is long enough for him to stretch out on his back and lace his hands behind his head comfortably. “I’m done talking to you, Alana,” he dismisses her, and then he closes his eyes and goes away.

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Jack offers her a drink when she enters the room, even though it’s her office, and even though the sun is just starting to rise. There’s a sheen of grey light on the dark sky beyond her window, a promise of the coming dawn. Even in this strange new world, some things remain assured. She accepts, and drains the glass before speaking.

“He’s not going to make this easy,” she says, at last.

“That was always a possibility,” Jack says. She nods. It was. Just one neither of them had wanted to consider. It had been an easy topic to avoid, when they’d still had to focus on managing his arrest. There’s no avoiding it now. “We need to keep trying to get through to him. What’s his mental state like?”

“Oh he’s extremely lucid,” Alana answers, grimacing. “Too lucid to get far with an insanity plea.” She doesn’t add that she doubts Will would opt for an insanity plea. Or any plea. After their last brief conversation, she feels fairly certain Will will simply refuse to participate in the rituals and ceremonies of court altogether. Her thoughts hit a wall imagining how that scenario is likely to play out.

“What did he say?”

“Why don’t you go talk to him and hear for yourself?” she snaps, and then regrets it. “I’m sorry, Jack. I shouldn’t let him get to me. But.”

“I take it he isn’t volunteering to cooperate.”

“He’d probably give a confession right now. How’s that for cooperation?”

Jack utters an oath under his breath. “There’s got to be a way to snap him out of this.”
Alana says nothing, considering possible means of bringing Will back to himself - or back to a version of himself that won’t wind up incurring the federal death penalty. She’s considered some of the options available to them before, but had hoped it wouldn’t come down to this. Jack isn’t ready to hear any of those options, however, not until he sees what Will’s become for himself. Maybe part of her still hopes that Jack’s presence will be enough to restore Will’s mind to order; it’s worked before.

Finally, she says, “He can still serve his main purpose, for now.”

It’s impossible to miss Jack’s indrawn breath. “Saving Will has never been your primary objective, has it, Alana?”

“Once,” she says, “a long time ago, it was.” She helps herself to another drink, refilling her glass and draining it again in the silence that fills the air between them.

“What is your objective, now?” Jack asks, when she begins to pour another glass.

“Handling the consequences of all the times I put Will’s safety first,” she answers.

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Alone in the cage that used to hold Hannibal, Will wanders the halls and chambers of his mind, listening for music. On those nights he spent by himself, facing the night beyond the illumination of the porch lights, the soft sound of piano and violin had heralded Hannibal’s presence in his mind. That voice which called to him over the lilt of Mozart’s arias and across the space and years between them, is oddly quiet now. The air of his memory palace seems smeared with screams instead of songs, but Will continues hunting, resolute. There is nothing else he can do.

He should feel Hannibal reaching for him by now. He’s not sure how long he was unconscious, though it was clearly long enough for them to transport him here, change his clothes, and let forensics take a close look. Padding frescoed chapel archways, Will frowns at the thought of Price and Zeller examining him. His neck, in particular. He can imagine their conversation about the marks Hannibal left there with a sickening clarity.

Although, he thinks, under these circumstances they may have found their usual jocularity absent. The last time he’d been brought in there’d been a noticeable lack of witty banter from the two of them. He recalls Zeller’s awkward but resolute apology after he’d been released back then, and his frown deepens. He never tried to entangle himself socially, but he knows they consider him
something like a friend. They more than tolerate him, which has been Will’s definition of friendship for most of his life.

He doesn’t want to think about how the forensics team reacted to the string of love bites decorating his throat; he wants to find Hannibal, and he wants to get out of here. He didn’t think to ask Alana if the FBI managed to apprehend Hannibal, but he highly doubts they could take him alive. Which leaves two options - either Hannibal attempted to defend Will from capture and was killed or critically wounded in the stand off, or he slipped out undetected while Will was walking into an obvious trap. One scenario feels far more likely. And if Hannibal is out there, he’ll know that Will will search for him within the corridors of his own mind, trusting to the deep magic between them that he distrusts so mightily when it is not his only option.

But the chambers of his mind feel increasingly like the catacombs beneath the Capella, winding dark tunnels lit by guttering flames and inhabited by silence. *He must be here,* Will thinks, following his instincts down the twisting caverns, *he must.* *He’d know that I’m looking for him.*

*Or would he?*

The thought arrests Will’s steps, slowing him to a stop in the dimly lit crypt. The candle burning low in the sconce at the end of the hallway sends shadowy monsters crawling over the walls around him. Branching dark antlers and claws climb the walls on either side of him as he pauses in his search, to question for the first time what it is he’ll find.

The memory of the elevator’s cold metal wall colliding with his shoulders springs unbidden to the forefront of his mind. Hannibal’s dark eyes flashing with anger, the weight of his hands, of his rage, curling in the scant space between their bodies. Alone in the crypt of his memory, Will fingers the little band of metal on his finger, remembering the petty satisfaction he’d felt at keeping it. *Jealousy,* he thinks, *I had to give you a reason to fear me. To doubt me.*

He takes a shaking step deeper into the tomb, peering down each passageway, through the dancing shadows and wavering lights. He can see himself at the end of one hall, his hand raised to his wife’s cheek, his eyes glassy and far away as he strokes her face but sees someone else’s. From the end of the hallway it could almost be a sweet reunion. *Is that how it had looked to Hannibal,* he wonders, *like I wanted her there, planned to meet her, even?* It’s a ludicrous thought, but not, he laments, entirely beyond belief.

Will searches onwards, glancing down halls that house memories of the three years he spent in a prison of his own choosing. Tender family moments - baseball games and dog walks and holiday meals that now feel like rehearsals for a stage performance he was never quite ready to deliver believably. He speeds passed remembered nights spent alone on the porch, facing the infinite night, facing the darkness calling to him from the corners of his mind. He searches for that call now,
but hears only a familiar voice intoning from the next hallway over.

“No prison cell could protect you,” Hannibal says, facing Will across the kitchen counter. Will stares at the two of them, eyes wide. He forces himself to remember to breathe. Hannibal’s words come in a low, loving tone, laden with promise. “I would get to you, and dispense my own justice.”

Will watches as the memory of himself standing across the counter from Hannibal swells with pride and expectation, sees the look of utter satisfaction spreading across his face. He’s still present enough to feel vaguely embarrassed; he hadn’t realized he was being so transparent at the time. He remembers how it felt, to stand close to Hannibal and hear that promise, how his blood had sung within him, everything warmer suddenly at the knowledge of being owned and cared for in that way. The look on his face doesn’t surprise him, but the new spike of anxiety he feels at the exchange does.

“You don’t end this story in captivity, Will,” Hannibal says, voice somehow managing to convey both comfort and threat. Will can’t tear his eyes from his own enamored visage to face him as he speaks again. “I’ll give you your ending, no one else.”

At last, he does turn to where he can see Hannibal’s dark form at the corner of his eyes. He finds only the curving stone walls of the catacombs. Will swivels his head back to where the ghost of his recent past self had been standing a moment before, but there’s only a pitted grey wall there.

“Hannibal!” he yells into the empty tunnels, but the only response is the echo of his own voice, and a creeping sense of dreadful familiarity.

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Jack’s in the room when Will opens his eyes. God knows how long he’s been standing there. He’s even speaking, Will realizes, though it takes him a moment to understand the words.

“...help you, Will, please,” Jack implores, his body a tense line on the other side of the glass. Will blinks out at him.

“Hello, Jack,” he says. “How long have you been here?”

Jack exhales noisily, and remains silent for a moment. At last, in a tense voice, he says, “About four
“My apologies for not being here to greet you,” Will says, voice bitingly sarcastic. “Were we having a nice chat? I’m sure it was more productive without me present.”

He can see Jack struggling to remain calm. His voice, when he speaks, is strained almost to breaking. “You need to give us something, Will. An address, ideally, something that leads to his capture. We can say we struck a deal, avoid a trial, but you’ve got to show you’re working with us.”

_Not wounded or dead then, he thinks, not captured._ He’s not surprised, but a small part of him aches, even as the rest of his body floods with relief. Will considers Jack for a long, quiet moment. He looks half dead, eyes darkly circled, chin covered in two days’ worth of stubble. There’s still hope in his eyes. _Hoping the leash we’ve been keeping me on has only frayed and not snapped, _Will thinks, _hoping he won’t have to feel too guilty._

“You know I’m not going to help you, Jack,” he says, at last, and watches the muscles in Jack’s jaw tighten like a vice.

“Help yourself,” Jack manages to spit, finally. “You want to go to trial? Remember what that was like before? Imagine it now. They’ll burn you alive.”

“Oh, I won’t be standing trial,” Will answers.

“And just how do you intend to manage that?” Jack asks, arching one eyebrow. Will’s smile is tight.

“Hannibal won’t let me.”

There’s a flash in Jack’s eyes, so quick he’s half certain he imagined it. “You think he’d risk his freedom, his _life_, to free you?”

“No,” he says, “he’d risk it to kill me.”

Will can see his own face reflected in the glass, laid over Jack’s frown. The black line of stitches running across his cheek stands out in the dim light, a darker shadow making his already slim face
appear unnaturally gaunt. He thinks of the drawing on Hannibal’s desk, the one that isn’t of the two of them, of the faint scar running across the face that isn’t his. He thinks of Hannibal telling him about the Sacred Band of Thebes, and grits his teeth to keep any expression from showing on his face. To stop one you must stop all. If they want to stop either of us they’ll have to bring us both down. They have no intention of only capturing me; I’m just the bait on the hook. But I’m not theirs to stop.

“Why would Lecter want to kill you?” Jack asks, when it becomes clear Will is not going to offer any further information on his own without some prodding. “You seem to be getting along so well these days.”

“He’ll consider this a betrayal,” Will informs him, coldly. There’s no reason not to let him know the truth. “Did you see him, when you brought me in?”

Jack shakes his head. “No, it was just you down there. You and…”

Will’s smile is tight and humorless. “Me and what was left of Michael Barker,” he finishes for Jack, noting the older man’s wince. “Were you hoping I’d claim not to know about the body, Jack? That we could both pretend I wasn’t actively involved in what happened to Mr. Barker?”

Jack says nothing for a long moment, but considers him from behind his closed off facade. “I hoped you’d tell me I was wrong for suspecting you again. I was certain of your guilt before, and I shouldn’t have been. If you’d asked me to trust you now…”

“You’d have done it to make up for the last time?”

“I figure I owe you.”

He snorts a bitter laugh. “Come on, Jack, you’re a better detective than that. I’m clearly guilty.”

Jack says nothing.

“And just as clearly I’ve abandoned Hannibal to return to my life with the FBI, and in particular my wife,” Will continues, voice dripping with derision. “That’s how it’s bound to look to Hannibal, anyway. Tell me, how did you convince Molly to help? That’s a pretty low move, Jack, even for you. I’m almost more surprised that you asked her to help than I am that she agreed to anything you
Jack coughs, shifting his weight from one foot to another. “Alana brought her to me,” he says to Will’s raised eyebrow. “I didn’t want to use her, believe me. You didn’t leave us a lot of options.”

“I don’t suppose it occurred to you to just let me go,” Will says, “repay your debts by just not bending the law and your conscience to subdue me. Just let me slip away.”

“You weren’t exactly trying to slip away,” Jack points out, and Will supposes he can’t argue there; vanishing without a trace hadn’t been on his agenda. He remembers Hannibal’s angry voice calling back to him down the hallway of the penthouse. *Sober up.* He’d been too overcome with sensation, emotion, the heady and uncontrollable desire to let them all see him for what he had finally stopped denying he was. It should have been obvious that this was where he’d end up - surely it had been obvious to Hannibal, how unsustainable their trajectory had been. Why had he allowed Will to call such terrible shots for the two of them? But even as he thinks it, Will wonders what Hannibal could possibly have said to quell the force of his bloodlust. Even now, the memory of his hands buried in the eruption of Mike Barker’s visceras hums through his body, like energy flooding from a battery, like the blood and the knife and Hannibal’s eyes watching him have completed the circuit of his life and he’s charged, finally, alive.

He lets the silence grow between them as he contemplates what life could almost have been for him. For them. They would have left North America - should have done so immediately, if Will had been thinking correctly, or if Hannibal had had any mind to stop him. Will would have sailed the boat. Italy would have been too obvious, they’d both agree on that. They’d have fought about where to go, though. Hannibal would have pressed for Europe, probably Spain, but Will would have pointed out that was the obvious choice.

“No one will be looking for us that hard, Will,” Hannibal would have said, exasperated, but he would have agreed to South America or Thailand eventually, somewhere no one read Tattlecrime and no one would recognize them, somewhere with breezy white curtains and sunlight, where they could keep their windows open all day. Somewhere far enough from the rest of the population that no one would hear what went on in their kitchen some nights. Will pictures a blue tile floor, something easy to wipe clean. He pictures the moon, the light gleaming on the curve of Hannibal’s scarred cheekbone, the curve of his smile, the slick black void of blood staining them, their hands, their chests, their mouths - their devouring mouths -

“You could let me go now,” Will says. “You’d be saving my life.”

“We have enough guards on you right now to start a war,” Jack says. “We can protect you from Hannibal Lecter just fine, Will.”
“Protect me from Hannibal in order to deliver me to the state executioner,” Will sneers. “Unless I’m willing to give you something that proves I’ve been your man the whole time, right? Or at least that I’m still trying to be. And if I give you something good enough, what then? Do you let me go then? Do I get to go back to my wife? Back to my life by myself with just the dogs for company? Do I get to rest secure in the knowledge that Jack Crawford will *never* call on me for help again?”

Finding himself almost breathless, Will stops speaking. He watches Jack, but the other man makes no attempt to reply.

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Molly insists on seeing Will at first, but thankfully allows herself to be persuaded that seeing him this early in the recovery process won’t help either of them. She’s still eager for news of him, and Jack deflects her questions as best he can, instructing Alana to take her back to the motel for some rest. He checks in with the SWAT commanders stationed at the entrance of each of the five floors of the BSHCI. Will’s cell is on the fifth floor, and though there is an elevator, Jack huffs up each flight, inputting the unique door codes for each floor. Alana had forced him to memorize the codes, had forced the guards to do the same, insisting that no one write them for any reason without immediately destroying them.

The squad leaders and the men they command are in top shape, intelligent and diligent men and women prepared the deal with any situation. They’d been briefed on who they’re up against, and they’re as prepared as anyone can be without having met Hannibal Lecter in person, which none of them have. No one in the Bureau who has met Hannibal Lecter is anxious to meet him again, except Jack, it appears.

When he reaches the fifth floor, Jack rides the elevator down to the bottom. He and Alana are the only ones with the code to that; Alana’s rationale was that everyone should know as little as possible, lest they become compromised for any reason. Jack can’t help thinking that they never tested whether this prison could actually hold Hannibal, if he’d been interested in escaping. It’s as secure as anywhere can possibly be, he supposes.

He passes Alana on his way out. “Molly wants to see him,” the doctor says with a purse of her glossy red lips.

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”
“It might be what he needs to bring him back to himself,” Alana shrugs. “She’ll insist on it, whatever we say.”

“Let’s just try to delay that as long as possible, then,” Jack answers. He edges towards the door. His head has begun to throb, and he’s anxious to get back to his office, where he can mix an Alka Seltzer and drink it in the dark.

Alana nods. “Have you thought at all about what I mentioned to you?”

He has, but he doesn’t want to talk about it right now, not with the pound of a migraine beginning in his temples and the edges of the room beginning to blur. “I don’t know, Alana. Don’t you feel like we’ve already crossed enough ethical boundaries?”

“What’s the point of any of it if we don’t get the results we’re after, Jack?” There’s an edge to her voice that he recognizes, but not from her. “It won’t hurt him.”

“Not more than he’s already been hurt, you mean,” he says, turning to the door. “You have my opinion.” He can’t forbid her, with Will technically residing under her care. More than that, he doesn’t want to forbid her.

The air outside is crisp and cold, prickling with moisture, the promise of rain. Jack staggers towards his car, no longer certain he’s safe to be on the road. Perhaps he can sleep in the front seat for a few minutes, just long enough to let the pain in his head subside. He shouldn’t have been so anxious to leave, should have asked Alana for an Aspirin while he was in the damned hospital, for Christ’s sake.

He’s cursing himself for his lack of foresight when he reaches his car, and stops short. He knows at once that something is wrong, even as it takes his mind longer than usual to catch up with the vision in front of him, seated on the passenger seat of his car. Her blonde hair spreads around her on the heavy silver platter, pale tendrils twirling around peacock feathers and split pomegranates, black figs coated in honey that drips into her honey colored locks, antlers woven into her curls. Jack fumbles for his phone, shouts for back up, and stands, silent and alone in the parking lot as he waits for someone to come. From within the car, Bedelia Du Maurier stares back, dark grapes spilling from her distended jaw, her eyes like the spaces between the stars.
A. Odorata

Chapter Notes

Couple of things up top! First off, warning for non-consensual drug use at the end of this chapter, and Will being an asshole throughout. Second, the plot I have planned out is basically three acts, and this is the first. Chilton and Freddie have a larger role to play; they haven't been around and won't be for a little while, but they're neither gone nor forgotten. And last, this is another potentially rougher chapter. I wrote most of it yesterday after being out of town for most of the week. I'll be out of town most of next week, as well, in the electricity-less backwoods, but I'll take actual antique paper and pens, because writing this is outrageously fun. Thanks for reading! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The stack of photos makes a soft plop as it hits the bottom of the metal tray, and then there’s a short series of slams and scrapes as the tray slides to his side of the glass barrier. Will opens his eyes, but makes no move to stand from the desk. The books, papers, felt tipped pens that had filled the room when he first came here, what feels like another lifetime ago, are noticeably absent now. Of course, Hannibal hadn’t quite finished earning back his privileges. Any rational society would have either killed him or given him his books, but Will knows that Hannibal’s motivation for risking his life to help apprehend Dolarhyde had nothing whatsoever to do with the petty privileges Alana and the BSHCI had afforded him. Now that he is here, on the other side, Will knows Hannibal never needed those things. He never needed to stay here either, Will thinks. No prison is impervious. If he’d tried he could have gotten out - just like he’ll get in when he tries, now.

If that’s true, it means there’s a possibility of escape.

“Will,” Jack says, finally, when Will neither approaches the tray nor looks in his and Alana’s direction. Will turns to him, slowly, as if towards the sound of a bird singing, a dog barking, some peaceful noise that draws only idle curiosity rather than urgent concentration. Like their presence does not affect him, but might amuse him. It’s a look Jack’s seen before, from the other side of that glass partition, but never on Will’s face before. He quells the shiver that starts at the base of his spine before it can traverse the length of his back. “We need to talk.”

“So talk,” Will says, voice polite but cold, hands clasped on the empty desk.

“We brought you pictures,” Alana says, too quickly, and Jack scowls at her as Will raises an eyebrow, still making no move towards what they’ve sent over to him in the little metal tray. To her credit, she doesn’t flush this time. She always was a fast learner. “Bedelia Du Maurier’s body was discovered in the parking lot three hours ago.”
“Surely not all her body,” Will states, tone amused but matter of fact. Alana’s skin crawls at the sound, and at the look he gives her.

“No,” Jack answers him, “not all of her was discovered. Would you like to tell us which piece of her you think we’d find?”

“Oh I couldn’t possibly say,” Will says, pushing the chair back. He stands, one hand resting palm down on the desk as he does. “Probably not her left leg, if I had to make any guesses.” He crosses towards the glass and the photos, pausing before he removes them from the metal box. “Or her eyes.”

His expression doesn’t change when he looks at the first few photos. He flips through the top of the stack cooly. Alana thinks there might be a hint of a smile starting on his face when he reaches the last picture, but she hopes it’s her imagination. He sets the pictures back in the tray and looks up at her and Jack again. “Thanks,” he says.

Jack looks as if he’s about to swallow his own tongue for a moment. At last he manages to make it work properly again. “Will, you need to tell us where to find him.”

“Did you bring me this pictures so I could assume his thoughts, Jack? Tell you his motive and how to catch him before he completes his sounder, just like old times?” Will sneers. “It didn’t work then. Why should it work now?”

Will watches their faces, not their eyes. Jack’s mouth is a hard line; Will can practically hear his molars grinding themselves smooth. Alana’s expression is less transparent.

“You need to understand what’s happening here, Will,” she says, her voice suddenly steadier than he’s heard it since he first returned to Maryland, “for your own good. You helped break the world’s most notorious serial killer out of a maximum security hospital, then proceeded to go on a murder spree, killing so many innocent people in such a short amount of time that the two of you together started to make the Chesapeake Ripper look mild. We don’t have hard proof of your involvement in all of the murders, but you left your DNA all over Clark Ingram’s condo, and you were spotted at the scenes of Frank Duffy and Michael Barker’s murders. We needed to bring you in; that’s our job. It was your job, as well, until recently. You need to understand that you needed to be stopped. This has nothing to do with friendship or cruelty and everything to do with preserving innocent lives, something you used to understand.
“You will stand trial without our help - maybe even with our help, Will - and you will be found guilty. You’ll be damned lucky if you get anywhere with an insanity plea; guilt has a habit of sticking to you, Will, and you’ve been linked to Hannibal Lecter for too long in the public’s eye. I tried to approach Frederick about writing something in your defense - something like what he did with that horrible purple page turner he wrote on Hannibal, that helped lend credence to his insanity plea.” She shifts under Will’s gaze. “You can imagine he was uninterested in helping.”

“I’m surprised you bothered asking.”

“It was worth a shot,” she says, “if there was a chance it could help you avoid life in prison, or keep your head from the chopping block.”

He examines her closely, the faint creases at the corners of her eyes, the concern written in furrows across her brow. “You really do want to help me,” he breathes, and her face breaks.

“Jesus, Will, yes, that’s what I’ve been trying to tell you,” she practically sobs. Beside her, Jack is silent and stoic, no doubt sensing they’ll get further with Will if he lets Alana do the talking. She was always better at the emotional appeals, after all. “I’ve known you since before this all began. I love you. This isn’t what I wanted for you - I’m the one who recommended Hannibal work with you and I will never forgive myself, even though I couldn’t have possibly foreseen the consequences.”

“None of us could,” Will says softly. “Not even him.”

He sees her shiver. “I wish I could take it all back,” she says, “make it so you never met each other, so we never made it here. He might have kept killing, unchecked, and never been apprehended. But I wish I could take it back anyway.”

Will doesn’t speak. He wants to tell her that he doesn’t wish that, to see how her face would look in reaction, but he wants to hear how she’ll finish this plea even more. There’s regret, and compassion, and love in the twist of her mouth. But that’s not all there is. Will supposes he can hardly begrudge her a little self preservation after all these years.

“You need to understand the reality of this situation,” she repeats. “The only way we can help you is if you help us. It’s not a bargain - not with us, anyway. We’re your friends, even if you don’t feel like that’s true right now, and we’re putting ourselves and our careers at risk for you by doing this.”

“I haven’t been officially arrested yet,” Will realizes. “I haven’t been read my rights.”
“We didn’t want…anything you said to be on record.”

“You could have sent a SWAT team in after us.”

“We thought you might kill someone.”

“I would have.”

Alana flinches. “If you give us something that helps us apprehend Hannibal, we can say you were working with us the whole time. We’ll say Hannibal abducted you after Dolarhyde wounded you.”

Will is silent, staring back into Alana’s wide blue eyes with uncharacteristic calmness. Beside them, Jack shifts, still trying to remain as unobtrusive as possible for once. The moment stretches, and time seems to slow until Alana can count the breaths she takes between her heart’s heavy beats. Finally, Will says, “Bring me the head.”

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They argue about it for a while - just like they’d argued about allowing Will to retain his wedding ring when they’d let forensics strip the rest of his clothes and belongings; Jack had argued in favor of following protocol as best they could, siting the fact that they were “already in deep enough shit as it is,” but Alana had convinced him they’d retrieved Will due to his attachment to Molly, and the presence of a symbol of their marriage, after everything else was stripped away, might help revive his sense of loyalty to his old life. She convinces him again, now.

“I still think we’re making a mistake,” Jack grumbles, following the click of Alana’s heels on the linoleum, right into the forensics lab.

“I know,” Alana says, “you mentioned. Extensively. Repeatedly. For the duration of the drive here, the walk to the door, the entirety of the elevator ride, and then again thirty seconds ago. I hear your concerns.”

“Concerns about what?” Price chimes as they round the corner into the lab. “The correct shoes to wear with this stylish little cellophane number? I’m thinking something daring, maybe in red.”
Alana stops abruptly, and Jack nearly collides with her back. Price is holding a transparent, one-piece, plastic jumpsuit. White stitches run up the sides and in two lines along the lower back of the suit. “There’s darts,” Alana observes tonelessly.

“You know your sewing,” Price beams, displaying the suit for them like he’s convincing them of the next fall trend. “I won’t believe you if you say you made that outfit you’re wearing, though.”

“This isn’t funny, Jimmy,” Jack growls, finding his voice again.

“Oh no, of course not, no,” Price agrees. “It’s a proper tragedy.”

“What is?” Zeller asks, coming into the lab with two mugs of coffee in hand, one of which he delivers to Price. “The pairing of a conservative brown loafer with something as fashion forward and Avant-garde as this suit?”

“This really is the kind of piece you need guts to pull off,” Price says, “sometimes extra guts. More than you were born with. Someone else’s.”

Alana stares. Beside her, Jack looks as if his head is about to explode. She decides it’s better if she speaks before he does. “Have you found anything useful?”

“Besides learning something new about Will’s wardrobe preferences, we’ve learned very little, sadly,” Price says. “The suit is mostly composed of polypropylene, and appears to have been custom made to fit Will Graham’s measurements. Do you think Hannibal sewed it himself? I would love to read the invoice if he ordered it custom made.”

“He probably has a matching one,” Zeller says, chugging his coffee. “It would explain the lack of evidence at his crime scenes. Kooky look, but a pretty smart move, I have to admit.”

“The suit and the rest of Will’s clothes appear to be brand new,” Price adds. “Have any local tailors reported taking orders from the FBI’s most wanted this month?”

“Assuming Lecter is the one who procured the clothes,” Zeller says, “which seems likely since they aren’t flannel, I’m kind of surprised by the total lack of paisley.”
“Prison has changed him,” Price says gravely.

“No fibers or clues to where they’ve been staying?” Alana hurries to ask, seeing Jack’s face tightening further. Zeller shakes his head. “What about the head? Anything useful?”

“Aw,” Price lights up. “We did find something there, but probably nothing that will help you locate Lecter.”

“What?” Jack speaks, voice strained.

“For starters,” Price says, “it’s covered in prints. There’s an entire palm print across the forehead, three perfect finger prints and a partial fourth along the right cheek, practically the entire hand along the left. Two hand prints on the platter itself.” His eyes look misty.

“Lecter’s?”

“It’s like he was patting her face,” Price confirms. “And there’s more.”

“We found six of his hairs wrapped around the quill of one of the peacock feathers,” Zeller says. “I mean wrapped, like intentionally wound around the calamus and then tied in a loose knot.”

Jack’s frowns so deeply his face creases into new wrinkles. “He intentionally left evidence.”

“Like he wanted credit for the kill and thought we were too dumb to figure it out on our own,” Price says.

“We were too dumb to figure it out,” Alana says. All that time, killing right in front of us and growing more and more audacious, and we never saw him.

“It gets weirder,” Z says. “I noticed a sound, like something shifting inside her head each time I moved her. So I shone a light down her eye sockets and found these.”
He takes a clear acrylic box from the cabinet to his left and lays it on the desk in front of them. Alana leans in, staring down at a segmented cylinder roughly the size and shape of a man’s thumb. Its surface shines, glossy brown like polished wood, and scored by faint grooves. The ends of the thing taper, and one extends into a thin dark curl like a willow twig.

Jack picks the box up and brings it closer to his scowling face. “Some kind of cocoon?” he guesses.

Price nods. “A large butterfly or moth, we think,” he says. “There was one in each eye; we sent the left one to the Smithsonian for analysis.”

“Send this one as well,” Jack says. “No reason to assume they’re identical, even if they look it.”

Zeller nods, taking the box back. “That’s all we’ve got for now I’m afraid.”

“We need one more thing,” Alana rushes, before Jack can drag them both away.

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They bring the head to Will in a small styrofoam cooler. Alana insists on bringing the cocoon as well, arguing that Jack can send it to the Smithsonian himself immediately afterwards. Jack drives them back to the BSHCI, Alana in the passenger seat with the cooler locked between her knees.

She won’t fit through the metal tray in a dignified way, so they place the open cooler against the glass partition so that he can look into it. Jack lets Alana take the cooler up to the glass and remove the lid herself. She supposes that’s fair. Dr. Du Maurier’s gaunt and eyeless face gazes up from the ice packs, her broken jaw hanging in an expression of permanent surprise, as if she’s just witnessed something utterly scandalous. Alana expects whatever the doctor saw last probably counted as scandalous.

Will stares down at the head without any apparent interest. They send the box through the metal tray, and he takes it, holding it up to the light to examine.

“It’s some kind of insect cocoon or larvae,” Alana tells him, though he hasn’t asked. He spares her a glance before returning his attention to the dark little shape. “We’re sending it to the Smithsonian this evening for analysis.”
Will turns the little case against the light, expression contemplative. The overhead light glints against the shiny carapace. Watching from behind the glass, Alana thinks she can see the hint of wings through the thick silk of the cocoon, the barest impression of a dark shroud draped within the darker casing. He drops the box gently back into the tray and slides it across.

“Okay Will,” Jack says, clearly marshaling his last reserves of patience at this moment. “We brought you the evidence. Time to uphold your end of the bargain. Give us something we can use to find him.”

“I changed my mind,” Will says, and then he shuts his eyes and no amount of Jack’s apoplectic commands rouse any response.

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Will sits on the bench before the Primavera, ensconced by the warm light and rich colors of the Uffizi gallery. His knees are drawn to his chest, shoes resting on the padded bench. He can imagine the silent look of disdain Hannibal would serve in response to his disrespectful posture, but the gallery is as empty as the catacombs had been, and so his transgressions pass without even a silent rebuke.

“You’re here somewhere,” Will says, to the Botticelli paintings, to the soft lights set into the painted walls, to the dichromatic marble floors. “I know you can hear me.” So why don’t you answer? There’s only silence and the sound of his own troubled breathing in response.

But you did speak, Will thinks, didn’t you? He thinks of what Alana and Jack brought for him. What Hannibal had sent for them to bring him. Surely the head had been a message for him, not them; they’d just been playing postal service.

It’s not a threat, Will had known at once, though Alana and Jack would doubtlessly interpret it as a warning to them. Alana had said they’d found it in the parking lot - Will feels certain one of them found it in their car. Jack’s, he thinks, suddenly very sure of it, like Miriam Lass’s arm, it would remind him there is no secure place in his world, no part of his life he can safeguard against invasion. The method of delivery is a threat, but the message itself is something other.

He turns his mind to reading the message that Hannibal has sent for him. That he’s sent it all feels like the loosening of a noose, like Will can take a deep breath again. It doesn’t necessarily mean that Hannibal isn’t intending to kill him for the perceived betrayal, but Will realizes that, perversely, he
fears being ignored far more than being murdered.

_You can kill me_, he thinks, and finds that the idea is not at all an unpleasant one, _only still speak to me, as you have always done._ _Don’t make me like your other victims._ _Don’t show me only silence and flippancy, that distance and insincerity you forced between us when you took the bone saw to my skull._ _If you’re going to kill me do it while you’re holding me, like you did that night in Baltimore, hold me and keep your hand over my heart as it stutters to a stop._ The words echo around him in the lonely gallery. The air smells like blood.

“_You’re in love with your own doom,_” Bedelia says, and Will jerks his head towards her where she sits to his right on the bench. Her jaw hangs at a wrong angle, too far from the rest of her face, and her words seem to float up into the air from out of the black tunnel of her throat. “_Aren’t you going to tell me you’re not in love?_”

Will stares back into her empty, blood-caked sockets, and disregards everything she’s just said. “_You’re a message,_” he tells you, “_a symbol. But what do you signify?_”

“_How did he change me?_”

“_Where’s the rest of you?_”

Her sigh sounds on the air like the rush of a wave over soft shores. “_Divided and conquered, torn apart by my enemies._”

“_Your mouth,_” Will says, “_broken jaw, mouth pulled wide and crammed with grapes._”

“_Tempranillos, to be precise,_” Bedelia’s voice breathes upon the air, her jaw unmoving. “_Excellent for making wine. Perhaps that symbol was a gesture intended for me._”

“_Perhaps,_” he allows. “_In vino veritas. Perhaps he’s worried I’ll tell them the truth._”

“_Perhaps he’s worried you won’t._”

Will frowns. Hannibal’s voice floats through his head. _To the truth…and all its consequences._ Has he told Jack and Alana the truth, since being brought here? He certainly hasn’t given them the one truth they’re after, but he realizes that, for the first time ever, maybe, he is giving them the truth.
About himself. About his intentions. He could have lied to earn their trust, or accepted the lies they’ve asked him to parrot for his own good. But that option never presented itself in his mind, he realizes now. He’d opened his mouth and the truth had come spilling out without hesitation, sweet and potent as fruit or wine.

“Our eyes,” Will says. “What did he replace them with?” He thinks of the moth in the room Hannibal made for him, walking the rim of the lampshade with its dark wings draped over its back like a monarch’s cloak, dusty black with jagged lines of ivory and flashing violet. The memory of the wings pressing against the hardened silk, visible through the casing when he held it to the light. He can feel the breath of Hannibal’s words falling on his face, years ago. *I can whisper through the chrysalis…*

“He wants them to see me,” Will breathes, his heart stuttering an irregular rhythm in his breast. “They couldn’t see either of us before, couldn’t see…what I was becoming. My transformation.”

“You could scarcely see yourself,” Bedelia tells him. There’s a dark line forming, right to left, across the white column of her throat. Will watches as the thick blood begins to drain out of her. “Do you see now?”

“I do.”

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The desire to see Hannibal - to touch him, breathe him, be consumed by his ever expanding dark presence, but even just to see him - is like an itch spreading all over his skin. He feels it in every inch of his body, like a fever. As if separation were cause for legitimate illness. The pain of it follows him out of sleep, plucked at by the leeching cold of the room. He shivers against the restraints as he awakens, curious to find himself sitting upright. It’s a different room than the one in which he fell asleep. Dark, dank, and familiar. The cavernous room and the scratch of the hospital jump suit are both too familiar. He tests the binds, finds them tighter, more effective than handcuffs.

“Prunell came down on us this morning,” Alana says, her voice floating from somewhere in the darkness behind him. He can’t turn his neck far enough to see her. “They want to take an official statement from you if we don’t provide one for them first. Can you be trusted to give a statement that ensures your survival, Will?”

“Can anything ensure my survival, Alana?” Will asks, staring into the dark stone room ahead of him. “And what kind of survival would I have?”
“What you’d make of it,” she answers, stepping closer. He can smell her perfume curling through the air around them, patchouli and orange blossoms. Her voice is gentle. “I’m doing this for your own good, Will.”

“Everyone is so kind,” Will hears how his voice seethes with bitterness, years of resentment he hadn’t meant to reveal, “always doing things for my own good. You, Jack, Hannibal. Gosh, with friends like you, it’s a wonder I haven’t ended up in a better situation.”

“You could have ended up dead,” Alana tells him from right above his shoulder.

“Still might,” he says. “That might count as a better situation.”

“You are lucky,” she says, “that so many people want you alive. Me, Jack. Hannibal.”

His laughter tastes like bile, and he nearly chokes on it. His eyes press into tight, sharp creases, and he searches the darkness behind his lids for something to hold him together. Why aren’t you here? Why won’t you listen?

Alana steps around his shoulder, and fixes him with a piercing gaze. She leans heavily on a glossy ebony cane, though she hasn’t needed a cane in her day to day life for at least two years. Signs of stress, Will thinks, the wear and tear the past four weeks have had on her. He returns her stare, forcing his face to appear calm, even as he feels his heart accelerating. Something in the way she’s looking at him - her eyes and face devoid of the softness she’s always reserved for him, even in times of anger, through all her many changes these years - makes him highly uncomfortable, but, he thinks, she doesn’t need to know that.

“Poor Will Graham,” Alana murmurs, leaning down to peer more closely into his face. “You’ve had so many people inside your head. Doctors, journalists, therapists, killers. At least by now you must be used to it.”

His heartbeat skips, and he feels his chest clench as he sees where her attention has turned - to the low medical tray equipped with one loaded syringe. “Alana…”

“Yes, Will?” She pauses, midway to the tray, her attention focused completely on him. “Is there something you want to tell me that might make the rest of this interview unnecessary?”
Will licks his lips. Memories spring into the foreground of his mind - of his prior incarceration, of the dark shapes that flayed and skewered him, set free by the drugs and the cooling fever in his brain. His instinct is to prevent it, in anyway he can. The knowledge that he could make this go away in an instant appears clearly at the center of his thoughts. He doesn’t even entertain that as an option.

Will shakes his head, chin tilted defiantly at her. Alana shrugs, masking any disappointment she may feel. She’s far more composed than she was the last time he saw her, Will thinks. Now that she knows what to expect, she probably finds each encounter easier to prepare for than the last. And the allotment of power between them - her, looming and dressed in pressed silk and clean dark wool; him, bound to a chair in a sack cloth jumper that scratches uncomfortably over his sensitized skin - certainly can’t hurt her confidence.

He closes his eyes, listening to the small sounds she makes, prepping the injection. “You remember what this feels like,” she says, her voice filtering into his private darkness. He breathes slow, picturing the stream, the water tugging at his ankles, her face calm and collected as she calls to him from the bank. “I read Chilton’s notes. Your reaction to the sodium thiopental was unusual, and strong. Traumatic, he said, but productive.”

“I was recovering from encephalitis at the time,” Will tells her, feeling the wind on his face, gauging the best angle to cast. He can already feel the motion, stored in his arm and waiting to be called to the forefront of his memory. “Might have influenced my reactions a bit, don’t you think?”

“It’s a theory worth testing,” Alana tells him, wading into the stream towards him. Her woolen slacks turn a darker shade of grey as the water soaks them to the knee. *Careful*, he wants to tell her, you’re not used to the cold like I am.

“I want you to know I’m sorry,” she says, “that it’s come to this. I really do want to help you; that’s at least a good part of what this has all been about. We gave you a chance to cooperate, and I really wish you’d taken it. I don’t suppose we’ll call each other friends again, after this.” She smiles, sadly, her short brown hair plucked by the wind. “I love my family as much as you love Molly and Walter,” she says, “and like you I would do anything to protect them.”

There’s no talk of consent forms this time. He feels the injection like an insect’s bite, pictures darkly furred wings unfolding in a hum of vibration. The stream, the trees, the red and orange leafs along the bank, Alana’s forcefully calm face are all lost in the unfurling shadow. Will breathes the cold dark air, feeling tranquility expanding outward from the center of his chest. Oh, how he wants to sink into that feeling, to let it take him away, like a bit of bark or a dead leaf borne away on the clear water of the stream.
“Let my voice follow you,” he hears her say, and the words seem to come from the air all around him. “Will, can you hear me?”

He moans, feeling the vibration of her words running through his bones and tissue. The darkness shifts, buzzing around him. There are eyes, great flat pupils watching him at all sides, unfolding before his eyes as numerous as the stars. They blot out the sky, the earth, surrounding him. Somewhere, maybe, one pair is not black or grey, but luminous as rubies; Will can’t find them in the dark onslaught of watchers, though. The air ripples, eyes moving like paintings on silk screen.

“I’m going to ask you some questions now,” her voice undulates in the dark air. Will sighs. It feels so easy, so simple, almost funny now that he has time to consider. He can tell her anything now and it won’t be his fault. “If you answer truthfully, it will mean good things for you. Will you do your best to answer the questions truthfully, Will?”

His response is a noise tragically similar to a giggle. Alana takes it as a yes, at any rate, because she proceeds with her questions. “Have you been with Hannibal since the escape?”

Dark eyes flutter in lidless vibration all around him. From with the dusty darkness, he hears the shift of some large body, but he feels warm, comfortable, unworried. “Yes,” he says, in answer to a question he has almost forgotten.

Through the darkness, he sees Alana smile, her lips curling too many times at the corners, tiny spirals like a snail’s shell forming there. Then the eyes shift and she’s lost once again. Her voice comes through. “The entire time?”

“Yes.”

“Very good,” she says, and her voice is so pleasant Will smiles back. “They aren’t hard questions, are they? Do you know where Hannibal is now?”

“Yes,” Will says.

“You’re doing such a good job. It’s easy, isn’t it?” *It is easy,* Will thinks. Her voice, the events transpiring around him, the round painted eyes watching him, all just feel like sinking into a warm bath. “One more question, and then you can go,” Alana’s voice drifts down through the forest of flickering pupils. “This one is the most important, but it’ll be easy to answer. You’re doing great.” Around him, the eyes shift, sliding in the darkness. “Where is Hannibal Lecter?”
There’s a clamor of small bodies, dark wings shuttering open and closed with soft clicks as a thousand moths with wings like eyes rise up in a pillar around him. *It would be so easy,* he thinks, *I wouldn’t even be able to blame myself.* Through the reeling dark wings there’s a flicker of fire caught between great pronged horns. The sound of a hoof stamping cuts through the din of clicking wings. Will swallows thickly, twice.

“I-he,” Will starts, then breaks for something between a cough and a laugh before resuming. “Heat two tablespoons of butter in a saucepan on low heat,” he says.

Alana says nothing.

“Add…two tablespoons of flour. And a cup of milk,” he continues, his voice strengthening as he speaks. “Whisk it to mix, if you’ve got a whisk. If not, you can stir with a spoon, but it takes longer.” Through the flapping of wings, he forces his mind onto this one image. He pictures his old kitchen, back in Wolf Trap, years ago, a saucepan of thickening cream bubbling away on the stovetop. “You’ll need to stir for about ten minutes,” Will says. “Just long enough for your arm to start getting real sore.”

“Will,” Alana tries to interrupt. He ignores her.

“You can use any cheese,” Will says. “The recipe said gouda, but you can use any shredded cheese you have. Cheese is cheese,” he says, smiling inwardly at the thought of the pained expression his words would no doubt evoke if Hannibal could hear them. The world begins to lighten at the thought, dark eyes and wings and eyes on wings flittering higher and higher, away towards the sky. “Stir in about a cup and a half.”

“Will,” she says, louder. He can see her, standing in the stream, as the black moths lift in a cloud to reveal the world again. Everything just as it should be.

“And that’s it, really,” he says. “When the cheese melts, you can serve it with bread, or crackers, or apple slices. The picture that came with the recipe showed it in a bread bowl, but that’s always struck me as a decadent waste of both time and food.”

The door slams shut with a brief echo when she leaves. Will waits, alone in the dark, for the orderly to come with an armed guard, to escort him back to his room.
Lloyd Bowman: What about sweating Lecter?
Will Graham: We tried sodium amatol on him three years ago to find where he buried a Princeton student; he gave them a recipe for dip.
- Red Dragon, 2002

Next week - Molly Foster Graham reappears in this story.
Promethea

Chapter Notes

Sorry for being a day late on this update, and for any typos. Warning for a tiny reference to suicide at the end of the chapter, though there is no suicide or any attempt at it and it’s just like, a mention of it and a dismissal. Still, heads up if that is something you want to avoid.

Riding the aftershocks of the serum sweating through him, Will wanders the corridors of memory and imagination, half dreaming, half hallucinating. He tosses fitfully on his hospital cot, as a seemingly endless parade of visions of his own death, always at Hannibal’s hands, shuffles behind his closed lids. An infinity of perpetual punishment, Hannibal stabbing, burning, cutting, drowning, killing, killing, killing. Just like he promised. Dreams of red eyes, black blood, his own ribs, laid bare, cracked like dry branches. Hannibal’s cool fingers caressing his hot entrails, hands fisting in that innermost part of him, lifting wine colored organs to rest raw on the jagged edges of his smile. Will groans in his sleep, neck straining against the thin mattress. His heart races. The dream of Hannibal devours him with slow, rapturous bites. He lowers his dripping mouth to the bowl of meat Will’s open diaphragm has become, and Will feels teeth sinking into the thickness of his beating heart. Over and over, Hannibal eats him alive.

He knows he is dreaming, knows he has to be dreaming, because there’s no way on earth this could possibly feel so good. He watches the top of Hannibal’s head, watches the slide of smooth muscle in his shoulders, catches glimpses of those delicate and valuable pieces of himself vanishing over teeth and down gullet. He watches and the sense of euphoria is transcendent. It’s completion. It’s what he wants, what his body aches for - to be taken in and transformed in such a manner. He can feel his breaths coming shallower, accompanied by a faint whistle after Hannibal punctures a lung with one neatly manicured nail. His head rolls from side to side in his sleep, his hands fisting in the thin sheets beneath him as he moans. A trickle of sweat tickles down his collar bone like finger tips.

“Will.”

The voice is awe-struck, reverent, brimming with unspoken emotion. Will sees Hannibal, kneeling over him on the cot, his legs straddling Will’s - intact - torso. Will blinks up at him. He skates his fingers over his unbroken skin - just to be certain. Then over Hannibal’s forearms. Just to be certain.

“Hannibal, how -“

“Shhh,” Hannibal cuts him off, one un-bloody hand stroking Will’s jaw as Hannibal leans down to
bring their faces close. The kiss is softer than Will anticipated - the barest brush of lips humming against his own, the far from unpleasant aroma of Hannibal’s skin and breath, the tickle of his hair against Will’s temple. Somehow, Will feels himself more completely consumed by this gentle act than he had by teeth and tongue a moment before. All thought - of resistance, of escaping, of how the hell Hannibal got in here in the first place - is blotted out by the elation he experiences at the reunion.

Will props himself slightly on one elbow, pressing up into the solid body above him and seeking to deepen the kiss. He darts his tongue across Hannibal’s lips, tasting salt, and feels his cock thickening against his thigh. There are things Will wants to tell him, but right now he feels capable of communicating those concepts only through touch. He hopes the drag of his teeth conveys his pain at their separation; the arch of his back, his devotion; the grip of his fingers in Hannibal’s soft hair, his regret at having been fool enough to get captured. He hopes the cant of his hips says that he’ll accept any payment for that transgression, that he never intended to transgress but, having done so, would rather die at Hannibal’s hands than suffer the rest of his days in that unassailable isolation which accompanies their division. His heart pounds like he’s been running, and he hears Hannibal’s voice in his ear, even as Hannibal continues to kiss him. “You are never alone, Will; my hand is always on your heart.”

He feels the other man’s strong hands cupping his face, fingers trailing lower to rest on the straining pillar of his neck. He feels the squeeze, pressure building against his windpipe until he cannot help but struggle. Hannibal pulls back, rearing above him, pressing down with his full weight on that fragile white column. Will tries to speak, just to feel the shape of Hannibal’s name one final time. No sound comes. It doesn’t feel as good as it did in his dreams before, but it certainly hasn’t diminished his erection in the slightest. He stops struggling. The feeling of lightheadedness is its own kind of euphoria, a quieting calm to which he’ll gladly succumb. He focusses on the triumphant red eyes staring from the face above him, and keeps that image bright and clear in his mind as his fingers on Hannibal’s arms slacken and his vision begins to fail and the edges of the room dim and dim.

Then he wakes up. And being alive is worse.

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Alana has never been less in the mood to see Freddie in her life, and that’s really saying something. She tells the redhead as much, when she finds herself accosted on the short walk from the front door of the BSHCI to her car.

“Come on, Alana,” Freddie laughs lightly, “you can’t expect me not to pay a visit. The public has a right to know the truth about Will Graham.” She steps directly into Alana’s path, legs wide and hands on hips, forcing Alana to stop short or bowl directly into her. “He’s in there, isn’t he? You’ve got him in custody. Is he under arrest?”
Alana refuses to gratify Freddie with any reaction, but can’t help the flare of her nostrils. She sidesteps the reporter and continues across the parking lot, leaning gently on the black cane she carries. “Leave it, Freddie,” she says simply. She’s too tired for this right now, after what she’s done today. Little good it did, anyway; she feels as if she’s traded another piece of her integrity for nothing more than the image of Will’s straining, maddened rictus. All she wants is her hotel room shower, and her nightly phone call to her family after, when she’s made herself feel somewhat clean again. All she wants is Margot’s voice on the line, urging her to come home to her arms. *I can’t yet, she thinks, her heels clicking across concrete. Soon, I hope. Soon.*

“I know you have him,” Freddie continues, undeterred by the weariness Alana knows must show in her face. “What’s he being charged with? He *is* being charged, right? You’re not going to claim he was working with you this whole time again, are you? Because honestly, Alana, I was *there* last time and we both know he was never altogether on your side.”

Even though Alana’s limp has worsened today, Freddie has to rush to keep up with her. The key is in her hand, her finger pushing the unlock button when Freddie steps in front of the driver side door, radiating determination. “Do you think you’d need that cane if Will hadn’t called to warn Hannibal you and Jack were coming for him?”

She feels like she’s been backhanded. It takes a second to get her bearings. “Stay out of this,” she hisses. “You’re not doing anyone any good.”

“Tell me he didn’t kill those three drunks,” Freddie says, tilting her head defiantly to the right. “Give me an official statement: Will Graham did not help to kill Clark Ingram. Will Graham never conspired with Hannibal Lecter.”

Alana reaches behind her and pulls the door open with a jerk, forcing Freddie aside to avoid a collision. “Get lost,” Alana orders, sliding into the driver’s seat. “And don’t think I don’t know you’ve been hanging around Chilton’s hospital room a lot lately. Not a very mysterious or unbiased secret source, Freddie. Whatever the two of you are doing, stop.”

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“I can’t begin to tell you how tired I’m becoming of cleaning up after the messes you invariably create with Will Graham and Hannibal Lecter,” Prunell tells him when he reports to her office the following morning as instructed. Her voice is higher with exasperation, her mouth a disbelieving scowl as she glares up at him from her desk.
Jack resolutely refuses to shift his face or body. “If you could just allow a little more time, I assure you that Dr. Bloom and I can clean this up sufficiently on our own, Ms. Prurnell. We’ll have Lecter back by the end of the week.”

Prurnell almost laughs, her tight lips pulled into a mirthless smile by his words. “You’re in deep enough trouble as it is without any further scheming, Agent Crawford. You and Dr. Bloom both.”

You and your little dog, too, Jack hears in his head, and fights to keep the sneer off his face. “You’ve been holding a man without charging him or officially arresting him for days, you’ve yet to take an official statement, you used a civilian as bait to trap a suspected murderer who happened to be her husband, and have since refused her access to him, you lost Hannibal Lecter when a man who is not an official agent working for you convinced you to let him help Lecter escape…we don’t have time to waste on anymore of the juvenile games of cat and mouse your team seems intent on repeating. I’m placing Will Graham under arrest. I’ll get a statement from him myself, since you and Dr. Bloom are incapable of producing one. Honestly Jack, how have neither of you taken a statement yet? You’ve had him in custody half a week. I don’t recall him being mute, unless Lecter has eaten his tongue.”

“He’s not mute,” Jack grumbles. “Will’s been…too confused to provide an adequate statement.”

Her expression, though unchanged, conveys the depth of her contempt perfectly. “Adequate? Confused? Jack, you just ask him what happened and record what he says; you don’t give him a week to clear his head and figure out his story because you don’t like what he tells you the first time.”

Jack feels the indignation rising him in like bile. He can’t, technically, refute what she’s saying. He’s behaved unethically, injudiciously, illegal, as he inevitably does when Will or the Chesapeake Ripper are involved. Still, in his heart he feels this was, if not the right choice, nonetheless the only one he could make. It’s a course of action motivated by love, at least.

“It’s just difficult to get him to make any comments relevant to the matter,” Jack lies, hoping Will will have the good sense to shut up when he sees the Investigator. “He seems indifferent to his circumstances. When I speak sometimes I’m not even certain that he’s listening.” That last part, at least, was true.

“Inattention can be a stratagem to avoid pain, Jack,” Prurnell tells him, sounding utterly bored. “It’s often misread as indifference. We just need to make Will Graham’s situation too painful to ignore.”

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He’s standing in front of the glass partition when she enters the room, facing forwards, expression calm. There’s something unsettling in the stiffness of his body, in the way he holds his hands with palms facing away, in the expressionlessness of his scarred face. He’s changed since she last spoke with him, and not in any good way that she can see. “Mr. Graham,” she greets coldly, “in trouble again.”

“Not for long,” he tells her gently, and it’s the gentleness more than his words that chills her.

“Let me tell you what’s going to happen,” she says, “whether you cooperate with us or not. Tomorrow evening you’ll be transferred to a federal detention center. You haven’t been found insane, so you don’t belong in this hospital and you certainly don’t belong in this cell. You’ll be placed with the general population, and let me tell you, law enforcement, even ones with records as spotty as yours, don’t tend to thrive in that environment.” She pauses, eyes raking over him, evaluating. “You look like it could go either way with you; either you’ll wind up in solitary because you keep getting your teeth shattered or because you keep shattering teeth. Either way, you’ll spend most of your day alone in a dark little room till your trial date…whenever that is.”

She pauses again, allowing him time if he wishes to speak. When he says nothing, she continues. “Now, let me tell you what’s going to happen next if you don’t cooperate. They’ll find you guilty. The FBI will supply such a mountain of evidence tying you to the deaths of Bedelia Du Maurier, Clark Ingram, Patrick Duffy, Michael Barker, and James Barnes that they’ll have no other rational option before them. You will not be found insane. Your past record is against you. You can’t cry encephalitis this time. Your good deeds and dragon slaying won’t excuse your crimes in the eyes of the jury. You have no defense. You won’t come back here, to be watched over by our kind Dr. Bloom for the rest of your days, given books and special privileges and a room of your own. Instead, you’ll go to a supermax prison, and spend the next fifteen years of your life in a cell the size of a walk-in closet, alone for twenty-three hours a day. And then they’ll kill you, and when they do you’ll probably be relieved.”

She waits again, but his expression doesn’t waiver, and he doesn’t say a word. She’s not deterred. “If you want to avoid spending the rest of your life alone in a box, you’ll give us what we want.”

“So I can spend the rest of my life in a box with Hannibal Lecter?” Will asks, voice oddly relaxed, almost humorous. “I don’t anticipate the rest of my life lasting long enough for any of your predictions to come true, Kade.”

She doesn’t quite manage to hide the flinch of surprise at the use of her given name, which is no doubt what he’d intended. But she won’t be shaken so easily. “You think he’s coming here to kill you,” she says, “for what he’ll perceive as a betrayal of his trust.” He says nothing, but the widening of his pupils is all the confirmation she needs. “He isn’t,” she says flatly. “We had reports of sighting from multiple sources in Paris early this morning. Interpol confirmed prints on a wine glass collected by a keen-eyed and financially ambitious server on Rue de Beaujolais.” She wets her lips, watching
for any tell. “He’s not coming for you.”

“He’ll come,” he tells her, voice as calm as before, face like the surface of an untroubled lake.

“He won’t,” she says. “But you’re welcome to wait. At this point, the information you hold isn’t really that valuable, anyway.”

“Then I’m sure you won’t mind me keeping it to myself,” he says.

She frowns. “Things will go easier for you if you help us,” she says. “When you’re ready to do that, let your guards know to call me.” She turns for the door. “But don’t wait too long.”

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He thinks of all the things Hannibal has done to him, all the pain and misery he’s endured at the touch of those artful hands. He pictures the worst of it, thinks of bleeding out in Hannibal’s arms, of the hot blood pouring from him, of the sharp bite of the blade that tore through flesh and sinew, remembers the little sound Abigail made as her throat opened, the way Hannibal set her down almost gently. The pain, the hopelessness and hurt of it all, so overwhelming, a dark cobweb of anxiety filling him where his blood used to as the cold sets in.

This hurts worse.

Somewhere on another planet, Prurnell is still speaking, but in this interior world her words become less and less clear. Will hears his blood rushing too quickly through him, and wishes he could let it outside of his body again.

He can feel his mouth forming responses to her words, but he doesn’t know what she’s said, or what he says in response, or how any part of him can still manage to continue this conversation when his heart has stopped beating. The bulk of him - the part that feels - is lightyears away, careening adrift through space.

Not coming. Not planning to collect his due.
He feels his body going cold faster than it did on Hannibal’s kitchen floor in Baltimore four years ago. The mask on his face doesn’t slip, even after Prurnell leaves with one last derisive glance cast back over her shoulder along the way. The only change to his face they’ll see on the cameras is the shutting of his eyes. If someone were to stand in front of him now, perhaps they’d see the flickers of motion beneath the lids. But no one does.

The humiliation. The nightmares. The loneliness, oh dear god, all that time by himself. Of course, he is used to being without human company, but he’s filled the space that humans - with their complicated, twisting emotions - would fill with dogs. Dogs, who radiate one feeling at a time, mostly contentment, curiosity, peace. Nothing complicated, nothing painful.

No dogs in prison. He remembers his previous incarceration and trial. Alone for too long with his own thoughts and emotions for company, the only visitors ones who force him to feel their confusionragepainfearcontempt.

Not coming. He imagines the future. Lawyers who stink of disbelief. This time they’ll be right to. He remembers his days in court, feeling the pulse of mistrust and revulsion.

I’ll go mad.

It hits him like a dark wave of frigid water. He wishes they’d drowned. Wishes he’d died that night in Baltimore.

I can make it all disappear, he thinks. Maybe not all of it. But maybe more than Prurnell is saying. Jack and Alana are still powerful friends to have, and he knows they’ll push against her anyway they can. Within the confines of the law. He knows exactly what he’d need to say, exactly where to push to bend Alana, especially now, with her savior complex no doubt amplified by guilt.

I could have told her everything I know, he thinks. Should have. Should call for Jack, now, before they move me. I should make demands, get it in writing. Save myself, as much as I can, the only rational choice left to me. Or else, or else…

Why didn’t I?
He can’t hold onto his thoughts. Mind fractured by the trauma of all that has happened - the multiple traumas - his thoughts raise off, several trains abandoning one station. He follows them all.


I’ll have to sit there, day after day, watching them bring out the photographs, the bagged evidence, the witnesses. The reporters shoving microphones into my face whenever they can. Shuffling into the courtroom with chains at wrist and ankle each day as the victims’ families watch with tight faces.

*Shared cell in the jail, brawls will start the day of my arrival. Knuckles splitting on teeth, teeth cracking under fists, maybe I’ll get lucky and someone will have a shiv. The indignity of dying at anyone’s hands but his.*

*Forsaken. Discarded. Unimportant.*

They’ll put the bite mask on me before they move me, like they did before. The strait jacket. Strap me in, tie me down, tip me back and wheel me to the transfer vehicle. I’ll watch the ceiling trailing above me, dotted by fluorescent lights as the night sky is dotted by stars. I’ll never see the night sky again.


I could plead guilty. Avoid the trial. Move directly to a decade or more in a dungeon. In the dungeon of my mind, alone with only thoughts like these for company.

*The crushing black wave, the future, bearing down on me, pressing with impossible weight. This is the worst thing. Worse than pain. Worse than death. A future I did not anticipate, for which I could not prepare. Am not prepared.*

*No one is coming. No one is coming. No other way out.*

*Why can’t I speak?*

For the finds that he can’t. Though his rational mind screams for him to call for Jack, for Alana, for
Prurnell, even, whoever can get to him first, he cannot do so. Something stronger than reason won’t let him. He doubts that giving them Hannibal’s address in Baltimore would help them much; Hannibal won’t be caught, has never been caught, has only volunteered his time. He’s not wasting that precious resource on Will any longer. Finally bored. No longer interested enough to bother with revenge. Relinquishing his claim. Let the feds have him, Will imagines him saying.

And yet he knows he won’t call for them. He won’t betray Hannibal, even if it wouldn’t hurt, and even if he’s already suffering the harshest punishment for betrayal. Of all the principles within him, this one part of his soul he knows he will never compromise. Not again. Never again. He won’t bargain for his life or deny who he is, what he’s done. What Hannibal means to him.

What does he mean?

If someone stood across from Will now, they would note the way his cheeks redden with a sudden heat, the minute parting of his lips around an almost inaudible gasp of realization.

So this is love.

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He’s grown accustomed to blocking out the voices of his visitors - jailers, interrogators - but at the first sound of her soft voice his eyes fly open. She says his name, and nothing more, looking small and misplaced and frightened in a way he’s never seen her look before. Frightened of me, he thinks, I caused that look. He’s not proud of that.

“You should go,” Will says, after a long silence. He can’t think of anything kinder to say.

She makes a noise like she’s being strangled. “I’ve been trying to see you for days,” she says. Her voice is steady, if quiet. Free from tears. She sounds scared and confused more than angry, as if she is visiting him in a hospital rather than a maximum security institution for the criminally insane. He wonders suddenly whether Alana told her about the marks on his neck, and about her suspicious as to how they came to be there. He hopes not; seems an unnecessary cruelty. He’s silently thankful for the rough, high-necked jumpsuit which hides the fading bruises from his wife.

“My, I know,” he says, after a pause, stepping closer to the glass. “I know this is confusing, and… painful.” The word is difficult. He closes his eyes against the sight of her anguish, and forces himself to recall how it felt to be her sweet man and husband, father to her child. “Alana found you?”
She nods, tendrils of blonde hair escaping her loose bun to fall about her sorrowful face.

“She told you you could help me,” he surmises, “help bring me in...rescue me?”

“Yes,” Molly gasps.

He can imagine what else she told Molly. He supposes it’s only right; he wouldn’t begrudge his wife the truth. She’s owed that much, and probably much more. Still, he’s no intention of paying his debts. “I wish you hadn’t listened,” he says, “for your own sake. Aren’t you tired of being entangled in this, Molly?”

“Entangled with you, you mean,” she retorts. “I love you, Will. Do you know what that means? Do you think I wouldn’t do all I could to protect you?”

It hurts - oh it hurts - to hear. Her pain is a cloud around her, drenching him as well. But far worse than pain is the hope he still senses in her. He feels her desires, pure and strong and simple, as all her emotions are, as she herself is. He sees what she wants as clearly as if she has painted it for him. Her desire is so strong he feels himself drawn to give in. She held him together for two years; she could do it again. He could again choose to lose himself in her goodness, her calm passivity.

He steps closer still to the partition, closer to his wife’s tortured face. He extends his hand towards her through one of the round ventilation holes in the glass. She doesn’t hesitate, and her smooth hand is warm in his. He strokes his thumb over the back of her wrist, smiling softly. “My pretty baseball wife,” he sighs, “you cannot truly intend to take me back. Think of your son.”

“You son, Will,” she says, and he can hear the tears thickening her voice.

His smile is sad. “No,” he says, voice gentle. “It was generous of you to share him with me for a time, kind of you to trust me. But unwise.” He passes his other hand through a second hole, gripping hers between them. “It was unkind of me to take the peace you offered me. You couldn’t have known what I was.”

“I know who you are, Will.” Tears slide down her face, and a part of him still wishes he could brush them off. Even if no barrier lay between them, he knows he couldn’t. “You’re a good man.”
“No,” he says, quickly, firmly, but she protests. “No,” he insists again, over those protestations, “I’m not. I’ve tried, but it’s not my nature. You made it easier to pretend that I was, but a part of me knew when I married you that I’d hurt you. And I did it anyway.”

“Oh, Will,” she sobs, her voice breaking finally on his name. “Weren’t you happy? With us - Walter, and me, and the dogs. Did you ever love us?”

His breath hitches at her words. He can feel her nails digging into his palm, her pleas digging into his heart. He shakes her hands loose. It would have been best, he thinks, if this could have been done gently, but he can see now that she will not be shaken of lightly. Her voice and the sound of her crying is causing a vein to beat in his forehead; a headache gathers like a storm cloud in his temples.

“I was wrong to marry you,” he says, voice colder now, hands no longer returning her clutching grasp. “I knew it would end like this. I knew,” he swallows, forcing the cruel words passed his teeth, “I belonged with him.”

He can scarcely bear to gaze upon her crumpling face, but he forces himself to look until the sight no longer affects him as strongly. “Why did you then?” she sobs, “Why marry me if you didn’t love me or intend to stay?”

_I meant to stay, _he thinks, _I hoped I could; I wanted to. Or I wanted to want to._ But that truth won’t help her now, only galvanize her hopes for his redemption. And her hope is dangerous, to him but even more so to herself.

“Maybe I just wanted someone to look after my dogs once I’d gone,” he sneers, and watches the shock of anger rise in her face with a curious mixture of satisfaction and revulsion. He twists the ring off his finger and presses it into her palm. “Go to Oregon,” he commands her, voice firm. “Go to your family. Take Wally, take the dogs, go far away from here, and never come back or answer a call form Jack Crawford or Alana Bloom again.”

“Don’t say this to me,” she cries, almost shouting. “You can’t.”

“I have to,” he says. “Go. I’m getting out of here, Molly, and I’m going with him.” His chest tightness at the words. He hopes she believes them more than he does. “For your own safety, you need to be gone.”

She goes, walking out of the room and out of his life without another word.
He watches the fire jumping in the hearth, consuming the pages he alone feeds it. He can feel the heat. Since meeting Hannibal, he’s seen places in the world that he never anticipated visiting. He used to need only a stream. Now of all the rooms in his memory palace, this one is the one he knows he’ll come to most often for comfort. He seats himself in an armchair, facing the empty one in front of him, reconciled to living here within the walls of his memory. He won’t be happy here, but he’ll remain sane, he thinks. He resigns himself to a future of reaching for Hannibal, always, calling as the other man had called for him for three years, unanswered.

Maybe Hannibal will answer him someday, in three years, or when he’s grown nostalgic some night in the distant future. Perhaps he’ll come when he feels Will has served out a long enough sentence, and release him from the prison of this world. Or else the United States government will kill him someday, and so bring an end to the yearning that he knows will never diminish in all the lonely years to come. It seems a shame to die in such manner. He could take matters into his own hands, he knows, but his life is not his own. He belongs to Hannibal and not to himself, and so he will wait for Hannibal’s judgment.

The curls his legs under him on the seat, resting his head against the warm leather. Shadows quiver on the far wall, and Will watches them until his eyelids begin to sag. His body is stretched on the uncomfortable hospital bed, but he’ll sleep here, in the safety and comfort of Hannibal’s old office. They can do what they want to his body, but his soul will always be here. He’ll go so deep inside himself they’ll never touch him. In twenty years they will execute a shell.

“Will.”

His eyes fly open at the sound. The room is empty, firelight still casting a dim illumination over the bookshelves, the desk, the curtains blowing lightly in the breeze. Will frowns, rising to cross the room, and peer out of a window he doesn’t remember opening.

The voice comes to him on the next strong breeze, soft but speaking of an incoming storm.

“It won’t be long now.”

In his ornate cell, upon the hard mattress, against the pressing darkness Will smiles.
Last week I was a day late, so this week, before I leave town again, I’m posting a day early. Thank you to those of you reading; this is so much fun to write, and it is great to know others enjoy it as well. Warnings for violence and sappiness.

Such a day should tremble to begin. Will isn’t sure where the words come from, appearing, as they do, in his mind. He isn’t even sure it is the beginning of the day, only that when Alana visits him it has been several hours since his last visitor, Molly, left in tears. He has little sense of time in this place, sleeps and wakes without discerning the length of his rest. His only indicator of how much time has passed since they brought him here comes from the bruises fading at his throat, and soon they will be gone completely.

He’s asleep when she enters the room, but wakes quickly to stand, alert, before the glass. He searches her face for any trace of shame or remorse over what she did to him a day before, but her face is shuttered, expression closed to his prying eyes.

They stare at one another for a long while before Alana speaks. “Molly left last night,” she tells him, wetting her red lips with the tip of her tongue so they glisten. “I thought you might want to know.”

“Good,” Will says, surprised by the measure of relief he hears in his own voice. He knows, now, that he’d never loved her the way he’d promised to do - she’d never been able to know him enough to love him, either, though he knows it will be a long time before she lets herself face that realization. It’ll come someday, he hopes, the knowledge that he tricked her; there’s nothing wrong with her. You drew a man with a monster on his back, Will thinks, remembering the pain on Reba’s face. At this moment, though, he feels entirely monster.

Maybe he is something other than Francis Dolarhyde, Will considers. Other than Hannibal, too. Not reacting to childhood trauma, excising the demons of a tragic past. A natural born killer, he thinks, and the thought almost brings a smile to his lips, though there’s no happiness reflected in his eyes.

“She’s your wife, Will,” Alana says, her voice, like her face, kept carefully emotionless. “Don’t you think you could have been a little kinder?”

“Do you wish I was milder, Alana? I’m done playing something other than my nature. Rather say I play the man I am,” Will bites the words at her.
“I only said kinder.”

“Kind like you were when you got her involved?” Will arches an eyebrow. “You let her endanger her life. Did you explain the risks to her, or were you worried she’d say no if you did?”

Alana dips her head, giving a short, bitter laugh of shock. “You endangered her life, Will. You got her involved. Don’t try to pin your guilt on me; she wouldn’t have been there to use if you hadn’t brought her into this first yourself.”

“You didn’t need to bring her back into it,” Will insists, feeling the anger she’s no doubt hoping to awaken in him. He tries to keep it from his voice, but he’s sure it shows in the tight line of his mouth. “You should have let her slip away.”

“You made it necessary to involve her, when you helped Hannibal escape from federal custody,” Alana says. “We haven’t all lost interest in protecting our loved ones.”

Will laughs in her face. “How is Margot?” he asks. “Where is Margot? Are you sure she’s safe, without you there Alana? Maybe you’re less protective than you think. Maybe this isn’t about keeping anyone safe but yourself.”

She looks like she would hit him if it weren’t for the glass between them. Just for a second, before the mask slides back into place, rage cooling on her cheeks but not in her eyes. He sees the anger there, unmissable now. He feels it twisting in himself as well, like a coil of snakes in his chest. If there were no glass, he thinks, what would I do?

“I’m not going to argue over which of us is worse at safeguarding our families,” she tells him placidly, but he sees the storm in the darkening of her irises. “I’m here to inform you that a transfer for you has been arranged for tomorrow morning, ten am. That gives you just shy of twenty-four hours to convince Prurnell it’s worth her time to keep you alive, because whatever you may think of my integrity, Will, you know I’m telling the truth when I say that you will get killed if you’re moved to federal detention.”

“Don’t worry about me,” Will reassures her, voice thick with irony. “I’ll be dead before twenty-four hours go by.”

She sighs. “Will, Prurnell has prints-”
“Well she’s either lying or being lied to,” Will scoffs. He locks eyes with Alana, smiling now, at the way her pupils dilate. “Hannibal is coming, Alana. Soon. And when he does you want to be anywhere else, because he’s coming to kill you, and me, and anyone else he finds when he gets here.”

******

Something in his voice doesn’t leave room for second guesses. Alana tells Jack as much while alarming the panic room, inputting codes that bring the heavy steel outer door sliding into place with a resounding thud.

“He honestly, Alana,” Jack huffs, watching the doctor bring a row of screens to life. Ten little boxes flicker with images of the hospital grounds - a shot of each side of the building, a close up of the front door, and a camera positioned by the stairwell of each floor of the building. A final, eleventh screen to the left of the others flicks on, showing the cell that used to hold Hannibal, where Will now sits, knees drawn up to his chest and back resting on the wall. “Do you really expect Hannibal to come? Or to get beyond fifty armed guards and SWAT units if he did? This place is a fortress. As we planned.”

“I know I feel a lot safer with both of us on this side of that door,” Alana replies succinctly. “Let your army of guards handle whatever does or doesn’t happen tonight. We can watch from here.”

She hands him a tumbler of scotch, the crystal winking as it catches the light. “Final steps in preparing for incoming crisis?” Jack raises an eyebrow, his smile small and sharp. She lifts her glass to him.

Part of him does wish Hannibal would come, Jack acknowledges as he takes a sip. He feels the alcohol burning down his throat and it’s a clean heat. If Hannibal comes now, it will be according to their initial plan. They may catch him, if he comes tonight, and that may pacify Prurnell enough to win some special allowances for Will.

“Promise me one thing,” Alana says, when they’ve both had time to finish half their drinks, watching the little screens project nothing worth noting in silence. Jack hums. “Whatever happens, or doesn’t happen, stay here. With me.”

“Alana…”
“If he comes,” she hurries, cutting off his protest, “you’ve got half an hundred people out there armed to the teeth, all younger, all faster, all posing less emotional liability than you.” The words hurt like a slap, and the pain must show on his face, but they both know they’re true. “What do you think you could accomplish that fifty trained individuals armed with paramilitary weaponry can’t?”

It’s not that he thinks he could succeed, if all else were to fail. They won’t fail, he thinks, of course they won’t. Not even Hannibal is that impervious to harm. But if they did, he doesn’t think he could accomplish anything they couldn’t. It’s just that he’d like to go down with them, he realizes. This is his fight, and if anyone is going to die in it he ought to be among the casualties.

“Be smart, Jack,” Alana says, eyeing him as if she can sense his thoughts. “You won’t catch him by becoming a martyr. Survive to fight.”

She’s right, he knows. Still, he doesn’t give her his word that he’ll stay. He raises his glass in stern salute. “To the mess we helped Will Graham build,” Jack says. “To old friendships.”

She smiles, and he watches the scotch run over her teeth, her slender throat working as she swallows. Perhaps nothing will happen tonight, as he’d protested to her only moments before. But his instinct says otherwise.

******

Will waits. He presses his knees to his chest, presses his fingertips to the fading bruises Hannibal left along his throat, feeling him there again, like a ghost. He has faith, he believes, he will be saved. But whether Hannibal is planning to save him from this prison or this life, Will can’t say. He supposes it doesn’t matter much. In many ways his existence has always felt like a prison itself.

Except that had been about to change. Had already begun to change. Will frowns, feeling the light ache in the flesh beneath his hands. He’d emerged from the ocean, dragged into new life by Hannibal’s hands, reborn as someone who could meet another’s gaze without flinching, someone who didn’t feel his every movement and his own skin like an ill-fitting costume. He hadn’t realized how much it had hurt until the pain stopped, and he was left unfettered, finally, and reeling with pure joy. That had been what Hannibal had intended for him, all those years Will had spent in fighting him, that ecstasy of freedom, the golden bliss of knowledge that this was what it could be like, for him, for them.

If he’d died that night on the cliff, if the Dragon’s first stab had struck him lower, slicing his carotid
instead of piercing his jaw, he would never have known what a waste his life had been, and what a waste it was to lose that life. Not even Randall Tier had made him feel so good. Maybe it was the pain, the struggle of the fight, the Dragon’s madness pulsing off him in hot waves until Will was half certain he saw black wings unfurling from the muscled shoulders. Maybe it was Hannibal.

The fire flickers behind him, warming his back, and Will closes his eyes against the shadows cast across the empty chair before him. He wants to believe Hannibal will be there, seated across from him as so often before, when he opens his eyes. He leaves them closed. He finds it easier to think this way, sending his thoughts out into the warm darkness, the only response the sound of wood crackling in the hearth.

_Maybe that’s the only response there’s ever been, Will thinks, just the crackle of burning memory, nothing more._

Maybe all of this has been madness - the whispers from the dark beyond his porch in Virginia, the sound of Hannibal’s voice on the air, the electric thrill he feels in Hannibal’s presence, the sharpened colors, the vibrancy of a life watered with blood. If so, it has been a shared madness, at least, and Will would not trade it for solitary sanity. No fever wracks him now but love, hot and fast, burning through him to boil his blood and brain. He waits. And seethes.

He doesn’t know how he could ever have been so blind. How he could have deluded himself into believing his little life would hold, in the face of something as large and powerful as what he feels now. What’s he’s always felt. He does not know how he convinced himself he could be anyone but himself, or that he even wanted to be.

Will sighs, shifting in the armchair. He opens his eyes and for a moment Hannibal is there, an after image burned into the air across from him. Gone again, only his imagination. _All of this, Will reminds himself, imagined._ He thinks of Hannibal lasting three years in an imagined reality, waiting for Will to come to his senses. Or lose them.

He’s still not sure what Hannibal is coming for - whether it’s for rescue or revenge. He tells himself it’s enough that he’s coming.

******

The man slides into death without so much as a whimper, accompanied only by the popping sound of his spine snapping between Hannibal’s strong hands. The sixth soul sent fleeing so far this night, and the last of the snipers stationed around the hospital. It had been easy to take each of them, one at a time, with silent efficiency. Now, he holds the final one’s body, feeling the heat fade from it. The
limbs are still limber enough to make undressing them easy.

He stares through the trees as he slips his arms through the dark grey vest, his breath steaming in the air so that the hospital beyond it is wreathed in brief clouds of fog. He’s facing the back of the building. There are seven guards stationed outside: one in each corner, of the building, one at the padlocked back entrance, and two more at the front door. Hannibal closes his eyes, bringing the annotated floor plans into focus in his mind.

Dropping to one knee, Hannibal lifts the dropped Remington to his shoulder. He searches through the telescope, scanning along the south side of the building. He can see a guard at the southeast corner, and another at the back door.

He hesitates for a moment, finger on the trigger. It would be easy to pick them off, one by one. Eliminate these two, then wait a moment to see if their deaths draw any of the others. Move around the building taking each of the sentry out from a quiet, safe distance.

The barrel flickers upwards with a minuscule motion of his wrist. Yards away, a security camera’s glass eye shatters.

******

“‘You hear something?’”

“S’nothing to hear.”

“Huh.”

“Why? You hear something? It’s your own imagination if you did.”

“I can tell the difference between what’s real and what’s imagined, thanks. I’m not a kid.”

“No offense intended, friend. Just mean I’ve done a lot of night shifts, and I know how it can mess with a person’s head. You’re out here, armed to the teeth in the dead dark of night, having to remain on high alert for the worst case scenario at all times. But you know what usually happens on shifts
like this?”

There’s a long pause. Finally: “What?”

“A fat load of nothing. The action doesn’t come to you. Ninety percent of the time, a job like this, we’ll spend the whole night just waiting, jumping at our own shadows. In the morning they’ll say they got a tip off, the real action is two miles from here at an abandoned warehouse or a run down apartment complex.”

A snort. “Really.”

“Well, somewhere. Somewhere where you know what you’re getting into, and you have that adrenaline going in, and it gets used up fast. Here, it just simmers in you. Makes you start hearing sounds, seeing things moving. Just wait till two am. That’s when it always gets bad for me.”

There’s silence for a long moment. From the west side of the building, a small sound passes without comment. Raccoons, stray cats, even a mouse, could make such a sound.

“I’m gonna take a leak.”

“Sure you’re not heading out to investigate that mouse fart?”

“Might as well do that, too. We’ve got the whole night to kill.”

The next noise to break the silence is louder - not a sound a mouse or cat or raccoon could make. Something larger and heavier, hitting the grass with a thud.

“Hey, Jones, what was that?”

Silence.

“Did you catch your mouse?”
No answer.

Footsteps, and the guard’s grumbled, “This better not be some kind of joke,” and then his shadow preceding him around the corner.

Hannibal is on him in a second, one arm pinning the guard’s arms to his sides, one hand covering the mouth that opens in a scream of alarm. “It’s no joke,” Hannibal whispers against his ear. He moves fast, twisting the guard’s neck before the man can anticipate his intentions and tense the muscles there. He feels the fracturing of the spinal column beneath hands strong as gallows, feels the body sag, becoming nothing more than meat. He lets it fall to the earth.

He uses the guard’s gun to shoot out the fourth outdoor security camera, and walks towards the front of the building, shoes grinding broken glass into the cold ground. There are five doors between him and Will Graham, and Hannibal intends to make his way through every one.

*****

“Do you think Hannibal is really in Paris,” Jack asks, watching the remains of his second drinks swirl in the bottom of the glass. He’s not drunk - not even tipsy - but he’s beginning to feel the outer edges of intoxication. It’s not enough to dull him, but enough to blunt the edges of reality, lending a surreal haze to the night. “Or do you think Kade was lying?”

Alana, pouring herself a refill, doesn’t answer for a moment. “I think we need to prepare for the possibility that what she said is not true,” she finally tells him.

“It would be a good tactic,” Jack says, “if she was lying. Make him think he’s been abandoned, force him to confront the reality of his situation. A little underhanded, but I can’t fault her for that. It’s a good scheme, if it is a scheme.”

“It didn’t work very well,” Alana points out.

“No,” Jack frowns. “She believes he’s in Paris. As angry as Prurnell is with the BAU, she wouldn’t thwart our efforts by allowing us to believe that our quarry was on the wrong continent.”
“You think he’s coming?” Jack asks.

“No word yet,” Alana says. “None of the alarms have sounded and no word from - ” Her words end abruptly as she swivels in her seat to face the cameras. When she speaks again her voice is small. “Jack.”

He turns in his seat, looking where she looks. Four of the little screens show only static. The interior cameras show stationary guards, and Will Graham standing stock still in his cell before the thick glass. Stillness and static. The one that holds Alana’s attention, however, shows movement. It’s the camera at the front door. Jack inhales in a sharp hiss.

“We didn’t look away for more than a few minutes - ”

But it doesn’t matter. Even if they’d stayed, staring, unblinking at the screens every second, he’d still find a way to emerge ahead of them. For there he stands, keying a code into the pad at the front door - a code Jack memorized, because Alana forbade even him from writing it down. And the door swings open, just like that.

And then the rest of the screens go black.

Alana is rigid in the seat beside him. He can feel the tension seeping off her, adding to his own. His eyes flick towards the door without conscious thought, and he feels her fingers gripping hard through the sleeve of his jacket before he can look away again.

“Jack, no,” her face is pale, drawn, eyes wide when he returns his gaze to her face. “No, I need you here.”

“You don’t need me here,” he scoffs. “The doors are keeping you safe, not me.”

She shakes her head, chestnut bob swinging around her face. “There’s nothing you can do out there. We can contact the guards from here.” She pushes a button on the console, speaks into what he assumes is a microphone. “Officer Lee, Lecter has breached the front doors. Do you copy?” She pauses, finger raised over the button for an instant. “Officer Lee, or any other officer on this channel,
what is the status of the first floor? Report.”

A longer pause. Jack can feel the blood beating harder in his throat, a trickle of sweat beginning to form along the back of his neck, a shift in his breathing as if he’s preparing to run. Alana jams her finger back onto the button and shouts into the microphone. “First floor officers, report: is Lecter inside?”

He thinks the silence that greets her might stretch forever. It’s the same quiet he’s heard when visiting Bella’s grave - a marker on a hill in the cemetery behind the church where they said their vows, no body below it, but a place to visit when he feels her absence like a jagged hole inside him - the same quiet as the one that sounds in the morgue on late nights and early mornings. And then there’s a frizzing hiss, the sound of a mic being turned on, and Hannibal’s familiar accent responds.

“Hehello again, Alana.”

He thinks he’s going to have to catch her, but she steadies herself with one hand on the console before her body can tilt out of the chair. He watches her knuckles whiten, her jaw clenching so hard he imagines teeth splitting.

“I’m afraid you’ll need to have the first floor cleaned thoroughly,” Hannibal says, voice politely apologetic. “I’d offer to foot the bill, but I’m afraid I’ll be leaving town shortly, and I don’t think you’ll be able to send me the invoice.”

Jack watches her shake herself, her eyes brightening in fear. She punches a few keys on the board in front of her and pushes the button again. He can hear her voice echoing faintly on the other side of the heavy doors as she speaks over the intercom.

“Attention all guards and SWAT,” she says, voice clipped and severe, “there is a trespasser inside the building. He is to be considered armed and dangerous. We believe he is located on the first floor at this time, reinforcements are on their way.”

She releases the mic, and a few seconds of silence pass before a light begins to flash on the console.

“It’s an incoming message,” Alana says, “from the guard stationed at the second floor stairwell.”

The message is screaming. It’s too loud to be just one voice - too loud for two voices, or five, or ten.
The entire floor, by the sound of it, every inmate in each cell, shrieking and whooping and singing like some infernal choir of the damned.

“Don’t listen to it,” Jack orders, placing a hand heavily on Alana’s shoulder and shaking her lightly. “He’s just trying to scare you.”

“He doesn’t have to try,” she whispers. There’s a quiver in her voice, a terror Jack hasn’t heard from her before. It is almost resignation, he thinks, but the clench of her jaw is not resigned. “He opened the doors. He shut down the cameras. We’re blind, trapped up here.”

“We need to go,” Jack tells her. “We can stop him before he reaches Will. I’m not taking him into custody, Alana; I’m putting a bullet through his head and ending this once and for all. Come on,” he slides his hand down to take hers, tugging. “Let’s go. It’s no safer here anyway; who’s to say he can’t open this door, too?”

She pulls back against him. “It’s a different system than the rest of the security,” she says. “All these years, feeling his eyes on me like I was the best cut of meat at the butcher’s shop, I taught myself to be cautious.”

Jack shakes his head. “I can’t wait this out, Alana. Whatever’s happening out there, I need to be a part of it.”

“You’re making a mistake,” she says, but he goes anyway, and Alana is left to survey her darkened security footage alone. She eyes the door warily, fingering the pistol in her pocket with her right hand.

*****

Will paces, no longer able to stand still or lose himself in inward examination. He feels like one raw, stretched muscle, waiting to snap. How Hannibal managed to hold his facade for so long is beyond Will. He knows without having to be told that the other man’s mask never slipped. But right now, Will doesn’t particularly care that his restlessness is visible on camera. Whomever is watching him, let them watch. He has bigger concerns.

He feels as if he’s about to crawl out of his own skin. The room is sound-proofed, the only noise the hum of electricity and the faint shushing of air being circulated through the room. And yet Will swears he can hear screams. If he closes his eyes he can see them, smeared like bloody hand prints across the air. His limbs ache, muscles coiled and tightened, longing for release. He pictures his dogs, the way they run. Inside his chest his heart beats slow.
When Will opens his eyes there is someone else in the room with him.

“Oh, God, oh,” the young man in SWAT gear curses, his chest rising and falling so rapidly Will is momentarily certain the man is about to keel over with a coronary attack. “It’s you.”

He arches one curious brow at the words. “I’m the new tenant, yeah.” Will licks his lips. “Were you expecting someone else?”

The man shakes his head. He’s dressed in Kevlar, the dark grey and navy gear of the SWAT team. “No, no, I was looking…looking for you.” The man is shaking so hard his words are punctuated by the clatter of his teeth. “Will Graham.”

“That’s my name,” Will says, cocking his head to one side, curious. The man has become mute with fear, by the look of it, literally quaking in his boots as he stands, staring, in need of prompting. “What’s your name?”

“Phillips,” the man manages to splutter.

“Did you want something from me, Phillips?”

The man shakes like a dead leaf clinging to the branch. “This is all happening because of you.”

Will feels the fear rolling off the man like a stink, feels the limits of his own patience being tested. “What’s happening out there, Phillips?”

The young officer shakes his head, a short fringe of sweat soaked hair swinging against his clammy forehead. He doesn’t speak in response, just opens the sound-proofed door behind him so that Will can hear what’s playing on the intercom loudspeaker.

A hundred, hundred voices fill the room at once. Will steps back in an involuntary flinch as screams rend the air - the shrieking, gibbering, animal-like hoots of the madmen calling from their cells. He hears their garbled, overlapping words, feels the desperation and excitement and fear rushing through them. Above it, he hears one voice screaming in piteous desperation.
It begins as pleas. “No…no, please, stop…” but the voice quickly loses its grasp of language, sliding into frantic, animal wailing. Will can hear the wet sound of flesh rending before the screams fill with fluid, turning to chokes, desperate wheezes, a thud lost in the sound of the inmates hollering and howling. Will reels on his feet, unsteady with terror and expectation. It’s a piece composed and broadcast especially for him, he knows, played on an orchestra of living instruments more macabre than anything Tobias Budge dared dream of. *Hannibal is inside.* He feels his heart rate begin to quicken.

“It’s because of you,” Phillips insists again. “You’re what he’s here for. I…I need to be here when he comes…to stop him.”

The last words come out shaky and uncertain. It’s almost too easy; the boy is begging to be talked into it. “You’re right,” Will tells him, “I’m what he’s after. No one else has to die, if you hand me over to him now.”

The young man makes a decent show of struggling. Will sighs, chooses to indulge him further if that’s what it’ll take to hasten this process along. “He’ll get to me eventually anyway, you know,” he says, gentling his voice through enormous effort. He sees Phillips eyeing him plaintively. “It’s a senseless waste of life,” he says, “you could save a lot of people.” *Including yourself.* The words hang between them, unsaid but heard.

“What does he want with you?” Phillips asks, already moving towards the door set into the wall to Will’s left.

“He wants to kill me,” Will says. “It’s not worth protecting me, after the things I’ve done. Do you think my life is worth all the men who’ve already died defending it tonight? I certainly don’t.” It’s true; a certain part of him is disgusted by the thought of how many innocent guards and law enforcement agents Hannibal has mowed through - is continuing to mow through - in order to reach him. He feels the weight of guilt as if the crimes were his own, and it turns his stomach at the same time that it sends a shot of energy sliding along his spine.

Phillips needs no further convincing. He’s keying in the door code and sliding open the door before Will’s even finished speaking, and he’s standing at the doorway to the cell so quickly Will wonders if he’s losing time again. Once he’s stood in the entrance, with only his gun between himself and Will, the young man’s resolve seems to waiver.

“You won’t try anything, will you?” he asks, and Will has to stop the pitying smile that wants to blossom on his face. “I’m giving you what you want, aren’t I?”
“Very much so,” Will says, extending a hand to Phillips, who steps into the cell cautiously. Will is on him in a flash, pushing his arm upwards and tightening his grasp over the guard’s trigger finger, forcing him to fire all twelve rounds into the ceiling in quick succession. He loosens his grip on Phillips’ arm, then, allowing the man to break free from him, staggering slightly as he unbalances himself in his haste to pull away. Will uses the moment to strike, pressing the meat of his thumb forcefully against the crook of his index finger, forming a hooked fist which he slams into Phillips’ exposed Adams apple in one quick, brutal movement. The young man chokes brokenly, clutching his throat with both hands, the useless gun falling forgotten to the floor. Will watches his mouth move like landed fish’s, opening and closing on a breath that won’t come. He plucks the handgun from the ground and brings the handle down hard on the back of Phillips’ neck, sending him sprawling and still.

The sound of chattering and screaming is louder in the hallway. His cell is on the fifth floor; he remembers choosing the stairs over the elevator on his visits, descending with a heaviness as if he carried the dead on his shoulders. He recalls the building’s layout from those visits. Other inmates reside on the second through fourth floor; first floor is hospital services; fifth floor is administrative offices, and one fortress-like cell lined with empty bookshelves.

The guard outside the ante-chamber doesn’t hear him coming over the shrieks exploding around them. Will presses the barrel of the gun to the back of the man’s neck, takes his gun, takes the knife strapped to his belt, and catches the man in a headlock, one hand squeezing his nostrils shut, palm flat against his mouth. Will can feel his breath coming hot and wet, growing shallower and less certain against his hand. He waits until the man no longer struggles, until he cannot feel the hint of breath against his damp palm, before he lets the body slide slackly to the floor. He drops the empty handgun at the dead man’s feet and carries on.

There are two SWAT officers stationed by the stairwell, looking rattled by the madhouse bellowing but alert enough to spot him as he rounds the hallway corner coming towards them. Will ducks, rounding his shoulders and dropping into a roll, only to spring up in a crouch within reach of his prey. He sheaths his stolen knife in the first officer’s femoral artery, his blade sliding home right below the groin. The man grunts above him, and Will removes the knife, uncapping a cascade of blood. The officer drops to his knees, and Will wraps an arm around his weakening form, advancing on the second officer with the body of the first shielding him from the upraised weapon.

Will bowls the remaining officer over with his weight combined with that of the dying man pushed between them, sending him onto his back. Will straddles him, clenching man’s head between his hands. He brings it down against the hard floor once, twice, a harsh, fast staccato. His fingers slide against the slick hair at the back of the officer’s head as he releases the head to drop with a wet smack.

He wipes the blood and brain matter onto the front of the jumpsuit as he stands and approaches the stairwell door. The handle doesn’t budge beneath his grip. Will frowns, noticing the security pad
with its red light blinking, signaling that the system is alarmed. His scowl deepens as he contemplates his situation.

A faint whimper from the supply closet to his left cuts through his thoughts. Will wrenches the door open, gun raised to point into the terrified face of the guard hiding among the mops and latex gloves. The man has no weapons in hand, and is shaking so violently Will doubts he could aim a gun if he tried. Honestly, he thinks, rolling his eyes to himself as he digs a fist into the guard’s shirt and drags him out into the hallway, where did Alana hire her security? Though he supposes the otherworldly shrieking permeating the air, broken at intervals by the sound of security officers being torn apart painfully, probably contributes to a feeling of inescapable fear. Normally, intense fear is felt in waves; the body can’t stand it for long periods. Knowing this, of course Hannibal would attempt to push them beyond their limits, confront them with constant agitation, a terror that cannot be shut out or turned off for a moment. Will feels the screams echoing in the arena of his own skull as he slams the frozen guard against the wall beside the keypad.

“There’s a code for the door,” Will snarls, and the sound of his own voice startles him out of speech for a moment. “You know what it is,” he recovers, listening for the biting edge with which his words sting the air.

“I-I-I.” the man quakes harder, shaking so hard Will’s arms strain to hold him. He might as well be seizing in fear.

Will presses his thumbs into the soft flesh below the man’s chin, forcing his head to tilt back, and feels the body slacken in surrender beneath his touch. He feels the guard swallowing again and again, throat muscles working against the pressures of his thumbs. He leans close, smelling rancid terror on the man’s breath. “Listen to me,” Will says, voice calm, heart steady. He pushes their faces close, placing his mouth right above the guard’s ear so he can be heard above the sound of tearing skin and screams playing over the intercom speakers. “You’re going to give me the code. You can do it now, or I can hurt you first, but the end result is going to be the same.” His left thumb strokes against the straining throat, pressing against the curve of the Adam’s apple. “Up to you,” he says.

The guard swallows hard for the tenth time, and opens his mouth to speak. “9 - 9 - 0 - 6 - 4,” he croaks. Will smiles.

He takes the guard’s gun and sends him to sit against the wall while he punches in the numbers. There’s a half second pause before the red light turns green, during which Will feels his heartbeat suspended. Then the light flashes green, and the lock turns with an emphatic thunking sound. Will spares the guard a glance - finds him mouthing prayers, eyes closed - and returns his eyes to the door. He turns the handle smoothly and the door swings open unhindered.

Will’s breath catches in his throat. His hand, clutching the gun in front of him, lowers of its own
accord, gun aimed towards the floor now, his finger no longer pressing against the trigger. He feels his mouth go as dry as ashes, throat aching as if he’s inhaled fire. Across from him, he watches Hannibal, blood smeared and slack jawed, drop the crumpled body he holds to stand, motionless but for the increasingly rapid rise and fall of his chest. He watches Will from beneath heavy lids, eyes glinting oxblood in the harsh light. It’s a look Will’s only seen once before, and for an instant he’s back there, smelling salt on the night air, his skin blazing against the cool breeze blowing over the cliffside.

Will can’t hear anything except the rush of his own blood, the pound of his own heart. It roars like an ocean within him, drowning out the sound of the screams. There is no sound but the sound of blood flowing like the sea upon the shores, and then he hears his own breath, coming after too long a pause. It’s a rough sound, broken and surrendering. And he’s moving before he can stop himself, weapons dropped and hands clenching in the fabric of Hannibal’s shirt. Hannibal’s fingers burn like brands against his wrists and forearms, and Will sways on his feet, inhaling the scent of blood and fresh earth clinging to the man in front of him. Clinging as Will himself clings, unable to relax his grasp, managing little more than raucous breaths through gritted teeth for a long stretch of seconds.

He can hear his heartbeat drumming in his ears, so thunderously loud he thinks for a moment that he’ll go deaf. The air reeks of blood, the stairs beyond Hannibal’s shoulder glisten as if they’ve been painted with it, and Will’s grasping hands are slicked with crimson. His fingers abandon the stained fabric to slip wetly against Hannibal’s matching red wrists, unable to gain purchase because both their hands are so wet, but trying, trying desperately to hold on. The sense of relief Will experiences at being reunited is so strong it’s all encompassing. There’s no room in him left for the regrets or fears which had previously consumed him. No room in him for anything but the wave of joy engulfing him, filling him to overflowing. Will is dimly aware of Hannibal clutching back at him in return, of dripping hands dragging him impossibly closer to that solid, terrifying form. Close enough to feel Hannibal’s breath falling in hot gasps upon his face. Close enough to feel the twinning of his heartbeat.

When he tightens his fingers, pressing till he feels the bones beneath the muscles, Hannibal just grips him back, lets him breathe. The tilt of his head against Will’s jaw could almost be a nuzzle, and Will breaks.

“I’d kill them,” Will hears himself chanting, words he’s speaking without planning to, swelling up from a place inside him that is deeper and purer than rational thought, cleaner than desire or guilt. Each word is an epiphany. There’s no cap on it, either, no way to filter what he’s saying. Will can do no more than listen, and feel the weight and truth of each revelation. “Everyone there is. Everyone on earth. Everyone alive. I’d kill them all, for you, to get back to you. Jack, Alana, Molly - there’s no one - no one but you, and I would do anything, kill anyone, kill everyone - “ the words flow from him as hot and unstoppable as blood from a wound, “everyone, everything for you because I love you, Hannibal, oh God I love you so much.” His teeth clench. He can hear the break in his voice but can’t stop the words coming, though quieter now, breathed into the scant space between them, audible above the symphony of screams coming from the speakers. “They don’t mean what you mean to me. You’re everything, the only one, you’ve always, always been.”
He hears the words continue spilling out of him, and although they’re unaccompanied by conscious thought he knows they’re true, has maybe always known that there’s nothing in his life that’s as true as this. He’s raving, he knows, but he can’t make himself stop, can only stare down at his stained hands gripping Hannibal’s stained wrists and think how all the blood in the world wouldn’t be enough to quench the fire Hannibal lights inside him.

“You can kill me now,” Will hears himself saying - sobbing, unplanned and unchecked - as he watches his fingers tighten impossibly over the wrist and forearm they’re gripping, holding tight enough now to bruise deep. He imagines livid black hemorrhages which never fade, bruises tattooed across Hannibal’s skin so he can never forget. Every word Will says is a surprise to himself, exiting his mouth before his brain can catch up. He wonders what else he’ll say before Hannibal takes pity on him and snaps his neck. Oh, dear God, please let that moment come soon. Will isn’t sure he’ll be able to shut himself up on his own, and these are hardly the final words he would have wished for himself, though he supposes he is gratified to know he can be honest with the both of them, in these final moments. There’s an uncomfortable thickness to his voice as his words break apart, a tightness in his throat that tells of tears he’d rather not shed. At least not until Hannibal begins to take him apart.

“I didn’t run off, I didn’t mean to leave - I could never - even when I tried, when I used to try, I mean, before - I couldn’t. I didn’t. But it’s okay, you can kill me anyway, I don’t mind. I want you to. God, Hannibal, please just get it over with, I can’t stop talking I can’t you’re just going to have to kill me to make me shut up. I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, I - ”

“Will.” Hannibal’s voice is low and toneless, and, miraculously, it shuts Will up. “Breathe,” Hannibal says in that same deadpan voice, and Will gasps for air, suddenly aware that he’d forgotten to breathe. His cheeks are wet, he realizes, his nose beginning to run. He huffs gracelessly, air coming with a harsh cough. Hannibal could just have let him talk himself to death.

Hannibal’s hands tighten around his arms, holding him so close that Will is forced to crane his neck back to meet Hannibal’s eyes. He does so now, lips parted to gasp for the air Hannibal has reminded him he needs. Hannibal gazes back down at him, eyes full of a familiar fondness that stops Will’s heart for a painful second.

“I’m not here to kill you, my remarkable boy.” Will closes his eyes, sighing as the words slip through him. He opens his eyes again at the wholly unexpected sound of soft laughter. “Courageous Will,” Hannibal breathes, voice full of indulgent amusement, “are you ready to go home?”
Death's Head

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone who has taken time to read, leave kudos, comment; you fine people keep me going! <3

I'm as happy as everyone else to have the murder babes back together; I missed writing their dialogue. Thanks for bearing with the long separation haha.

I added what is an *estimate* of how many chapters this fic will be in the end. I took some time to lay out the rest of the chapters this week, but I also am kind of awful at estimating such things. However, I wanted everyone reading to have some idea of how long this will be and where we are in the story. If that makes sense? I'll also be adding tags in the upcoming couple weeks. I'm still new to the whole tagging thing, so lemme know if you have any suggestions.

Thank you, as always, for taking time to read. Hope you enjoy some Bronte inspired sappiness. Murder babes for life <3

It takes her twenty breaths to decide. Alana rises from her seat by the useless monitors - she no longer controls the building or security system, so what would be the point in watching, anyway, even if they did work? She leans on the cane at her side, but keeps the other arm raised, pistol pointed defensively before she even leaves the safety of the panic room.

Jack will have headed to Will’s cell, she thinks. It would seem the logical place. She thinks of the strange posture of Will’s arms and shoulders when she’d seen him last, of the way he’d looked in the moments before the security cameras went dead and her screens shattered into static. She turns left, toward the elevator, and punches the button for the first floor.

_I could walk out the front doors_, Alana thinks, _get into my car and call the police and Kade Prurnell on my way out of town. Back to Margot._ She imagines her wife sleeping peacefully in their bed, auburn curls spread across the pillows, Morgan clutched in her arms. Every part of her wants to be there with them, safe in a life she never thought possible and will likely die to defend.

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The room melts around him, stairs and walls sliding like Dali’s clocks, and the only solid thing - the only thing keeping him from liquifying, himself - is Hannibal. As usual. Despite it all, Will supposes this at least has remained constant; Hannibal has been his touchstone, his paddle, his handle on a reality that feels in constant danger of slipping away. He grips Hannibal’s wrists, stares up into the familiar fond expression, and forces himself to breathe until the hallway and the rest of reality has
time to congeal. Hannibal’s thumb strokes the inside of his forearm, and Will can’t stop the small sound that escapes him at the touch. Home, he thinks, mind racing over all that Hannibal has just said, catching again and again on the promise of that one word. No longer a place, no longer a reference to a fixed location, but a state of being. Will knows that right now, with their hands clasped around one another, surrounded by the corpses they’ve made getting to one another, they are both home again.

A little whimper behind him draws his attention. He springs apart from Hannibal, both of them abruptly alert. Will wonders if Hannibal feels the same heightened awareness of him as he does of Hannibal, or the same pang of longing he does, the moment their physical connection breaks. As soon as this is over, Will resolves, he’s going to touch Hannibal, without pulling away, without distraction.

The whimper comes again, and Will curses under his breath, darting forward to grab the guard and drag him forward by his collar. “What to do with you?” he muses, holding the fear stricken young man under the fluorescent light.

“Bring him with us,” Hannibal says, slipping the dropped knife into one of Will’s hands, and his own hand into the other.

Will tangles their fingers, frowning. “What, seriously?”

“Yes,” Hannibal says. “Let’s go. Now.” He tugs at Will’s hand, and Will wraps his other arm around the guard’s neck, dragging him along with the bared knife to his throat. The man comes willingly; too scared to resist, he stumbles along on feet clumsy with fear.

Will expects Hannibal to lead them down the stairwell, back the way he’s come. Will lets his eyes rest on the body resting in a pool of its own blood at the top of the stairs, catching flashes of the ending - shrieks echoing off the walls, Hannibal moving, a thing of blood whose every motion is timed with dying screams; this one tried to run, movement drawing the predator’s eye, it found itself trapped between the hunter and its true prey. But Hannibal pulls him down the hallway, away from the stairs and away from the book-less cell that’s played home to them both now.

“Jack will be heading down the parallel hallway to your cell now,” Hannibal tells him, words clipped by slight breathlessness as they run. “He’ll follow the trail of bodies to the stairwell when he finds you’ve fled.”

“We’re taking the elevator,” Will says. His voice is a deal more ragged than Hannibal’s. “You’ll need a separate code, I bet. Not one this kid is likely to know, either.”
“I hacked the security and communications system from the control on the first floor,” Hannibal tells him, as they jag to a halt in front of the metal elevator doors. Hannibal presses the solitary button, and the downwards pointing arrow lights up green. Above the door, the number three lights up.

“We could go back for him,” Will says, and feels Hannibal go rigid beside him. The hand in his clenches over his knuckles till it hurts. Four. “You wanted me to stand in judgment,” Will says, hoisting the guard, whose legs have collapsed with a fit of trembling Will hopes is only temporary. “I judge Jack Crawford singularly guilty of destroying my life.”

“I thought I was responsible for that,” Hannibal says, voice carefully neutral.

Will smiles as the elevator doors slide open. The guard regains the use of his legs, and Will lugs him roughly towards the little box. “Another day, perhaps,” he says, watching Hannibal’s inscrutable face. It’s been a long night, Will thinks, for both of them. And it’s far from finished.

“How many of them are left?” he asks, as Hannibal pushes the button for the bottom floor and the doors slide shut with infuriating sluggishness.

“None,” Hannibal replies, and Will both hears and feels the wet sob that tears from the guard in his arms.

“Jesus,” the guard whispers weepingly. “Oh, God.”

“Do we seem like monsters to you?” Hannibal asks. He tugs a lock of hair when the guard remains silent.

“Why do you do it?” he stutters. Will almost rolls his eyes. Just like Jack and everyone else he’s known; they all want to know, to understand what makes someone kill the way Hannibal kills. They think that’s what they want, anyway. But you can’t understand Hannibal without changing, Will thinks. Without being changed by what understanding him entails.

“It feels good to do it,” Hannibal answers him, voice frank and unrepentant. “I enjoy it. I don’t have to do it. I can function perfectly without it. But I want to do it. That is reason enough.”
“Why keep me alive?” The man manages to sound defiant, even if he has been sobbing since the moment Hannibal stepped through the stairwell doorway.

Red eyes meet Will’s above the guard’s head. “Someone must remain to tell the story,” he says, simply.

Will’s heart thuds. Hannibal’s thumb skates along his knuckles as the floor jolts to halt beneath them. Will feels his stomach in his throat as the doors open.

He’s staring down the black circle of Alana’s pistol before before the doors are done opening. “Oh,” he manages to say, his arm tightening over the guard’s chest. He brings the knife up to press against the man’s throat, blade pressing an indentation across the jut of his Adam’s apple. There’s a mechanical sound as Alana swallows and presses the hammer back, gun trained on the bridge of Hannibal’s nose.

Will can hear the click of Hannibal’s throat as he swallows. “Alana,” he says, bringing one hand to rest on Will’s shoulder. His fingers rest against Will’s clavicle, his thumb brushing the nape of Will’s neck with languorous, unbothered swipes. Will can’t help imagining how easily and swiftly the hand at his throat could tighten; he knows that Alana is picturing it as well, and that this was Hannibal’s purpose, putting the image of Will in danger into her head. He wonders how far that act would go. How far he’d be willing to let it go. “Good to see you again.”

“Get out of the elevator,” Alana orders, forcing her foot into the door before either of them can press the button to close it. Will shuffles passed her, but manages to keep himself positioned between her and Hannibal. He holds the guard against his chest like a shield. Alana frowns at him. She punches the button to send the elevator back up to the fifth floor, empty, a sure sign to Jack if he needs one. If he isn’t already thundering down the stairs towards them.

“How do you imagine this ending, Alana?” Hannibal asks, his hand on Will’s shoulder again, relaxed, still.

She keeps her gun trained on him, her mouth set in a hard line. For a moment Will thinks she won’t answer. It would certainly be wisest of her not to engage. But then she says, “I don’t imagine you’ll come peacefully.”

Hannibal’s voice contains his smirk. “No, indeed not. When Jack or whatever other cavalry you’ve arranged arrives, Will is going to slit your man’s throat. He’ll be dead in minutes. You may manage to shoot one of us, but the other one will be on you in a matter of seconds, long before this unfortunate young man has time to bleed out.”
Alana narrows her eyes at him. “I’m aiming for you,” she tells him. “Is Will going to kill me after I shoot you?”

“I don’t know,” Hannibal says, “are you, Will?”

“Don’t try to find out,” Will grits. The knife in his hand is steady. He presses a fraction harder, and a small round garnet wells up at the tip.

“Whichever of us is left after you’ve been dispatched, he, or we, shall move on to killing Jack, and as many of the men and women who arrive to fight us as we can before sustaining mortal injury. You once told me that enough people had died,” Hannibal continues speaking. “If you detain us here, more will die. Including this guard. Including you, Alana.”

“More people will die whether I detain you or not,” Alana says.

“Certainly,” Hannibal admits, voice easy, untroubled. As if they’re discussing his latest composition for the harpsichord. “But those people won’t include you.”

Alana raises one eyebrow, her gun arm unwavering. Hannibal answers her silent request for assurance. “We come again to that fateful moment,” he says, accent rolling over the words. “You, with a gun to my head, and me with only my word to give. A second chance. Let us go, Alana, take the second chance to look away, and I’ll promise never to fulfill my vow to kill you.”

Will can feel the guard’s heart beating frantically against his arm. He watches Alana, watches the stairwell doorway, watches the elevator behind her. Any second they could be interrupted. Will eyes Alana, calculating the distance between them, the force he would need in order to send the man in his arms crashing into her hard enough to stun them both.

“You’ll break your word,” she says, at last. The black circle of her gun shakes slightly. Will feels his muscles relaxing.

“I’ll give it anew,” Hannibal says. “A moment for second chances, Alana. The bitter heart eats its owner; don’t cling to vengeance when what you crave is security.”
When she lowers her arm, Will takes the gun from her. Her fingers loosen on it easily, sticking with a clammy sweat as he pulls the weapon away. He brings the handle down on the back of her head, and then the guard’s, dropping them in an ungraceful pile.

There’s an echo from the stairwell. Or maybe Will’s imagining it. He fixes his eyes on Hannibal, on the small smile that plays on the other man’s face. If he’s regretting the rare of display of mercy he doesn’t show it. “Shall we leave?”

Will nods, sparing a glance back at Alana and the man Hannibal has spared to tell their story. Will wonders how much of it is meant as a romantic gesture, and how much is meant as a test of whether Will will spare a witness to his crimes who doesn’t have a reason to lie on his behalf. He wonders how much more they can and will test one another, or whether this is the end of the subterfuge and guile. He hopes so. Then he turns, and follows Hannibal out the front door and into the trees at the edge of the property.

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The moment the viciously fast Italian motorbike comes tearing onto the empty backroad, Freddie knows her time has been well spent. It had been the road that made the most sense for staging a get away - less crowded, less accessible - and she’s staked it out two nights in a row.

Now, she’s rewarded for her clever thinking and determination. She ought to be the one with the FBI profiling position. Her camera clicks as she loses herself in congratulations. The bike tears off into the night, and Freddie flicks through the images. There are a couple really good ones. They’ll go great on the front page and the splash page, with the right headline, of course. Murder Husbands Flee Feds! maybe, or Biker Cannibals On the Loose!

If she’d thought they’d listen, Freddie thinks, fumbling to dial 911 on her phone while still reviewing her photos, of course she would have warned the FBI to station someone here. “Hello, police?”

She gives them her location, still flicking through the images on her camera with a faint smile. “And send a couple ambulances to the hospital,” she concludes, jabbing the end call button as a little voice yells up at her to remain on the line until authorities arrive. She’ll be here when they get here. Or, more accurately, she’ll be parked outside the hospital, ready to take comments from any law enforcement agents who haven’t been ordered not to speak to her yet. She hopes Jack and Alana are alright, truly, hopes that not too many people were killed. How many is too many, and how many is just the right amount to move papers, she couldn’t say.

Her finger hovers above the camera’s display screen, not quite touching but stroking above the
image, as if caressing it through the air. The sleek black bike, illuminated by the flash, tilts on the deserted road, encased on either side by towering dark trees. They’re barely recognizable beneath their helmets, but she still thinks it’ll sell copies, with the right headline, of course.

Will shimmies out of the jumpsuit in the back seat of the car. He finds a change of clothes folded on the seat beside him, and pulls them on, wiggling the slacks over his hips awkwardly before pulling the soft grey sweater over his head. He kicks the jumpsuit once, then pushes it beneath the back seat, wedging it beneath the bench as far as it will go. Someone will find it eventually, but he doesn’t want to take the thing with him any further. He doesn’t even want to look at it.

He watches Hannibal through the rearview mirror, careful not to turn around and face him in person. Both their faces will be plastered to every screen, if they aren’t already, once word of the prison break goes public. When he watches the news later, the man Hannibal is talking to right now in the parking lot behind their car might recognize the face of the man who sold him his new bike. It’ll make sense to him then, why someone would sell a bike like that for so little money. Will doesn’t think he’ll go to the police; the man looks like he probably avoids law enforcement whenever possible. Still, better not to be seen, especially not together. Will catches sight of his face, reflected in half on the lefthand side of the rearview mirror. The scar bisecting his cheek is still dark and gruesome enough to stay with someone long after they see it.

Hannibal’s shoulder moves in a fluid shrug, and the man he’s speaking with extracts a greasy looking wallet and withdraws what looks like eight one hundred dollar bills. Definitely not the kind of person likely to go to the cops on his own, Will thinks. They’ll catch up to him eventually, and demand to know where a lowlife like him came up with an imported Italian motorcycle. By then, Will hopes that he and Hannibal will be far beyond the reach of Jack Crawford and the FBI.

The door opens and Hannibal slides into the driver’s seat. For a moment, he meets Will’s eyes in the rearview mirror and Will feels a shock of energy zinging through him, as if he’s brushed a piece of metal protruding from an electrical outlet. “Lay down,” Hannibal says. “They’ll be looking for two people; we may throw them off by appearing to be just one.”

We are just one, Will thinks to himself, mind clouding with a sudden longing to be closer, as he obediently lowers his chest and shoulders to the smooth leather of the back seat. One person in two bodies.

He watches the back of Hannibal’s broad shoulders as the car backs out and reenters the late night traffic. He lets himself think back to the last time Hannibal aided him in escaping from the BSHCI, that horrible, necessary day when he stood in the Hobbs family’s kitchen and finally saw Hannibal for the first time. He can remember how he felt - heart hammering, mouth dry, eyes stinging, and the
contradictory feeling of satisfaction and despair as the truth made itself known and the one safe place in his reeling world slipped abruptly out of existence, the way a dropped oar vanishes beneath the dark surface of a lake. He wonders, now, how the moment felt for Hannibal, and wonders, too, that for all his empathy, there have been so many times when he’s left guessing how Hannibal feels.

“Where are we going?” Will asks, his voice lost slightly in the leather seating. He thinks his words may have been muffled entirely, and is about to repeat his question into the growing silence when Hannibal answers.

“We are returning to the marina,” he says, as if he’s just made the decision. “Can you handle the boat?”

“Are you trying to insult me?”

“At night, I mean, and in your current state.”

Will snorts. “I’m not wounded, Hannibal. I can get us out into open water and anywhere else you want to go.”

He feels the soft leather warming beneath his undamaged cheek as the silence extends between them. He closes his eyes, focusing on the movement of the car beneath him and the way his body automatically tenses to compensate for the shifts and turns as it senses them. Hannibal signals to change lanes, and the soft ticking of the of the signal is like a metronome counting Will into sleep.

He’s dozing lightly, nerves still too flooded with adrenaline to allow for proper unconsciousness, and thinking about his dogs on the rare occasions he would take them for car rides - the comical look of concern they’d all wear, the way their paws would skitter on the floor as they attempted to walk before finally sitting down to pant peacefully against the window until Will rolled it down. He wonders if the feeling of lost equilibrium they experience is anything like the sensation of riding in the car laying down, or if it’s more like the loss of stability he feels when Hannibal leans back and brushes a hand over his side, from hip to shoulder, his touch following the curve of Will’s waist and chest.


Will staggers to an upright position, and then out of the car and after Hannibal, who is already striding across the dark above ground parking garage. Will blinks at his back, wondering when he
changed out of SWAT gear - surely it must have been before he sold the bike? - before scrambling to catch up.

“The parking spot is paid out through the end of next month,” Hannibal tells him, once he’s caught up to walk side by side. Their footsteps echo off the concrete walls around them, but Hannibal’s voice is low and unduplicated. “The car is registered to the spot. It should be some time before it draws any attention.”

“You think of everything,” Will says.

Hannibal turns towards him, clearly trying not to smile. “You say that with such derision, Will. Should you be grateful for my incredible foresight in this instance?”

“Oh I am,” he replies, letting his eyes settle on the amused smile Hannibal has failed to quash. It’s a familiar look; how many times has he seen levity rising unbidden in those eyes, watched Hannibal’s composure slip for him? Now he thinks he could look forever, and never get his fill. “You just always have to be two steps ahead of the rest of us.”

“That usually works out to your benefit,” Hannibal replies. “I believe planning ahead is usually seen as a favorable trait. A stitch in time?”

Will laughs. The sound, louder than their voices, bounces off the garage walls as they exit into the dark of early morning. “It’s usually a stitch in me, and not time,” he points out. “Or several stitches, and sometimes also a bullet.”

The air is colder outside the concrete parking structure, and it hadn’t been particularly warm within. Will draws his arms tight around himself.

“There was a coat for you on the back seat,” Hannibal admonishes, noticing the motion.

“I wasn’t cold when we left,” Will answers, hearing exactly how childish the words sound the moment they leave his mouth, once it’s too late to recall them. “I saw it but I forgot to grab it. I’m fine. The adrenaline is wearing off, is all.”

Hannibal says nothing, but moves a step closer. He lifts his arm and brings it slowly to rest around Will’s shoulders, movements calm and deliberate enough to allow Will plenty of time to move away
from them easily. He doesn’t. Hannibal’s hand flattens over his shoulder, and Will leans into the offered warmth. “It’s a short walk,” Hannibal tells him, “fortunately for you. Perhaps in time you’ll develop some measure of forethought yourself.”

“Don’t count on it,” Will sighs. “It wouldn’t be to your benefit, anyway, if I did.”

Hannibal’s laugh is little more than an exhalation. “No, I suppose you are a creature of the moment,” he concedes, “never certain in one moment what your actions will be in the next.”

“I’m more certain now,” Will tells him, and the silence that settles over their walk is comfortable, contemplative, and non-threatening. Will lets himself press closer, feeling the heat that radiates against him where he’s pressed against Hannibal’s side. He feels the warmth in his belly, as if he’s swallowed a firefly and it is radiating within him as its little wings flutter. The hand on his shoulder tightens, releases, and tightens again. There’s no one on the streets this early except the homeless, huddled under blankets and within dirty sleeping bags. Not even the pigeons have awoken yet. There’s a cat slinking around the dark storefronts, its white fur dingy and stained rusty red around the mouth. Will blinks at the little animal as it throws an arch into its back and hisses, once, before disappearing in a fast white blur.

It’s harder to speak, now, than it was in the moments immediately after he opened the door to the stairwell and found Hannibal standing at the end of a trail of blood that led right to him. Then the words had flowed as fast, urgent, and unstoppable as blood from a wound. Now every word feels loaded with meaning, heavy as an ox standing on his tongue. He can tell Hannibal is feeling an echo of the same emotion, and that makes the whole thing so much more real, because when has Hannibal ever been at a loss for words? It’s real, and Hannibal is real, pressed against him, and right now it feels impossible to speak, but also unnecessary. They’ve already said all there is worth telling; everything else is mere details.

Hannibal drops his arm when they reach the boat, but the cold doesn’t steal back right away, as if even the elements respect Hannibal’s wishes now. Will follows him below deck, grateful for the heater, and the blanket Hannibal hands him. It wasn’t that long ago that Will first found himself being dragged aboard in the midst of dark, crashing waves. He remembers the pain, the cold, and the awareness of an unassailable power within himself. He lets the scratchy fabric brush against his arms and neck and drops onto the padded bench. The adrenaline is wearing off, but the thrumming of energetic vibration, the buzz of violence and blood, still sings in his limbs and his veins. He couldn’t sleep now, but he feels exhaustion beginning to settle over him like snow over the soft earth and pine branches.

There’s a clatter from the kitchenette as Hannibal digs the kettle from the back of the little cabinet. “We should leave before dawn,” Hannibal says. “We can blend in with the rest of the fishing traffic that way, avoid attracting any attention.”
Will watches him preparing coffee. “Did you see that flash of light when we left the wood outside the hospital?” he asks.

Hannibal’s movements are measured and graceful, if somewhat frustrated by the cramped size of the kitchen. “A camera flash,” he says. “I spotted a blur of red across the dark forest.”

Will frowns. “As many steps ahead as you may be, Freddie Lounds appears to be one further.”

Hannibal pauses, a scoop of coffee grounds held contemplatively above the French press. “Miss Lounds may have done us more of a favor than she intended,” he says, resuming motion. The grounds fall to the bottom of the carafe like black sand. “The photo will circulate widely, no doubt. Law enforcement will be on the lookout for the bike.”

“Let’s hope its new owner leads them on a good chase,” Will grimaces. “Do you have any aspirin?”

Hannibal hands him a bottle of pills and a glass of water. A few minutes later, he passes Will a mug of steaming black coffee as well, and slides onto the opposite bench to drink his own cup.

Will watches him, letting the aspirin take time to work as they drink their coffee in companionable silence. The sound of the water slapping softly against the sides of the boat is a soothing one. It triggers something buried deep in his subconscious memory, a calmness that floods him despite the stress of the night, the vibration of his nerves, the thrill of his hands slicked in hot blood. When he looks down at the hands wrapped around the steaming mug of coffee, they’re clean and pink. For the duration of his blinks, they are otherwise.

Something jostles to the foreground of his memory, rousing him from the peaceful quiet into which he’s fallen. “You said something about going home.”

Hannibal shifts in his seat. The man makes eye contact so relentlessly that it’s especially obvious when he’s avoiding it. Will watches, rapt, wondering at the words that weigh too heavily to be spoken. Will frowns slightly, just the slightest crease between his brows. This was never like him; he was never one to hesitate. He thinks of the look in Hannibal’s eyes when he’d pressed Will against the keys of the harpsichord in a discordant clanging of notes and bodies. He’d looked confident then, assured, even when Will had pushed him off and retreated to his own corner of the apartment. Nothing like the way he looks now, eyes furtive, mouth creased with an uncertainty that looks so out of place on him; as if, coming so close to what he wants, he now fears losing it too much to reach out and touch. Will is intimately acquainted with the feeling. “I was speaking metaphorically,” Hannibal
admits, after what feels like a long time but probably isn’t more than half a minute in actuality.
“Neither of us can be said to properly possess a home, anymore. At least, none to which we might
return.”

He trails off, eyes focused on something remote behind Will’s left shoulder. Will reaches across the
table before he can think about what he’s doing, and lifts one of Hannibal’s hands in his own.
Hannibal’s eyes are blazing, so bright Will swears they almost glow as he lifts the hand to his face,
pressing the palm over his cheek and closing his eyes in a long blink as Hannibal’s fingers stroke
over the stubble there.

He reaches for the emotion he felt at the top of the stairs, the overflow of feeling that lubricated his
words so well. It’s harder now, but worth it for the light that sparks in Hannibal’s eyes, the way the
corners of his mouth soften. “You are my home,” Will says, and feels the fingers jitter against his
skin. “You are where I’ll always return.”

Hannibal is staring at him with such intensity, Will thinks he can feel his skin heating beneath the
burning gaze. Long fingers drag through his hair in a rough caress before twisting themselves around
the curls. Will leans against the table, his chest bent over the little formica slab separating them. He’s
thinking of all the moments spent in sitting across from one another, warmed by the dimming fire and
a glass of wine, and something else that burns between them now, too. Will watches Hannibal’s
bottom lip disappear briefly beneath the slide of his tongue. The look in his eyes is hunted and wary.
“Will.”

“I thought you’d left me,” Will confesses, smiling slightly against the soft skin at the inside of
Hannibal’s wrist. He can feel the pulse jumping beneath his lips. “They said you were in Paris. I
thought…maybe you had gone. Maybe you’d finally had enough of my indecisiveness and vivid
hallucinations?”

He means the words to sound light, but they drop into the space between them like heavy stones into
a pond. The fingers in his hair tighten their grip, forcing Will’s chin to lift just a bit, with the slimmest
suggestion of baring his throat. Will feels more exposed by it than the motion warrants. “Then you
were mistaken,” Hannibal murmurs, “and you know nothing about the sort of love of which I am
capable.”

Will laughs. He can’t help himself. The sound is incongruous, light and genuine, cutting through the
oppressive air of drama like a sunbeam through a cloud. “I’m sorry,” he smiles more broadly. “I just
didn’t think you were capable of love, full stop.”

Hannibal hums, shaking his fingers slightly to free them of Will’s tangling curls. He smooths his
hand over Will’s hair, the side of his face, curve of his throat. “Every atom of your flesh is as dear to
me as my own,” he says, as simply as if he is stating the tide schedule. Will’s face heats. “In pain, in
distress, it is dearer still. Your mind is my treasure, Will. In those moments when it falters, when it breaks, it is my treasure still, and never truly broken. Only mutable, ever changing as the surface of the sea or the sky. As you, yourself, are ever changing. Even the color of your eyes, depending on the light, the weather, the time of day, the shade of your shirt - I have often noticed that they fluctuate, now cobalt, now flecked with green, now shrouded in grey as the fog hangs over the blue sea. Impossible to pin down, impossible to limit with definitions. Remarkable Will, who suffers visions and contends with the bright blaze of a reality the rest of us cannot hope to encounter; if you rave, my arms will confine you. Even in your fits and furies, you charm me. Do you truly believe I could leave you again, having seen you fully now?"

Will shakes his head, momentarily unable to speak through the tightness in his throat. “The thought of living without you,” he choked out when, after a long moment, he can breathe normally again and he is certain his voice will come out dry, “of going back to that loneliness, only more aware of it now, because of you, because of having had this…it’s a possibility worse than death. Even if you wanted to leave, I wouldn’t let you.”

Hannibal’s smile has teeth, and his fingers twitch over the sensitive skin of Will’s neck. “I admire your courage immensely,” he says. “Should you ever wish to leave, please know that I plan on eating your heart. Not allowing your astonishing beauty to fade in a cell. The thought of the waste would haunt me too much throughout the years.”

Will snorts. It’s been a long time since anyone described him with the word, “beauty;” certainly no one since his childhood has done so. He pictures his trial, if Hannibal could somehow be his lawyer. *Your honor, such great beauty should not be wasted upon the insensate stone walls of a prison cell. Will Graham: Too hot for prison.* But then another thought hits him, and he feels the air leave his lungs as if he’s actually been struck. Hannibal would never be so cruel as to leave him to languish alone in a cell for the rest of his life, never so cruel as Will himself.

“It’s time,” Hannibal says. “I hear movement. We should head out now.”

“Right,” Will slides from the booth, following Hannibal’s tall frame towards the narrow stairs. “Where are we going?”

“Where would you like to go?” Hannibal asks in reply. “There’s extra fuel for the engine onboard, and the kitchen is stocked as well as can be expected. We’ll have to go ashore to refuel eventually, depending on how far you want to go, and how often we run the motor. There is a sail,” he gestures vaguely. Will wonders if he has any experience with boats.

“Are you letting me decide?” he asks.
“I do not care where we go, Will,” Hannibal says. “As long as we go together.”

Will’s head swims. On the one hand, he’s happily surprised that Hannibal is allowing him this much control over their future (and slightly horrified at his own mind for its use of the verb allow in this context, as if this partnership is actually more of Hannibal indulging the whims of a pet - he shakes that thought loose). On the other hand, he’s too tired to think of a reasonable destination - or rather, too tired to choose one, since his imagination is suddenly on fire with a seemingly infinite amount of possibilities.

“Let’s just take her out, cruise down the coast a ways and anchor somewhere further south,” he says at last. “We both need rest; we can decide what to do once we’re out on the water and have had time to sleep and think.”

Hannibal agrees easily, and Will sets about dropping the motor and untying the ropes holding them to the dock. Hannibal’s help is minimal; he stands to the side of the steering wheel and watches, mostly. Moral support, Will thinks, then decides he really should cut the other man some slack, seeing as how he broke Will out of a maximum security hospital less than twenty-four hours ago. It wasn’t even his fault I was in this time, Will thinks.

The truth is, he doesn’t mind Hannibal not helping, not even offering to help. Explaining how to do something would take him more time than doing it himself does. He can imagine how Hannibal would respond if Will set him to a task simple enough for someone with little to no boating experience to manage; he would do whatever is asked of him with uncanny perfection and not a hint of annoyance. Will doesn’t ask him to help; he’s managed boats like this alone before, most notably, perhaps, when he sailed across the Atlantic to follow Hannibal to Europe. Eventually, he thinks, he’d like to teach Hannibal how to sail, especially if they’re planning to use the boat as a means of transportation on a somewhat long term basis, as seems to be the case. He tries to envision Hannibal, shirt open, skin golden from the sun, hanging off the boom to dangle his long fingers in the warm water of the southern hemisphere. For now, however, Will doesn’t mind doing the work.

He takes them out of the marina, and heads down the coast. There are plenty of places to rest the boat, but Will wants to put some distance between them and whoever is looking for them. An hour and then two down the coast, guided by the boat’s headlights in the cold morning dark, and Will slips the boat into an empty cove to drop anchor.

His body sags with exhaustion, but he says, “I’d like to stay up here for a little longer,” and finds the words are true. “The sun will be coming up soon.”

“One moment,” Hannibal says, and vanishes down into the cabin below. Will watches him go, feeling his absence, even for this brief instant. He does not experience the wave of anxiety over abandonment that he had before, doesn’t feel compelled to follow Hannibal and watch him. Instead,
he stands with hands in his pockets, watching the dark sky.

Hannibal returns in a couple of minutes, arms filled with blankets and a flask. Will smiles, and gratefully accepts the latter as Hannibal spreads a blanket out over the wooden planks of the bow and sits, extending a hand to draw Will down as well. A second and third blanket go around the pair of them, and they spend a moment in cautious shifting, until settling into a comfortable position leaning against one another in which to watch the sunrise. It feels like the kind of awkward exhilaration Will recognizes from the few first dates he’s talked others into (or, on even rarer occasions, been talked into himself) in his life. He boggles at the feeling, at the notion that anything between them could feel so normal, so pure, after everything they’ve done to each other, been through together. Hannibal takes one of Will’s hands between his own and pulls it against him, and they watch the night begin to relent to the day.

“Not to sound totally ungrateful,” Will speaks after a silence, “but why did you let me stay in there for most of a week?”

“Honestly, Will,” Hannibal says, and Will smiles at the familiar words, the familiar air of affectionate exasperation. “I’m flattered by the high regard you have for my capabilities, but you speak as if I orchestrate prison breaks from maximum security insane asylums on a regular basis. Isn’t it possible that it took me that long to gather things like security codes and floor plans, and compose a plan?”

Will snorts, and leans his head against Hannibal’s shoulder. The sky is beginning to lighten at the edges, like a fading photograph. “It’s possible,” he says, “but I don’t think it’s the full truth.” He doesn’t mention the silence in his own mind, or the way he’d wandered the rooms of his memory palace searching. It feels too frightening, too dangerous - more dangerous, even, than what they are becoming together - to acknowledge as a possible reality.

“Clever,” Hannibal concedes. “Perhaps I wanted to allow you time to experience some of what I felt throughout the previous three years. Although I still think you are rather downplaying the lengths I had to go to secure your freedom.”

“Hmmmm.”

“Perhaps that was cruel of me.”

“Perhaps,” Will answers, watching the sky. “But it wasn’t unnecessary.” And certainly not any crueler than Will had been himself. He knows that now. “I’m sorry,” he says, before he can convince himself not to. He feels Hannibal’s hands tighten over his at the words. “For before, I mean. For not visiting. Not understanding.”
“Will.”

He closes his eyes. He could listen to his name, said in that low, reverent voice, for the rest of his life. He hopes he will.

The kiss is a little awkward at first, more like a real first kiss than what they did back in Baltimore. Their teeth and noses collide, and Will is off balance and unsure of where to place his hands. He loves every bit of it, though, loves the moment it becomes less awkward, loves the softness and slowness of the touch, the way Hannibal doesn’t release his hand, the way the boat shifts their bodies with its gentle swaying. Around them, dawn breaks on a new morning, a new chapter in their story dawning as well.

“Do you think we’ll ever entirely manage to stop deceiving one another? Just tell it like it is?” Will says, when they’ve pulled apart and Hannibal is gazing down at him with a look of undisguised affection. “Or does it even matter, now that we’ve finished with all of the great revelations?”

“We are beginning a new age of our lives,” Hannibal tells him, one hand framing the side of his face. “I believe it will be an era defined by honesty, and the revelations in store for both of us will be beyond the current scope of our imaginations.”

Will doesn’t answer. He’s watching Hannibal’s face, softer and more vulnerable in the early morning light, as if the dawning sun illuminates something usually invisible. For the first time since he dropped it outside the crashed transfer vehicle, Will regrets the loss of his phone; he’d like to take a picture, now, of how Hannibal looks. As if Hannibal would ever allow it. He wishes he could draw, or paint. But then again, Will already knows that he’ll remember the expression on Hannibal’s face perfectly, even if he sees Hannibal every day, forever. Which, in this moment, sounds like a pretty good idea.

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They waste a few exhausted minutes in attempting to fit onto one of the twin beds together, before Hannibal simply sweeps up both mattresses in his firm arms, leaving Will to collect pillows and bedding as he makes his way to the empty space at the fore of the ship, on the far side of the kitchen and dining area. The space is awkwardly shaped, and the mattresses don’t quite lay flat, but Will spreads a couple of blankets over them anyway and they lay down, neither voicing the option of sleeping in separate beds again.
Will isn’t quite sure how to lie. He tries his back, then his side, head pillowed on his arm to avoid rubbing his healing cheek against the mattress. Behind him, Hannibal scarcely hesitates before snaking an arm around his chest and nuzzling softly at the back of Will’s shoulder with his cheek.

“Goodnight, Will,” he whispers, words a low rumble Will can feel through his chest.

“Goodnight, Hannibal.”

Will lies awake with his eyes open, feeling the stiffness in the arm wrapped around him. He can feel Hannibal’s heart pounding erratically at his back, feel the irregular and just slightly too rapid rise and fall of his chest.

He sighs, shifting onto an elbow to turn himself around so that he lies face to face with Hannibal. The other man’s face is stiff, eyes shut in a positively dreadful approximation of sleep. Will can’t help smirking. It’s easier because it’s still too dark to see clearly, too dark to be seen, and Will feels brave enough to raise his hand to stroke along Hannibal’s jaw, feeling the rough scratch of stubble and seeing the way Hannibal’s throat moves in a slow swallow.

Hannibal’s eyelids flutter open, gazing down at Will in the dark as if surprised. To be honest, Will is a little surprised at his own daring; Hannibal has always felt so distant, otherworldly, unapproachable and untouchable - even though Will always did approach. Hannibal has always found reasons to touch him - or simply touched him without needing an excuse - but Will has never felt a lot of confidence about returning the attention. Even now, as they redefine the limits of what they are to one another, it feels somewhat intimidating.

He steels himself, closing his eyes and bringing his legs to tangle with Hannibal’s. He slots one leg between Hannibal’s thighs so that they lie even closer, touching from shoulders to toes. Will keeps his eyes closed as he leans upwards, finding Hannibal’s mouth with his own. His body is too tired to react - to the kiss, to the closeness, to the feeling of sinking into Hannibal’s pervasive darkness - but it feels good. Will sighs into the kiss.

“Goodnight,” he mumbles again, against Hannibal’s soft lips, not quite believing that this is real, that he can fall asleep free, on this little boat, kissing Hannibal Lecter as unconsciousness slips over him. And then he’s asleep, and the press of warm lips follows him into his dreams, and for once, despite all the odds, he sleeps soundly.
Chrysiridia

Chapter Notes

Thank you as always to everyone taking time to comment or leave kudos. I appreciate the encouragement and good vibes!

I know last week had some major happy ending vibes, but I promise, we're just getting started. Waaaaaay too many people left alive. I said before I picture the plot of this fic as three acts, and this is where I'd say we're in act two, which I thought deserved fresh song lyrics. Act two is honestly gonna include a lot more dick. So if that's something you were waiting for, congratulations, after 96k words we freaking got there...kinda. It's been a long time since I wrote explicit fiction, and this chapter honestly was a bit of a challenge, though an enjoyable one. Hope it's up to snuff! The focus of the story is going to be almost entirely on Will and Hannibal for a few chapters, but Jack, Alana, Margot, and the Freds will be back in due course.

Kill idiot violence

Punish greed, punish me

Run naked through the streets

Stabbing bloody eyes and scream

I pray for you murderous

I pray for you well-honed and clean

I pray for you any way

Your violent nature needs you to be

And I, I praise your name

I praise your name

I praise the taste of the word on my tongue

And I praise your righteous rising hate

I praise your soft lips

And I praise your revenge

I praise your tenderness and your skin

And I praise your pure incorruptible pain
He wakes to the cry of the gulls, the smack of water against the keel - daytime sounds. He’s stretched out on his back, his feet protruding from beneath the blankets. He can see Hannibal’s ankles and feet tangled with his own, also exposed by the blanket that’s ridden up their bodies as they slept. Will is used to waking up with his bedding in a state of disarray, thrashed out of place by bad dreams. That’s the only thing he finds familiar about waking up this morning, though. He stares hard at Hannibal’s feet - slim, smooth, and pale - and wonders if time will transform these moments into mundanities. For now, a film of surreality clings to the proceedings, as if this is all pretend, a dream he’s been having and from which he is bound to awaken at any moment.

Will’s chest currently serves as a pillow for the FBI’s most wanted serial murderer. Hannibal has one arm stretched around Will’s chest, in an embrace that feels more than a little restrictive and territorial to Will, and is breathing slowly into the grey fabric of Will’s sweater. He’s flung a leg over Will’s hip, his thigh resting high between Will’s legs. Will gives his hips an experimental thrust against the weight of Hannibal’s body resting atop him. Hannibal doesn’t stir.

Will, in turn, has both arms wrapped around Hannibal, hands clasped behind his broad back. He blinks down at the sight of Hannibal, sleeping in his arms, resting on his chest, the latest in a series of unfolding miraculous visions. If he does wake up from this, Will thinks the pain may just kill him. He ducks his head to brush his lips over the soft greying hair at the top of Hannibal’s head, taking time to breathe in the scent of him - clean and deep and forested. In his sleep, Hannibal murmurs and shifts against Will, eliciting a sharp inhalation from the man beneath him when his thigh comes to rest against the thickening length of Will’s cock.

*It has to be a dream,* he thinks. He’s back in Virginia, churning the sheets in his sleep beside Molly, having a dream he won’t want to think about later. *Won’t be able to help thinking about.* But the weight of Hannibal’s head and shoulders stretched over his chest feels real. The heat of Hannibal’s leg where it rests firmly against his feels real. Will tongues the raw spot on the side of his cheek until he can taste blood. In his arms, Hannibal stirs at the scent, his thigh dragging more firmly against the hot hardness of Will’s erection, and Will closes his eyes, lips parting in a surprised little gasp at how *good* it feels.

He shifts his hips, just trying to get comfortable, of course. It certainly has nothing to do with replicating the sensation of Hannibal’s sleep-warm body pressed against him. Hannibal stirs against him again, and Will sees those red eyes fluttering open. Hannibal lifts his head to meet Will’s eyes, one eyebrow raised and lips curling into a sleepy smirk, as if he’s just caught Will at something and is utterly thrilled about it. Which is, actually, pretty much the case. He rolls his hips, watching Will’s eyes widen in response. “Good morning.”
Will kisses him, rather than answering. It’s too early for overbearing metaphors, and he’s just awoken Hannibal by digging a hard on into his leg, and a day ago Will was in prison and he didn’t know if he would ever have this - this closeness, this warmth, this safety and contentment and wholeness - and so kissing Hannibal seems like the only logical response to the situation. The half-moon of Hannibal’s smirk melts against his mouth and Will relishes the soft slide of Hannibal’s mouth beneath his. He tightens his arms around Hannibal’s back, shifting his body to lie on his side, chest to chest with Hannibal, and sparing a moment to assure their legs remain entwined.

Hannibal makes a small sound at the movement, his lips parting against Will’s, and Will can’t stop himself from flicking his tongue over the gap. He feels his tongue snag briefly on the sharp tip of a tooth, not enough to break the skin but enough to send a frisson of pain bouncing along his nerves. There’s a pressure in his chest like a small sun is expanding there, widening and whitening, preparing to collapse back in on itself because how can anything grow and grow the way this sensation does? The way this feels - both of them awake and alive and too aware, pressed close but not close enough - Will knows he will never regret everything he’s left behind, all the people he’s turned his back on. He’d sell his soul, just to have this moment again and again, illicit and somehow permitted, somehow his. He gasps against Hannibal’s mouth, pressed firmly to his own, feels Hannibal’s lips part in a mirror of his own. The heat between them overwhelms abruptly, and Will struggles against the blankets, trying to remain close while fighting his way out of the heavy wool.

There’s laughter against his lips, and then Hannibal’s hands easily pluck away the blankets in which Will has managed to completely entangle himself. They come apart for a second while Hannibal draws the bedding to the side, and then Will rushes back, eager to regain closeness, even if it means they both burn themselves alive from within. Just let this happen, he silently prays as Hannibal’s tongue flicks teasingly against his bottom lip, don’t think, don’t stop.

Of course, much like God, Hannibal does not heed prayers. Will is left gasping into the empty air as Hannibal pulls back to recline on one elbow and gaze down at him, looking freakishly composed, if still somewhat somnolent. He trails his free hand along Will’s hip, fingers digging into the soft flesh and releasing rhythmically. Will feels the same rhythmic pulse between his legs, and tugs at the back of Hannibal’s neck with a frustrated growl.

Hannibal shakes him off easily, and Will abruptly finds himself flat on his back. He blinks, then rolls back onto his side to glare disapprovingly into Hannibal’s smirking face.

“I have to confess,” Hannibal says, voice still thick with sleep and arousal, but tinged with amusement now as well, “I have often thought about what it would be like to touch you for the first time. How you would look, coming apart beneath my hands… my mouth.” He places his palm flat against Will’s stomach, just below the hem of his sweater, so that the center of his hand rests over Will’s navel and his fingertips graze the scar he left there, and even that small touch is too much. Will shivers, feels his dick jump at the touch. Hannibal must feel it, too, against his thigh. He smirks. “Much as you look now. But this isn’t how I pictured this happening.”
Will laughs a little, ducking his head for a moment only to peer up at Hannibal through sleep-tangled fringe. “What were you picturing, then?” he says, only somewhat scandalized to hear the husky pitch of his voice. Will pushes himself closer to Hannibal again, feels Hannibal’s hand slide up his torso as he moves, a slow warm slide of skin on skin until his palm rests over the center of Will’s chest, fingers splayed. Will pictures them growing talons, digging into him, clawing out his heart. Distressingly, the image does little to quell the desire unspooling low in his belly. He arches an eyebrow at Hannibal’s unchanging smirk. “Champagne on ice and silk sheets? Candlelight and a string quartet playing behind velvet curtains?”

“Something like that,” Hannibal says, in that light tone he has which Will always, always hopes is joking (and which never, never is). “I pictured a bed, at the least.”

“This is bed…like,” Will objects. He leans up to claim Hannibal’s mouth again, then frowns when Hannibal refuses to let him deepen the kiss. He pulls back, exhaling with noisy frustration. “You’re serious about this.”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Why?”

“Can’t you just divine my motives? Close your eyes and examine the evidence of everything that’s transpired between us, without forcing us to resort to the barbarism of spoken words?”

“Or,” Will says, propping himself to lean on one elbow, “you could just tell me.”

Hannibal’s smirk has lost much of its edge. He regards Will now with an unreadable look. “You may find it laughable,” he says, “or macabre.” Will’s eyebrows creep up his forehead at the words, and Hannibal exhales heavily through his nose, bringing one hand to smooth over Will’s cheek and trail down his neck and collarbone before dropping into the lumpy tangle of bedding and mattresses beneath them.

“I have had an appreciation for beauty, and the arrangement of beautiful things, since childhood. It is an appreciation I shared with my aunt, Murasaki, a commonality that helped bond us when I first went to live with her and my uncle, Robert. I had difficulty adjusting to the new circumstances in my life, and my aunt invited me to arrange flowers with her one day. I think she believed I might find it calming, though what she saw in me that made her think that has never been clear to me. She was, of course, correct, and I took to the activity with immediate fascination. I remember the way white sap leaked from the cut stems picked fresh from the garden that morning, the smell of it stronger than the scent of the blossoms themselves. I had no previous experience in creating floral arrangements.”
Hannibal’s hand strokes over Will’s hip, fingers tracing rhythmic circles against the skin. He’s never spoken so candidly about his early life before, and Will realizes with a sudden feeling of aching despair how little he knows about Hannibal, really. He’s read all the files, of course, knows the facts and figures of Hannibal Lecter, could recite the life story the FBI compiled in their dossier. Born and raised as some sort of obscure Lithuanian royalty - Will had practically swallowed his own tongue when Jack unearthed that detail - before being orphaned at a young age. Parents, sister, and household murdered; family estate seized by the Soviet government and converted into an orphanage - his family home transformed into a nightmare before his eyes. Will’s read about Hannibal’s family in Paris, about the suspicions French authorities had concerning Hannibal. But what he doesn’t know are things like these - the small moments, the authentic and individual instances known only to Hannibal and found nowhere in any file bearing his name.

He recalls the strangeness of reading about Hannibal for the first time. It was while he was recovering from the incision Hannibal had made in his abdomen before fleeing the country, still bedridden and itching with a need to be up and moving towards Hannibal again. Someone had taken the time to send him the official dossier the BAU had created. There was a lot of new information that had been unearthed and added since Hannibal had attempted to murder the department head and two profilers before fleeing the country. Will had read the whole thing in one long, painful go, waiting to push the button for more morphine until he’d reached the final page, at which point he was almost too weak with pain to depress the button. It had felt invasive, disrespectful, pouring through the intimate details of Hannibal’s life without having gained permission. He’d wished he could have learned all of it from Hannibal himself, over dinner or drinks by the fire. But he’d needed to know.

“She asked me to complete an arrangement she had begun - peonies, lilies, lilac and ivy. I had no previous knowledge or training to guide me,” Hannibal continues, “but considered the arch of the windows in the chamber, the curve of the fireplace where a tea vessel hung over the fire; I observed the world surrounding me, the lines and curves, and I cut two flowers and arranged them to create a vector harmonious to the rest of the arrangement and to the room. I had employed, without realizing it, _moribana_, the slanting style. My aunt said I had a natural gift for it.”

“For the slanting style?” Will asks, stretching words and letting his tongue rest against his teeth too long on the final syllable.

“For the arrangement of beautiful objects,” Hannibal replies.

In Will’s mind, there’s the image of a table, draped in dark fabric and laden with split fruits, cut flowers, curling ropes of sausage, sweating heaps of ice dotted with the rough hoary surface of oyster shells and dazzling with black and ochre pearls of caviar. The white bone plate before him contains a single perfect pink square of watermelon bedecked by one immaculate fat-tipped prosciutto rose. But all of this is somehow also the curve of Cassie Boyle’s back and the limpness of her arms, the red lines bleeding over pale skin, the dry grass of the field and the curving points of antlers. Arranging
flowers, plating food, staging bodies after death, bringing out the most beautiful aspects of things that are already beautiful; Will wonders whether he is food, flowers or death.

He can feel himself flushing but his voice is steady when he makes himself ask, “Am I an object you want to arrange, Hannibal?”

“The most beautiful of them all,” Hannibal answers, and Will bites his lip on the sound that wants to escape him. He’s never been called that before, and the sensation that skitters along his spine is as unexpected as it is undeniable. Will can’t help hearing it like a fairy tale. The fairest of them all. If this were a fairy tale - and he isn’t always sure it’s not - then Hannibal would surely be something enchanted and all-seeing, a fixed point around which all other characters spin. A magic mirror on a wall, Will thinks, in which he can study his own reflection, to search and search without finding what it is about him Hannibal deems beautiful. “I’ve thought about the arrangements I would make, the best ways to display this body,” Hannibal says, hand running firmly over Will from chest to thigh. As if it’s something he owns. Will’s skin burns beneath the touch. He feels close to trembling, from the heat of Hannibal’s fingers and the sound of his voice saying, “beautiful.”

Okay, okay,” Will concedes at last, because really, it’s not as if he can force Hannibal to make passionate love to him on two overlapping twin mattresses in the cramped bow of a thirty foot sailing ship bobbing in the choppy afternoon waves. Or is there??? he wonders, internal monologue sounding unusually desperate in his head. He sighs, letting his lids flutter heavily as he wets his lips and gazes plaintively across at Hannibal…who smirks back at him, thoroughly unmoved. No, there really isn’t. “So we wait until we go ashore to…uh…” Oh God. He can feel his face burning, his self-consciousness thoroughly unaided by Hannibal’s silent smirking. “Can’t we still, just,” he scoots closer, reaching inquisitively for the waistband of Hannibal’s pants.

Hannibal lets him struggle through a few more half sentences before Will manages to get a grasp on the English language again. “We could save sex for when you can arrange me,” Christ, Will thinks, who only knows what that’s going to entail. He doesn’t want to think about it right now; he just wants to get off, and get as close to Hannibal as possible in the process. “ Couldn’t we just touch each other? Fool around? And still wait to have sex.”

“Hmmm.” Hannibal buries one hand in Will’s hair, fingers stroking over his scalp in a hypnotic rhythm. “In your mind, there is a hierarchy of physical intimacy,” Hannibal says, stroking Will’s hair with unfaltering calmness. “Do you consider an act to be sex only if it includes penetration?

“There is no hierarchy for me,” Hannibal adds, after Will fails to respond with anything more eloquent than a few slow and wide-eyed blinks, “I would consider touching you in any way beyond how I already have to be intimate enough to count as sex.”

“Jesus Christ,” Will swears, but there’s little fervor in his words, relaxed as he is by Hannibal’s
fingers, now tugging lightly at the curls at the nape of his neck. “Do you count stabbing me as sex?”

“Because it was penetrative?”

“Because it was intimate.”

Hannibal’s fingers tug his hair straight, then twist around it. “I don’t know,” he says. “Perhaps.”

“I wasn’t exactly displayed in the slanting style then, either,” Will says, bringing his hands up to rest lightly on Hannibal’s chest. He splays his fingers, momentarily dizzy with the realization of how broad Hannibal’s chest is - totally unlike any of Will’s previous, exclusively female, lovers. It’s a detail he wouldn’t have thought to imagine, and it runs through him like an electrical current. This is real; this is really happening.

“I can’t explain it any better than I have,” Hannibal says, neither angry nor apologetic. “I can rely on trite cliches about wanting the physical action of intimacy between us to be special, but it won’t convey the reasons.”

“Which are purely aesthetical,” Will specifies dryly.

“Almost entirely,” Hannibal says, and leans in at the same time he spreads his fingers to cradle the back of Will’s head in his hand and him into the kiss. Will sighs, his fingers unconsciously clutching at Hannibal’s shirt. He opens him mouth with a low moan at the feeling of Hannibal’s tongue at his lips, then moans again when Hannibal pushes closer to lick the roof of his mouth. Will squirms, unable to stop the motion, and feels Hannibal smile against his mouth, before he pulls back to lay a trail of kisses over the arch of Will’s neck. “There’ll be no stopping us,” Hannibal whispers, his voice hot and wet and breathed directly into Will’s ear, “once we get started.”

Will pulls back, his breath already coming shorter. “We ought to get up,” he says, a little mournfully.

Hannibal’s thumb skates along the bottom of his lower lip, rubbing softly at the swollen curve of his mouth. “Why?”

Will huffs a noise that is half laughter and half sigh, and entirely exasperated, because, as always, Hannibal is entirely exasperating. “Does this,” he gestures vaguely between them, between their tightly pressed bodies, “do anything to you? Because I feel like I’m going crazy, and I’d like to get
up and calm down if we’re waiting till our fucking wedding night or whatever.” He pushes half heartedly at Hannibal’s shoulders, silently relieved when the other man doesn’t budge.

“Do you think this does anything to me, Will?” Hannibal asks, and Will huffs again, with even greater exasperation, because of course it must do something, he knows it does, but Hannibal is so damned inscrutable and unreadable when he wants to be. “Do you suspect I’m only capable of restraining my desire because it is weak enough to be restrained? Whereas you,” he sighs, drawing a shudder from Will as he trails the long fingers of one hand down Will’s chest and waist to rest a heavy hand on one of Will’s hip bones, “you feel strangled by it.”

“I feel like you can look straight through my skull, sometimes,” Will admits, focusing his eyes on the shadowed curve of Hannibal’s solid wrist, “and I’m left staring at a mask.”

Hannibal blinks at the words, at the rawness of Will’s voice as he says them. His expression shifts, facade slipping before Will’s eyes. It’s as if Hannibal’s features are relaxing - he can’t think of a better word for the way the tension seems to bleed from him. And what’s left is so open, so readable, and so full of bare, undisguised desire that Will’s heart falters, then picks up speed abruptly.

“I-I need to…” He needs to go. As far away from Hannibal as he possibly can. He feels like his skin is burning under a slow heat everywhere that Hannibal is touching him, and the hunger in those eyes makes him want to squirm. Will shakes his head, pushing himself to sit up, only to find himself flat on his back again in the blink of an eye. He blinks at the low ceiling, and doesn’t move.

“I know what you need,” Hannibal breathes, somewhere above him. “I shall not give it to you now, but no one said you couldn’t help yourself.” Will turns his head to fix Hannibal with a look of disbelief, and finds himself speechless again at the sight of the desire so consuming and unhidden on Hannibal’s face.

Almost desperate.

“Let me watch you, Will.”

He breathes out all the air he didn’t realize he’d been holding in his lungs. “Uhhhhh.” Eloquent response. He shuts his eyes tight, as if it may reset reality. A part of him wants to believe that Hannibal is joking, but he knows it’s not a joke. And a larger share of him is relieved - relieved at being wanted, at Hannibal’s desire for him not being a joke, at the way that Hannibal is pushing his sweater up his chest to bare his stomach to the charged air between them.
Will exhales again, fighting a sudden mad urge to laugh. “Honestly,” he breathes, reaching down to flick open the button of his jeans and haul down the zipper. He watches as Hannibal’s pupils dilate at the sound of his fly dropping, the sight of Will spitting into his own palm triggering a spark of lust plainly visible in the flaring of Hannibal’s nostrils and the way his fingers tighten on Will’s thigh. Will wets his lips, closes his eyes, and reaches down to wrap a hand around himself with a sigh. He hears the wet noise of Hannibal’s mouth opening. “I have to do everything around here.”

Hannibal is uncharacteristically silent above him, his only reply the sound of his heavy breathing. Will shifts to drag his slacks down over his hips, and feels Hannibal’s hands helping them down to his thighs. Will opens his eyes, tightening his hand over his erection and feeling exposed on an unprecedented level. He must look ridiculous, with his shirt and pants half way off and his dick waving in the air while Hannibal looks on, fully clothed and dignified.

But the look in Hannibal’s eyes certainly doesn’t suggest that he finds Will ridiculous in the slightest. “Don’t think yourself out of enjoying it,” Hannibal tells him, as if reading his mind. “Let yourself just feel, Will, don’t think.”

But that’s impossible, Will wants to say. Even with fire riding through his nerves, with the blaze of desire in Hannibal’s eyes, there’s no way he’s going to stop thinking and relax into this situation. He’s committed to seeing this through - at this point he thinks he would need to be physically restrained to stop touching himself - but his sense of shame, meager thing that it is, isn’t just going to flip off. No, Will thinks, flexing his fingers experimentally, this is going to be awkward.

“If you decide it’s going to be awkward then it will only be that,” Hannibal says, mind reading again, somehow. “Look at me - you can see how much I want you. You can feel it, if you let yourself. Apply yourself to my perspective, if it helps; focus on what I’m feeling, instead of how you yourself feel. Do you understand?”

Will blinks. “It’s…an interesting idea.”

Hannibal smiles down at him, his graceful fingers brushing the taut skin over Will’s hipbones. “I would ask if you’ve ever tried it before, but I can already tell the answer will be no.”

“No,” Will says, mind still attempting to catch up with the conversation, which hurtles ahead with an alarming velocity. “I mean yes. Yes, no, I haven’t.”

“Clearly.”
Will squints at Hannibal, suspiciously, but the other man’s face is still unusually open and decipherable, letting Will access what he needs. Will reads the lust written in bold across Hannibal’s eyes, the longing, the appreciation, something almost worshipful glinting in those wine colored eyes as well. His heart beats with the rhythm of a swinging pendulum, and he feels the force of his own lust doubled, feels it like a punch to the gut, feels it in the sudden clenching of his abdomen, the stiffening of his already rigid cock. “Oh,” he says, eyes widening.

Hannibal’s laughter is little more than warm air against his cheek. “Let me see you, Will,” he whispers, leaning in to breathe the words against the shell of Will’s burning ear. “Let yourself feel how much I want that, feel the pleasure I’m taking at seeing you this way.”

Will can feel it like a pressure against the skin of his chest. His hand strokes, once, over his cock, already feeling too far beyond self control. “Oh God.”

His hand moves in a slow, steady slide. Down to the root of his dick, then back up to palm the thick head leaking against his exposed belly. When he bothers to peer through the thick lashes obscuring his sight, Will can see Hannibal staring back at him, and the rising clamor of desire bounces off the bone walls of the echo chamber his skull has become. His desire rides through him, fueling Hannibal’s, and Will’s empathy feeds on that lust in turn, until his body and mind feel taut, tight, overcharged, an endless feedback loop of pleasure and hunger.

He growls, brief and low, when he can no longer contain what he’s feeling. Hannibal’s hand sweeps over his sweat slicked face in a strangely soothing gesture, as if Will is injured, rather than simply on fire with their combined need. “I dreamed of you like this during my incarceration,” Hannibal confesses, voice conspiratorial and low.

Will closes his eyes for a moment, tilting his head back to laugh shortly. “Dreamed of you, too,” he pants, thrusting up into his own fist as Hannibal’s eyes bore into him. He exhales hard before speaking again. “You came and killed me.”

Hannibal’s eyes flash, so brightly Will thinks he wouldn’t have been able to disguise it even if he’d been maintaining his usual guard. “How did those dreams make you feel?”

Will laughs breathlessly again at the words, pumping his fist over himself. He can feel the pressure building in him, like flames licking beneath his skin. The head of his cock is flushed dark and drooling pre-come when he looks down at it for a moment, swollen thicker and harder under his fingers than he’s ever felt it in his life. He shuts his eyes against Hannibal’s fierce scrutiny. The feeling unspooling within him is rawer and more desperate than anything he’s experienced since leaving adolescence, and it feels like it will kill him if it grows any stronger. “It turned me on,” he admits, breathless and unashamed. He doesn’t need his eyes open to sense the spike of hunger that pierces Hannibal at his words; he can picture the way the other man’s pupils widen from behind his
closed lids, can hear the skip in his heavy heartbeats, feel the air changing between them, becoming something denser, more dangerous. “I wanted you to do it.”

He opens his eyes at the sound of Hannibal’s sharp inhalation. The look on Hannibal’s face…Will grits his teeth and moves his hand faster over his straining erection. He pants for air, unable to help the groan that slips past his clenched teeth. “I wanted it,” Will gasps, thrusting into his own fist again and again, thinking of the dreams, the desire that throbbed through his whole body as his imagination spun out the myriad scenarios, the glint of knives and scratch of ropes and flash of teeth. “Oh, I wanted you to do it.” He clamps his teeth shut, frightened for a moment that he’ll say what’s just occurred to him. I still want you to do it.

Hannibal’s fingers tighten over his thigh, just shy of where he really needs him. His nostrils flare, either with lust or to scent the fear that’s sweetening Will’s sweat for an instant. “Tempting. You know I never could,” he whispers, leaning close to nip at the sensitive skin at the base of Will’s throat. His thumb rubs firmly over the skin of Will’s thigh, and Will feels his legs beginning to shake beneath the touch, with the force of the climax building inside him. “Without you, who would remain to stand judgment over me?”

“God, Hannibal, holy shit,” Will pants raggedly, pushes his face into the softness of Hannibal’s hair and breathes.

“No one else,” Hannibal is whispering, and his voice feels like it’s sinking into Will’s brain, the corners of his skull filling with the echo till there’s no space there for his own frantic thoughts. “No one but you deserves it, Will, to wield the flaming sword of justice and cleanse this world. Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world; how you’ll ignite the world with righteous judgment! And, in the fullness of time, Will, when all of this is said and done, I need it to be you who ferries me into the dark.”

Will’s heart pounds loudly, once, then everything stops - breath and blood and the rotation of the planets. Will feels himself bending at the waist as his stomach muscles clench. It’s the low pitch of Hannibal’s voice rumbling through his bones and brain, the feel of his hand where it rests like a shackle on Will’s thigh, the sudden thickness of his accent and the curl of his lip when he says it: need. “Ah, God, Hannibal.” Will’s cock pulses against his palm, muscles in his legs and chest and stomach clenching in rhythmic sympathy. Thick ropes of come painting his exposed chest and stomach in stripes, Will strokes himself through the most intense orgasm he can remember having.

Hannibal’s mouth covers his, swallowing the cries Will is making as his body shakes. One second he is certain he will break apart, limbs dropping off like a worn doll’s, and the next Hannibal’s tongue swipes over the top row of his teeth and he feels himself solid and vital once more. He reaches to clasp Hannibal’s elbow with his clean hand. Hannibal, once again the stable center of a world that’s eroding around him. Will clings to him like a lifeline, until his breathing has steadied and his heart rate has slowed.
“Can I get you anything?” Hannibal asks him when Will finally lets his head and hands drop back to the mattress.

“Mmmm,” Will replies, momentarily forgetting how his tongue is supposed to work when it’s not in Hannibal’s mouth. “Towel?”

“One moment,” Hannibal says, rising with a final squeeze of his hand over Will’s thigh.

Will exhales shakily, running his clean hand through his hair, as much as is allowed by the tangles that formed in it whilst he was busy breaking out of federal custody and running from the FBI on motorcycle and escaping by ship. One thing Will supposes he can never deny is that his life is much more exciting with Hannibal present. Unpredictable and exhausting and often deadly - and always dangerous - but never boring, never with that dull patina of fear and longing with which so much of his previous life has been characterized.

Although he will admit, he feels slightly less glamorous laying in a cooling mess of his own spent passion than he had tilting madly down the dark streets on the back of Hannibal’s bike. He’s trying hard to think of anything but how ridiculous he must look when Hannibal returns, sliding down beside him to wipe at Will’s chest and stomach with the damp towel he’s collected from the ship’s bathroom. Will inhales sharply as Hannibal’s hands work the cloth gently over his softened cock, cleaning him with a quick and delicate efficiency.

“You were perfect,” Hannibal tells him, brushing back Will’s hair and pressing his lips to his temple.

Will pulls one of the blankets back over them and turns so that his head rests against the top of Hannibal’s. He wonders if he should offer to watch Hannibal, but he doesn’t think the answer is likely to be yes. His lips brush the silky strands of greying hair as he speaks. “How much of what you said before did you mean?”

Hannibal tilts his neck to gaze up at Will. It’s dim in their corner of the cabin, but he thinks there might be a smile forming on Hannibal’s lips. “Don’t mistake my meaning, Will,” he answers crisply. “I’m not asking you to slit my throat right now and be done with it.”

But if I tried you’d let me, Will thinks, fisting his hands in the blanket to keep them from shaking. He presses a kiss against the hair at the top of Hannibal’s head. “I promise I’ll save you for last.”
They take their coffee in the open air, mugs leaking steam into the chill afternoon air. Further off from shore, a couple hopeful fishing boats still linger, but the waters are emptier now, and choppier. Will turns the wheel so that the nose of the boat is perpendicular to the softs swells that rock it. He blows a curl of steam from his mug and squints out at the shimmering water. Behind him, Hannibal rests one hand lightly on his waist. His fingers tighten after a moment when Will leans back into the touch.

“Have you decided where you’d like to take us?” Hannibal asks.

Will nods, swallowing a scalding mouthful of coffee. “Yeah,” he says, “I mean, I’ve got an idea.”

He turns to face Hannibal. Hannibal doesn’t move his hand, letting it glide along the curve of Will’s back as he moves. He strokes a thumb over Will’s lower back, through the grey sweater now wrinkled from sleep and from the day’s previous activities. It occurs to Will that he could probably take them anywhere, provide no details and set them off in any direction without explanation, and Hannibal would follow without question or concern. The level of trust, the willingness to tie their fates together despite any consequence, staggers him for a moment, and he looks up into the eyes of the man smiling down at him, temporarily unable to speak.

“We keep heading south,” Will says, after the seconds it takes him to recover himself. “Follow the coast to Florida.” He turns his head, looking out at the small white peaks of the waves. It should calm down in another hour or two, he thinks. “We can decide where to go from there together. Sell the boat and fly somewhere, or refuel and keep sailing down the coast. I know you said you don’t care, but I don’t want to make a decision like that for the both of us. Not on my own.”

Hannibal’s thumb moves in slow, steady circles against the small of his back. He can feel those eyes on him, studying him, memorizing him, but he continues looking out at the water. A sharp winged gull breaks the surface of the sea like a dart, its wings pulled into tight peaks and valleys that pierce the water without creating a splash. Will watches, waiting for the bird to reemerge. “One might say you are owed some say in our decision making.” Hannibal tells him, voice slow. Picking his words with care. “I meant it when I said I do not care.”

Will blinks. The bird is still swimming somewhere beneath the waves, webbed feet kicking and its sharp beak piercing the water in search of its cold silver prey. Its disappearance is so complete it may as well never have existed, Will thinks. He wonders how many birds dive without resurfacing, then wonders if he’ll be one of them. It feels like he’s been sinking since he dove into the Atlantic, deeper and deeper into a subaquatic dream, with Hannibal always just there, clutched against him.
“Come on,” he wheedles, turning to face Hannibal before he can determine whether the bird he’s watching for is a survivor. “You know there’re places you want to show me, streets and smells from your youth that you’re dying to share.”

Hannibal’s smile broadens, lips pulling back just slightly from his teeth in amusement. “And I have no doubt I will lead you down all those paths in due time. For now, I would like to see what choices you make for us. After all, I have spent so long in winding you up, as you once put it; it’s only fitting that I be allowed now to watch how you go.”

Will snorts, and turns his attention back to his coffee, and to the water, where a bird may have reappeared while he looked away. Or not. “What if I decide I want to stay in Florida?” he asks, turning back to watch Hannibal’s expression slide. He can’t quite keep the smile from his lips as he carries on with the hypothetical. “Wear white suits, move to Miami, start slinging cocaine.”

Hannibal’s expression is one of bemusement. It looks a little like he’s trying to settle on what exactly to say in response. “I’d be very interested to see you in a white suit,” he finally concludes. “And I think we would be admirable drug dealers.”

“That’s not typically an adjective one associates with drug dealers,” Will points out.

“We would hardly be typical drug dealers.”

“We’re hardly typical anything,” Will sighs. *Not your typical friends, rivals, criminals. Killers. Lovers.* “You can decorate our villa with loads of clouded antique mirrors salvaged from ships wrecked during the Napoleonic Wars,” he continues acerbically, “for us to do blow off of.”

Hannibal shrugs. “If that is what you’d like.”

“You’d embark on a new career in drug trafficking, just like that,” Will laughs, incredulous. This is what he loves, he thinks, this ability of Hannibal’s to completely surprise him. Sure, it hasn’t always worked out to his benefit, but then there are moments like this one - moments when Will finds himself shocked and delighted at how spectacular and inappropriate and spectacularly inappropriate Hannibal is. How he refuses outright to behave like an appropriate person. For some reason, it makes Will think of scrambled eggs eaten in a motel room one morning years ago. “On a whim.”

“On *your* whim,” Hannibal answers. “Though I am hoping you’re joking.”
“Can’t you tell?” Will smirks.

“With you, it is impossible to ever be certain, your behavior is so unpredictable,” Hannibal sighs, and Will almost laughs again, at how familiar the words are because they so closely mirror what he’d been thinking a moment before.

“That’s what’s going to give us the edge over other drug lords.”

“Approximately how long do you estimate it will take us to reach Florida and begin our new lives as drug kingpins?” Hannibal asks.

“A couple weeks,” Will frowns, “maybe eighteen days.” Which wouldn’t be too much time spent at sea, if Hannibal weren’t harboring some unshakeable romantic fantasy about how the consumption of their partnership needs to proceed. “We can make better time if we run the engine through the night in shifts.” Guiding the ship in shifts through the night would get them to Florida faster, and also alleviate the problem of waking up sexually frustrated next to Hannibal every morning. The memory of Hannibal’s eyes on him, raking over his body, the way his gaze had burned against the flaming skin of Will’s face, shoots through him like a forked lightning bolt. The sooner they get to Florida so Hannibal can strew rose petals and antlers around a the bed or whatever the better. Will’s tempted to take them ashore in North Carolina, but even Florida feels too close to Quantico for comfort. He knows they’ll be able to blend in there; the manhunt will have time to reach a fever pitch and taper off slightly in the two weeks it will take them to reach their destination, and people see what they expect to see; most aren’t expecting to see a wanted serial killer checking in to a local hotel or buying a used car or getting groceries at the corner grocery store. Still, as certain as Will is that he won’t survive the sheer force of the sexual tension if they have to sail anywhere further than Florida, he is equally sure that he’ll rest easier once they’ve left the country entirely.

“You must teach me to sail,” Hannibal says, nonchalant and apparently unaware of the stutter his words cause in Will’s heart. “We’ll save time if we don’t have to refuel as often.”

“Tomorrow,” Will says, thinking of teaching Hannibal how to do anything, of Hannibal asking to be taught. “We’re both still worn out.”

“Indeed,” Hannibal agrees. “And, in the spirit of recovering our strength, I propose breaking our fast with something besides coffee.”

“I could eat,” Will shrugs, follows Hannibal back below deck. “And I was joking,” he says, “about doing cocaine off your antique mirrors. You never get high off your own supply.”
The water has calmed and the wind is mild but steady after they’ve eaten, so Will lets the sails down
and takes advantage of the late afternoon light to show Hannibal the basics of tacking and cleating.
He’s a pro at rope tying, to Will’s complete lack of surprise.

“Don’t get cocky,” Will warns. “I’ll swing the boom around without warning you and knock you
right into the ocean.”

Hannibal looks amused more than threatened. “Who taught you to sail?” he asks, squinting up from
where he’s cleating a sail. The setting sun reflects in his eyes, making them look flat and black. For a
second Will thinks he can see himself reflected there, too, wreathed in red orange rays of light. Magic
mirror on the wall, Will thinks, feeling foolish, I don’t always recognize the reflections of me that
you show.

He shrugs. “Just kind of picked it up,” he says.

“You learned it young,” Hannibal says, “you have sailed rarely in the time that I’ve known you, yet
the neural pathways connected to the skill and knowledge of the sea are still sharp and bright,
memory deeply chiseled in your mind.”

“Worked on boat engines as a kid,” Will answers. He doesn’t really want to talk about his past; it
feels like another life, events that happened to someone else. A person who had lived without
knowing Hannibal Lecter. Right now feels all about fresh starts; looking backwards is the last thing
he wants to do. Especially at this. “You spend time around boats like that, you pick up some stuff,
even if you don’t have one yourself.”

The look Hannibal gives him says he’s aware there’s more to know and that Will has no intention of
telling him. “You sailed to Europe by yourself,” he says, changing his approach. “A daunting
voyage, I’ve no doubt. Alone, alone, all, all, alone on a wide, wide sea. Did you ever fear for your
safety, crossing that wide expanse of water, Will?”

“I didn’t care,” Will says with a shrug. “I didn’t know why you’d left me alive, or what I would do
when I found you. Being lost at sea would almost have been a relief.”

“A soul in agony,” Hannibal says, “and yet you prevailed. My brave, bright boy who crossed the
ocean to find me again.” He steps closer to Will, bringing his left hand up to brush the pale line that crosses Will’s forehead. “How ungrateful I was when you found me.”

The sun glints in the dark mirrors of Hannibal’s eyes, and Will wonders that he hasn’t gone blind from it. “It doesn’t matter now,” he says, voice stiff when he wants it to be light and relaxed. Hannibal’s fingers clasp his shoulder.

“No,” he says, “I suppose it doesn’t after all.”
Waves lick the hull of the little ship as Will guides it through the darkness slowly. The water is unusually still, parting for the prow of the boat like black curtains, and rippling out into invisible silence. Will follows the starry path of reflected constellations, heading south.

“Towards hell and damnation,” Bedelia smiles, lips tight and nostrils flaring with some scarcely contained emotion. “What was that expression your father used to use? ‘That’s when things turned south?’” She lifts one blonde brow in strained self-satisfaction. “What’s waiting for you at the end of this journey?”

Will sips scalding coffee from his thermos and stares out at the bright stars in the sky, the equally bright stars winking to him from the still glass of the water before him. “Journey is it’s own destination,” he tells her. “Haven’t you heard that?”

“A journey of self discovery? Or into the heart of darkness?”

“I’ve seen enough of my own dark heart to know the horror within man,” he answers.

“You see into the hearts of men,” she says, “all the secrets they would keep hidden. You see them better than they see themselves.”

“Does that make me a worthy judge, then?” Will asks. “Maybe that’s why we work so well together - I can evaluate, and he can execute.”

Bedelia’s eyes keep sliding between too blue and much too wide and black. He tries not to let it distract him. “You are both executioners,” she says, eye sockets gaping at him obscenely. “Where will you go?”
He doesn’t know yet. It’s impossible to think past Florida, for some reason. Too many options, too much uncertainty. He needs to know first, what it will be like for the two of them. What they will be like together. Maybe they’ll simply tear themselves apart, without an external force to unite against.

_Somewhere with an upstairs bedroom_, Will thinks, suddenly, his mind flashing on the image of the life he’d thought was lost to him when he sat in the BSHCI waiting for his own execution date. _White curtains rustled by the warm breeze. Blue tile in the kitchen. Blue tile dotted with crimson._

“The mind is its own place,” Will tells her.

******

It’s their third day out when Hannibal thinks he’s seen a dolphin.

“I doubt it,” Will tells him. “The water’s too cold this far north, I think. Maybe a small whale? Or some kind of porpoise?”

“I think I know a dolphin when I see one, Will,” Hannibal insists, voice authoritative as ever, but face awash in comically extreme disappointment that gives the lie to his self-assurance.

“We’ll probably see some when we get further south,” Will says. “If we keep sailing south to the Florida Keys I’m sure we will.” He smiles, and lets a little slack into the sail. “I’m a little surprised you’re such a dolphin fan.”

“Dolphins are fascinating creatures,” Hannibal tells him, as he bends to tie off the rope Will has indicated for him. His voice is smooth and relaxed, without a trace of defensiveness. “Marine scientists studying sleep deprivation in dolphins found that they are capable of going days without sleep with no loss of mental acuity.”

“They’re known for rescuing sailors,” Will says. “Seems a little benevolent for your tastes.”

“They are known for such good deeds,” Hannibal agrees. “No doubt they would have failed to gain such popularity as a species if they were better known for their other activities.”
“Okay,” Will laughs. “What dark secrets are dolphins hiding?”

Hannibal studies him for a moment. His mouth is quirked just slightly at the edges, but his expression is undeniably amused. “Infanticide,” he says at last, and drops his eyes to the rope he’s coiling in his hands. Will’s sure he saw him twitch first, though. “It’s not uncommon for them to batter their own young, or hunt and kill porpoise calves.”

“Do you think they differentiate,” Will asks, voice quieter and less jocular than it had been before, “between the flesh of their own offspring and that of a similar species?”

“Most people would be unable to tell the difference between veal and a human child,” Hannibal says, and now it’s Will who has to look away, his eyes shifting out to watch the water. You don’t have to tell me, he thinks.

“There!” His head jerks round at the sound of Hannibal’s shout, and Will follows the direction of his pointed finger to the dark shape bobbing in the swells.

“That is a seal.”

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“How does it feel,” she asks, her voice like the chiming of bells as it floats to him across the dimly lit deck, “to know you’ve betrayed everyone in your life? Everyone who ever bothered caring for you.”

“Everyone but him,” Will corrects her, and she makes a dismissive sound of acknowledgment at the amendment. “Better to have betrayed them than betrayed myself any longer.”

Below the black holes of her eyes, Bedelia’s mouth quirks into a smirk. “You know just who you sound like.”

Will shrugs. The moonlight makes a silver path across the dark mirror of the sea, but his course lies elsewhere. Southwards, downwards, he imagines sailing till there’s nothing but ice, safe aboard a floating home.
“Your wife,” Bedelia sighs. “Your friends. What must they think of you?”

“I don’t care what they think of me anymore,” Will answers, relaxed. “They don’t matter the way he does. Everything else in my life was a shadow, a curtain waiting to be pulled aside.”

“A veil,” she suggests, smile tight. “Something for him to draw back like a bridegroom.” Although there’s nothing but pits where her eyes once were, Will can feel her gazing at him. “The last shreds of your decency - your humanity - for him to slough off you and toss aside.”

He shrugs. “Then it’s been tossed aside,” he says. “I won’t deny what I am any longer, won’t put a lie to the lips of my own life again.”

“Shameless,” she scolds him, but her smile never falters. “He must be so proud of how far you’ve come. He always was pleased with himself, when he’d manage to convince some poor teenager to give in to the darker urges that kept them up at night. You think Randall Tier was the first or only one? You think you’re something different?”

“I do, actually,” Will says. “And you know I am, too.”

******

The last time Will found himself on a boat with Hannibal he’d been unwilling to let the other man out of his sight for more time than it took to take a shower. Now, he finds himself in the exact opposite position. Hannibal’s presence robs him of air, turns the air to fire with the heat of their longing, now perpetually amplified within the confines of Will’s body and brain. He feels like he is a deep pool of gasoline and Hannibal is a match. Together they are more than the sum of their parts, no longer composed of their own atoms and molecules, now plasma, now heat, a chemical reaction, a combustion of nightmarish lust.

Keeping a safe distance is much more difficult than maintaining proximity.

For one thing, there’s limited space aboard the ship. When he’d wanted to keep a close eye on Hannibal, this fact had worked to his advantage. Now it does the opposite. There are only three distinct areas of the ship - above deck, in the main cabin below where the kitchen and dining area are located, and in the mid cabin bunks. Technically the bathroom constitutes a fourth area, by far the most private, but Will quickly discovers there’s only so long one can spend in the shower.
Another challenge in maintaining a safe distance from Hannibal is the fact that Will doesn’t actually want to maintain any kind of distance at all. Certainly not a safe one; when has anything between himself and Hannibal been safe? Will finds himself committed to the pretense that what he wants is distance, when what he actually wants is anything but. It’s only the threat of humiliation, of once again being overtaken by the force of his lust - by the force of Hannibal’s lust reverberating through him and hijacking mirror neurons - that prompts his attempts at separation. What he really wants is to curl up in the electrifying warmth of Hannibal’s lips and fingers and let the force that swells between them bury him alive. Unable to do that, Will finds himself fighting both the physical layout of the ship and the emotional layout of his psyche as he attempts to create space between them.

They sleep in shifts of two to six hours. Will’s longest turn at the helm comes each night from midnight to six am - six hours of unbroken darkness. It’s quiet, usually, the kind of atmosphere that fosters dreaming, even when one is awake. The sea contains no monsters except the ones Will brings it from his memory.

At six he kills the engine, and retires to the mid cabin sleeping quarters. They’d replaced the mattresses, when it became evident that they wouldn’t have the luxury of sleeping simultaneously until they reached their destination. With his mind still shaken from contending with the ghosts of the night sea, Will sinks into his bunk and slides into sleep with more ease than he has ever known, the motion of the ship and the sound of the shower running soothing his jangled nerves. He dozes deeply for a couple hours, then wakes to find breakfast laid out in the kitchen on covered plates - simple offerings of scrambled eggs and sausage, fruit juice and coffee - ready to be carried above deck, where Hannibal waits. They eat together, Hannibal standing by the wheel and raising the plate with one hand and his fork with the other, Will still clad in soft flannel pajama bottoms.

They eat all their meals this way, and if the informality vexes Hannibal he keeps it to himself. Will sleeps most of the time he isn’t captaining their vessel, or helps Hannibal practice using the sails. He’s a quick learner; before long he needs no help, and Will contents himself with watching the graceful, competent way Hannibal moves.

Engine noises and the sound of water make conversation difficult. Unless the water is flat and they are standing side by side, they’re unable to maintain the kind of dialogue that has previously defined their interactions. Instead, a comfortable silence settles over the boat at most times. Hours - maybe even an entire day, once - pass without either of them speaking a word. They communicate instead with their eyes and bodies - hips brushing as they pass on deck, hands lingering as they pass a thermos of coffee between them. Occasionally, Hannibal will run a hand down his arm as he walks by, his fingers stroking Will from shoulder to wrist without any explanation or comment.

Everyday is much the same. Will counts them by mornings, with thick lines of graphite he makes on a scrap of paper by his bed as he stumbles into it after sunrise.
“You’re different,” she says, “because you can understand him. Because you’re just that much more malleable than the subjects he would normally bend. That remarkable mind of yours - do you think he won’t relish reading what the journals publish about you?”

Will snorts, and wonders, not for the first time, why she’s the ghost that haunts him on these nights. There are memories he’d rather see. But then again, maybe seeing her hurts him least, her death a triumph and not a tragedy in his worldview. He shudders to think what conversations he might have with Abigail these days. Bedelia is, at least, a better verbal jouster than Garrett Jacob Hobbs. “Must it always be that?” he asks archly. “I’m different because he loves me.”

“And you love him,” she challenges, and then presses on when he offers no correction. “Will your love be sufficient to save you?”

“I don’t need to be saved,” Will answers shortly. “He doesn’t need to be saved. We’re the ones from whom other people need to be saved, Bedelia.”

“Your love unites you.” Her eyes are the dark swell of the tide. Her eyes are the empty ring of the new moon. Her eyes are her eyes are nothing but holes in her skull, into which Will falls again and again. “A bond to be feared. Perhaps even by you?”

“I’m not afraid.”

******

They refuel for the first time in North Carolina. There’s a floating gas pump, and a slanting metal plank that leads up to a small convenience store. Will wraps a scarf tightly around his neck, taking care to obscure as much of his scarred cheek as possible before he leaves the boat with a last look of hope. Because really that’s all he’s got - hope that they won’t be recognized here, that he won’t walk into the little store and see his face and Hannibal’s staring back from a TV screen or a wanted poster, that this will all somehow work out for them, not because they deserve it but because they’ve worked so hard it seems unfair for it not to.

It will work out, he tells himself as he walks the ramp up from the boat slip to the convenience store. If he has to murder everyone working here - everyone on earth - he will make it work out for them.

Will doesn’t find his own face reflected back at him when he enters the little store, his entrance
heralded by a little metal bell above the door. The woman at the cash register doesn’t bother looking up from her cell phone. Even when he places his chosen items on the counter in front of her, Will doesn’t earn more than a glance from her. She hands him a couple of used looking plastic bags and lets him sort his own bagging.

His breath catches at the top of the ramp, when he looks down to see Hannibal standing on the dock, speaking into a cellphone while the pump attendant looks on. He has a hat, at least, but there’s no disguising that mouth or those cheekbones. Which was why they’d decided that Will would be the one to deal with people, would pretend he was traveling alone. Will thought they’d decided.

“Thank you,” Hannibal says as Will approaches, arms full of groceries he already knows Hannibal will sigh and sneer to behold - white bread, canned vegetables, dry soup mix, a pallid tomato and a couple sad bananas the only fresh produce he’d managed to find. Will watches Hannibal hand the attendant the phone and a folded bill.

“Happy to help,” the man says. “Anything else we can do you for?”

“I believe we are sufficiently outfitted now,” Hannibal answers, sizing up the bags in Will’s arms as he speaks. “Have a pleasant day.”

“Safe travels,” the attendant says, a slight twang to his voice. Will hands the bags to Hannibal and sends him below deck wordlessly. He unties the ship and pulls away from the dock on his own, heading out of the cove with the motor scarcely churning the waters. When they’re out to sea he cuts the engine and heads below.

Hannibal is grimacing at the loaf of white bread, just as Will had anticipated. Will doesn’t give him a chance to speak, just crosses the small space between the stairs and the kitchenette and presses Hannibal firmly against the fridge and brings their mouths together with a bestial groan.

It’s hard to say which of them is more out of breath when Will pulls back. Hannibal’s eyes are dark with blown pupils, gazing heatedly from beneath heavy lids. Will thinks of him standing on the dock, of the anger and fear Will had felt in that moment, and he brings a deceptively steady hand to rest against Hannibal’s chest, fingers splayed to cover as much surface area as possible.

The desire throbbing between them is nearly violent in its sudden intensity. There’s no build up, no time to slow down, just this sudden wave of fire. Will’s breath is coming from behind clenched teeth, Hannibal’s falling in hot gasps between them. Will can feel every inch of Hannibal’s firm body pressed against him, and Hannibal’s words ricochet around in his skull. There’ll be no stopping us once we get started. Once they get started, Will thinks, this hunger building between them will
devour not only themselves but the whole world.

“Be more careful,” Will growls, pressing his teeth and his words to the damp flesh beneath Hannibal’s ear. He can feel the blood pushing through the vein beneath his lips, and he darts his tongue over Hannibal’s pulse, relishes the answering shudder. *I can’t lose you*, he thinks, and trusts that Hannibal will hear the words somehow.

Hannibal nods, his hair brushing against the side of Will’s jaw with the movement. He doesn’t speak, chest rising and falling a little too rapidly. Will breathes against his skin. His head isn’t clear enough yet for him to feel surprised at his own boldness, but it’s clearing enough for him to know that shock *will* come eventually. He’ll need to pull back in a moment and retreat to cool down, but not yet. He wants to memorize this moment, the physical reaction he feels from Hannibal - the quiet, ragged breaths, the heartbeat stuttering, the firmness of Hannibal’s cock pressed against his answering arousal through their clothes - so he can conjure it later. A charm to ward against fear on those long hours he spends in the company of the dead.

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“He’ll expect you to keep killing,” Bedelia says. “How long before your standard for punishment starts to slip? You went from slaying dragons to torturing drunks before the moon had time to wax and wane.”

Will shrugs.

“You’ve arrived at the threshold,” Bedelia purrs, her voice rasping low through the dark, salt air.

“I’ve passed through it,” he says derisively. “We occupy a new liminal space together, now, face a new threshold.”

“Who will you each be on the other side, I wonder,” she hums, considering him sightlessly.

He doesn’t tell her, even this ghost his mind manifests for him, that the other side is ashes, that undergoing this change will break them apart piece by piece. He’s not frightened of the transformation that awaits them. Will anticipates a continued decay in their individual codes of ethics - because, despite all evidence to the contrary, they both live by - kill by - some kind of standard, their victims never wholly innocent. *Sinners*, he considers, *facing divine retribution*. Bedelia is right; he can feel the core of his heart eroding. He doesn’t doubt that Hannibal, if not already familiar with
the sensation, will know the feeling in time. The force of what’s between them will consume them entirely, but, he thinks, it will consume plenty of other people, first.

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“Have you ever been with a man before, Will?” Hannibal asks, handing him a thermos of steaming coffee as he comes to sit beside him in the cool light of the afternoon sun. The wind is dead, and the boat glides forward with the rumble of its engine. Hannibal stares out over the glimmering waves, into the red and orange horizon. The air is growing warmer these days. “We’ll be in Florida soon, I think,” he says, then looks back at Will with an expectant expression.

Will reckons there’s no answer he could have to that question that wouldn’t make his face flame up as it does now. He doesn’t even bother feeling shocked that Hannibal would ask him something this personal this casually because of course he would, just to see what Will’s face does when confronted with his own discomfort. He coughs. “N-no. Not really.”

Hannibal raises a pale eyebrow. “Not really?” he repeats, the syllables rolling inquisitively from his tongue.

Will inwardly curses Hannibal’s curiosity, not for the first time. The urge to squirm under that inquisitive gaze is overwhelming; the urge to push Hannibal into the water is even stronger. He’s never discussed this with anyone, save the stray dogs who always seemed drawn to him, even as a child. “Just a kiss,” he says steadily, and takes a sip of his coffee, wishing it was something stronger. “I was young.”

He can read the interest in Hannibal’s face plainly, and braces himself for the next question. How young? Why only a kiss? What was his name? How did it feel? Why just the once? But through some holy miracle, no questions come. So Will asks his own. “I suppose you have more experience?”

“I’ve had some practice,” Hannibal admits, and Will resists rolling his eyes at what must be blatant understatement. He remembers Hannibal’s social life in Baltimore before, a parade of endless dinner parties, opera outings, symphonies, and besotted socialites hanging on his every perfectly articulated aphorism. Some of these suspicions must show on his face, or rise from his skin in a sickly sweet miasma, because Hannibal continues, “Less than you are imagining, I think. Sex has rarely interested me enough to engage in social entanglements beyond the superficial.”

“Is that a fancy way of saying you don’t like having to talk about your feelings afterwards?”
Hannibal smiles. “I suppose that could serve as a crude interpretation. Any truly worthwhile sexual experience would have involved exposing more of myself and my preferences than felt safe.”

Will desperately wants to know what that more refers to, and what Hannibal considers truly worthwhile, but he finds the questions impossible to ask. The glint in Hannibal’s eye almost dares him to prod, but Will senses he’ll discover the truth of it if he just waits long enough. Was it just that Hannibal worried romantic partners would eventually connect him to the Chesapeake Ripper? That would certainly make sense, but Hannibal had said preferences. Will swallows audibly at the thought, and refuses to follow it further than this.

“Kind of embarrassing,” he admits, instead of interrogating, “being the bumbling inexperienced virgin again. I figured I was over this after high school.” Christ. Hannibal is probably cringing at all of this internally; he’s just too polite to show it. Will wonders, not for the first time, why Hannibal even bothers going to such lengths with him; he’s the one who pushed them here, to this new precipice, when he could have let things remain platonic just as easily. And then Will is gripped by a horrible fear that Hannibal will suggest exactly that - tell him that he’s rethought things and he doesn’t feel this is the necessary evolution of their relationship - and he thinks it might actually drive him insane if it happens. It won’t happen. Surely not. Surely Hannibal must have known he couldn’t count on Will having any sort of experience. Of course Hannibal would be knowledgeable about this, as he is everything else in the world, somehow adept at every possible human activity. “Sorry,” Will concludes lamely, feeling somewhat spiteful.

“You have absolutely nothing to apologize for,” Hannibal tells him. The shadow of a flock of birds flying above them flickers across his face, flashes of sunlight glinting off the red in his irises. His voice is low, rich, sliding like silk over skin. “On the contrary, I find your lack of experience surprisingly alluring. I admit, it’s not usually a quality I look for in a sexual partner. But in this instance I am incredibly gratified at the prospect of being the first person to explore your ass.”

Will’s face catches fire immediately. He can feel the heat so intensely his skin prickles with it. The uncharacteristic crudeness of Hannibal’s language only amplifies the shock Will experiences at his words. His tongue has become a thick and useless piece of meat filling his mouth. Hannibal smiles across at him, leaning back against the railing with a self-satisfied expression on his aristocratic face as Will chokes on air.

“Hang on,” Will sputters, when he finds himself capable of speaking again. His voice sounds rougher than it should. “What makes you assume you’re fucking me?” Let that pull him from his self-congratulations, Will thinks.

“You want me to,” Hannibal says.
The fact that it’s true doesn’t excuse the fact that Will has never explicitly stated this for Hannibal - has barely even thought of it for himself except in vague dreams that flit through his mind at times when he holds his station alone. Will’s fantasies have always had a dangerous tendency to veer off in some uncontrollable and uncomfortable directions, and how do you fantasize about something with which you have virtually no experience, anyway? Maybe because of his lack of experience, or maybe because nothing is ever easy with Hannibal, Will finds his considerable imagination fading into nothing but a throbbing white need when he tries to picture what will happen when they reach Miami. He’s thought less about what he wants, exactly, than he has about the force of his desire. “What makes you think that?” he asks, and he sounds defensive to his own ears.

“It’s true, isn’t it?” Hannibal asks, leaning back against the railing with his elbows behind him. “You want to feel me as far inside you as I can get.”

Will can scarcely hear his voice answering above the din of his clamoring heartbeat. “I don’t even think about it.”

“You’re thinking about it now.” Hannibal cocks his head to the side. “What do you want, Will? Maybe you’d be more comfortable telling me directly.”

Will finds this unlikely. His face clearly communicates as much. “I just want,” he starts, and then sighs, shakes his head, rakes his fingers through his hair - a gesture made meaningless by the wind that abruptly pushes his hair back into his face. “I just don’t want to have to talk about it. Think about it.” As if he could possibly keep himself from thinking about it - about the way Hannibal had looked at him, and the echoing desire he had felt engulfing him under that gaze. “Just let it happen? I don’t even know. What to think. Can we revisit the part of this conversation where I’m an embarrassing virgin with no experience of any kind? Why do we have to talk about this?”

“What do you think about,” Hannibal asks, choosing to ignore everything Will has just said, “when you think about us?”

Will swallows. He wonders for a moment if he’d be able to swim to shore if he just jumped off the ship now. Wonders why this is so damned difficult. Curses Hannibal’s insatiable curiosity. Stumbles bravely forward. “I - I imagine kissing you.” Hannibal gives a little hum, encouraging him to continue. He sighs. “I think about what it’ll be like, wherever we end up.” White curtains blowing on a pleasant breeze. “I wonder if this will ever feel anything other than thrilling and terrifying. I have dozens of questions, but when I think about it none of the answers matter. I imagine kissing you… killing with you.”

Hannibal’s eyes gleam, and Will takes a step towards him, setting his coffee next to the wheel to cool. “You took Cassie Boyle’s lungs while she was still using them,” he says, watches Hannibal lick his lips, his red eyes wary but bright with curiosity. Will thinks of that day - the golden glow of
sunlight over the field; the crows that hovered in the grass near by, waiting for the men to leave so they could scavenge; the antlers, dark with blood, like great misshapen hands cradling her torn and lifeless form. “You did that for me, so I would see what I’d been missing in Hobbs’ kills. You tortured that girl,” he says, “vivisected her. For me.”

Hannibal is silent, face closed. *That first time you tried to show me,* Will thinks, and remembers the cold, disdainful feel of the kill, the display. He steps closer still.

“I want to watch you,” he says, and licks his lips at the sound Hannibal makes deep in the back of his throat. “I want you to watch me.”

Hannibal raises a hand - not entirely steady, Will notices - to stroke the side of his face. His fingers slide into Will’s hair, pulling Will just a little off balance. *Like always,* Will thinks. How one man can be both the chaos and equilibrium at the heart of his life, Will cannot say. He rocks on his heels, letting Hannibal’s heavy caresses sway him.

“Are you capable,” Hannibal asks, “of distinguishing between sex and death?”

Will watches the way Hannibal’s mouth moves over the words. “Pleasure and violence,” he says, contemplative, “desire and decay. With us, they become less distinguishable by the day.”

“With death, at least, you have some experience,” Hannibal says, his words softened by the fond and playful smirk on his face. “Desire first, death afterwards, they typically say.”

“But we aren’t typical.”

“No,” Hannibal smiles, “we certainly aren’t.”

He gives Will’s hair one last tug - fingers dug in near the scalp so that Will’s head moves easily at the pressure - then leaves Will to his thoughts, and the deepening dark.

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“You plan on falling faster and faster,” Bedelia whispers above the waves, “accelerating till the
“speed crushes you.”

“I look forward to it,” Will bites at her.

“Look forward to what?”

Will turns to see Hannibal, holding out a steaming thermos and smiling bemusedly. “Oh, um.” Will glances back but of course, no ghosts are brave enough to stand in Hannibal’s company, and the memory of Bedelia has retreated to the dark corners of his mind once more. “Getting to the Keys. Sorry. Talking to myself.” He takes the thermos with a grateful smile. “You’re early.”

Hannibal lifts one shoulder in a lazy simulacrum of a shrug. “I found myself awake and thought you might like to be relieved a little before the allotted hour. I know these night watches take more of a toll on your psyche than you are readily prepared to admit.”

Will sips the coffee - just this side of too hot, and delicious and deep. “Mmmm. What toll do they take on you?” Hannibal just smiles. “Okay, yeah, I could use some sleep. Thanks.”

But he doesn’t want to leave Hannibal’s presence, suddenly. It’s not the same old anxiety over loss and abandonment that grips him now, just a sense of contentment and protection that comes from being near the man. They’ve been aboard the same tiny vessel for over two weeks, but they’ve scarcely been around each other, except in brief moments of unbearable intensity.

There’s a pair of blankets folded in the space below the wheel, and Will fishes them out. Hannibal watches as he moves to the stern, lays one blanket down on the deck and then lays himself atop it. The air is warm enough now, even at night, that one blanket will be sufficient. They should be there soon. Tomorrow, Will reckons.

“Is it okay if I just sleep out here for a while?”


Hannibal disappears below deck, and Will frowns. But he reemerges a moment later, hauling one twin mattress easily along. “This will be more comfortable for you,” he explains, unnecessarily. Will smiles up at him. There’s a softness in Hannibal’s expression that Will rarely sees, though maybe it’s just the dim starlight that makes it seem so.
“Will you talk to me?” Will asks, when he’s made himself comfortable again. “I miss listening to you,” he admits.

“Of course,” Hannibal says. “Do you have a preferred topic?”

“Anything,” Will says.

So Hannibal starts talking. “Let us imagine,” he says, “that the ether does penetrate any transparent body, its particles will still be able to transmit the motion of the waves just as do those of the ether, supposing them each to be elastic.” He’s reciting something he read once, Will thinks, from memory. Even after knowing him for all these years, Will finds it impossible not to experience periodic amazement at these casual shows of mental superiority. Hannibal’s voice rolls serenely on, words that mean as little to Will as the rumble of the engine or the lap of the water, till soon words, motor and water are all one blended noise, from which Will plucks the occasional word or phrase.

“…experiment shows further that these two reflections are of almost equal intensity, and that in various transparent bodies this intensity increases directly as the refractive index. Thus we see that reflection from glass is stronger than that from water, while in turn that from diamond is stronger than that from glass…”

Will lets Hannibal’s steady voice blend with the sound of the night and the sea, and feels himself drifting into sleep, wondering about the intensity and strength of the reflection he sees from Hannibal.

Chapter End Notes

Working on replying to comments! Sorry this chapter is kind of short and transitional.
Chapter Summary

Honestly, this was supposed to be the end of last week's chapter but I just did not get my shit together in time. Sorry for any typos; my shit is scarcely together now.

The house is a short walk from the shore, its shaded porch and french doors facing the sandy beach and the sea beyond. A sea of waist high green and yellow grasses surround the back of the house in a sea of waving foliage, while the front faces the beach. Will closes the car door and looks up in time to see a pair of cranes flying silently above on massive wings. Like angels, he thinks.

They’d left their boat in a slip in a marina in Upper Sugarloaf - Hannibal said Chiyoh would handle its sale, and the destruction of their belongings on board. Hannibal had gone into the boathouse, leaving Will in the hot afternoon air alone for a moment, then reemerged with a set of keys dangling from a simple silver keychain. They’d found the car that went with the key in the parking lot - a low, dark green convertible with leather seats, at which Will had raised his eyes and Hannibal had given a fluid have shrug.

“How did you arrange all this?” Will asks.

“Chiyoh’s tastes,” he’d said, by way of explanation, and slid into the driver seat and brought them here, without consulting a map of any kind.

Now Will stares up at the house - a two-story conch house wearing a fresh coat of powder blue paint. The shutters are a pale lavender, the pillars and fencing around the porch white, and everything about it looks clean and light and pleasant. Will cranes his neck to study the second story, where one window has been left open, and gauzy white drapes are spilling out to flap in the slight breeze. Will wiggles his shoes into the sand. He could turn, run, and be in the water in a matter of seconds, so close is the front door to the sea.

“How did you arrange all this?” Will asks.

“Chiyoh handled it,” Hannibal says, “I merely gave her some parameters within which to work.”

Will remembers Hannibal returning the man’s phone at the gas station in North Caroline, remembers the force of his own panic and anger and realizes now that he’d never thought to consider what Hannibal had wanted with the cellphone in the first place. Of course, it would have been obvious if Will had bothered to think about it; naturally Hannibal would call Chiyoh and have her set up suitable lodging for them in Florida. Either Chiyoh is rich and generous with old friends, Will thinks,
or she has access to at least some of the foreign bank accounts Hannibal definitely possesses. Will can’t begin to understand the nature of their relationship, but he trusts that Hannibal knows what he’s doing, and that Chiyoh truly does have his best interests at heart. There’s a distinct possibility, Will reflects, that Chiyoh feels exactly the same way about him.

“Shall we go inside?” Hannibal asks, gesturing forward with one hand while his other comes to rest on the small of Will’s back, ushering him gently towards the house as if steering him. Will lets himself be led, the hand on his back a reminder of what’s going to happen between them, now that they’ve finally reached land. Will’s heart thuds. He’s unsure now, whether he feels more excited or nervous. Honestly, he’s spent the past two and a half weeks grinding his teeth with anticipation, and now finds himself filled by a ridiculous apprehension. He schools his face to neutral calmness and follows the gentle push at his back, up the stairs and into the cool and well-lit foyer.

The bottom floor of the house is open and airy. Hannibal throws the french doors open onto the porch. There’s a set of rattan patio furniture, bedecked with jade green cushions. The furniture inside is light wood, breathable cotton upholstery, cool colors, as unlike any place Hannibal has previously inhabited as fire is from ice.

“Nice place,” Will says, following Hannibal into kitchen. It’s not quite the level of quality he knows Hannibal prefers, but it’s spacious and, with its cherrywood cabinets, its pale marble countertops, elegant enough. The floor is a pale blue tile, and Will isn’t sure what frightens him more - how similar all this seems to what he’s been dreaming of since before Hannibal busted him out of the insane asylum, or his lack of surprise at the similarities. Maybe this isn’t real, he thinks, but it isn’t the first time he’s had that thought.

There’s a mudroom with an adjoining walk-in shower - for rinsing off after a swim in the sea, Will supposes, and then pictures rivulets of blood running down the steamy white walls and feels himself prophetic.

“I wanted a place you would be comfortable,” Hannibal says casually, “relaxed. There’s much to celebrate, after all. And, additionally, I felt this place incongruous enough with my known aesthetic that its purchase would not alert any of our old friends.”

Our old friends, Will thinks. It occurs to him that Hannibal was Jack’s friend, too, and Alana’s. More than just her friend. Somehow in his mind Hannibal has always been only his, the betrayals for him alone. He wonders now how Jack felt, when he finally began to believe that the man who had snatched his wife back from the jaws of death had himself closed those jaws over so many others. He wonders if Hannibal felt anything at all.

“The bedroom is upstairs,” Hannibal says, and slips his hand into Will’s as if they do this everyday. Will lets Hannibal pull him up the narrow staircase - framed photographs on the wall show another
man’s family, smiling and laughing across years and memories - his heartbeats drowning out the sound of his footsteps.

“There’s an empty room,” Hannibal gestures. “If we stay here long, I may make it into a study.”

“I don’t think the climate is conducive to year round fires in the wood burning fireplace,” Will says, feeling lightheaded. He tries to sound casual. “Show me the bedroom.”

Hannibal smiles with mischievous pleasantness. “Feeling tired?”

“Exhausted,” Will replies sarcastically.

He sees the edge of Hannibal’s jagged canines flash for an instant as the man’s lip curls, and feels his heart rate pick up. Hannibal hasn’t even touched him yet and his body is already reacting as if he’s jogged half a mile.

“Right this way,” Hannibal says, and holds the bedroom door open. The knob is brass, Will sees, and he can almost feel the cool metal under his hand just by looking at Hannibal’s fingers on it. And then he wants to feel Hannibal’s fingers on him, instead. He blinks, and lifts his head to take in the room.

It’s a large room, with a pair of tall rectangular windows facing out towards the ocean. Will walks towards the open one, letting his hands trail over the white curtains that seem like manifestations of a vision. His previous thoughts come back to him now, and his heart clenches with the sudden, horrible fear that this is all just a dream - that they’re still on the boat, that he’s still in custody, that none of this is real - and he rubs the fabric between his fingers for the concrete evidence of the moment’s veracity.

Outside, the low afternoon sunlight glimmers on the sandbar, and a pelican takes flight. Will turns from the view, his faith in the reality of the room and his present conditions suitably restored. There’s a dresser in one corner, and a door to what he assumes is the en suite bathroom. And in the center of the room, appearing extremely suggestive, a massive, wood framed bed dominates the space.

Unlike the rest of the furniture, the bedding is dark - a deep, rich cobalt blue. The exact color of Hannibal’s old dining room walls back in Baltimore what feels like a lifetime ago, Will thinks. And the exact color of the suits Hannibal most prefers to see him wear. Will wonders for a fleeting moment if Hannibal had his dining room painted in order to match Will’s coloring - if it had been
some other color before they met - but the thought is too daunting to consider - because honestly, it’s not impossible, or even improbable. The sheets are definitely a deliberate choice, Will thinks. He can imagine Hannibal dictating orders to Chiyoh, and the thought makes him frown.

It occurs to him, too, that this is the first time since Hannibal’s escape when Will hasn’t at least had the option of his own room, his own bed. He thinks of the empty room Hannibal indicated before, and is abruptly certain that it was a bedroom until sometime in the very recent past when someone gutted it at Chiyoh’s behest. He thinks of the photographs someone forgot to remove from the stairwell - photos of two parents and a little girl. He wonders if the wallpaper in the - now empty - room is covered in horses or flowers, if that’s the reason Hannibal hadn’t bothered opening the door.

*Every move deliberate,* Will thinks, *herding and corralling prey towards the desired destination.* He’s not sure he should feel the jolt of dizzying elation he does, at the thought of being captured and caught.

“This is great,” Will says, lamely. He licks his lips, unable to look anywhere but at Hannibal’s mouth. “Perfect.”

“I’m pleased that you approve of the place,” Hannibal says. “It is my first secret hideout in Florida, and while it isn’t quite to my usual taste, I find it rather pleasant myself.”

“Yeah, well, calm down,” Will says, taking a step to erase some of the distance between the two of them. He smiles crookedly. His hands are shaking by his sides, but when he presses them open palmed against Hannibal’s chest one can scarcely tell. “It’s no villa in Miami.”

“We’ll need to earn that with our cocaine trade,” Hannibal says, smiling back. “You wouldn’t appreciate it as much if I just bought it for us.”

“Hmmm,” Will hums. He spreads his fingers over the front of Hannibal’s white cotton dress shirt. Beneath, he can detect the heartbeat, steady and strong. His own is clamorous, calamitous, racing and faltering with each moment. He’s waited, and waited, and now finally….But he finds himself more nervous than he would have anticipated, suddenly uncertain of himself. “True.”

Hannibal chooses to take a step forward - a long stride that brings him so close their chests are pushed together, Will’s hands trapped between. Will swallows loudly, refuses to take a step back in retreat or remove his hands. He tilts his head to blink up at Hannibal, and it occurs to him that he really has no idea what is about to happen, beyond a gross mechanical understanding. All of this is so far outside his realm of experience it makes Will feel a little dizzy. He’s had little enough experience with women - and virtually none with men. He swallows again, and Hannibal, smiling,
lifts a hand to stroke his jaw.

“Something you want, Will?” Hannibal asks, his voice a low rumble that Will feels reverberating through his ribs and sternum. His thumb grazes the curve of Will’s lower lip, and Will takes it between his teeth gently without thinking. When Hannibal’s eyes flash, Will bites down a little harder.

“Something you want?” he asks, releasing Hannibal’s thumb, one eyebrow arched in a challenging query.

“Oh, very much,” Hannibal confirms, and Will can feel the depth and richness of his voice where his hands are pressed flat to Hannibal’s chest. “I think dinner, first, and then - ”

Whatever Hannibal had been about to say, it is lost in the press of Will’s mouth over his. The kiss is rough and graceless, a desperate press of closed lips, Will’s hands slipping from between their bodies to bury themselves in the short soft locks of Hannibal’s hair. And then Will tilts his head, and their mouths fit together perfectly, and Will feels the floor swaying beneath him as he opens his lips and sucks Hannibal’s lower lip between his own.

“Two and a half weeks,” Will pants against Hannibal’s mouth when they part to breathe again. “A thousand miles at sea, watching you, wanting you.” Hannibal’s mouth covers his for a second, and Will groans, pulling the other man’s face closer by his hair.

“Soon,” Hannibal says, but the word is mostly lost into Will’s mouth. He laughs, the sound vibrating against Will’s lips, and Will feels Hannibal’s hands come up to frame his face. Then he feels Hannibal take a step back, and he makes a plaintive sound too close to a whine, into the kiss Hannibal is already drawing back from. How is he this needy? He’s never felt this needy with anyone before. It must be Hannibal’s fault, somehow. It usually is.

“I need to get dinner started,” Hannibal says, removing his hands from Will’s cheeks, and for a second Will thinks maybe he’s speaking metaphorically, or in another language, because he definitely can’t literally mean he’s going to go downstairs and start cooking dinner right now. Except that then Will looks at him, and it becomes apparent that yes, that’s exactly what Hannibal intends to do.

Only he’s not moving. Just standing and staring at Will with a look of bewildered amusement. In fact, Will thinks this is probably one of the few and far between moments when Hannibal doesn’t know exactly how he looks, hasn’t intentionally chosen which expression he’ll show.
Fortune favors the bold, Will tells himself, and pulls his shirt off in one - more or less - graceful motion. He looks up, right into Hannibal’s eyes, his own intentions plainly writ across his face.

They have nothing to do with dinner.

Will’s heart is hammering so hard he’s almost positive it’s visible through his chest. He thinks of old cartoons, images he saw on some motel room TV a hundred years ago - the lovesick wolf pushing his heart back into his chest with both hands. His own heart feels as if it’s attempting to beat its way out of his chest in a desperate bid to get nearer to Hannibal. Hannibal, who is currently staring at him with one eyebrow raised in a look of mildly surprised approval, and there’s more than a hint of a challenge in the curve of his smirk. Eager to see what Will will do next. He’s been skittish up till this point, Will knows, and Hannibal has no doubt expected him to continue in this vein. He’s got Hannibal’s attention now, maybe enough to convince him that whatever grandiose romantic fantasies he’s entertaining aren’t necessary. But it isn’t enough, Will knows; if he stops now, Hannibal won’t hesitate long before brushing him off until after whatever five course meal he’s no doubt planning to prepare.

If he’s going to be daring, Will figures he might as well put it all on the line. The worst that can happen is outright rejection and the resulting humiliation from which he’ll never recover. Keeping that as far from his mind as possible, Will keeps his eyes locked with Hannibal’s as he slides his jeans and boxer briefs off simultaneously, toeing off his shoes and socks to step free of his clothes and stand, naked, in front of the bed.

Hannibal’s fists clench and relax, one time. Will smiles. He might be risking a cardiovascular incident at the moment, but he can still interpret the evidence just fine, and the evidence in this room right now is telling him that Hannibal’s not going downstairs to the kitchen, or anywhere else, anytime soon.

Will reaches down and wraps one hand around himself, fist loose around his half-hard cock, and the look Hannibal gives him is electrifying and terrifying. It still makes him feel so exposed, so vulnerable, to display himself like this, but he manages to keep his face from turning scarlet. The expression on Hannibal’s face helps a lot. Will licks his lips, thrusts into the tunnel of his slack fist lazily. “What are you making?”

Hannibal blinks at him dazedly for a second, and Will realizes with a immense satisfaction that he’s momentarily forgotten what they were discussing. Hannibal Lecter, distracted from the prospect of cooking in a proper kitchen for the first time in nearly three weeks, Will thinks, and that alone is a triumph beyond reckoning. And the fact that it’s because of him, because Hannibal wants to see him like this - enjoys seeing him this way - makes his breath catch.
“I might be persuaded to let dinner wait for now,” Hannibal says, recovering from his momentary disorientation. His voice is steady, but deeper, rougher than before. He’s staring at Will with a look of such intensity that Will feels it should certainly quell the force of his arousal. However, Hannibal’s steely eyed stare appears to be accomplishing the opposite effect; Will’s cock swells under the scrutiny. He uncurls his fist, brushing his fingers along the shaft of his cock and watching the way Hannibal’s eyes flicker between his face and his hand where he is touching himself.

“Please,” Will says, voice a little breathy, “how can I persuade you?”

Hannibal smirks. “Undress me,” he orders - because it’s definitely not a request - in that same dark, husky voice.

Wait, what. Will’s brain feels like it’s blown a fuse for a moment. Then he recovers, enough to realize that Hannibal is likely calling his bluff - or testing how committed Will is, or attempting to shock him out of a rational mindset to encourage more primal reactions - and he takes a step closer. The space between them disappears, and Will raises his hands to begin at Hannibal’s top button. Only his hands are shaking so badly that it takes him much longer than it should to work the top button out, and by the time he’s made it through the second one he has his tongue stuck between his teeth and he feels like his brain is sweating. He pulls the third button free with a noise that’s more animal than human, and tugs the shirt up over Hannibal’s head instead of continuing with the impossibly tricky buttons.

Which leaves him face to face with Hannibal’s bare chest. Oh. He swallows, mouth gone suddenly dry, and tilts his head back to meet Hannibal’s eyes. Hannibal is looking down at him, expression expectant, not quite a smirk. Everything feels like a dream, and yet shockingly real, beyond any fantasy or memory or even the nightmares that wake him. As if he’s fallen into a dream, become a dream himself. He can think of nothing quite like it, except perhaps the hallucinations he experienced at the height of his sickness. Something that can’t be real but is.

For a moment, the world sways, and Will feels himself falling, and then the floor is still again. Hannibal is watching him, face a blank now, but Will senses the energy and fascination rolling off him. His hands are steadier when he lifts them to Hannibal’s hips, hooks his index fingers into the waist of Hannibal’s slacks and tugs. There’s a flicker in the depths of Hannibal’s eyes, like the reflection of a creature darting between trees in a dark wood. Will licks his lips, tucks his chin toward his chest and looks up from beneath his dark lashes.

He feels Hannibal’s hand sinking into the curls at the back of his neck, and his eyes slide shut at the touch of those long fingers carding through his hair, only to fly open again when Hannibal wrenches his head back cruelly a second later. Will gasps, eyes widening, vision filled by Hannibal, Hannibal looming over him, Hannibal twisting him, bringing him to heel.
“I told you to do something, Will.” His voice is smooth, unbothered, a gentle reminder that’s completely at odds with the pain burning along the back of his neck. Hannibal pulls hard one more time before releasing him, and Will stumbles, momentarily jarred by the release.

You like me unsteady, he thinks, when I can’t think straight, when I have to rely on you. It’s strange to think how the same qualities within him that repulsed most people just seem to drawn Hannibal closer. Will’s hands are shaking again, but only slightly, as he unbuttons Hannibal’s slacks. Somehow, he feels more exposed, the more he uncovers Hannibal. He takes a breath, and starts to slide Hannibal’s slacks down, over his thighs and knees.

With a shock, Will realizes Hannibal isn’t going to help him at all, and that if he’s going to get Hannibal’s pants off he’s going to have to actually kneel in front of him, at least on one knee, which is doubtless what Hannibal had intended all along. Part of him wants to fight - take your own fucking clothes off, he wants to say - but more of him wants to obey. He looks up into Hannibal’s eyes as he sinks to his knees.

“Oh, Will,” Hannibal sighs, reaching down to stroke his face gently as Will pulls first one leg and then the other through the slacks and Hannibal stands in only his black boxer briefs, the front straining over his erection. Will’s heart is hammering so hard he’s certain Hannibal will feel it through his face - possibly even through the vibrations shaking the floor beneath them. “You have no idea how it feels to see you like this.”

“I can imagine,” Will answers, voice rough. He can’t look up, can’t tear his eyes away from Hannibal’s body long enough to look him in the eyes. Will stares at the damp spot darkening the black fabric of Hannibal’s underwear and swallows hard, feeling the heat that’s uncoiling in his belly. He feels like he’s losing his mind. In a moment, I might do something insane.

But Hannibal shakes his head - Will sees it from the corner of his eyes. “Even with your prodigious imagination,” he answers, “I assure you, you cannot.”

He looks up, then, into Hannibal’s maroon eyes, and leans forward to bring his open mouth to the tenting fabric of Hannibal’s briefs. He presses his lips to cover the spot where pre-come has soaked the soft black cotton, breathing the subtle, salty taste of Hannibal’s body through the thin layer of clothing. He breathes, a deliberate heavy, hot breath, and feels Hannibal’s cock jerk against his lips. And all the while he keeps his eyes open, trained on Hannibal’s, unwilling to break eye contact, even as he reaches up to hook his fingers in the elastic of Hannibal’s briefs and pull.

Hannibal’s cock springs free as Will drags his underwear down and off. Holy shit. Will finds himself at a momentary loss - unable to think, unable to process. Hannibal’s cock is huge - much larger than Will was mentally prepared to deal with, in fact - and about five inches from the end of Will’s nose. He stares at it, going cross eyed, and tries to regain control of his senses.
Then he feels Hannibal’s hands under his armpits, dragging him back to his feet. *No, no,* he thinks, suddenly frantic, *did I already fuck it up?* He throws his weight down, feeling it in his knees as they collide with the wood floor.

“Come here,” Hannibal says, in response to the defiance. His voice is stern, and Will hesitates for only a moment before obeying. He climbs to his feet without help, and glares at Hannibal. He hopes he looks defiant and unshaken, but suspects he only looks forlorn at having been told to stand.

Hannibal tugs him closer by his arm, and Will stumbles at being jerked forward so abruptly. He rights himself with a hand on Hannibal’s shoulder, unable to stop the gasp that escapes him at the feeling of Hannibal’s skin beneath his palm. He lets his hand trail over the pale curve of Hannibal’s collar bone, following the motion with wide eyes, unable to believe in the reality of hand and skin and bone.

“It’s too much,” he hears himself saying, and despite the part of his mind that screams for him to shut up before he ruins everything, he can’t stop the confession welling up and out of him. “You’re too much, but I want you so badly, Hannibal.”

“You never know what is enough,” Hannibal murmurs, bringing his mouth close to Will’s ear - close enough for Will to feel the warm air of Hannibal’s breath, “until you know what is more than enough.” He pulls back, and Will forces himself to look up and meet Hannibal’s gaze. Will’s head is swimming, as if he’s been drinking whiskey, instead of coffee and cold water, and he’s so hard he thinks he might pass out if he doesn’t relieve some tension soon. He imagines Hannibal’s hands on him, and thinks he might pass out either way.

Will blinks up at him, and attempts to collect his thoughts to form a coherent reply. It’s hard to think, with Hannibal standing naked before him, so close he can feel the heat from his body. “I want you,” he repeats, because he’s not sure what else there is to say. It really is all *too* much at once - even if he’d had more experience it would still be too much. Too overwhelming. The summation of years of work they’ve both put in, subconsciously and consciously moving themselves towards this moment, and now that they’re here Will finds himself torn between desire and nerves. “I-"

But he finds he has no words left. He’s terrified, really, of all this. The realization of how scared he is comes to him like a blast of cold water and suddenly his hands are shaking and his knees threaten to buckle. A dozen thoughts jostle for space in his skull - performance anxiety, fear of pain, a vague sense of unease about what this is going to mean about who he is, what Hannibal will expect, what those preferences he’d alluded to before might be - and Will feels half sick with the abrupt wave of anxiety. Even so, he knows he would rather forge ahead than risk losing this, risk making Hannibal think this isn’t what he wants.
“I want you,” he says, for a third time, because Hannibal is still staring at him, expressionless and evaluative. “That’s all.”

“You’re afraid,” Hannibal says, his voice slow and even, betraying no emotion. Conversely, Will’s body immediately belies his feelings, his face flushing scarlet in embarrassment at having been found out. He doesn’t have time to find his voice and protest - uselessly, because Hannibal would know it was a lie - before Hannibal continues: “That’s only natural, of course.”

“I am not scared,” Will lies, having regained the ability to speak. “I’m not.”

“Of course it stands to reason that this would make you apprehensive,” Hannibal continues, as if Will hasn’t spoken. Will glowers at him. “I don’t think you want to stop, though,” Hannibal continues, and runs a hand down Will’s shoulder and over his arm, fingers looping into his own. No, Will thinks, heart thudding as Hannibal pulls him gently towards the bed. Don’t stop. “If I’m wrong you’d tell me, yes?”

“No,” Will says. “I mean yes, I would tell you. I don’t want to s-stop.” He clamps his teeth over his lower lip reflexively to stop it from trembling. Hannibal’s hand is still tangled in his own, Hannibal still holding their bodies just shy of touching. Will could step forward, initiate contact himself, but he’s frozen, all his bravado expended early.

“I won’t stop, then,” Hannibal says, and Will’s gut clenches with something that isn’t entirely fear and isn’t entirely lust, but some mixture that’s stronger and stranger by far than either emotion on its own. Burning desire coupled with knife cold fear. “But we’ll take this slower. Do you think you can trust me not to hurt you?”

“Please,” Will says, before he can stop himself, and then frowns at the needy sound of his voice. “I want - I need you to touch me. I can’t wait for this any longer.”

“And you don’t have to,” Hannibal soothes, his hand pulling free from Will’s to tangle in his dark curls - slightly longer and more unruly after a month on the run. “I have every intention of touching you, Will, believe me; I’ve waited for this much longer than you realize.”

Will doubts that. He wouldn’t be surprised to learn that Hannibal has been maneuvering them towards this since before they met. His reputation has always had a nasty habit of preceding him; even before he brought down the Minnesota Shrike, Will Graham was well known in psychiatric circles. He thinks about his first meeting with Fredrick Chilton, the way his eyes had gleamed with greed at the prospect of dissecting Will’s brain. The experience had lacked novelty - Chilton might have been particularly blatant, and discourteous, about his interest, but Will had faced the same
combination of professional curiosity and avarice often enough to recognize and resent it. It would hardly shock him, if Hannibal had heard of him long before they met. And, having heard about him, how could Hannibal be anything other than profoundly curious?

He thinks back to the day they met - Hannibal advancing their conversation into dangerous territory at once, Will pushing back in fury against the sudden, relentless assault on his psyche. It hadn’t been the same as it was with other psychiatrists - even Chilton had been more polite. But it had been a calculated move, he knows, pushing him into anger, forcing him to react emotionally. Unbalancing him. It had been intentional, which implies planning. He finds that the idea doesn’t bother him. Or rather, it bothers him, but his discomfort pales in comparison to his desire.

He licks his lips. “So then touch me,” he says, and Hannibal smiles. And then Will finds himself no longer standing but on the bed, his face buried in a pale fluff of pillows. He has time to lift his head - just enough to take a breath - before he feels Hannibal’s weight covering him. He feels one muscled thigh on each side of his hips, and Hannibal leans forward, straddling his hips and using the pressure of his chest and arms to pin him down. Will feels Hannibal’s dick leaking against his back, trapped between them and rubbing slick against the upper curve of Will’s ass. He groans, pushing his hips down into the impossibly soft duvet.

Hannibal’s mouth is on his neck, traveling upwards with a slow drag of teeth. He catches Will’s earlobe in a gentle bite, pressing down just hard enough to draw a whimper from the man beneath him before releasing the delicate flesh with a wet suck. Hannibal leans closer, kisses the shell of Will’s ear and then licks quickly across the helix before pushing his tongue into Will’s ear.

Heat surges through him, his body electrified by the unfamiliar sensation - by the fact that it’s Hannibal that’s causing it. “Ah, oh my God,” Will moans, twisting beneath Hannibal. He can’t move much; Hannibal holds his head in place with a hand that clenches Will’s jaw so hard it almost hurts, and the weight of his body is enough to effectively pin Will’s slighter frame to the bed. Hannibal growls at his weak struggles, the sound reverberating through Will’s head.

He squirms again, as Hannibal exhales hot air against the wet conch of his ear. Hannibal thrusts against him, his dick dragging against the round of Will’s ass with the motion. Will’s hips snap forward, out of his control. He hears Hannibal snarl again, louder this time, an animalistic noise that fills Will’s belly with incandescence.

Hannibal’s weight lifts for a moment, and Will takes the opportunity to lift his head and take a deeper breath of air. Then the pressure on his back returns - Hannibal’s hand, this time, pushing down on the center of his back. He struggles against the force, involuntarily, and hears Hannibal’s sharp inhalation, feels Hannibal’s dick drooling more copiously against his ass cheek. Will moans, the sound lost into the pillow Hannibal is pushing him down into. His heart hammers in his chest. There’s a certain comfort in being held down like this, Will thinks. Nothing is in his control. Nothing is his fault. There’s no way for him to mess up.
He hears the pop of a lid being flipped, and a moment later feels the cool drizzle of lube running over his thighs. The heat of Hannibal’s hand chases the chill away a second after that, and Will’s mind goes terrifyingly blank as he feels Hannibal’s long, slender fingers rub between his thighs.

“God, Hannibal,” Will pants. His muffled voice sounds slightly comical, but he doesn’t have the energy to laugh about it at the moment. “You’re…you…”

“Shhh,” Hannibal presses a kiss against his shoulder blade, his hand spreading the copious lubricant between Will’s ass cheeks and thighs. Will feels his hand withdraw, feels Hannibal shifting behind him, feels his own cock throbbing against his stomach as he attempts to grind into the mattress, desperate for relief. Hannibal doesn’t let him seek his own release, however; one hand clamps firmly around his hips, angling them back and up. Hannibal’s other hand, Will infers after a couple of seconds, is wrapped around Hannibal’s own cock. He feels the thick crown of Hannibal’s dick rubbing gently against his hole, and his brain snaps.

“What are you doing?” Will’s voice sounds thin and frantic with a combination of desire and nerves. His words are somewhat muffled by the bedding. “I thought - ”

“I’m not going to hurt you,” Hannibal responds, and Will is satisfied that at least Hannibal’s breath is ragged, too, his voice lower and rougher than Will’s heard it. He feels the head of Hannibal’s cock sliding smoothly between his thighs, up and down over the tight ring of muscle and the soft skin beneath. “I’m not going to fuck you,” Hannibal pants, “not now,” and Will whines as Hannibal rubs his hot hard dick against him. Hannibal applies the slightest pressure, not enough to be remotely uncomfortable, but enough that Will’s nerves feel soft and warm and blossoming with need.

“You’ll let me, eventually, though, won’t you?” Hannibal asks. The question ends with a gasp as Hannibal’s well-lubed cock slips against Will’s perineum and between his upper thighs. He can feel the heat of Hannibal between his legs like a thick brand of hot steel, and instinctively brings his legs to press more tightly together. Hannibal’s forehead drops to Will’s shoulder blade with a shaky exhale.

For a second they just breathe, and Will focuses on the throbbing heat pressed against him and his own throbbing heartbeat. Then he feels Hannibal’s thumb brushing lightly between his upper thighs. With one finger, Hannibal circles Will’s wet and wanting hole. “I asked you a question.”

“Y-yes,” Will manages to get out. Because of the weight Hannibal rests on him, he’s forced to arch his back in order to lift his head and speak. His entire body feels strained, taut, like a bow string. “I want you to fuck me. You were, oh, you were right.”
Will’s words trail off into incoherent moans, his hips rolling against the soft bed beneath him as Hannibal thrusts lazily between his thighs. He brings his hands to push Will’s thighs together, tighter. Will can feel Hannibal’s dick rubbing slickly against the underside of his own with every thrust; his brain short circuits at the sensation. For an instant he hears wind rushing, feels as if he’s careening from a great height.

“I thought so,” Hannibal says, breathless. He traces Will’s hole with one oily finger tip, and Will grits his teeth, dragging shaking breaths between his clenched teeth as his mind processes the unfamiliar sensation. There’s a hot ball of white heat building inside of him, unlike anything he’s ever felt. He decides it feels good - it feels really good - and Will finds himself wishing for Hannibal to press harder, finds he does want to feel Hannibal’s finger inside him, in this moment, as foreign and frightening as that is. Then his ever ready imagination offers him the idea of Hannibal’s thick, heavy cock pushing into him, and everything in him goes hot and still for a second. His stomach clenches and flops with excitement, and Will thinks suddenly of the moth he’d seen in Hannibal’s penthouse, of the cocoons forensics had found lodged deeply into Bedelia’s skull. He’s heard of butterflies in stomachs, but right now he feels like he has five or ten of those huge dark winged creatures fluttering inside of his own body.

“Please,” Will gasps, turning his head to the side so far his neck aches, so that he can make himself heard. “Give me more.”

He hears Hannibal chuckle, feels the man’s length dragging against his, thrusting into the tight channel of his inner thighs, which Hannibal is still pushing together. His fingers press immovably into the flesh of Will’s upper thighs. Will’s muscles tremble in a pleasant ache beneath the touch. “I’ll give you everything,” Hannibal replies, “anything you want, Will.”

Will squirms, his cock leaking onto the mattress beneath them. He can feel the slickness of pre-come coating his belly, soaking the sheets. He can’t stop himself from wriggling beneath Hannibal, can’t keep from grinding desperately against the mattress, but it isn’t enough.

The fleshy head of Hannibal’s cock taps against Will’s asshole, and Will gives a muffle scream as Hannibal lets the entire considerable length of his dick run against Will’s hole as he thrusts between his thighs.

“I want to touch you,” Will half sobs. “Hannibal.” He presses his palms against the mattress and pushes, or tries to.

Hannibal lifts himself above Will, enough for Will to squirm onto his back, then he hovers over him. Hannibal’s bangs, grown longer over the last month, are stuck to his forehead in places by a light
glow of perspiration. His pupils are blown, eyes almost entirely black. Will knows he probably looks like a mess, himself; Hannibal still looks mostly composed, though his mouth hangs open for him to breathe through, and his chest brushes against Will’s on each of his short inhalations. Will can smell his sweat, a deep, hot smell that lights up some dormant neurons in his brain.

Gazing down at him, Hannibal’s face softens, a glint of oxblood reappearing around the black of his pupils. He lifts a hand to cup the side of Will’s face, and Will closes his eyes, sighing. How many times has Hannibal touched him like this before, but never like this? His mind is on fire - at the newness of the physical sensations, at the fact that this is all happening with Hannibal, Hannibal’s face and voice and teeth filling his mind.

“Beautiful,” Hannibal breathes, “adaptable, changeable Will Graham. I knew from the moment we met that you were not for them.”

“Who am I for then?” Will rasps. His hips strain upwards, but Hannibal uses one hand to pin them down, resting his own weight on the other forearm.

“You know to whom you belong, Will,” Hannibal says, simply, and everything inside Will is indignation and fire and need.

He lifts his hands to Hannibal’s hips, and tugs, thrusting up against the pressure of Hannibal’s grip simultaneously. Hannibal smirks down, an immovable force. Then the force relents, and their bodies come together, and Will hears Hannibal inhale sharply above him before his own half-cry drowns out the noise. “Oh!” His back arches, hips pressing upwards so that they slide together, trapped between their bellies and slick with lube and pre-come.

Hannibal’s hand closes over his, and Will feels him dragging it between their bodies, to wrap around both of their lengths. Will’s face flames at the touch, and the thought of what they’re doing. His hand won’t close around both of them at once, but he holds them together in a firm half grip as Hannibal thrusts. Hannibal’s hand snakes around Will’s hip to cup one of his asscheeks, and Will grunts at the feeling of Hannibal’s middle finger brushing firmly over his hole. The heat inside him is rising so quickly he thinks his body must be steaming. Much more of this and he may explode.

“Ah, I’m so close,” Will pants, almost sobbing. “Hannibal, oh God, you feel so good.”

Hannibal dips his head, his eyes sliding shut as his breath catches. Will rolls his hips upwards experimentally, feels the slide of their firm lengths against one another and through his fist. He’s trembling, so close it feels like he’s being torn apart by the intense need to come.
He remembers their conversation on the boat - remembers the predatory look in Hannibal’s eyes, and feels himself inspired. “No one’s ever touched me like this before,” Will hears himself saying, shocked at the roughness of his voice, the wantonness of the words. Hannibal’s eyes become black mirrors at the words, his fingers tightening over Wills flesh. He snaps his hips forward and Will groans.

Will is engulfed by Hannibal - the pressure of Hannibal’s chest pinning his, Hannibal’s hips pressing into his, Hannibal’s cock burning along his own, his hand gripping Will’s flesh, finger tip rubbing slow, wet circles around Will’s quivering asshole. It’s too much, he thinks to himself, I’ll come apart. I’ll lose myself. But he no longer cares.

“Come for me, Will,” Hannibal is breathing, and Will practically screams. His eyes fly wide and lock with Hannibal’s, unable to look away as his climax hits. His back arches, and his fist clenches harder around the two of them as his dick pulses, muscles shuddering throughout him at the force of the orgasm rushing through him. The pleasure is so intense he thinks he might black out. Above him, he hears Hannibal grunt his name, and then go still, feels the wet heat of Hannibal’s seed coat his hands and stomach. Hannibal’s face is radiant, mouth slack and eyes blazing beneath heavy lids. And then it’s too much to look at, too much to feel all at once, and Will closes his eyes, throws an arm over his face for good measure.

He feels Hannibal’s mouth covering his, and opens his mouth to respond toe the light brush of Hannibal’s tongue over his lips. It’s a short kiss, messy and panting, both of them out of breath. After a moment, Hannibal rolls over onto his back, tugging Will onto his side against him.

“We’re a mess,” Will mumbles, burying his face in Hannibal’s chest, marveling at the way the hair there scratches against his lips and beard. He’s more attuned to Hannibal’s scent, he finds; it’s as if the essence of Hannibal fills the air around them, as if it’s permeating him, sunk into him. Will wonders if Hannibal has this same feeling about him.

“We’ll clean up in a moment,” Hannibal replies, brushing Will’s hair back from his forehead to press a kiss there. Will shivers at the delicate gesture.

He sighs, and lets his head rest more heavily against Hannibal. He can feel himself drifting off, and he doesn’t stir a moment later when Hannibal rises and disappears into the bathroom for a towel. He shifts himself to allow Hannibal to wipe the drying come off him, but he already feels half asleep, and he’s relieved when Hannibal returns to bed, drawing the covers up over them and wrapping an arm around Will to draw him close.
The room is dark when Hannibal opens his eyes, the only illumination coming from the moonlight that pours through the open window. It falls in a swath of pale luminosity across the sheets, across the line of Will’s body curled in sleep beneath the stained bedclothes. His skin appears quite pale in the moonlight, a glowing silver, and next to it Hannibal’s own sun starved skin seems bleached as old bones. The Florida sun, he thinks, will remedy their pallor soon enough. Hannibal has missed the feel of the sun’s warmth for years. He longs now to lift his face to it, let his skin drink in the heat and brightness of a still moment.

But for now he cannot dwell on dreams of what’s to come soon enough, for all his attention is taken by the young man in his arms. Hannibal brushes a curling strand of deep brown hair back from Will’s forehead, letting his thumb skate over the raised scar tissue running straight across Will’s frontal bone. Impulsive, he thinks, and although he is not given to regrets, he does regret that he allowed himself to grow so carried away in that instant. He supposes he owes Mason Verger a debt of gratitude.

The mottled circle of scar tissue on his back itches at the thought. Hannibal shifts, drawing Will’s sleeping form closer, deeper into the tight circle of his arms. Will’s skin is warm against his, smooth and lean against Hannibal’s own broader, thickly furred chest. Will stirs against him, lips tickling against Hannibal’s neck as he murmurs in his sleep. He does not wake, but grips Hannibal back more tightly than before, and Hannibal, looking down at the mess of dark curls beneath his chin, feels his heart thud hard against the cage of his ribs.

It is a terrifying thing, he thinks, to get everything one wants. He cannot place the emotion he is experiencing, at first; it has been so long since he last felt it. And then it comes to him, with a shock the makes his fingers curl more tightly, drawing little sighs from the sleeping man in his arms. Contentment, he realizes. If he has ever felt it before, it has not been since he waded through the blood-soaked snow to drag his sister back from the heat that spread towards them across the cold ground, from the flames that reached out with ravenous fingers from their mother’s blazing white gown. His mother, the epicenter of the blaze - he remembers the way her flesh smelled, burning. Her limbs had seemed to dance with the movement of light and shadow, so that she appeared to live again, a spirit of flames and air.

Stop.
Hannibal closes his eyes on the memory, burying his face in Will’s soft hair. He smells of the sea, of his wool hat, of the soap they both used aboard the little ship. He pictures the way the soap bubbles slid over his own skin, and then imagines how they must have looked on Will. He resolves to witness this ritual as soon as can be arranged.

Will will let him, he thinks, almost certainly, and without too much protest. He’ll do it because it will make Hannibal happy, because he’ll want the way Hannibal looks at him. Hannibal imagines Will’s dark curls soaked by the hot spray of water, his skin steaming as his lips part, those fervent eyes watching him with a desire to rival his own.

In his arms, Will stirs again, rubbing his eyes against the column of Hannibal’s throat. Hannibal presses a kiss to his temple, his arms wrapping more tightly still around the lithely muscled form held against him.

Will blinks up at him, his eyes shifting shades in the glimmering moonlight. Hannibal hears his own voice, exhaling poetry onto the warm night air. O lips that mine have grown into, he hears himself whisper, like April’s kissing May. The ghost of some poem it had thrilled him, once, to read as a young man. When the world had felt like an egg waiting to be cracked, or like the dry bonfire awaiting a spark. Here, now, before him, is the spark at long last.

“Those eyes,” Hannibal murmurs, completing the lines he had heard in his head a moment before, as his fingers trace the light lines at the corners of Will’s eyes. “The greenest of things blue, the bluest of things grey.”

Will’s look is one of sleepy bemusement, and Hannibal is tempted by the mad urge to ruffle the younger man’s already disheveled hair. He smooths his hand over the tangled curls, instead, working his fingers gently through the worst of the snarls to loosen them. Will sighs, those remarkable eyes sliding shut at the touch, like a beast soothed by caresses. Hannibal doesn’t stop the smile that lifts the corners of his lips. “Ever changing,” he whispers, smoothing a dark curl between his forefinger and thumb. “Ever adapting.”

“And you’re - what?” Will’s voice is deep and rough with sleep, and edged with challenge. “Steadfast and unchanging?”

He feels the corner of his mouth twitch. “The core elements of who and what I am have remained static throughout most of my life,” he says. “As a child, I knew it felt good to hurt bad people. So did you, I’d wager.”
Will’s eyes flit away - startled birds, bright and tropical - to focus on Hannibal’s shoulder. He lifts a hand, looking at it as if he’s watching a dream, and rests it over the skin there. His hand is hot, and grips with slow deliberation, as if he’s testing that Hannibal is real. “Your definition of ‘bad people’ has broadened somewhat since childhood, I’d wager.”

“Of course,” Hannibal says, “as has yours, in the short years I have known you.”

“What were you like as a child?” Will asks. His hand has flattened against Hannibal’s chest, and it burns there like a brand over his heart.

“Quiet,” Hannibal says. “How is your hair this tangled? Was it like this when you fell asleep?” He eases his fingers through another snarl.

“I have thick hair,” Will says, defensively. “They brush out; just leave them alone.”

Hannibal makes a tsk-ing sound, and swats Will’s hand - raised to deter him - away. “Social grooming is a trait embedded deep in our psyche,” he tells him, gently untangling another knot. “A holdover from our primate ancestors.”

“That’s great,” Will says, yawning open-mouthed directly into his face. He carries on without noticing Hannibal’s crinkled nose: “I’ll braid your hair right after dinner.”

“I thought you didn’t want dinner.”

“Breakfast, then,” Will says, and his stomach rumbles as if on cue.

“A midnight snack, perhaps,” Hannibal suggests. “We can eat on the beach.”

“A moonlit picnic?” Will queries, the consonants sharp in his mouth.

“Not much moonlight out there,” Hannibal says. It’s true, too; the silver glow in the room has dimmed as clouds obscure the moon. “Torchlight, I think.”
Will hums, and rolls over, out of his reach, to climb out of bed. For a moment, Hannibal calculates the velocity he’d need, the pressure of his hand and wrist propelling him forward, in order to bring Will back. He lets himself imagine the way Will’s trachea would fold, the feel of Will’s blood rushing beneath his hand. Then he follows the younger man’s lead, and climbs out of bed to pull on the clothes they’d abandoned on the floor earlier.

He considers the bathroom door for a moment, before deciding a shower can wait. Will’s scent clings to his skin and he finds himself loathe to rinse it away. In time, he knows, it may not matter as much. Custom and familiarity may dull the intensity of these emotions. But he rather thinks the opposite will prove true, and his feelings for Will, Will’s feelings for him, will only heighten, straining upwards and outwards in a burst of heat and violence, like flames spreading across the snow.

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It’s been years since Hannibal realized he - remarkably - doesn’t mind Will’s lack of reverence for his culinary skills. From most people, he anticipates - perhaps expects is more accurate - a certain degree of awe and fanfare over the food he serves. It is rare that anyone disappoints him in this regard, but Will is as likely to eat what’s placed in front of him without comment as he is to acknowledge the food with some small compliment, always delivered more as statement of fact than as flattery.

So he’s not bothered when Will devours the finger sandwiches he prepares for them - while still standing in the kitchen - with no comment besides, “Made with real fingers?”

Hannibal cocks an eyebrow and smiles in response. Will is far more playful and at ease than Hannibal has ever seen him before, and he finds it utterly delightful - a whole new facet of Will’s psyche to explore. New territory, a savage wilderness of mirth and pleasure which Hannibal anticipates unfolding before them both for the first time. He feels a bit like Cortez, silent upon a peak in Darien.

“I was right when I said you’d feel much better if you just relaxed with yourself,” he says, watching the last delicate sandwich vanish behind Will’s teeth. “Or maybe sex puts you in a good mood?”

Will coughs, but doesn’t choke, on the last bite. “Wouldn’t know,” he mutters, and washes down the food with a long drink of water. “Not enough experience to determine something like that.”

“But some,” Hannibal presses.
“I’ve slept with five women,” Will says, deadpan, “and one was a lesbian who got me drunk and lied to me about being on birth control so she could get pregnant.” He’s staring at Hannibal’s chin, face hard. “The other four weren’t a lot better, to be honest. Except for…you know, Molly. But even then,” Will rushes on, face drawn tight, “not a lot of opportunity for post-coital relaxation.”

“Then we’ll have to conduct our own experiments,” he says, and the way Will’s cheeks flush is positively enchanting. He’ll miss it, when it inevitably ceases, but for now he intends to take full advantage of Will’s innocence in this arena. He wants to commit that look of shock, the way the blood rushes to his face, the little noises of distressed surprise to memory.

The night air is warm, and Will abandons his shoes and socks at the front door, walking out onto the sandy porch barefoot. Hannibal hesitates at the doorway, watching Will’s bare feet winding towards the tideline. He slips his shoes off, places his socks inside one of them, and cuffs the hem of his slacks before following the swaying beam of the electric lantern Will carries.

He finds Will resting in the sand, back against a beached tree trunk worn smooth and white by the waves. The lantern rests in the sand beside him, illuminating half his face and casting the other in dramatic shadow. Hannibal would like to sketch him like this. He drops to sit beside Will on the sand, and they rest together in silence for a time, listening to the lick of waves along the shore. It’s strange, he reflects, not to feel the motion of wave and wind propelling them. Which isn’t to say he does not feel propelled by something.

“Where do you think they’re looking?” Will asks, after a time. He doesn’t sound concerned so much as curious.

“We can check the news in the morning,” Hannibal replies. “We’ll need to buy a wireless router first.”

“Chiyoh didn’t leave the wifi password?” Will quips, one eyebrow quirking upwards.

“The router in the bedroom appears to be broken,” he shrugs. “It’s a simple enough thing to replace it, Will.”

Will scowls. “Do you think anyone here will recognize us?”

“Possibly,” Hannibal admits. “But probably not.”
He can tell Will is mulling the uncertainty over in his mind, gnawing at the thought like a dog worries a bone. Hannibal can almost track his thoughts in the tiny muscle movements in his face.

“They won’t take either of us again,” he says. “They won’t be capable.”

“Yeah, well,” Will kicks his feet in the sand, burying them and uncovering them reflexively. “We weren’t exactly planning on it happening last time.”

“We are no longer on their turf,” Hannibal says. “They are not looking for us here. And I believe you have a firmer grasp on yourself now than you did at the time.”

Will frowns at him. “A firmer grasp? Do you have any reason to believe I won’t experience a fracture in reality the next time we…”

So shy, Hannibal thinks, still so reluctant to accept what you are. But not for much longer. “The next time we hunt together,” Hannibal says, providing the words Will can’t say easily yet, “I will keep a closer watch on you, until we are certain you are able to distinguish between the real and imagined. The more exposure you have to the sensation, the faster your mind will adapt.”

“You don’t think it’s a little dangerous, pushing my mind like that?” Will arches a brow. “Shouldn’t we…lay off?”

“Is that what you want?”

“God, no.”

Hannibal studies Will’s face for a moment, notes the way he’s staring out at the dark ocean, where stars reflect in twinkles on the waves. Overhead the clouds shift, allowing the moon’s beams to illuminate the sandbar at intervals. He wonders if Will fears losing his mind - or fears that he already has. Hannibal himself finds he is experiencing a certain loss of self, as more and more of his thoughts and choices hinge on Will. Since they met, they’ve been escalating, catapulting towards a time when their minds will run together, when they lose themselves entirely in their last transformation, into one creature, one being, one two-headed hydra snatching the wicked from their respite. He does not fear the loss of his own ego, and he does not think that Will truly fears the deterioration of his mind.

“When one burns one’s bridges,” Hannibal says, against the sound of waves rustling pebbles along
the dark shore, “what a very nice fire it makes.”

“You burned all your bridges for me a long time ago,” Will says, and Hannibal feels something stir inside him, a spreading warmth that only Will invokes within his abdomen. “It was about time I did the same.”

He closes his eyes for a moment. He has to. But the sound of the waves seems amplified by his sightlessness, and his eyes fly open at the crashing. “Time moves only in one direction,” he breathes, leaning into Will as he speaks, needing, suddenly, to be closer. “I feel as if our timeline is unspooling.”

“It is,” Will answers, leaning back into the pressure of Hannibal’s body so that they are pressed flush at the side, foreheads resting together lightly, “a new beginning.”

Something flickers - a strange, sliding motion that moves from the water to the shore on the tip of a soft wave. Hannibal sits up straighter, looking towards the movement. Will follows his line of sight.

“Hey!” The younger man is on his feet almost before Hannibal can register he’s moved. Then he freezes, and drops back to crouch against the beached tree. They watch the sea turtle crawl up the shore, towards the copse of skinny trees and the sparse yellow grasses. Will watches, intent, a look of wonder on his face at what he’s seeing. Hannibal watches that expression, more than he watches the turtle who’s come ashore to lay her eggs.

They watch her brush sand back over the little mound of soft-shelled eggs, and then as shedrag her heavy body down to the water with the power of her front flippers. As soon as the round, green shape of the turtle is out of sight, Will is on his feet once more.

“We ought to mark the spot she laid her eggs,” he says.

“What for?” Hannibal asks, enjoying the energy that pulses off of Will. He feels vibrant, triumphant.

“That way we can make a fence around them,” he explains, as if it should be obvious. “Chicken wire,” he says, “protect them for predators till they hatch and then help them all down to the sea.”

Hannibal makes a noise of agreement. He cares less about the wellbeing of the turtle’s progeny than he does about the way Will reacts to his acquiescence, the sudden jolt of elation one doesn’t need an
empathy disorder to divine. Hannibal smells relief on him, too, and wonders at it. Protecting a sea
turtle’s eggs is hardly the furthest Hannibal is prepared to go to make Will happy; it hits him that Will
truly is unaware, still, of the extent of Hannibal’s feelings for him, the lengths to which he’d go just
to see the light that sparks in the shifting blue depths of Will’s eyes.

He helps Will collect a half dozen large stones to arrange around the mound of sand, all the while
watching wordlessly, delighting in the surprise and happiness, wondering at the contentment he can
sense on Will, like an aura shimmering around him.

Someday, Hannibal thinks, they’ll return to finish settling Will’s business. Hannibal knows he hasn’t
crossed every name off his list just yet. He thinks of the moment before they stepped into the
elevator, of the look on Will’s face staring up at him as he’d suggested going back to the cell they’d
both recently escaped in order to kill Jack Crawford. He thinks of Will’s face - years past - painted
by firelight as he’d demanded Hannibal offer him a sacrifice in the form of their mutual friend. I need
him to know.

The pain of the memory is still present - but duller now, softer. What once screamed through him
now only sighs.

He’s lost in thought when Will rounds on him - not a memory, not a regret, but this astonishing
creature of flesh and bone and blood - with a wild gleam shining like a beacon from his eyes. “Let’s
go out tonight.”

“Out?”

“Anywhere - I don’t know - let’s go buy a newspaper.” He licks his lips, and Hannibal watches the
motion of Will’s tongue, the way he tugs his lower lip between his teeth with a quick, gentle motion.
“We drove passed a convenience store we could probably walk to from here,” he continues. “We’ve
been cramped up on a boat for weeks. Don’t you want to stretch your legs?”

“Very well,” Hannibal replies, brushing sand off the lap of his slacks. “Best bring the flashlight.”

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“I can’t believe you bought it,” Will says, voice comically outraged. Their steps shush in the gravel
as they trudge back from the convenience store, their path lit by fluorescence. Ahead, an unlit
darkness leads the way back home, with the electric lantern swinging merrily in Will’s fist. Hannibal
could feel the tension in him, when they’d entered the store. Will had flinched at the sound of the door chime. Hannibal watched him slinking between the aisles, eyeing the somnolent cashier warily from behind the pastries.

Of course, the teenaged salesman barely looked at them as he rang up their purchases. “Of course,” Hannibal says. “As offensive as her personality may be, she’s usually ahead of the major outlets when it comes to crime reporting. Though it does require a tolerance for dramatic and overwrought prose,” he admits.

“Major news outlets have bigger stories to cover than the mad and tragic,” Will frowns.

“What else is the world,” Hannibal asks, “if not mad and tragic?”

Will kicks a can laying in their path, sending it clattering out of sight. The light of the convenience store is growing smaller and paler by the moment, and the street lamps are fewer and further between as they walk towards the sound of the sea. “Let me read that,” Will says, reaching for the glossy paper folded under Hannibal’s arm.

He snatches it before Hannibal can protest. Will shoves the lantern towards him, and Hannibal takes it, holding it at shoulder height to better illuminate *The Tattler*. The cover image is in full color, and it looks as if someone has dipped the front page in red paint. Hannibal recognizes the interior of the BSHCI, and he thinks he may also recognize one or two of the bodies, though he honestly hadn’t gotten too good of a look at all the men he’d mowed down that night. There’s an inset at the bottom, an oval picture of a face he *does* recognize. He looks a deal more composed without a knife held to his throat.

“Looks like he followed your orders,” Will scoffs, indicating the photo with a flick of his hand.

“Good boy,” Hannibal says.

Will pulls the paper open with a snort, and scans the story before he begins reading aloud. “‘I Escaped from Cannibals.’ *David Steiger, one of the only three survivors from the BSHCI Massacre, tells his story.*” He stops reading to fix Hannibal with wide eyes darkened by his widened pupils. “I can’t believe he went to Freddie Lounds.”

“I can,” Hannibal says. “And doubtlessly, she went to him. How has our friend portrayed us to the media?”
Will’s eyes flick back to the page, held close to his face. “‘They said they left me alive to tell their story,’ Steiger says, ‘and that’s what I intend to do. The public needs to know the danger these men pose. I left my job with the Baltimore PD to give this interview. And frankly, after what I saw that night, I’m ready for a career change.’

Steiger claims public perception of the duo, and in particular of former FBI profiler Will Graham, has been tainted and manipulated by FBI officials themselves, in a bid to shield the former profiler from scrutiny. ‘There are a lot of people in the FBI who want to protect Graham’s reputation, but the image of him as a victim or pawn is a lie they’ve created to protect their own. In all honesty, Graham scared me worse than Lecter.’"

Will stops. “Aw,” he sighs. “I’m more frightening than you.”

“You had a particular light about you that night, Will,” Hannibal tells him, “like a corona glowing round your head. It’s no great surprise that even the uninitiated could sense it.” Will’s eyes shimmer up at him before he continues reading.

“For years, speculation over the nature of Graham and Lecter’s relationship has swirled. Now, Steiger insists, there can be no doubt that the two men are lovers, as well as allies in gore. Allies in gore? Seriously?” Will scoffs. “And she fails to mention that most of the swirling speculation originated with her publication.”

He turns his attention back to the newspaper, sparing a glance up occasionally to the path in order to stay on a safe course. Hannibal transfers the lantern to his opposite hand and lets the left one drop to tangle in Will’s. Will’s eyes dart to him, then back to the magazine too quickly to be casual.

“He repeats everything I said to you verbatim,” Will frowns, forehead creasing deeply. “How does he remember it so well?” His eyes scan the page, face contorting as he looks at his own words printed for the entire world to read. Hannibal glances over to read a snippet - They don’t mean what you mean to me. You’re everything, the only one - but he doesn’t need to read to remember exactly what Will said, exactly how he looked saying it.

“How did he even hear me?” Will continues, scowling. The paper shakes lightly between his hands, and Hannibal realizes he’s shaking lightly with anger. “He was across the hall, and with the sounds playing over the intercom -“

He freezes, mid-step, and the realization hits Hannibal at the same moment. He’d hacked the
intercom to play Will his symphony of screams, projected in real time. But when he’d found Will, of course he’d neglected to terminate the connection between the tiny mic clipped to his jacket and the hospital’s intercom. He remembers flipping it as they ran towards the elevator - thinking then that it would not do to broadcast their plans - but it hadn’t registered to his conscious mind that everything between them before that had been projected throughout the building, likely recorded by a security system. He wonders if perhaps a part of him knew, wonders if slip was intentional, on some level. He laughs while Will curses.

“Of course,” he says, “they heard us through the whole hospital. It must have been recording somewhere.”

Will flips a page. “And of course Freddie Lounds would get her hands on a copy of the recording.” He swears again, under his breath. “The recording has been leaked online, apparently,” he continues, voice low and heated. Of course, Hannibal thinks, Will has always been sensitive about the invasion of his privacy.

Hannibal suppresses the smirk that wants to spread across his face at the thought of Will’s heartfelt and overwhelmed confession, booming across the stone walls of the hospital, screaming out of speakers across the world. He derives intense satisfaction from the thought of everyone alive - Jack, Alana, the FBI, his former medical colleagues, everyone they’ve both ever met, everyone in the world - hearing Will profess his love for Hannibal, his promise to kill them all for him. He hopes he’ll be able to find the recording easily, and resolves to wake early and obtain a wireless router immediately.

“What else does our friend have to say about his harrowing experience?” Hannibal presses, and pulls Will forward to start him walking again, into the darkness, towards the sound of waves, back to the little house he’s arranged for them to call home for the time being.

“He claims that Jack and Alana are responsible for all the deaths that night, and that they gambled with the lives of the local law enforcement officers in order to protect their pet psychopath,” Will answers, summarizing as he skims. “Honestly, I can’t argue much with that.”

“They wanted to protect you,” Hannibal says, “from me and from yourself.”

“Jack didn’t always worry about protecting me,” Will answers, spiteful, “from you or from myself.”

“You begged him to let you quit,” Hannibal says, softly. “He knew what he was doing to you, what he was asking of you.”
“He knew he could save lives.”

“By using you. By asking you to sacrifice your own.”

Will frowns. “Now they want to protect me.”

“Well,” Hannibal says, “now they probably don’t. Or at least, they’ll recognize that protecting you is no longer a possibility.”

“No,” Will muses. For a moment the only sound is their footsteps, and Hannibal wonders if Will knows they’re being followed. He suspects not; Will’s attention is trained on the *Tattler* article. Hannibal grips his hand tighter. “Freddie Lounds is going after them,” he says. “This interview will start an investigation. She means war.”

“It’s not ours to fight,” Hannibal says. “There’s a certain enjoyment to be had in watching from the sidelines as those who would harm you tear themselves apart instead.”

“Would Jack and Alana harm _me_?” Will wonders.

Hannibal is silent for a moment. Then, “They would separate us,” he says, and feels his hand nearly crushed by Will’s. “I cannot imagine a greater harm than that.”

Will lets his hand holding the paper drop, and leans into Hannibal as they walk. “Did you know there’s someone following us?”

Hannibal looks down, feeling the fond smile that forms on his face. Will glances up at him, eyes flicking back behind them for a second, not long enough to be detectable to whomever is tracking them down the dark path. Hannibal can spy the figure at the edge of his peripheral vision, a dark shape loping slowly in the shadows behind them.

“They’ve been following us since we left the store,” Hannibal tells him.
“Someone recognized us,” Will mutters, “wants to collect the bounty.”

“If that’s the case then there’s no problem,” Hannibal says lightly. “You and I can easily dispatch one man with greater avarice than sense.”

“But if we were recognized this quickly we can’t stay here,” Will says. He sounds extremely forlorn, and Hannibal resists the urge to throw an arm around his shoulders and nuzzle his cheek against those tangling dark curls.

“We don’t know yet why they’re following us,” Hannibal says. “Let’s not jump to conclusions.”

“So what do we do?”

“Let them follow us,” Hannibal says, with an easy shrug. “If they turn and leave, we’ll follow them, make sure they aren’t going to report our location. But I think they’ll follow us all the way back to the house,” his eyes glint, “and once we get there we can handle this problem easily.”

Will’s hand grips and relaxes over his. The younger man spares a quick glance behind them, disguising it with a kiss he presses to Hannibal’s stubbled jaw.

“With pleasure,” Will breathes into his ear, and Hannibal smiles.
It’s still. Silent. There’s a red glow - red bulb in the porch light casting a warm glow over the deck furniture and wood boards. Will’s skin is a rich scarlet that makes him think of grim bars playing loud music, of bass beats vibrating through bones. He listens to the white noise of waves over sand, its hypnotic rhythm soothing the crackle that edges along his nerves. He imagines his nervous system, a glowing tangle of branching roots and tiny blossoms, glimmering like a deep sea creature alight of its own deep mystery. His heart is a steady thrum, slowing now to match the pound of water. It stays slow as the doorknob turns beneath his hand, and the silence splinters into screaming. Then the door clicks closed behind him, and the red night without is noiseless once more.

The night within howls and gibbers, pleads and curses. Will follows the sounds to the walk in shower. The walls and floor of the room are tiled in the same pale blue as the kitchen. Copper shower heads cut from the three walls. The room is large enough to accommodate three adults showering at once. In the floor, a trail of red disappears down the grated drain. And there’s one other feature Will failed to notice when they first arrived: a set of shackles set into the wall, four heavy steel cuffs on adjustable chains.

Hannibal tugs the final chain tight as Will rounds the corner and steps into the shower. The man who followed them home struggles and bellows, but he’s fixed too tightly to the wall for his movements to have any effect. He’s a large man, his face puffy and contorted in frightened rage. A vein in his right arm bulges, the muscles around it straining against the bonds without result.

Will steps closer, the tray of instruments held between his hands like the tools for an exorcism, for a blood ritual, for a surgery or an execution. They glint up at him, neatly arranged across the white lacquered tray, with the final piece set in a neat loop along the left hand side: the sharp wire he’d found in the shed, and, beneath that, a pair of thick leather gloves.

“Now, now, Mr. Manillon,” Hannibal chides, flipping casually through the screaming man’s wallet for ID. “Try to pull yourself together. I’m going to need your attention.” He drives his hand into the captive man’s hair the instant he stops speaking, his fingers wrenching the man’s head cruelly to the side by his hair, and the screaming dissolves into heavy breaths, separated by a high pitched yelp of pain.

“Are you working for the FBI?” Hannibal demands, holding Manillon’s head tight. The man does his best to shake his head in short, frantic jerks, blood oozing from the gash in his forehead. Will walks closer still, and bends to set the tray on the floor between them. He leans down to examine the tools, some that Hannibal had requested he find, some that he had chosen on his own, inspired by the thin high whispers of imagination, the images that float behind his eyes when he closes them and
focusses on this sensation, this agonizing, building darkness that floods and thrums through him.

He chooses the heavy pewter crab cracker the itch in his brain had told him to bring back from the kitchen along with the knives for which Hannibal had sent him. Will steps to Hannibal’s side, reaching his empty hand up to trace the captive man’s straining fingers. The man flinches from his touch, a full body recoil at just this slight caress, and Hannibal delivers a vindictive wrench to his head.

“Do you know who we are?” he asks, voice rough and demanding. The man shakes his head again, the movements truncated by Hannibal’s death grip on his hair. “Why did you follow us?”

“Saw you at the corner store,” the man coughs. His voice is raw from all his screaming. Will brushes his fingers over their captive’s once more, and watches as the man holds himself very still.

“Go on,” Hannibal instructs, as if unaware of the response Will is intentionally invoking in the man.

“I - I thought you might have money,” he stammers. “You looked well off enough. And you…you looked like…you didn’t look hard to beat.”

“Wrong there,” Will murmurs. “Thought a couple of queers would be easy targets for a robbery, huh?”

The man shudders, and Will lifts his other hand now, the one that holds the gaping set of serrated crackers.

The screams start again, along with the sound of a snapping metacarpal as Will clamps down on the man’s index finger and twists with a sudden savage jerk. The digit hangs at a wrong angle when Will releases it, crumpled too flat in one spot and swelling rapidly like an angry red balloon. Manillon’s screams pitch higher, higher, as Will works his way through each finger, joints separating and phalanges splintering under his ministrations. The sound the man makes can no longer be called a scream by the time Will reaches his thumb, which gives, after a deal more pressure, with a sound like cracking branches. The man howls, his head lolling forward and his mouth spewing vomit onto the floor between them. His sickness reeks of sour fear and curdled milk.

Hannibal tuts, flicking one of the shower heads to life and sending a jet of cold water into the man’s dirty, dripping face. Will sidesteps the vomit rinsing towards the grate in the floor. His shoes squeak on the slippery tiles, and he reaches a hand to steady himself against the wall as a wave of dizzying
pleasure rushes over and through him. Everything is brighter, burning with new colors, and most vibrant of all is Hannibal, who dips to lift one of the sparkling kitchen knives from the tray. He emanates his own light, angelic and eternal. A fixed illumination by which Will thinks he can chart a course for his wandering bark.

The knife glints like a shard of broken mirror, and Will watches Hannibal use it to divide the man’s flesh. It feels as if he’s cutting through reality, too. Will’s head spins with a din so loud it’s like silence, empty and void of meaning. He feels himself coming unstuck from the moment, and for an instant he hangs in a dark abyss, sailed to the stars and hanging high above the world, from a vantage where he can point down at the wicked, and his finger extends like a bolt of lightning to spear the sinners. His hands are death, his eyes are judgment, and he is free as only God ever can be.

And then he crashes to earth, his senses flooding again with sound of shrieks, the sting of the cold water, the cacophony of colors as red streams down to fork in mazing paths along the blue tile. Will gasps, and feels himself expanding, as if a piece of him is unfurling, uncurling. Oh earth, Will thinks, his arm resting on the wall for balance as he watches Hannibal’s hand move, oh air and stars, behold me.

The man’s belly gapes like a grin, and Hannibal’s hands drip with viscera. The knife drops to the tray with a clatter, and Hannibal holds his hands aloft, bathing them in the cold water that seems to steam off his skin. Blood dyes the water pink, and Hannibal moves his hands like he’s preparing for surgery, pulls on the leather gloves. They are too coarse and worn for his hands, Will thinks, and wishes he could have found something fitting, something supple but strong, as Hannibal himself is, something sleek and smooth to glide across his skin.

Hannibal lifts the wire between his gloved hands, and there’s the thinnest glimmer of light reflected along its length. Hannibal’s eyes appear to stare at nothing, as he focuses on the impossibly thin line he holds taut in his hands. And then his hands move, cupping invisibility in the spray of water and blood, wrapping the line about the man’s neck. It is so thin, Will can scarcely see it. Magic tricks, he thinks, hidden wires and sleight of hand.

Mr. Manillon gives a terrified choking whimper, and Hannibal turns away from him, leaving the wire slack, to beckon Will closer. The earth shifts below them. On him the tempest falls. It does not make him tremble. He steps closer, into the sphere of violence, rejoining the fray with a delirious grace. He thinks of Hannibal’s words to him about oracular visions, thinks about the pain and pleasure of this moment, the tight line of sensation wrapping like a wire about the stem of his brain. He could rave, he thinks, throw himself down and foresee. He is so close to that boundary, so close to true knowing he could brush his fingers against the ineffable.

From here we escalate, Will thinks, letting Hannibal pull one glove over his right hand, so that they each wear one. We’ll climb towards heaven from hell, and bring hell with us to the pearly gates. Each new sensation, each new atrocity, will pale and lose luster as we ascend. He fears the heights
they’ll reach to, but yearns for it nonetheless. *Like climbing to the stars only to fall*, Will thinks, and wonders yet again where the two of them will land.

They pull the wire between them, and the man’s flesh gives gradually, and then all at once, in a rush of yellow tissue and dark waves of blood - so much Will thinks perhaps it is not altogether real, the way it soaks the hems of his pants and submerges his shoes - and they stop only when they reach bone.

Will’s heart beats steady, despite what he’s doing, until he looks up and into Hannibal’s crimson rimmed eyes.

And then he is lost, hopelessly and irreparably.

Hannibal’s skin might as well be water under his hands, it slides so soft and subtle under his fingers as Will pushes his fingers beneath the hem of Hannibal’s shirt. The cold water spraying over them does nothing to cool the heat rising from their bodies now; Will’s half certain each droplet evaporates before it ever reaches his skin.

“Will,” Hannibal breathes, voice reverent as if the name is a prayer, and Will can’t stand it. He can’t bear the look in Hannibal’s eyes, the open yearning and affection, the desire so sharp it cuts. The force of his emotions is strong enough without compounding them, doubling them with the reflection of Hannibal’s lust filling up those many busy mirror neurons. Will feels himself spinning. Everything is brighter and louder, reality overwhelming with the force of its new intensity.

He closes his eyes with a groan, and pulls hard at the front of Hannibal’s shirt, sending buttons spraying outwards to clink against the walls of the shower. He half expects Hannibal to object, but his only response is to clutch at Will more desperately, and the little breath of sound that sends Will’s heart skittering. His hands run up the wide wet expanse of Hannibal’s chest, his fingers twining curiously in the hair there. He can feel Hannibal’s breath catch beneath his palms, and looks up to see Hannibal staring down at him with a look so bare and raw Will feels his lips part in a gasp before he can stop himself. Because it’s everything - all of the fear, and anger, and pain, and all the desire, and hopefulness, and love - everything he knows is there, just below the facade Hannibal projects. Everything he normally can’t see. And maybe it’s a choice Hannibal makes to show him, or maybe it’s something Hannibal can’t control in this instant. Maybe it’s something that’s always right there, but Will can only see it when he’s washed his eyes with blood.

“All these years, waiting,” Hannibal sighs, one hand coming up to cup Will’s cheek. “All entirely worth it, to see you as you are now. Remarkable, beautiful boy, you really can have no idea.”
Will bites his lower lip. “I waited, too,” he says, “for you. You have to - you must know, how much I wanted you?” He shakes his head as if to clear it, and a lock of overgrown hair falls over his eyes. Hannibal brushes it back for him, and Will blinks up, into that face that’s both so familiar and, suddenly, so new and unknown. He recalls, now, all the moments throughout their acquaintance when the urge to reach out, to touch, to take and own in some capacity, was almost overwhelming. Even after Hannibal orchestrated his commitment to the BSHCI, and after Will had discovered who and what he truly was, Will had wanted him, knowing the strength of his convictions would never allow him to act on that desire.

*Thank the Lord that’s over with,* Will thinks.

And then Hannibal is kissing him, and he does not think anymore, merely allows himself to be moved and maneuvered, pushed against the wall uncomfortably close to the stiffening corpse they’ve made. One of Hannibal’s hands leaves gripping his hip to fiddle with the shackles, but the kiss doesn’t break. Hannibal presses closer, making a noise in the back of his throat that Will feels like a sudden drop of his stomach. Will finds himself trapped between the shower wall and the force of Hannibal’s lust.

Will both feels and hears the dead man collapsing in a slumping pile to the ground as Hannibal releases the second cuff. His hand returns to Will’s hip, squeezing the sensitive flesh there in a firm grasp before skating up to pull Will’s shirt over his head. Will lets himself be undressed, moving dreamily as Hannibal kneels to pull off his shoes and socks.

Hannibal’s hands move off him again, and Will watches as Hannibal unchains the body’s ankles. Its head lolls obscenely on a pillar of vertebrae as Hannibal hoists the dead weight easily and moves it to the other side of the shower. There’s a frightening grace to the way he moves, his movements easy and smooth as he lifts the large man beneath the arms and moves his body quickly away. *There’d be no way to stop him,* Will thinks, his brain supplying the words and images too fast for him to process what they mean first. His heart is pounding like the heavy fall of rain, now, his dick impossibly hard. And then Hannibal is on him again, pinning him firmly in place against the wall.

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Will struggles lightly in his arms, movements as gentle as an insect’s wings, or the wings of a dove. Will is more powerful than these frail symbols, naturally, but in this moment he seems so fragile, weakened by the onslaught of delight and horror, and Hannibal intends to take full advantage of his situation. Will blinks up at him, lashes dotted with droplets of water from the shower’s spray. His eyes appear larger, wider, more earnest than Hannibal has seen them in some time. He thinks of the open, trusting look Will used to have for him, before seeing him for what he truly is, realizing what he had done. He had been Will’s refuge, at one point, his fixed and safest place. He doesn’t feel guilty for betraying Will’s trust; Will didn’t understand then, the way he does now.
Hannibal runs his hand down the side of Will’s face, feeling the curve of cheekbone and mandible beneath his fingertips. He leans in. The kiss is deep, slow, and searching. Their mouths pressed together like hands pressed in prayer, exchanging sins and small sounds of pleasure. Hannibal lets his hands travel the length of Will’s throat and chest - fingers skating over a tightening nipple in a movement that draws the prettiest gasp from Will’s lips where they press against his - before coming to rest on the alluring curve of Will’s ass, fingers spread to cup a cheek in each palm, through the clinging wet fabric of Will’s slacks. Hannibal rolls his hips, pulling Will’s body flush against him at the same moment.

“Oh, oh God,” Will pants into his mouth, and Hannibal takes the opportunity to lick languorously into Will’s mouth, his tongue dragging along the roof of Will’s mouth. Will makes a sound like a wounded animal, and his body begins to droop, knees buckling. Hannibal can’t imagine what Will is feeling at this moment - his own sense of reality and the physical world is heightened beyond that of the common man’s, but even his honed senses cannot compete with the vibrant, half-mad way Will experiences reality, particularly at these moments. He doesn’t look like he did when he was sick, doesn’t appear to be seizing, but his eyes are too clear, like the edge of broken glass.

In time, he thinks, it will grow easier. More manageable. He remembers the bright edges of his own early triumphs. The experience of control over life and death can be a heady intoxicant. Will needs only expose himself to the same stimulant repeatedly to build a tolerance. And then…

Will sags a little more, propped up almost entirely now by Hannibal’s grip on his ass. Hannibal huffs against his mouth, breaking away to spin the slighter man around, so that he slams into the shower wall forcefully, and only avoids knocking his head at the last moment when his hands fly up to stop him. Hannibal pushes against him immediately, rubbing his erection against Will’s ass through their clothes. Will sobs against the wall, the sound drifting back to Hannibal, amplified by the tile walls. “Oh,” Will sobs, “oh fuck.”

“Is that what you want, Will?” Hannibal asks, thrusting his hips against Will’s ass in a slow, unstopping motion, until Will’s body is pinned to the wall with Hannibal’s dick grinding against the cleft of his ass. “Do you want me to fuck you?” His voice is harsh, cold, and beneath him Will trembles.

“I-I,” he’s shaking so hard Hannibal considers taking pity on him. “I want - I want - ”

“Maybe I should just take what I want,” Hannibal says. The words are a risk that pays off immediately, success evident in Will’s quickening heartbeat and the warm scent of desire that spikes off him so strongly Hannibal’s head goes light for a second. He growls, and spins Will’s body again, slamming his back against the tile wall hard enough to knock the breath out of him but not hard enough to do damage.
Will’s eyes are immense, pupils swallowing the greenish haze of his cut-glass eyes, his knees still threatening to give. Hannibal grips one wrist in his iron grasp and hoists it to the chain in the wall. He can feel Will’s heart beating a desperate rhythm against his chest, and pauses for a moment before snapping the cuff closed, waiting for resistance and finding none. He stares back at Will’s wide frantic eyes, and the power of his desire is plain. He snaps the second wrist into place above Will’s head without hesitation, then steps back to admire his work.

Even he is impressed by the artless beauty of the tableaux. Had he planned and arranged it intentionally he could never have created what spontaneity and passion has by chance. Will’s arms are lifted above his head, spread wide as if in worship and fastened to the tile wall by thick metal cuffs Hannibal knows he could slip from if he wanted to, his legs weak and spread to accommodate the erection tenting his pants. His body language screams submission, but his chin is tilted defiantly, eyes rebellious. The blue tile behind him is smeared with blood, and Will himself is streaked a mottled red, turning pink where the water has rinsed him partially clean. Hannibal breathes, and looks. *I will remember this,* he tells himself, *if I forget all else I have ever known, this image will remain.*

He lifts a hand to shut the shower off, and the cold water stops at once. “If you could see yourself,” Hannibal says, voice edged with lust. He sees Will shiver at the sound. “It’s clear you want to fight me, and equally clear you don’t wish to win.” He steps closer, reaching his hand out to Will’s bare and displayed chest. “Do you know what I think?”

Will licks his lips. His voice is edged with challenge, as he strains lightly against the restraints but makes no real move to escape them. “What do you think?”

Hannibal smiles, and lets his fingers brush against the center of Will’s chest. He can feel the quake that moves in the skin there, and his hand trails downwards slowly. “I think it’s only an act,” Hannibal purrs, and his fingers slide the button of Will’s slack free as he speaks, “the way you fight like a young horse biting against the new bit in his mouth. The truth, as we both know, is you want me to take you.” The sound of Will’s zipper descending is almost loud enough to drown out the pounding of Will’s heart. Hannibal swears he can hear the blood rushing through his veins. “You want me to take whatever I want,” he says, “and I intend to.”

Will’s answer is just a moan, as his legs sag a little more beneath him, and he gives more of his weight to the cuffs holding his wrists. Hannibal bends to brush a kiss to the smooth skin above Will’s lively heartbeat. “Ah, ah,” Will gasps at even this small touch. “I’m - I’m s-scared,” he manages to pant between his moans, voice sweeter and younger sounding than Hannibal’s heard it before. It makes something in his chest shift, and he finds himself caught between the urge to caress Will’s face and the desire to take him apart. Hannibal forces himself to breathe.
There’s a look in the corner of Will’s eye that tells him this might be - at least partly - an act, performed - at least partly - for his benefit. If so, it’s quite the gesture. Hannibal buries his face in the crook of Will’s neck, inhaling deeply; he can smell fear there, it’s true, but the scent of arousal is far stronger. Hannibal lets his fingers hook into the waistband of Will’s slacks, begins to urge them over his hips.

“What are you scared of, Will?” he asks, and Will’s slacks slide obligingly down his thighs as Hannibal dips down to pull them off, one leg at a time.

Will steps obediently out of the garment, to stand naked and chained before him, skin awash in blood, sweat, and water. His body is trembling, but hot to the touch, and Hannibal suspects it is due at least as much to lust as fear. Either way, he finds it breathtaking.

“Y-you,” Will stutters, “this. I’ve never - ” He bites his lip, looking up at Hannibal with such alluring and vulnerable desperation, and that glimmer in his eyes that makes Hannibal want to push further, makes him suspect he’s the one being pushed, in fact.

*I push you, you push me,* he thinks, *always further than before, always just beyond the boundaries we’ve established. Always more. Changing each other, blurring and transforming as gods, as a rod to a serpent and as a serpent again to a rod.* He doesn’t wonder where this ends, because he knows.

“Are you scared to feel me inside of you?” He punctuates his question by grinding his still clothed erection against Will’s bared hip, and the younger man gives a shattered cry beneath him. “Scared I’ll hurt you, Will? I promise,” he says, voice low, hips rolling to bring his cock against Will’s answering hardness, “when I do it to you, there’ll be nothing but pleasure. Even when I hurt you,” he says, nipping at Will’s shoulder to elicit a little yelp, “it will feel so good.”

Will can’t speak. The small attempts he makes are little more than noises, until he at last surrenders to his muteness and stares, chest heaving, with bright blinking eyes. It’s an enchanting sight. And the way Will’s eyes widen impossibly further, the way his breath hitches when Hannibal drops to his knees before him, sends a frisson of pleasure running through his body.

“H-Hannibal,” Will pants, tugging against the cuffs harder now. He could escape if he wanted to, Hannibal knows. Will gives a whine that turns into a moan as Hannibal licks up the length of Will’s straining cock, one hand locking his hips into place against the wall. “Oh! You - ”

“Hmmm,” Hannibal breathes, pressing a kiss to the curve of Will’s hipbone. “You taste delicious, Will.”
Will sobs, and Hannibal darts his tongue over the head of Will’s dick, tasting the salty precum drooling from the slit. Will’s legs wobble, and Hannibal lifts his other hand to help hold Will in place as he swallows his dick entirely, from tip to root.

Will’s legs give almost entirely at the sensation, and he cries out like a torture victim hanging from his shackles. Hannibal moans low and rumbling over Will’s thick length. “Hannibal,” Will pants. “Oh, fuck, fuck. I can’t believe this is happening - ah!” His hips jerk weakly, unable to make much headway against the strength of Hannibal’s grip.

Hannibal swirls his tongue around the crown of Will’s cock and his mouth withdraws with a wet pop. He stares up, into the huge, fevered eyes of the man he’s trusting his life, his future, his heart to. He has no choice in the matter, he considers, can do nothing but love desperately, perhaps foolishly. For this moment, and for every moment like it yet to come, it will all have been worth it.

He meets Will’s eyes with his own heavy-lidded gaze, and spreads his legs. Hannibal reaches down to loosen and remove his belt, then opens the zip of his jeans to pull his cock free. He never breaks eye contact with Will, who by now is panting frantically. Hannibal smiles up at him, wrapping one hand around his cock and reaching the other up to place two fingers into his mouth. When they are thoroughly wet he withdraws them.

“This is happening, Will,” Hannibal murmurs fervently, as his hand travels behind Will’s balls. He can hear the change in Will’s breathing, the sudden wild inhalations as Hannibal presses one finger lightly against Will’s entrance. Soft, he thinks, at the first touch, and almost growl imagining himself sliding into Will’s unused ass for the first time. He pushes his face against Will’s cock, breathing the dizzying scent and taste of him, and waits a moment, till Will’s taut body sags in submission, before he presses in with one finger.

“How tight you are,” Hannibal breathes, his voice just audible above the sound of Will’s harsh breathing. He presses a kiss against the straining cock in front of him, squeezes his own aching erection with the hand that isn’t between Will’s legs, and slips his finger just a little further into that impossible silky heat, until his second knuckle rests at the entrance to Will’s body. “I can feel your body gripping me, pulling me in.” He exhales hard, almost a laugh, and the hot air of his breath makes Will’s dick twitch. “It’s going to feel so good when I’m really inside you.”

Will sobs, straining at the cuffs. Hannibal can’t tell if he’s trying to get away from the touch, or sink into it, or if he’s simply too overstimulated to hold still. Next time, he thinks, both sets of restraints. He licks up the length of Will’s cock again, pressing his tongue flat and wide against the underside of the curving erection before sucking the head into his mouth teasingly. He pushes in, slowly, the rest of the way, as his mouth works over Will’s shaft.
“Clench your muscles,” he murmurs, pulling back momentarily to lick at the head. “As hard as you can around me.”

Will’s body is incredible - so hot and tight and smooth Hannibal wants to pull his finger out and bend Will in half, push his legs to his chest so his weight rests solely on the restraints and on the pressure of Hannibal fucking him into the wall. But he’s been patient all these years; he can hold on a while more. His own dick jumps in his fist, and Hannibal slides his fingers over his length as Will’s body clasps him. He fixes his mouth over the base of Will’s dick and waits for the moment when Will’s body can’t clench anymore, the moment when his muscles can’t help but relax, before pushing a second finger inside of him.

Will jerks like a wild animal in a trap. His cock leaks copiously, and Hannibal relishes the taste and smell of him, humming around the flesh in his mouth and working one hand between his own legs. He can feel the pleasure and want sliding through him, amplified by the needy, half-crazed sounds Will makes above him, by the knowledge that he is touching Will in a way no one else has before.

No one else ever will, he thinks, swallowing Will’s cock again and again as he works his fingers carefully, twisting until he both feels and hears Will’s reaction. He strokes over the spot again, and is again rewarded with Will’s tortured, ecstatic moaning. “Has anyone ever done this to you before?” he asks, just so he can hear Will’s denial.

Will shakes his head, frantic and unable to speak for a second as Hannibal’s fingers move relentlessly inside him. “No - no one,” he practically shouts. “Hannibal!”

Hannibal presses his swollen lips in a soft, soothing kiss against Will’s hip, and Will sobs brokenly. “I’m going to do a lot of things to you that no one ever has, Will,” he promises, working one hand over himself and one hand into Will, fingers sliding in and out to loosen the tight ring of muscle. It won’t be much longer, he knows. The way Will’s body is trembling now, so violently it seems as if he’ll shake himself apart, tells him that the end is near. He moves the hand between his own legs faster, feeling the pressure that’s gathering there build. “I’ll make you feel like no one else ever has.”

Will moans, grinding down onto his hand. “Th-this already does,” he gasps. “I didn’t - didn’t know it would feel -” his words give way to a long groan as Hannibal swallows his dick once more.

“I’m close,” Will warns, sounding young and distraught and utterly perfect. Hannibal hums around him, twists his fingers again, and Will screams. “Oh, fuck, Hannibal I’m going to - you have to s-stop!”

But Hannibal doesn’t stop, just seals his lips more tightly around Will’s shaft and lowers his head to
take him in fully. He can feel the heat building in his own body, the hot rope of desire coiling at the
base of his spine. Will’s muscles flutter and then clench down on his fingers so hard it’s startling, and
Will goes stiff and silent for half a second before his muscles begin to convulse, and Hannibal feels
and tastes the hot flood of his release.

The sounds Will is making and the pervasive scent of him - the way he dominates every sense - is
enough to drive Hannibal over the edge himself. He moans over Will’s spasming cock as the
pleasure crests within him, a bright red wave that steals his rational thought for a blissful series of
seconds. His skin tingles with the force of it, and his cheeks prick with heat.

Will’s body is slackening, and Hannibal withdraws his fingers carefully, the motion accompanied by
a small noise of discomfort from above him. He presses a last wet kiss to Will’s still swollen cock
before sliding gracefully to his feet and reaching up to release the cuffs. Will practically collapses into
his arms, mind and body shot by the combination of death and sex, and Hannibal scoops him up
easily, ignoring the sleepy half-protest Will gives him. He imagines that this won’t be something Will
allows him to do often - carry him to bed like a child - but on this occasion he doesn’t seem to
possess the mental capability to object beyond the faintest breath before turning his face to nuzzle
into Hannibal’s neck.

There’s an unfamiliar feeling in the center of Hannibal’s chest. He thinks it’s something to do with
the way Will’s breath falls in slowing exhalations against his skin, the way Will’s beard rubs against
the crook of his shoulder. He’s not sure how to describe or define the emotion - something more
tender and soft than the usual violent flame of his love for Will, something almost protective. Not that
Will needs protection. Hannibal will burn the world down in his name, and Will will help him.

He carries the other man upstairs to the bed. Will is half-asleep by the time they get there, his eyes
moving rapidly beneath his lids as if he’s already dreaming deeply. Hannibal touches his face softly.

“Beloved,” he breathes, and Will sighs at the sound of the word. Hannibal can’t tell if he’s sleeping
or hallucinating or awake but too drowsy to respond more or open his eyes. He speaks anyway,
soothing his fingers over the unresponsive plain of Will’s exquisite face. “You are the force that
moves me. I have no God but you.”

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The open window lets in the early afternoon sunlight, the sound of gulls, the smell of the sea. Will
stirs, under a mess of tangled sheets. His dreams have been fast and dark, feet running bare over
twisting roots through the dense trees, and as he drifts towards wakefulness he releases them. There’s
plenty to occupy him in the real world, after all. Like, for instance, Hannibal.
Hannibal, who is currently nowhere to be seen. Will frowns, and his eyes flick automatically towards the bathroom door, where a thin strip of light and the sound of the shower running help to confirm Hannibal’s location. Will props himself up on his elbows, blinking sleepily. His mouth gapes in a yawn, but he forces himself up. His body tingles with a light, buzzing energy as he pulls on his clothes, half awake, and heads for the stairs and the front door.

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The air feels like a damp blanket when Hannibal steps outside. He silently laments that his hair will likely never get all the way dry here, before letting the regret go with a sigh. Will is hammering a stake into the ground, near the cluster of stones they made the night before. There are three similar stakes sticking from the ground already, and a small pile awaiting their fate.

“Good morning, Will,” Hannibal says, coming to stand a few feet from where Will is building his fence. “I see you are brimming with altruistic energy today.”

Will laughs roughly, and gives the stake one final pound. He selects another from the pile, and takes four steps from the first stake, placing the new one just to the right of his foot. “I watched a documentary on sea turtles when I was a kid,” he says, lifting the hammer. “The mother turtle lays her eggs, then swims away, and when they’re born the babies try to follow but only like one in a thousand survives to adulthood. Birds and other predators are on them the second they hatch.”

Hannibal hums. “You identify with the turtles because you were abandoned by your mother,” he suggests, and smiles when Will gives him the usual look of horrified disbelief that Hannibal would say something so presumptive just casually. “You’ve contended with predators, proven yourself that one in a thousand.” More than a thousand, he thinks, one of a kind.

“I’m not a baby turtle,” Will tells him flatly. There’s a bead of sweat dripping down the center of his bare chest.

“It’s less common for mothers to abandon their children than fathers,” Hannibal muses, as Will shakes his head and resumes hammering. “But hardly unheard of. I wonder how much of your paternal instinct was learned from observation of a parent, and how much is a reaction to what you didn’t see.”

“I’m not some tragic orphan, Hannibal,” Will says, breath slightly ragged from the exercise and the heat. “I got a long fine with one parent.”
“One parent always on the move,” Hannibal amends, dredging an old memory of a conversation from years before, the details of Will’s mysterious childhood. Hannibal had researched him of course, looked into his history with the NOPD, but Will had kept a low profile throughout his young adulthood and adolescence. He’d simply seemed to spring into existence at the age of 25, and Hannibal could trace his history no earlier. In their sessions, over dinners, he’d failed once again to tease out a complete profile of the man.

Will shrugs, the gesture almost lost in the motion of his arm swinging the hammer. Hannibal decides to change tact; sometimes an abrupt shift in conversational direction has the effect of jarring Will into sudden, uncontrolled honesty. “You said before that you’d had some sexual experience with men before,” he says, and watches as the hammer glances off the post.

“I did not - ”

“Just a kiss?” Hannibal reminds him, the corner of his lips quirking upwards. Will flushes, and moves on to the next post, measuring his steps with his back turned to Hannibal. Hannibal waits until he angles his body back slightly before he speaks again. “You said you were young; how young?”

Asking direct questions of Will always gets the best results, as if Will can’t help answering. “Fifteen,” he says. “Almost sixteen.”

“It was your first?”

Will nods, hammer swinging to collide with a thwack against the wooded post. “Both of ours.”

Hannibal considers him in silence for a moment, weighing which question to ask next. “You did not find it enjoyable?”

Will laughs, a bitter sound ending with the noise of metal on wood. “Oh, I found it highly enjoyable,” he answers, between blows. “It seemed at the time that we both did.”

“Then why only the one kiss?” Hannibal asks, and Will frowns. “Did you move again? Did your father’s work take you elsewhere?”

Will shakes his head. “It was - we were in Louisiana then,” he says, “in this little town along the Mississippi. It was the longest we ever stayed in one place.”
“How long?” Hannibal asks.

“Nearly two years,” Will says. “I was fourteen when we got there, end of eighth grade. I’d been to three schools that year already. We stayed in that town till for all of ninth grade and most of tenth. It was the only time I ever started and finished a grade in one school.”

Hannibal considers for a moment how truly remarkable Will is, to have managed to absorb a decent education under such conditions, to have gotten out, all the way to the FBI and a position as a respected teacher and academic. “Did you meet him at school?”

Will nods. He lifts the last stake, counts four steps, brings it down equidistance between the last stake and the one that had already been there when Hannibal arrives. A perfect circle of wooden posts spreads around him. “My first day,” he says, laughing. “We got sent to the principal’s office together.” Hannibal lifts a brow and waits. “Some of the other boys were picking on a stray dog…”

Hannibal doesn’t need him to finish describing the scenario to know what happened. “The two of you stopped them,” he says, and Will nods.

“After that we were inseparable,” Will says. “Jeremy was well liked at school. No one bothered him. But he hadn’t had any actual friends, hadn’t had anyone he spent time with after school or on weekends till we met each other. Obviously, I hadn’t either, and we bonded pretty heavy that summer.” Will pauses for a few blows of the hammer, breathing heavily when he stands straight again. He runs the back of his forearm across his brow, chest and arms glistening with a sheen of perspiration.

“My dad did some work for his dad,” Will says, “fixed his boat’s engine for him. They got along well enough. I think Jeremy’s parents saw my dad as a goodhearted but incapable parent, and tried to take me under their wing as much as possible. I remember staying with them for weeks while my dad worked further up the river, so I could stay in school.” Will swallows. “I think, actually, we may have been homeless at a couple points, and my dad was probably staying with friends from work until he could cobble together enough to cover a week in the motel six.

“They never made me feel ashamed, though,” he says, “never treated me like I was anything less than they were. Maybe they were just grateful their son had a best friend. We’d go out on his dad’s boat and his dad would teach us how to sail. We’d stay up late, sitting on the back porch and talking about all the things we were going to do one day. He was going to be an astronaut,” Will smiles.
“Did you intend to become a police officer?” Hannibal asks.

Will heads towards the shed. He pauses midway there to pluck a bottle of water from the sand. “Yeah,” he says after a drink, “I always thought I needed to make up for the things no one knew I thought about. Dreamed about.”

Will’s eyes flash as he turns back towards the shed, and Hannibal forces his smile not to widen at the way Will opens up so easily under the slightest pressure. “Did you tell Jeremy about your dreams?”

“I just told him I wanted to be a good person,” Will says. He vanishes into the dark doorway of the shed, and reemerges half a minute later with an arm full of chicken wire.

Hannibal steps back and watches as Will unspools the wire between one pair of stakes, wrapping it around each post before moving on to lace the wire around the circle on post at a time. “You were fifteen when you kissed him,” Hannibal says, “so a year later. Or did he kiss you?”

Will’s face flushes beneath his damp curls. “It was a mutually agreed upon endeavor,” he mutters. “The week before tenth grade, we convinced his parents we were responsible enough to house sit for them while they went out of town one weekend to visit friends. Then, we proceeded to get painfully drunk for the first time on a fifth of whiskey Jeremy had gotten as a birthday present the month before from a girl a grade above us who thought he was cute.”

Hannibal watches the smile spread over Will’s face, gentle and light. He finishes wrapping the last of the wire around the last post, completing the fence. “We drank most of the bottle between the two of us, sitting on his back porch and chasing every swig with colas. The next morning we were so hung over we didn’t move till two pm.

“Normally, we slept in his bedroom. He had a pair of twin beds, so we’d each have our own. But his parents had a television in their room, and since they were out of town we’d decided to share their queen bed so we could watch TV. When we woke up at two all we did was get up to piss and pour ourselves some water before climbing back into bed to watch TV.”

Hannibal imagines a lanky, wide-eyed teenage Will as vividly as he can. “What did you watch?” he asks.

“Why ask?” Will retorts. “I doubt you’ve ever seen a television show in your life.”
Hannibal can’t prevent the smile that spreads across his face at Will’s abrasive tone. “Because it will help ground you in the memory to recall as many details as you can.”

“I don’t remember,” Will says, “reruns of some terrible sitcoms, I was barely awake for most of it. When I woke up it was the local news,” he says, “and I was laying with my head on Jeremy’s shoulder and his arm around me.” Will swallows. “We both woke up at the same moment, more or less, and just, just froze. I don’t think it had occurred to me before then, to think of him as something more than a friend. I hadn’t been harboring any secret crushes. But suddenly it was like I couldn’t think of anything except how badly I wanted to kiss him. And I could tell that was what he was feeling, too.

“We didn’t exactly talk about it before hand,” Will says, “but the energy between us shifted palpably; we both knew what was happening between us in that moment. I remember, he put his hand on my face,” Will’s hand cups his own cheek, and Hannibal’s blood spikes with an impossible surge of jealousy.

“Why only the once, then,” he asks, fighting to keep his displeasure at the thought of someone else touching Will out of his voice.

Will sighs. “Well, we were both still pretty hung over, so we wound up falling asleep again after a minute or two of clumsy kisses,” he says, “And when I woke up he was downstairs ordering a pizza and I think we both just felt too shy to talk about it again that night. So we just ate pizza and fell asleep watching So I Married an Axe Murderer.”

Hannibal’s brows shoot up. “This is a movie?”

Will laughs at him, and the sound is positively delicious. “Yeah,” he says, “comedy gold.”

Hannibal smiles back. “Recalling details is good. What happened the next day?”

“Nothing,” Will shrugs. “His parents came home and a few days later my dad came home from whatever job opportunity he’d been pursuing out of town, and we moved into an apartment for the next four months. It was a good time; dad and I had our own place, and Jeremy and I didn’t talk about what happened, but we spent all our time together and I could feel the energy sparking between us.” He sighs, rakes a hand back through his head. “I was happy,” he says, and his voice is tinged with pain.
“What went wrong?”

“School started,” Will says. “As soon as we got back around other kids, it was like the spell broke. Like he remembered there were other people in the world besides the two of us, people who would judge us if they knew, people who would make our lives a living hell. We didn’t talk about it, ever. One day in mid-September I showed up at his house after school and his parents told me he was out on a date.”

“With your whiskey benefactor?” Hannibal asks, earning a wan smile.

“No,” Will says, “with the pretty girl who sat behind us in geometry. They started going out. Sometimes just the two of them, more often all three of us. They tried to set me up with a friend of hers at first,” Will says, laughing bitterly at the memory. “That ended pretty fast.”

“Did you ever confront him about it?”

“Of course not,” Will says. “I felt lucky just to have him as a friend. I’d never had a friend before. The idea that he would want more was unthinkable to begin with; it was easy to accept there’d just been some mistake. But…it hurt. I spent my time alone, when they’d go out together without me, debating with myself whether I wished we’d never kissed, so I wouldn’t have started wanting him, or whether it was better to have loved and lost.”

Hannibal considers Will in silence for a moment. The sunlight sparks off his hair like a halo, beating down on his bare shoulders and arms. “I want to kill him,” Hannibal says, at last, voice smooth.

“Because he betrayed me?” Will asks, laughing lightly.

“Because he kissed you,” Hannibal says, and Will’s gasp is a small sound that sets his nerves aglow.

“You can’t just murder everyone who’s ever touched me,” Will objects, half laughing. As if Hannibal is joking.

“Can’t I?” He raises an eyebrow. “How do you propose to select our victims? They won’t all stumble into our hands as easily as the last one did.”
Will frowns, his brow creasing in a line Hannibal has to fight himself not to reach out and smooth. He settles for pressing a kiss to Will’s cheek. They have plenty of time to sort this out, now, he thinks. Will’s just adopted his latest strays, and sea turtles take months to hatch. They won’t be going anywhere for a while.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for any typos, and that it's taking me longer to respond to comments. Thank you for reading!
Holometabolism

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone reading! I appreciate you so much. I think this warning is probably a little late, but look out for a lot of graphic violence in this and upcoming chapters.

The blue light flashes, and Hannibal rocks back on his heels, still crouching before the small black box. Sitting on the couch across from him, Will refreshes the tablet’s screen. This time, the website’s logo appears immediately, a garish red scrawl across the screen. “I can’t believe you have this set as your homepage,” Will tells him flatly.

“Are we on the front page?” Hannibal asks, casual and infuriating.

“You know, press coverage is actually bad for us,” Will points out, “we aren’t celebrities, we’re serial killers. We don’t want to be on the front page.”

“No one is paying attention in their day to day life for us,” Hannibal says, coming to sit next to Will on the couch so he can scroll down TattleCrime’s front page. “No one looked at us twice when we went out to buy the router.”

This is true, Will has to admit. And Hannibal was hardly trying to look inconspicuous. It might be too hot and humid here for a three piece suit, but Chiyo had stocked his side of the closet with tangerine slacks, pastel button ups, and offensive straw hats. Will didn’t think it was possible to miss the subtlety of a violet paisley suit. He’d spent the two hours they’d been out in public expecting the sound of a police siren, alert for any eyes that lingered too long on him or (more often) his garish companion.

But no one had seemed particularly interested in either of them, and he’d been forced to concede that Hannibal had been right about the general public’s willingness to overlook anything outside of what they were already expecting to see. He still thinks he’ll feel safer when they’re out of the country - Cuba, he thinks, or somewhere further south than Jack is likely to look - but for now this doesn’t feel as risky as he’d feared. Instead it feels strangely comfortable, almost domestic, apart from the dismembered corpse stored in the freezer in the shed. Hannibal settles in close beside him, wrapping one arm around his shoulders to draw him closer, and Will lets himself relax with a small sigh. Actually relax. The panic and frenzy, the hallucinations, the sleepless nights staring into silent black waves, the past three years, six years, his entire fucking life - it all just falls away as Hannibal’s arm tightens over his shoulders in a casual half embrace.
They are, indeed, on the front page of TattleCrime. All over it, in fact. The top three articles pertain to them - the top hit is the interview with the guard. Below is a link to the security audio recording of Will and Hannibal reuniting. Will’s face catches fire at the title - *Mad Love: Will Graham’s Feelings on Hannibal Lecter in His Own Words!* - and he scrolls passed it with a curse.

“Look at this,” he says, handing the tablet to Hannibal. “She’s coauthoring a book with Frederick Chilton.”

Hannibal’s eyebrows shoot up. “When I was incarcerated,” he says, “Alana took great pains to convince poor Frederick to amend his accounting of the circumstances of my crimes and arrests, in order to convince the public of my insanity. He lied under oath, for her.”


“Control,” Hannibal muses. “More than security, I think she found she had a taste for dominance.”

“Hmmm, I wonder who she could possibly have learned that from.” The image of a controlling and domineering Alana is incongruous with his memory of the woman he’d called friend for so many years. Then again, Will recalls Hannibal’s empty cell, and the sleek sense of confidence clinging to Alana. *All of us changed*, he thinks, *all undergoing complete transformations into new creatures.*

“This new book,” Hannibal says, “appears to walk back Frederick’s previous lies. He and Miss Lounds intend to tell the world the truth about you and I. A truth,” his lips twitch, “which they apparently do not feel the FBI wishes the general public to discover.”


“Fame,” Hannibal guesses. “For Frederick at least, fame is a powerful motivation. Miss Lounds has always had her own particular sense of justice. No doubt she sees this as her journalist duty. And also as a way to gain fame and money.”

Will snorts. “They’re perfect for each other. A pair of conniving opportunists.”

“I think Miss Lounds would do well to exercise caution,” Hannibal says, “around someone like
“Chilton?” Will’s eyebrow cocks. “I think Freddie can more than handle him. Particularly in the state in which I left him.”

“It’s just such a state that should cause concern,” Hannibal murmurs.

Will frowns. “Freddie will get Chilton to reveal all the details he kept out of his previous book.”

“Does it bother you?” Hannibal asks. “You’ve always been an intensely private person; I can’t imagine you handling such stresses well in the past. Now public scrutiny is all the more intense.”

Will considers for a moment before shrugging. “It’s fine,” he says, and then chuckles. “More than fine. It’s good that someone is finally telling the truth. It’s what we wanted, isn’t it? Why we left her Ingram? So that she’d tell them, show them what we are.” He wiggles closer against Hannibal’s side, leaning his head to rest against Hannibal’s shoulder. Hannibal’s scent seems stronger now, as if Will’s body and brain have become hyper attuned to the man’s pheromones. He feels Hannibal, deep in him, like a hook.

“I want them to see,” he says, tilting his head to meet Hannibal’s eyes steadily. “A part of me has always wanted it. I want everyone to know who we are, what we do, what you mean to me, what I mean to you. I want them to know what we are capable of.”

Hannibal’s eyes flash like candlelight on garnets. “That’s very good, Will,” he says, and his eyes drop to the tablet he cradles slightly out of Will’s line of vision. “I’m very happy to hear that. Tell me, do you feel the same way about this?”

Will hears his own voice. “I’d kill them all, for you, to get back to you. Jack, Alana, Molly - there’s no one - no one but you - ”

“What the hell?” Will glares up into Hannibal’s cool smirk, no longer feeling so unflappable.

“- and I would do anything, kill anyone, kill everyone, everything for you because I love you, Hannibal, oh God I love you so much.”
Will can feel his face flaming. Hannibal taps his finger over the screen and silence falls immediate
and shame-soaked between them. Will feels like the lights have just come up at the club, like he’s
suddenly too visible and vulnerable, all the most personal pieces of him exposed to both Hannibal
and the larger world. Wanting to be seen suddenly feels like a laughable concept.

“It’s been remixed a number of times,” Hannibal informs him. “According to TattleCrime it is ‘on
lock’ to be this summer’s inappropriate hit single.” Hannibal looks up at him in a state of jubilation,
pressing a link on his screen. A second later the room is filled with screams, played over a heavy
bass beat, and then over that Will’s voice rolls. Everyone there is. Everyone alive.

“This is upsetting,” Will says flatly.

Hannibal makes a *tsk* sound. “Nonsense,” he tuts. “It’s only natural the public would hear the beauty
in the music we performed for one another that night. Of course they wish to participate.”

Will stares. He can tell Hannibal is thinking of the grand romantic figure they cut - the Bonnie and
Clyde of a new age. *More like the Leopold and Loeb of it,* he thinks. It’s never bothered him, what
people think when they see the worst of him. Though he’d hidden it so meticulously, his true self
brings Hannibal no shame at all. Will has no doubt Hannibal’s concerns in this matter are purely
aesthetical. But Will’s brain can’t work like that.

*Molly heard this,* he thinks. *Hell, Walter probably heard it, heard the man he’d called father offering
to murder his mother in order to appease a sociopathic cannibal.* The reality of the situation sinks in
slow, like a sickness, starting in his chest and spreading outwards.

“That wasn’t something I wanted to *share* with the world, Hannibal,” Will informs, aware that any
normal person would not require this explanation to see why he’s upset.

Hannibal’s eyes flash. “Wasn’t it? You just finished telling me how dearly you wish for the public to
know the truth about us and about what I mean to you. It seems your wish is granted too completely
for your tastes.”

“This is just invasive,” Will mutters. His face clouds at a sudden thought. “You didn’t set this up on
purpose, did you?” he asks, voice slow and careful. He can feel Hannibal’s arm stiffen against his
shoulders, sees the storm in Hannibal’s eyes. *No,* he thinks, *you’re amused more than angered but it
wasn’t your intention. At least, not that you’re aware of.*
“I’m sorry,” Will says, before Hannibal can speak. The tempest does not immediately dissipate, but his arm goes slack gradually, and his expression shifts ever so slightly. Will isn’t sure why he can never just let things well enough alone, hears himself saying, “It’s hardly a stretch to think it though, is it?”

Hannibal considers him, and Will takes a moment to reflect on how close they are, the way that Hannibal’s arm loops around his shoulders, and how easy it would be for Hannibal to strangle him into unconsciousness right this second.

“It’s not a stretch,” Hannibal acquiesces at last. Will’s body sags, releasing tension he hadn’t been aware he was holding. He sees the corner of Hannibal’s lips twitch in response.

“Anyway,” Will sighs, dropping his head to look away from Hannibal’s searching gaze, “there’s no point in being upset about it, I suppose.”

“Does there need to be a point?”

“Is caring about it going to change anything?” Will asks.

“Must an emotion affect corporeal change, in order to be considered valid? You are entitled to your emotions, Will. You spend so much energy in repressing them I think at times you forget.”

He can feel Hannibal’s fingers running through his hair. The pressure is firm but not uncomfortable. It reminds him of the way he would pet his dogs, and the effect it has on him is similar. Will hums, sinking into the couch to rest his head against Hannibal’s shoulder. It still feels a little surreal, this comfortable closeness and the reaction it stirs in him - both the contentment and the arousal - but it’s becoming something upon which he feels he can rely. Not a passing hallucination or fleeting vision.

For a second his mind rebels at the concept of solidly and semi-permanence, and he feels cold air rushing over him, feels his stomach hurtling. Then Hannibal’s hands on him are real again, and the room is still, and Will just concentrates on breathing for a moment, breathing through the force of his emotions.

He wonders how many people have felt the way he feels, the way they both feel when they’re together, wonders how many have felt the glory and radiance Hannibal’s touch and voice produce for him, in those moments when they’ve washed their made up disguises off with fresh blood. Surely no one else has felt this way before. Surely it is not a common emotion, but something higher, more
elevated than what the average man or woman experiences. It feels like a fresh breath of youth, like he’s nineteen again and the world still pulsates with hope.

“I would die for you,” Will whispers, turning his face to hide his expression and breathe in Hannibal’s smell. He feels the laughter in Hannibal’s chest against his cheek, feels both of Hannibal’s arms come about him, Hannibal’s lips on his cheek, the hot breath of his laughter dusting Will’s skin.

“Dear boy,” Hannibal laughs, nuzzling his face against Will’s scruffy cheek, “haven’t you realized yet that I prefer you alive?”

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She can see him from the window, his little form a dark spot against the glimmering line of the horizon, chubby hands sprinkling sand to veil the sun in short bursts. He’s a shadow, moving in the sunlight, no details evident, only a silhouetted form sitting on the shore, stacking sea shells atop the crenelated towers of the castle he’s made. Perfect and safe, right where she can see him. And Margot, along with him, her own lean shadow blotting out the sun as she talks to the taller shadow that is their head of security and Morgan’s full-time security, Lars Caitling. Caitling is nothing like the men who let Hannibal and Will go - the men who ran and begged and screamed instead of reacting as they’d been trained. He’s nothing like the Sardinian thugs Mason used to keep in the Verger’s employ, either. A former Secret Service agent, Caitling came highly recommended. His competency, his loyalty, and his ruthlessness are all beyond question.

Alana trusts Morgan to no one else.

She closes her eyes, letting the scenery of stark contrasts fade into only the orange light that illuminates the veins in her eyelids. She doesn’t look away from the light, only watches the blood that moves through her lids, mindful of the tiny ticking beat of her heart even in these minute parts of her. Each inch of her alive, and able to rely on that life in a way she hadn’t for so long.

Safe now, she tells herself, but it is still difficult to make herself believe. Coming here is the gift she gives herself, when the world becomes too loud and too menacing. It’s not a secret hideout, but the private island is small enough to secure, and any incoming ship or plane would be quickly spotted. Caitling and the men who work beneath his command would be able to handle any threat, with such ample warning. If they are going to be attacked, Alana thinks, it will not happen here. And so this is her pause button. Her chance to step momentarily outside the anxieties that plague her.

The rational part of her mind knows that no one will attack them, here or elsewhere. Hannibal gave
his word, and he is nothing if not true to his oaths, even when he’s promising to break them.

“Thinking of me?” Margot’s voice always sounds pensive, a little sad, even now. Alana opens her eyes to see Morgan, and Caitling standing by, still silhouetted against the encroaching tide. She turns to find her wife at the doorway behind her. “Ugh, never mind. Your face is positively tortured, dear; I’d hate to imagine thinking of me inspires such a look.”

Alana sighs, moving towards her instinctively. “Surely not,” she says.

“What’s on your mind then, that sours even paradise?”

“Et in Arcadia ego,” Alana murmurs, coming to stand before Margot and taking the delicate hands held out to her in her own. “I’m being silly, I know.”

Margot cocks her head, copper ringlets falling around her wide, questioning eyes. “Not silly,” she answers, “nothing about you is ever silly, least of all this.” And Alana is struck by the totality of her love, of her gratitude, for this person. Ever since they met, Alana’s hoped to be the woman she sees reflected back from Margot’s searching eyes, that strong and cunning creature Margot imagines her being.

“He gave his word,” Alana says, as much to herself as to Margot. “Who knows where they are by now; out of the country for sure. Jack told me this morning that they found the motorcycle from TattleCrime, just outside New Jersey. Seems they sold it the night of the escape, so that’s Jack’s only lead gone cold. They could be anywhere in the world by now, and they’re definitely nowhere near us.”

“Be that as it may,” Margot counters, “we both know how entangled our lives have been with theirs. I don’t really think they’ll just walk away from us entirely, Alana, do you?”

“That’s what security’s for,” Alana answers.

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The sky above the shore is a deep orange, tinged by red, when they begin their walk along the beach. The tide is far out, and Will leads them down the beach to the packed damp sand at the edge of the water, where it is easier to walk and their shoes do not sink into soft dry sand. The tideline is
littered with shells and tiny crustacean carcasses, and here and there a hungry seagull picks through the debris for something still left to scavenge before the tides rush back in again.

The beach is mostly deserted out here, and they walk in silence, enjoying the sound of the waves and the warm glow of the setting sun. Will walks a few feet closer to the foaming tide that encroaches upon them in a slow crawl. Now and then, Hannibal watches with silent delight as Will is forced to skip out of reach of the waves that come in faster than he anticipates.

“I didn’t imagine ending up here,” Will says, when they’ve walked far enough to lose sight of their little house. “Not just here in the Keys, but here in this situation with you, like this. With you.”

Hannibal smiles slightly at the words. “What makes you think this is where you end up?” he asks. “I hardly think we end in the Florida Keys.”

Will arches an eyebrow back at him. “Will you give me my ending after all?”

“We’ll give it to each other,” Hannibal says. “You’ve felt it, I know.”

Will nods, face inscrutable. Hannibal thinks there’s a hint of pain in the corner of his lips, but it might as easily be wonder or lust or dread. “The further we go,” he breathes, “the faster we accelerate.”

“Hurtling towards oblivion,” Hannibal concludes. “A glorious ending, written in blood. And then nothingness, dissipation.”

“Not planning to rule in Hell in the afterlife?” Will queries, jokingly, and Hannibal exhales a chuckle, at his words and at the way he has to hop to avoid the rushing fingers of foam and sea water.

“I am grateful there is no afterlife,” Hannibal says. “We do not pay for our sins, we are not slaves to God.”

“Perhaps there’s another life,” Will argues. “Perhaps I’ll find you there.”

“Perhaps,” Hannibal allows. “Perhaps we find one another again and again, in other versions of this
world, other dimensions, in the imagined moments that come between the real. Perhaps in the
moment of death we’ll imagine a brand new world, a brand new life for ourselves that contains its
own ending, and its own imagined universes, all spiraling in a perpetual loop of endings and
creation.”

Will is silent for a long moment, thinking, Hannibal assumes, whether or not this moment is real or
imagined, whether he is living or dead. It doesn’t matter, Hannibal thinks, and Will must eventually
come to the same conclusion for himself, his expression softening into acceptance. Finally he asks,
“How much longer do you think we’ll last in this reality?”

“Less than a decade,” Hannibal answers without pause. He considers for a moment before amending
his statement. “Maybe a decade, a dozen years at most if we get lucky. I don’t think either of us sees
sixty-five.”

“I thought you said we’d be unstoppable,” Will says, emotionlessly.

“We will be,” he says, “we already are. Could you stop us, Will? Could you walk away?”

“But you think - what? The FBI catches us? We’re killed in the standoff?”

“Perhaps that,” Hannibal shrugs. “We’ll take increasing risks,” he says. “We’ve already started.”

Will mulls this over for a moment, before opening his mouth to reply. But no reply comes, that pretty
mouth hanging agape without sound or purpose as Will’s eyes go grey and hazed. Hannibal licks his
lips at the sight, before following Will’s gaze down the curve of the empty shore.

Only it’s not empty. There’s a single figure, standing in their path and coming more clearly into view
with every step. A middle-aged man, heavy set and dressed in a sweated out blue t-shirt. He looks as
if he’s been crying, his face blotchy, his shoulders slumped. Hannibal might be fundamentally
incapable of empathy, but he reads body language perfectly, and this man’s screams of turmoil.
Whatever Will picks up from the man, it causes him to react the way a bloodhound reacts to the scent
of its quarry.

Hannibal trails him, up the beach and toward the man. He can tell that whatever Will is seeing, it is
not the same as what he sees. Maybe it is what the man they are walking towards sees of the world,
or maybe they are simple misfirings in Will’s brain. Maybe they are divine visions, gateways into
other worlds. For a moment, Hannibal sees wings over Will’s shoulders, ivory feathers curving in
high, sharp-boned arches above him. *Angel of judgment,* Hannibal thinks to himself, following Will’s silent path, *lamb of God have mercy on us and grant us peace.*

There is a peace Will knows how to impart incredibly well. *Divine retribution,* thinks Hannibal, *and forgiveness through transformation.*

The man doesn’t speak until Will stops in front of him. “What do you want?” he asks, voice rough and hollow.

Will cocks his head to the side, examining the man carefully. “It’s what you want that matters,” he says. “Hasn’t that always been the case for you?”

Hannibal recognizes the expression on Will’s face and the tenor of his voice as the same one he wore and used at the crime scenes Jack dragged him to, time after time. When he’d bent reality with the force of his imagination, and seen beyond what anyone else could. Like a parlor trick, like a street psychic. Like a seer.

Now he sees this man, and Hannibal watches as Will’s face shifts, a decision made.

“You’re in trouble,” Will says. “She’s going to leave and she’s going to tell people.”

There are beads of perspiration forming on the man’s brow. His eyes look fevered. He does not question how Will knows these things, does not deny that they are true.

“I can help you,” Will says.

He turns his back on both of them then, and begins to walk back towards their house. Hannibal watches, and after a breath the man begins to follow, trudging after Will in silence as if under some enchantment. Hannibal exhales softly, feeling a shiver run through him at what he has just witnessed. Then, he begins to trail the two of them, bringing up the rear as they head home.

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He is perfectly content to do nothing more than hand Will fresh knives, as the ones he holds become
slick and slippery with blood. Will drops them like sharp red fish with silver bones, onto the drop cloth-covered floor of the spare room, and the clean knives Hannibal passes him are wet with blood before they ever taste flesh.

Hannibal can hear the music blaring loud from the speakers downstairs, a faint melodic wailing audible between their guest’s screams. The music has a droning, hypnotic quality, the singer’s high voice warbling through formants. The rhythm of the song replicates in the rhythm of the dying man’s frenzied breaths. Hannibal feels his heart beating in the same looping pattern, and the hallways of his mind are alight in radiant golden sound.

“I know how you feel,” Will had told the man, after he’d led them all upstairs to this room. “I know what you’ve done.”

And the man had broken, sobbing raggedly and letting Will push him down, to sit in the one wooden chair furnishing the room, as if waiting to fulfill this purpose. Will’s eyes had flashed to Hannibal then, and Hannibal had known as clearly as if Will had spoken aloud what it was Will wanted him to do. He’d brought the rope from the box beneath their bed, and moved to secure the man’s legs, torso, and arms to the seat. The crying man had offered no resistance, only wept and looked up at Will as if he was looking upon the face of a god who stood in judgment above him. Which, Hannibal had thought at the time and thinks again now, was exactly what was happening.

The man’s skin comes away in long peels under Will’s ministrations, thick and red, and he drops the slabs of flesh into a large copper basin Hannibal had brought for him along with the knives and towels. Hannibal watches, wiping one of the discarded knives dry all the while, and feels his mouth go dry at the sight of Will peeling the man like an apple.

The man’s rent and bleeding muscles are visible where Will’s flayed him at shoulder and chest. Hannibal imagines reaching his hand through the exposed muscle, driving his fist to grip the ribs caging the man’s wildly beating heart. Will guides the knife through the man like he’s slicing through fresh fruit, and a ribbon of skin and sinew a finger’s length wide lifts with his hand. Will catches his gaze above the bound man’s head, and Hannibal sees his eyes are wide, pupils blown so that the iris is little more than a storming blue grey ring around the black.

“I didn’t mean to hurt them,” the man had sobbed, tears and snot falling down his face. His hands were bound, and neither Will nor Hannibal hurried to clean him. “I just get so worried. I can’t help it. I didn’t know - ”

“You knew,” Will interrupted him, voice cold and arresting. “Why lie to yourself?”
The man nodded. “Alright, alright, I knew, yes, I knew what it did to them. But the thing you have to understand is, I’ve been hurt before. I’ve learned to fear abandonment. I’ve learned not to trust.”

“Do you think,” Will had asked, voice dripping with unconcealed contempt, “that any of that remotely excuses your actions?”

“No, no, of course not,” the man sobbed. Hannibal had stood by, marveling at the scene unfolding before him. Of what crime their guest was guilty he hadn’t the faintest idea, nor could he ascertain how Will had come to be so suddenly certain, and apparently so correct, in his own profile.

“I admit it,” he said, “I’ve been an asshole to my wife. To my mom. Worse than an asshole. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“You take,” Will whispered down, and Hannibal had stepped closer to hear him. “You take and take until the women who love you can give you no more. You take their energy, their money, their other relationships, their self-esteem - am I missing anything? Their sense of safety, maybe? Their trust?”

“I know, I know,” his words were barely audible, voice choked with sobs. “I need help.”

“I can help you,” Will had said, and even to Hannibal he’d sounded nothing but merciful. “I can give you what you need.”

“I’m sorry,” the man had cried, and Will had gestured to Hannibal to hand him the first slender knife.

“I forgive you,” Will had said, and then he’d slipped the blade in right below the man’s tricep and started to slice.

Hannibal can sense the man’s vitality beginning to wane, his screams slipping into gurgles as blood floods his airways. The body can’t withstand this much pain without cessation. It really is a terrible way to go, Hannibal thinks, and he feels the heat rushing to his lower abdomen at the sight and sound and sense of Will, vibrating with righteous fury.

“Have you heard of the slow process?” Will had asked him. “I read about, years ago. It left quite an impression.”
“A form of execution and torture, employed until shockingly recently in China if I’m not mistaken.” Will nods. “Death by a thousand cuts.”

“Featured heavily in my nightmares for a time,” Will said, and the man’s skin sloughed off in wet stripes as he worked. “Taking little pieces away, bit by bit, till what’s left behind cannot sustain life,” Will had murmured, looking down at the man who howled in pain but didn’t beg for the punishment to stop. “Seems a fitting fate for one who took without consideration or gratitude from the ones closest to him, took until what was left could not sustain life. Your mother died a broken woman, exhausted by giving all she had to you, didn’t she? Working herself to the bone for a son who had no intention of repaying her kindness. What about your wife?”

But the man had only shrieked, his mind beyond language as Will cut away his shirt in order to better reach the tender flesh of his chest and belly.

The man’s life is bleeding away in hot red ribbons of blood and muscle and veins and tissue, and to Hannibal it seems as if Will eats the man’s strength. He seems to glow and expand, till he’s filling the room. Hannibal feels his wonder at Will’s fierce beauty rising till it feels like a scream waiting to tear from his own lips. In all things, Will has consistently impressed him. But tonight Hannibal has watched him move like the Angel of Death over the land, selecting their victim as if through prescience, doling out justice as no one else ever could.

He will walk among the living and pass judgment, Hannibal thinks, and I will be the sword and shield at his side.

The world will be a better place, when the two of them are done.

The knife falls into the copper pot, its blade ringing against the rim as it drops at the sound of the man’s final rattling breath. Will stands over him, breathing hard, a creature of blood, his hands and arms slick with it, his clothes and face messy with red splatters. Hannibal steps closer, lifting his relatively dry hands to card through Will’s curling dark hair. He can feel Will shivering, practically humming, under his touch.

“I saw him,” Will says. “He knew I could see.”

“You see things the rest of us will never dream of,” Hannibal agrees, petting his hands over Will’s feverish, bloodied face, hushing him with heavy caresses. “You can see into the hearts of men, empathize with them so intensely it is as if you can look within them and see through their eyes.
What a powerful tool that must be, to see a man’s true soul and stand in judgment over it, able to impart mercy or damnation.”

“We’re all damned,” Will says, turning his clouded eyes to lock into Hannibal’s.

“If I must be damned,” Hannibal says, “I can think of no finer company in perdition than you.”

Will waives, and then all but collapses into him, the divine fire departing to leave a weakened vessel in its wake. Hannibal hooks an arm beneath Will’s shoulders to prop him up as he helps him towards their bedroom and the master bath. He turns the tap to fill the claw-footed tub with steaming water, and strips Will with an easy efficiency borne of years practicing on the unresponsive corpses of his victims.

Will moves weakly, lifting legs and arms at Hannibal’s wordless urging, and climbing into the tub with the aid of Hannibal’s guiding hands. He’s warm and pliant as one just awoken from sleep, and, Hannibal notes with a mixture of surprise and arousal, rock hard between his legs despite his otherwise passive and dreamlike behavior. Hannibal brushes a hand over Will’s cock through the hot water, and watches the shiver that shakes through Will. So responsive, Hannibal thinks, already straining so close to climax. He wonders how far he can push Will, how far Will is going to push him, how long before they’re rutting frantic atop a pile of fresh cadavers. It’s a gruesome thought, ugly and thrilling at the same time.

For now, he contents himself with wrapping his fingers around Will’s throbbing cock. Water sloshes over the rim of the tub at his motions, to soak into Hannibal’s trouser legs where he is kneeling on the tile by the tub. It’s an uncomfortable position, but worth it for the little sounds of breathless, half gone pleasure Will makes.

“Stay with me, Will,” Hannibal breathes, brushing his lips against Will’s cheek to taste sweat and tears and the clinging trace of the stranger’s blood. “Stay here.”

Will’s only reply is a moan. His hands come up to grip white knuckled at the edge of the tub. Hannibal tightens his fist and watches as Will’s eyelids flutter open. “Hannibal…”

Will’s orgasm is unexpected and intense, rushing over him and ripping a surprised scream from his throat as Hannibal’s fingers move over him. Hannibal watches him shake, his release like strands of pearls drifting in the water around him. His face and arms are still streaked pink and red, his eyes closed tight as his breathing transitions gradually from frantic gasps back to something closer to a normal rhythm.
The two of them are headed towards an inevitable darkness, Hannibal thinks, as he runs fresh water from the tap to pour over Will’s bloody face with his cupped hands, sinking towards a roiling wave of violence. There have been and there yet shall be terrors that bite not and smite not in play, but Hannibal intends to enjoy every second of their fall.
Eclosion

Chapter Notes

This is almost entirely just porn. Sorry. Or not sorry? You choose. Sorry for any typos or clumsy spots, and for being behind on replying to comments. It's been a wacky week, but your encouragement and the fact that anyone reads this really means a lot to me so thank you. <3

Will doesn’t remember falling asleep. He supposes people never actually remember falling asleep, but he also doesn’t remember going to bed. Only he must have, because he wakes up nestled under the cobalt blue sheets, with Hannibal’s chest pressed flush against his back and one arm curled possessively around his waist. Sunlight streams through the gauzy white curtains, casting shadows on the opposite wall and illuminating everything in the room with a glow that Will can’t help feeling is somehow clean. The room and everything in it - including himself - is cleansed, washed in clear light.

Will certainly doesn’t remember being clean. The last thing he can clearly remember is a thick strip of flesh curling under his wet red hands. He can still smell blood, from the bedroom down the hallway, or possibly from the bathroom, but there’s no sight of carnage in the bedroom. Here everything is washed and bright and as it should be. Will sighs, settling himself back against Hannibal’s welcoming warmth. His breaths are deep and slow, and while he could be faking, Will thinks it’s likely that the other man is still asleep.

Hannibal’s arm tightens around him, and Will struggles to turn around without breaking free from the embrace. It’s an awkward motion, rolling over without dislodging Hannibal’s arm, but Will manages to maneuver himself so that they face one another, his eyes level with the pale indentation at the base of Hannibal’s throat and his hands resting lightly on the Hannibal’s pectorals. He breathes a contented sigh, and inhales Hannibal’s scent on the next breath - lavender and sage, and the smooth deep scent of ambergris, and beneath that the scent of Hannibal himself, like the forest after rain. It works on Will’s brain like a drug, and he feels himself sinking into the feeling of warmth and safety.

No sooner has he settled than Hannibal pulls him closer, mumbling something unintelligible and half awake into Will’s hair with a sigh. His lips pressed against the elegant curve of Hannibal’s throat, Will feels his chest flooding with a secret heat.

He leans back, pushing lightly at Hannibal’s chest with his hands so he can look up and into Hannibal’s face. The expression he finds there shocks him - there’s not a trace of sleepiness in Hannibal’s face, and Will is certain he had really been asleep a moment before. Will can’t think of a word to describe the way Hannibal looks at him - with lips parted and eyes glossy and wet. Wonder, he thinks, might come the closest.
“What I saw you do last night…”

Will feels the blood draining from his face. He remembers, suddenly, how it had felt to suddenly experience his sense of reality shifting. He had felt like a reflection in a glass, like a mirror image of the man they’d found standing forlorn and alone by the incoming tide. He’s struggled with his inability to turn of someone else’s emotions all of his life, but he’d never felt something like this before. The way he’d felt the man’s pain, the way he’d felt like both the judged and judge, reminds him of the way it felt to step into a killer’s mind for Jack. He’d made those intuitive leaps he could never explain to the Bureau’s satisfaction, but faster and easier than ever before. He can’t explain it, even to himself.

And he remembers, how he had wanted to forgive, like God forgives.

Hannibal loosens his grip on him, in order to stroke the back of his fingers over the scarred side of Will’s pallid face. Will shivers at the tender caress. Even this light touch is maddening. Will feels Hannibal like a magnet, and pulls himself up to bring their faces together, suddenly unable to do anything else.

The room around him seems to shrink and expand with the pressure of Hannibal’s lips over his. The man kisses him reverently, achingly slow, and too gently for Will’s liking. With a breathy sigh, Will deeps the kiss. Hannibal responds mildly, his lips parting to allow Will’s tongue to run along the roof of his mouth, letting Will guide the trajectory of their embrace. It’s still too little though, too subdued.

Will feels his desire thudding in him like a second heart. He lets out a soft, needy sound, and bites down lightly on Hannibal’s lower lip.

Hannibal goes still against him for the space of a deep inhalation. Then, his hands rise to grip Will’s face between them, immobilizing him and holding his mouth partially open with the pressure of his elegant fingers, so that Hannibal’s tongue can invade his mouth. Will can feel himself becoming impossibly hard at the way Hannibal licks into his mouth. Hannibal is so strong, Will thinks, he couldn’t back out of the kiss if he tried.

For a second he wants to try, just so Hannibal will stop him. He imagines the way Hannibal’s gently confining grip would turn harsh, the strength he’d exert, the way his eyes would light up at Will struggling beneath him, unable to escape.
Then Hannibal rolls his hips against Will’s, and Will can feel how hard he is, his erection like a brand, burning hot and leaking lewdly against Will’s thigh. Will’s own cock aches in sympathy. He moans into the kiss, bucking his hips. He feels empty, suddenly, his body aching in a deep and hollow way he’s never experienced. With a shudder, he thinks of Hannibal’s fingers inside him, and is suddenly curious about how it would feel to have more. He’d felt so full, he’s not sure his body could accept more, and he flushes at the thought, and at the imagined vision of what they would look like, finally coming together in such a manner.

What we will look like, Will thinks, realizing with a sudden catch of his breath that this is happening, really and finally.

Then Hannibal’s fingers are pressing bruises into his hips as he grips him there to hold him still, and grinds against him with a slow, lascivious roll of his pelvis. Will tears himself from the kiss, his neck arching as he cries out Hannibal’s name. He feels Hannibal’s fingers winding through the short curls at the nape of his neck, Hannibal’s humid breath against the skin of his throat a second before his lips close over the soft flesh there. His heart skitters, pulse thumping uncontrollably under Hannibal’s mouth as the older man sucks a violent bruise into the pristine column of his neck.

Hannibal’s teeth graze the delicate skin of his neck. Will feels the pressure a few seconds before he feels his skin tear on the point of one of Hannibal’s jagged incisors. He hisses, and then groans at the wet slide of Hannibal’s tongue licking away his blood. He feels like Hannibal’s tongue has dragged across the surface of his brain rather than his neck, as if his brain is caving in like a swirl of licked ice-cream caving to heat and suction and force. If you were to kill me now, he thinks, leaning his head back into the cradle of Hannibal’s fingers to better display his throat, I would let you.

Hannibal strings a necklace of bruising kisses round the base of Will’s throat, blood rising beneath his bloodied lips, a scarlet stain flushing just below the skin. His tongue traces a hot line up the straining muscles of Will’s neck, to lick behind one ear. He sucks the lobe into his mouth, biting gently at the sound of Will’s ragged inhalation.

“Out of all the world, Will,” he says, his lips pressed against Will’s ear so that the words fill him. They bounce around the boundaries of his skull. “Out of them all I found you. The only other soul in this dimension capable of understanding me. I think, sometimes, that you are more myself than I am.”

Will gasps, writhing against Hannibal’s viselike grip. He can hear himself making embarrassing, desperate noises, but there’s nothing he can do about it. He feels out of control already, overwhelmed by so much skin to skin contact with the other man. And then Hannibal rocks his hips gently against him, over and over, building the tension between them until Will wants to scream. Hannibal’s breath is hot and steady against the shell of his ear, Hannibal’s smell all around him. He can feel Hannibal’s erection thrusting between his legs, the thick head, wet with precum, dragging over his hole.
“I want you,” Will sobs, gripping Hannibal’s forearms with white knuckled hands. There will be bruises there tomorrow, a distant part of him knows, yellow and green contusions tattooed across the pale skin. Hannibal gives no sign of discomfort though. “Now, Hannibal, oh God, I want to feel you.” He can feel his face heating at his own words as he speaks.

Hannibal smirks. “Don’t you feel me right now, Will?” he asks, voice infuriatingly steady as he rolls his hips languidly. Hannibal lets his lips part in the subtlest gasp, and Will feels his eyelids fluttering closed, his eyes threatening to roll back. “I can feel you,” Hannibal breathes. His voice is edged with lust. “You feel amazing.”

Will shakes his head, straining against Hannibal’s hands uselessly. He’s too strong, of course, immovable and determined and relentless and cruel. “Please,” Will’s voice breaks. “You already know what I mean.”

“Tell me anyway,” Hannibal purrs, nipping at the shell of Will’s ear. He releases one of Will’s hip bones, and Will gives an experimental thrust. Hannibal’s strength is impervious, however. He traces the full curve of Will’s lower lip with the thumb of his freed hand. “I want to hear you say it.”

“You want to hear me begging you to fuck me,” Will says bitterly, and Hannibal’s eyes flash with something that might be either lust or warning. “just so you can gloat.”

“I want to do much more than gloat,” Hannibal says. “Ask me nicely, Will.”

His face, already flushed with mortification, heats up even more at Hannibal’s words. He opens his mouth, only to find it suddenly too dry to speak. Hannibal smiles down at him almost innocently, but slides his body against Will’s so that the crown of his cock once again teases over the entrance to Will’s body, and Will finds he can no longer hold back, suddenly willing to do or say anything to get what he needs.

“Hannibal,” he moans, “I want you inside of me - I want to feel your cock in me.” His eyes sting, and he blinks rapidly to clear them, looking up at Hannibal through the damp fringe of his lashes. He looks like he’s waiting for something, and Will knows exactly what it is. “Please.”

Hannibal’s smile broadens, widening to show teeth. He pushes his lips to Will’s in a kiss that is surprisingly tender. Will whimpers, and finds himself suddenly breathless on his back, with Hannibal holding himself above him and leaning in for another kiss. This one is deeper, harder, his tongue forcing its way deep into Will’s mouth to steal his breath. For a moment, Will is certain he will pass out.
“I want you in me,” Will pants, when Hannibal pulls back for air.

Hannibal smiles. “I want to be inside of you,” he agrees, “the first and only one to take you, touch you in a way no one else ever has or ever will.” Will’s heart pounds, frantic, and the edges of his vision blur. He wants to say something - say how intense this feels, how he feels too chaotic and unstable to even stand right now, how he’s spent his whole life trying to be better and now he only wants to be worse. But no words come, and Hannibal kisses him again, then dips his head to kiss Will’s throat, lips mouthing over the sensitive and sore skin before moving lower. Hannibal’s mouth finds one of Will’s nipples, teasing it lightly with his tongue.

Will’s back arches in a painful bow. His cock leaks against his stomach as Hannibal closes his teeth over the sensitive skin, holding delicately as he licks and sucks to draw gasps from Will’s parted lips.

“Hannibal, God,” Will moans. He hears Hannibal’s voice, filtering down to him through the haze of a half remembered dream, like sunlight through thick mist. I have no other god but you.

Hannibal’s mouth moves lower, sliding over Will’s sternum, and Will feels himself trembling. He knows what’s going to happen, but Hannibal’s tongue still shocks a sharp shout from him when it slides over his belly to trace, hot and wet, along the rough edge of the scar he left there years before.

“Ha - oh my God - you’re so, so, so - ”

“Shhh, darling,” Hannibal murmurs, pressing his open mouth to the scar tissue and Will makes a sound that is almost a wail at his touch, at the way his lips brush against the head of Will’s flushed and straining cock, at the sound of the endearment on his lips, and intended for Will. “Just let yourself feel.”

Will sobs, flinging one arm over his eyes to hide his face - but he can’t help peaking out at Hannibal, who has dipped his head to lap at the precum pooling on Will’s belly. Will breathes hard, watching as Hannibal’s tongue darts out to taste him. It’s such an incongruously filthy image - not at all the kind of thing Will would expect from him, but performed with the same suave self-assurance that Hannibal applies to every aspect of his life.

“Delicious,” Hannibal murmurs, and Will moans. “As if you could be anything but.”

Will’s heart and mind race, his head filling with the din of their mutual desire. He wants to tell
Hannibal that he’s never loved another living creature the way he does right now - that he’s never loved at all, never even come close before now. But his mouth refuses to work, and so Will settles for fixing Hannibal with a yearning stare and panting raggedly down at him.

Hannibal pushes Will’s knees up towards his chest, bending him practically in half. Will’s never felt so exposed. His body is uncomfortably open and on display. He can feel every inch of him flushing beneath the cool, evaluative gaze Hannibal sweeps over him. His eyes glitter with approval, and Will chokes back a sob when he feels Hannibal’s lips pressing in a hot, open mouth kiss against his inner thigh.

“Ha - uh - Hannibal,” Will starts, and then finds himself unable to speak - unable to think - as Hannibal’s tongue runs in a delicious wet slide between his legs, over his hole, aching to be filled. “Oh my God you - are you -“

Someday, Will intends to finish a sentence again. This is not the moment for such a triumph however, and his question collapses into babbling moans as Hannibal eats him out, tracing the tight ring of muscle with his tongue. The intimacy is nearly overwhelming; for a moment, he feels perilously close to tears. Will can feel his body relaxing beneath the unfamiliar sensation, and it’s somehow too much and not enough simultaneously.

When Hannibal presses a finger against his entrance, Will’s wet hole takes it easily. It feels strange, but not painful, and also not enough. Will whines, canting his hips to grind against Hannibal’s hand. Hannibal’s mouth sucks kisses along his inner thigh, and Will feels a second finger rubbing against the entrance to his body. He grunts as the second digit breaches him, sliding with a slow, forceful motion until he has both fingers fully inside him. His breath catches as the invading fingers rub against his prostate, and Hannibal’s tongue flickers over him, briefly inside of him. He feels like he’s losing his mind.

“Oh God, Hannibal.” It’s too much, feels too good. Will wails, unable to hold in the sound as Hannibal pulls back to watch him, withdraws his fingers slightly to stretch the gripping ring of Will’s ass. “Please - I can’t wait any longer.”

“Shh,” Hannibal soothes, uncharacteristically gentle in this instant. Or maybe not, Will thinks. He was always capable of showing kindness when he thought it would get his desired results. His voice is rough when he speaks again. “Trust me,” he rasps, “you want to be prepared. It’s going to feel good, Will, I promise. I’ll make you feel even better than you do right now. But you need to let me get you ready, first.”

Will whimpers, nodding even as his muscles spasm around Hannibal’s fingers. Hannibal sinks his fingers in and twists them, and Will cries out. Hannibal withdraws his fingers, just to thrust them in again, agonizingly slow.
“Darling boy,” Hannibal says, gruff voiced. Will notes with some satisfaction a hint of breathlessness in Hannibal’s voice. “The way your body grips my fingers,” he sighs, “so warm and tight. My God, Will, the thought of burying myself in you is almost more than I can stand.” He groans, tilting his body forward to lean his forehead against Will’s shoulder, and Will breathes in the scent of his hair, the light sheen of sweat on the back of his neck, trying to center himself when all he feels like doing is screaming.

“It feels so good,” Will babbles, “you feel so good. I’ve never, I’ve never…” He’s never behaved like this during sex before, never felt like this. He’s shocked at the sound of his voice - high and desperate and wanton - shocked and vaguely thrilled at himself. He wonders if it’s because of the new sensation of being with another man for the first time, of being touched like this, but he knows it’s mostly because it’s Hannibal. He grips the sheets beneath him so hard he half expects them to rip, but he can’t be bothered to ease his grip even so. “I need you, Hannibal, please.”

Hannibal quiets him with a kiss, and Will whines, tasting himself on Hannibal’s mouth and arching up into the kiss and the same time he’s trying to wriggle further onto Hannibal’s hand.

“I take a cruel joy in seeing you tremble and writhe beneath my touch,” Hannibal admits, and Will shivers at his words, and at the twist of his fingers, “and in hearing your groans and wails. I want to go on, touching you like this for hours, want to keep you always on that edge between too much and not enough, just so I can continue to witness the way you come apart for me.” Will sobs, and Hannibal gives one last, almost vicious thrust of his fingers before withdrawing them slowly to the sound of Will’s broken breathing. “Tonight, however, I find you are too much for me to resist.”

Will’s heart thuds. He can think of nothing except how he wants to make Hannibal feel as out of control as he does. Hannibal’s eyes flash down at him, and the other man pulls Will by his hips, positioning a pair of pillows beneath him before settling between Will’s thighs. He feels exposed, vulnerable in a way he’s never experienced. Will props himself up, staring intently into Hannibal’s eyes, his heart thundering.

“I want to take you, Will,” Hannibal says, staring into his eyes with such intensity that Will wishes he could look away, but finds himself unable to do so. “Will you let me?”

Will nods. For a moment, he wants to speak, even opens his mouth to say something - about how quickly they’re escalating, about how they’ve been so cautious, how Hannibal has been so cautious throughout the years, but together they can’t control themselves, and after this he doesn’t know how much more their violence will accelerate. But no words come, and Hannibal waits politely. Will can think of nothing to say, then, except from Hannibal’s name. It comes out small and needy.
“You and I,” Hannibal murmurs, “will change this world, as we have changed one another. In this and the infinite other universes, Will, the only constant must be that our paths will always lead us to one another.”

Will exhales, nods a second time. He lets his legs fall further apart, curving around Hannibal’s hips. He can feel himself trembling, shaken by the powerful combination of desire and fear and anticipation as Hannibal leans forward and into him. And then the slick head of Hannibal’s cock strokes over his sensitive, freshly fingered hole, and Will decides he doesn’t care about what comes after this, just this.

Will’s face contorts as Hannibal begins to push into him with small shallow thrusts, stretching Will’s ass over the exceptionally thick head of his cock. The wide, fleshy crown of his head slips into Will’s body, and Hannibal’s deep gasp sends a bolt of lust rocketing through him. It hurts a little, but mostly it feels like a strange fullness, and Will finds that he wants more, wants Hannibal to move faster. He says so, before he can stop himself, then flushes at his shameless begging. He’s too far gone to fully regret it, though.

“Settle down,” Hannibal breathes, his words ending with the barest gasp as his hips rock forward ever so slightly. Will feels his hand running, open palmed, down his chest, over his hips, urging him to be patient. But Will is done being patient. He throws his head back and rolls his hips upwards, feeling Hannibal fall against him, feeling the way Hannibal fills him, and he’s overwhelmed by the sense of completion, or fullness and perfection, as if this is always how they were meant to be.

Of course, he knows, it is.

The harsh noise of Hannibal’s exhalation and the movement of his chest rising and falling are the sound of victory to Will’s ears. “Will,” Hannibal says, voice unfamiliar, suddenly, so that Will has to look up and confirm it’s still him. Hannibal’s fringe, grown longer in the weeks since his escape, hangs down over one eye. His face is flushed, lips parted, and while he’s a far cry from the disheveled mess Will feels he must certainly appear himself, he’s undone enough for it to be visible and audible. His exhalation is hot and deliberate over the skin of Will’s throat, and his next words seem to come without thinking. “You’re so tight around me; you feel so good.”

Will sobs, his legs falling further apart to accept as much of Hannibal as he can. Some distant part of him is impressed with the way he can take Hannibal into him. He hadn’t been sure it would work, really, hadn’t been sure how it would feel but he’d known it would feel good. He just hadn’t realized how good. He hears himself yelling something to that effect, voice breaking and rough. “It’s good,” he hears himself sobbing. “You - you feel so good in me, Hannibal, oh, oh!”

Hannibal grunts - at Will’s words or at the way his body tightens as he moans and cries in agonized need. He presses a toothy kiss to Will’s temple, speaking words scarcely more than hot breath into
his hair and skin. “You have no idea, Will, how greatly I relish being the one to show you what your body is for.” Will knows he isn’t just talking about sex, but there’s still something about hearing such lewdness issuing from Hannibal’s mouth that makes him harder than he even knew was possible.

Then Hannibal grinds his hips down without withdrawing first, driving himself deep into Will’s asshole, and Will is overwhelmed by the feeling of being stretched on that huge dick. “Please, please,” he moans, unable to stop his words or the desperation behind them. “Hannibal please just move, oh, I can’t, I can’t - ” He begs but he knows begging just whets that appetite. Hannibal rolls his hips in a languid thrust, and withdraws slowly. Will feels as if he’s taking pieces of him with him in the process. When he slides back in, brushing against Will’s prostate in the process, the world goes blank and white for the space of half a second.

Will screams.

He doesn’t pull out, but Hannibal waits for the scream to subside. “Are you alright?” he asks, his own voice rough and thick with lust, over the sound of Will’s frantic breaths. “Do you want to stop?”

“Don’t stop, don’t stop,” Will practically shrieks. It’s too much - Hannibal’s too big, and this is too fast, and everything they’ve done with and to each other is too much to take back or ever cope with and be stable again - and Will just doesn’t care. He doesn’t care about stability, or sanity, or holding onto his identity or life. This is all he wants, all he needs in order to be complete. Hannibal exhales loudly, and begins to fuck him with a slow, steady rhythm that has Will writing on the bed beneath him, clutching at the sheets and Hannibal’s hair.

Will feels like he’s hallucinating again, then, like he’s falling from a great height. One of his hands fists in the sheets below him, the other is held down, Hannibal’s fingers intertwined with his own. Hannibal’s thumb rubs soothing circles into his palm.

“Oh,” Will moans, hips pushing to meet Hannibal’s thrust. The way his body moves and parts around Hannibal is breaking something in him a little more with every movement of their bodies. “I’ve never felt like this - this is - this is - ”

“This is what you need, Will,” Hannibal says, his hips snapping forward to elicit a howl from Will as his cock brushes over the sensitive spot within him. “No one can give it to you like I can.”

Will’s eyes roll back at the words, at how filthy they sound said in Hannibal’s aristocratic accent. “I want,” he moans, “I want to do everything with you.” And he means it in so many ways, because he knows Hannibal will keep driving them, moving them towards an inevitable blaze, but he can’t be
bothered to care. For as long as they can last, he thinks, will be enough for him.

Hannibal pulls his hand free and wraps both arms behind Will, pulling him closer. He spreads the fingers of one hand around the back of Will’s neck, then pushes forward, driving into Will hard and deep. Will groans, and draws his legs up, spreading them wider to accommodate Hannibal. He reaches down to grip Hannibal’s thighs as he thrusts into him, pulling him closer even as he’s overwhelmed by the closeness and heat and power of Hannibal moving inside him.

Hannibal is controlling his entire body, and brings one hand around to wrap loosely around Will’s throat. “You are mine,” Hannibal says, fingers tightening over Will’s arching throat, and Will gasps, staring up at him through a haze of light. “Now and always. I know you feel it. I know you’ve always felt it, just as I have. You should know,” he growls, thrusting deep into Will’s stretched and throbbing hole, “how furious I was when I learned of your marriage, learned that you had attempted to give yourself to someone, knowing you belonged to me.”

“Oh, oh God, Hannibal!” Will shouts, voice cracking. His fingers scrabble over the lean and straining muscles of Hannibal’s thighs, feeling them slide beneath his hands as he feels Hannibal’s cock sliding into and out of his body, over the spot inside him that makes his nerves flash and flare with pleasure. His blood burns within him, at the awareness of Hannibal claiming him in this way that no one else ever has, or ever will, because the idea of there ever being anyone else for either of them is absurd.

Hannibal’s eyes flash red, and Will can sense the passion and fury, the remembrance of anger. Hannibal’s emotions glow with such radiant heat, so incongruous with his cold exterior. Will worries at times about being burned alive in the furnace of them. “You are mine in every sense of the word now,” Hannibal informs him, his dick splitting Will open with a vicious snap of his hips. Will cries, a broken sound, his eyelids falling closed. His nails rake against the tender skin of Hannibal’s thighs, and he hears Hannibal’s hiss above him. He’s not sure if the sound connotes pleasure or pain, however, and he can’t bear to open his eyes and find out. He’s not sure what he feels, either - he’ll be feeling this in his body long after they’re finished, he knows, but all he can concentrate on now is the pleasure climbing in him like vines snaking up and around his limbs and throat and eyes. He feels strangled by it, overcome and out of control and unstable, and it’s all just fine. Finally.

He feels the pressure growing in him like the swell of a wave in the sea, pleasure threatening to peak within him as he squirms in Hannibal’s arms. Hannibal’s hand tightens incrementally around his neck, and Will’s vision blurs with tears. Through it he sees Hannibal, the one clear spot in a darkening world, his look of fierce curiosity and adoration filling Will’s mind and vision.

“I’m close,” Will cries, unable to keep still as Hannibal takes him in steady, powerful thrusts that move his body up the bed. Each lungful of air is burning, and he feels his face and shoulders growing feverish. “Oh, I’m so close.”
“I know, love, I know,” Hannibal’s lashes flutter, and he groans, driving into Will again. “Just focus on this feeling. Let yourself have this.”

Will sobs. There’s so much he wants to say, so much he feels capable of saying now that he normally would not, could not, bear to articulate. Above all he feels gratitude, and remembers not long ago when his blood had pitched and roiled at the notion that he would ever feel thankful for Hannibal’s ceaselessly cruel orchestrations. But he’s grateful, he’s so grateful, for whatever it took to bring them here, after all the pain and suffering and trauma. Because of all that. Maybe it had to be that way, Will thinks, had to be that terrible in order to feel this good. Nothing has ever hurt him as much as Hannibal, and nothing has ever made him feel as good.

And then Hannibal’s mouth is on his, Hannibal’s tongue delving hotly into his mouth, and Will is screaming into the kiss as he comes in fiery white spasms that threaten to shake him apart. He can feel his legs drawing up, hear his voice crying wordless, and Hannibal engulfs him. He hears his own name, reverent in Hannibal’s mouth, and then Hannibal’s low groan, and he can feel Hannibal coming inside of him, and it’s almost too much. Hannibal’s fingers tighten minutely, and for a moment Will leans up and into the pressure, and the edges of his vision blur and darken.

Then Hannibal’s arms are around him, drawing him close, hands running through his hair and over his face as Hannibal kisses him, and it’s just right. He can feel the powerful aftershocks coursing through him, feel the subsiding tremors of Hannibal’s body above him. He cries sharply when Hannibal pulls out of him, and moans, covering his face with a spread open hand, when Hannibal’s fingers push his spilled seed back into Will’s body.

He feels Hannibal pulling at his hand. “Don’t hide from me,” he says, voice oddly urgent, so that Will lets his hand be pulled away easily. Hannibal stares down at him with a wondering and wonderful intensity, and Will feels himself thrilling at the heat of that familiar look in this unfamiliar setting.

“You are so magnificent,” Hannibal breathes, his hand coming up to cup Will’s jaw, and Will flushes, his eyes darting away at the words. Hannibal laughs. “You know the truth of how I feel for you,” he says, “I couldn’t hide it from you if I tried.”

It’s true. Will can feel the passion and greed for him, the lust and love overflowing the cistern of Hannibal’s brain. He feels drowned in it, his senses clogged with desire and completion and need, and suddenly helpless, delicate, like something freshly hatched. “What happens now?”

“Now,” Hannibal sighs, pressing a kiss to his temple, “we rest.”
There’s limited trunk space, so they have to pack light. Even so, Hannibal insists on three separate garment bags for himself, and one for Will. Will objects, at first, and is almost ready to threaten a weekend of cargo shorts and Hawaiian shirts, when he sees what it is Hannibal is insisting he wear.

The blazer and pants are ivory, the oxblood shirt within spreading its wide collar like a wound over the jacket. There’s a matching crimson handkerchief, which Will can already feel Hannibal pressing neatly into his breast pocket. And while, ordinarily, the thought of letting Hannibal dress him up would turn his stomach, Will can’t help feeling at least as delighted as he is unsettled.

“You got me a white drug lord suit,” he says, eyebrow arching and voice light.

Hannibal smiles, slightly. Not his usual self-satisfied expression, but something softer. It takes Will a second to remember how to breathe. “I found myself intrigued by the image,” he confesses.

Will fingers the material through the garment bag. The suit could have looked like a Halloween costume - in his own mind, imagining it, that’s what he’d pictured: something garish and comical - but, of course, Hannibal has somehow managed to procure a suit that, while clearly reminiscent of Tony Montana, manages to look like actual clothing and not a costume. Will imagines how the suit will look, feel on him. He wonders if Hannibal will like how it looks on him, and if he’ll like it enough to replace the suit after Will inevitably destroys it this weekend. He wonders whether their hotel room will be sound proof enough to saw a man to death with a chainsaw in the bathtub, even though he knows in the rational part of his mind that they can’t. The entire point of taking a weekend in Miami is to avoid drawing attention to their kills; two kills this close to home, the remains of two bodies stacked like cord wood in the freezer, too much unnecessary risk. Will believes Hannibal’s estimation of their longevity, and he’d rather have whatever brief pyretic time he’ll have with Hannibal than live a lengthy half life without him, but it doesn’t mean he has to let them speed straight towards their own deaths. After all, no one is going to fuck him like that after he’s dead.

“Shall I drive the first stretch?” Hannibal asks, already moving toward the driver’s side door. Will lets him. He’ll watch the Keys fly by, doze in the morning sunlight, and dream about what awaits them at the end of their long drive. A weekend get away, a hunting trip in the city. He’s not sure how he feels about driving to Miami intending to kill with no specific target in mind, but when he reminds himself of how it had felt to lead that man home and take him apart he knows he wants to go almost as much as Hannibal wants him to want to.

He opens the passenger door, and is greeted by his own face glaring up at him from the glossy cover of the Tattler. “Online presence not enough for you?” Will asks, lifting the magazine disdainfully.
between his thumb and index.

“I thought you could use some reading material for the drive,” Hannibal says, and even though his
tone is neutral Will can clearly hear the delight in it. He throws the magazine onto the back seat along
with their luggage.

“Wouldn’t want to get carsick,” he lies, smiling across at Hannibal as he slips into the seat beside
him.

There’s a memory echoing in his head, Hannibal’s voice not that long ago, but impossibly distant
now. “Going my way?” Hannibal now smiles back at him over the console, and turns the key to
bring the car revving to life. They peel out of the driveway and onto pavement, and Will watches the
little house grow smaller in the side mirror as they speed towards someone’s certain doom.
Instar

Chapter Notes

It's still Saturday in my time zone, but sorry for being a few hours later than usual. Warning for drug usage. Also, I realize I may have assumed everyone on earth has a high degree of familiarity with the movie Scarface. Will's suit, and his jokes about cocaine, are references to Tony Montana in Scarface. I feel like Hannibal would do anything to get Will to voluntarily wear a suit this snazzy, and Will now literally has a scar on his face, sooo...I don't have a dumb sense of humor. If you've never seen it, here's a picture: https://bamfstyle.com/2014/05/26/scarface83-tony-whitepinstripe/

It also took EVERYTHING I have in me not to quote Nicki Minaj in this chapter. Sorry. This got ridiculous. I just...had this image in my head.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first time they go to Miami they stay on the thirteenth floor of a hotel with an infinity pool on the roof. It’s too crowded to use; Will watches a video clip of it - unrealistically empty - on the hotel amenities channel, sitting on the expansive hotel bed wrapped in one of the hotel’s thick terry cloth bathrobes. His skin is soft and warm from the shower, his hair smelling faintly of lemons from the hotel shampoo. Hannibal, currently in the shower, has his own shampoo, packed in a toiletries case Will glimpsed while they unpacked. He wonders if he’ll ever learn to care that much about something so inconsequential. He finds it unlikely.

Will watches the muted TV screen display the hotel’s five star restaurant and bar. He’s never stayed in a place this blatantly expensive in his life. Everything about the curving, mirrored room screams luxury with almost desperate enthusiasm. It’s gaudy, Will thinks, not really the kind of place he’d normally expect Hannibal to stay. Maybe that’s the point, or maybe Hannibal is conducting some kind of aesthetic experiment. Will eyes the suit hanging over the back of the bathroom door - white linen and blood red, he can imagine how the fabric would breathe in the warm night air.

There’s a knock on the door - three heavy thuds - and Will’s body jerks off the bed and onto his feet in a blink. He almost jumps at the feeling of a hand closing over his shoulder.

“I ordered room service,” Hannibal smirks. Will arches a disbelieving eyebrow.

“Why did we drag a cooler of your home cooked meals here to store in the mini fridge in that case?” he queries, blinking in foggy disbelief.

Hannibal pulls a dark pair of slacks over his hips and fastens them in place as three more, louder,
knocks fall. Will winces at the sound. “There are some things I didn’t have at home,” he answers, and makes his way towards the door. Will can’t help but admire the way his bare back moves with a fluid grace, the muscles in his shoulders lean and firmly defined.

The man on the other side of the door most certainly does not work for the hotel. Will frowns as Hannibal holds the door open, gesturing to welcome the man into their space. Will’s skin bristles at his presence - there’s a sick, venomous feeling wafting off him like a stench. He’s done terrible things; Will can practically smell it on him. He takes a step toward the bedside table, where his hunting knife lies, but Hannibal steps between him and their guest in an unthreatening and peaceable motion.

“Thank you for coming so promptly,” Hannibal says, every bit the polite gentleman he would be with a fellow professional or socialite.

“I aim to please,” the man says, sniffing. “Two hundred dollars.”

To Will’s dismay, Hannibal reaches into the pocket of his trousers and withdraws a thick wad of cash bound in a gleaming metal bill clip. He peels two bills from the top, and, after a moment’s consideration, adds a third. He hands all three to the man, who nods and reaches into his pocket.

“This stuff is the best shit out there right now,” the man boasts. “You wanna try some right now to see I ain’t lying?”

“I trust your professional judgment,” Hannibal purrs, and gently ushers the man back towards the door. Will scowls, attempting to see what it is the man hands Hannibal, but their bodies are angled in such a way that he can’t quite make it out. He has a sinking feeling that he knows exactly what it is, though.

And then the door closes, and he’s stunned to find them alone again. “You let him go.”

“We can catch up with him later if you like,” Hannibal says mildly. “Somewhere less easy to trace back to us.”

“I don’t want to go out tonight, though,” Will says, arms crossed in front of his chest. “I’m tired.”

Hannibal’s eyes gleam. “I have just the thing.”
“You can’t be serious,” Will scoffs when Hannibal produces the predicted vial of white powder. He stares hard at Hannibal’s smirk, willing this to be a joke. Of course, it isn’t a joke. Or it’s the kind of joke that involves Hannibal expecting him to actually do cocaine. “No,” Will says, flat and simple.

Hannibal cocks his head to the side in that curious way of his. He looks livened, younger and more rejuvenated than Will’s seen him in years, really. *Like he thrives off being an asshole,* Will thinks. “Why not?”

“What do you mean, *why not*?” Will asks, exasperated despite himself. “I’m not exactly stable to begin with; you really want to add a stimulant to the mix?”

“I was unaware that stability was your goal,” Hannibal scoffs. “It certainly hasn’t been mine for some time.” He reaches for Will, hand extended, and Will can’t help but take it. “What are you trying to hold yourself together for, Will?”

He can’t answer. There isn’t an answer. Only fear, at how out of control he already is, and how out of control this will make him. He lets Hannibal pull him closer, lets him loosen the sash of his robe. Hannibal’s hands are warm where they press against Will’s stomach and hips. Will lets himself be moved, turned.

“You certainly are under no obligation to do anything with which you find yourself uncomfortable,” Hannibal says, voice smooth and deep as wet velvet as his hands guide Will to turn, “but let me ask you to hold still for a moment.” Will can feel Hannibal’s hands stilling his hips, feels one broad hand sweeping the plush robe away from his skin. Will grits his teeth at the feeling of exposure as Hannibal’s hands encourage the jut of his ass.

“Just like that,” Hannibal murmurs, and Will feels something light and cool brushing like feathers along the curve of his ass. He attempts to speak but his throat is too dry to make sound, and he swallows frantically.

“What the hell,” Will tries to say, but his words are an abbreviated croaking noise when he experiences the bizarre sensation of Hannibal’s nostril running over the top of one ass cheek, inhaling with one long, audible, and somehow graceful snort. *Only Hannibal Lecter could make loudly snorting blow sound refined,* Will thinks, somewhere between annoyance and disbelief.

He moans as the feeling of Hannibal’s tongue, pressed flat against his skin, chases the line his nose had traveled a moment ago. Before he can regain himself from the shock, Will feels Hannibal’s
palms pressing hard into his ass cheeks, cupping and spreading them so that he can flatten his tongue over Will. Will doesn’t recognize the sound of his own voice, moaning and gasping and stuttering over Hannibal’s name again and again as Hannibal eats him out.

His skin tingles, then stops. Will frowns. He can feel the pressure of Hannibal’s hands, the sting of his fingers digging bruises into Will’s ass as he holds him in place. But the feeling of Hannibal’s mouth on him seems to drift further and further away. He pushes back onto Hannibal’s gaping jaw, into those crushing hands, anxious to be devoured. And then Hannibal slides a finger into him, his mouth pulling away to bite at the flesh of Will’s ass, and Will feels the curl of the digit inside him, hot and achy and intimate in a way nothing else ever has been, but the skin around his hole feels almost numb. Hannibal breaches him with a second finger, so quickly Will’s eyes fly wide, but unaccompanied by any sting of pain. He moans, bearing back into Hannibal’s urgent fingers.

“Are you sure you won’t reconsider?” Hannibal asks, sounding much too composed for someone who just did a line and buried his face in Will’s ass. “I’ve put far more damaging things into both our bodies, if it helps.”

Will thinks of those strobing half memories of a needle in his arm, Hannibal’s face sliding over his skull, the black branch of antlers protruding from his skull. He thinks, too, of interrogation chambers, and drugs that make his head heavy with dark visions. He can remember begging Hannibal not to drug him, in Florence, remembers the panic of being even more out of control than usual. The terror of losing his mind.

*Then again, Will thinks, what is the point in bothering with sanity any longer? Why bother clinging to a reality less vivid than intoxication and madness and ecstasy?*


Will blinks. “Not remotely,” he says. “Maybe that’s just fine.”

Hannibal’s fingers withdraw from his body with a wet sound, and Will huffs and pushes his hips back, wanting to feel filled again. He feels Hannibal’s arm wrap around him, and Hannibal’s hand moves carefully to rest beneath his jaw. There’s a bump resting on the flat of thumb. All of Will’s jokes about slinging cocaine feel further away, now, and he thinks of how he’s always favored depressants - alcohol, mainly. Stimulants always felt too risky; who knew what might come out if he got too excited?

Now that’s the point of it, the fun of things, seeing how far this can go, and not counting the cost. The room pulses around him, and he hardly thinks a nose full of powder is going to spin his brain
faster than Hannibal and the promise of violence already have. He leans in to take the proffered bump, covering one nostril and snorting hard like he’s seen other people do.

“Ugh,” Will grimaces. Hannibal’s laughter is low and warm against his ear. “I can taste it.”

“Yes,” Hannibal hums, nuzzling his cheek against Will’s hair in a way that’s almost animal-like, despite Hannibal’s perpetual and unflappable air of sophistication. “It’s rather unpleasant. And I doubt it will do much more for either of us than we already do for one another, but I wanted to help fill that Scarface fantasy you’ve apparently been harboring for some time.”

Now it’s Will’s turn to laugh. It still surprises him, to hear the sound of his own laughter without a hint of bitterness to it. He turns in Hannibal’s arms to face the other man. “I wasn’t sure you had any idea what I was talking about. I didn’t think you’d ever seen it.”

“I haven’t,” Hannibal admits. “But I did find myself curious enough to turn to internet research after I happened upon you talking to your own reflection with a perfectly atrocious attempt at a Cuban accent.”

Will flushes. “I wasn’t trying to do a real Cuban accent,” he bristles. “I was trying to do Al Pacino doing a Cuban accent.”

Hannibal’s smile is at least as infuriating as it is gracious. “My mistake,” he answers politely.

“I didn’t realize you were spying on me.”

Hannibal shrugs. “It was difficult to avoid on so small a boat,” he says airily, then arches one devilish eyebrow at Will’s annoyed expression. “Okay, caracicatriz?”

Will’s face heats further at the memory of himself, bored on the boat and contemplating the pale and ragged line of healing skin on his face in the bathroom mirror, when he’d thought he’d been alone. “I hate you,” he says, and means it.

“I’m well aware,” Hannibal says, and kisses him. Will lets himself sink into the kiss, into the roughness of Hannibal’s erection rubbing through a layer of clothing against Will’s bare skin. He lets Hannibal push him gently back, towards the bed, lets Hannibal’s firm hands turn him to face away, and he trembles as he feels Hannibal plucking the robe from his shoulders. Long fingers ghost down
“Bend over for me,” Hannibal breathes, lips close enough to Will’s ear for him to feel the heat of Hannibal’s breath. He shivers, but obeys, leaning forward to rest his hand on the bed. “On your knees,” Hannibal says, and Will almost turns at the cold harshness of his voice, but catches himself at the last moment, and moves to bring his knees up onto the bed instead. He can feel himself shaking harder the more he tries to hold himself still, poised inelegantly on hands and knees.

Will’s body shudders at the wet sound of Hannibal covering himself in lube, and then Hannibal slides into him in one long, deliberate thrust. The skin at his entrance throbs with a vague numbness, and he closes his eyes and moans at the feeling of Hannibal’s cock filling him so quickly. It doesn’t hurt, but his heart ricochets within his chest, and his brains fogs, as if he’s too full for thoughts, as if Hannibal is literally fucking him out of his mind. He moans again as Hannibal withdraws and immediately slides into him again, unable to form words as he’s fucked relentlessly. Will’s arms tremble, and he finds himself pitching forwards onto his elbows.

“You know how I feel, right now,” Hannibal pants, thrusting into him. He strokes Will’s stretched hole with one slick finger, stroking the delicate skin. Will feels it as a muted pressure. “You feel it, too, I know.”

“Oh,” Will manages to say through the shuddering gasps that grip him, at the feeling of Hannibal filling him, at the way Hannibal’s dick hits his prostate on every thrust, and, above all, at the thought of Hannibal feeling the same sort of overwhelmed ecstasy at their joining that Will does. “God.”

“I wonder how much more I can take,” Hannibal tells him, and his voice is a growl. Will feels his finger beginning to push against his body in earnest. “I wonder how much you’ll be able to stand.”

Will can’t speak. His heart is hammering hard in fear, and he holds perfectly still as Hannibal pushes into him. The numbness helps, but the feeling of being filled even further than before is too much, too intense. He’s not sure whether it hurts or feels good, just knows that it feels more than he can endure.

A small noise escapes him. “Stop,” he whispers. “Please, just, just stop moving.”

Hannibal stops, the second knuckle resting against his tightly clenching body. He rocks his hips, and Will sobs. “How extraordinary you are,” Hannibal says, voice gravelly and accent thick. “The way your body yields to me. Touching you is more intoxicating than any drug could be.”
Will’s hands claw at the sheets, winding them in fists so tight he’s sure they’ll tear. He’s not sure how much more he can fit, can stand. He can feel the trembling starting in his legs, and his dick is weeping against his stomach. He makes a whining sound, desperate and embarrassing.

*No matter how far we go, Will thinks, it will never be enough. We’ll both always want more than we’ve had. Every time will have to be more - more painful, more passionate, more pleasurable, more dangerous. Always building, always growing, till the end.*

He can see that end, somewhere far away, a future of far fewer possible happy endings than unhappy ones. But they’ve beaten the odds so far, and he reckons it isn’t impossible their luck will hold out a while more.

It doesn’t matter anyway, Will thinks, as Hannibal thrusts into him, pushing him closer towards complete loss of control. They’ve reached the final stage of transformation; at last, complete.

He cums with a yell, spurting hot and with violent intensity as Hannibal’s teeth lock of his shoulder. He feels teeth break his skin, and Hannibal’s long groan vibrates along his muscles.

*****

They catch up with the dealer later in the evening. Will finds himself energized enough to meet Hannibal’s demands for them to go out that night, though whether from the drugs or the sex he cannot say. Whatever the case, he finds himself enlivened, and tempted by the memory of how his hands had ached for a knife the moment the man entered their room. Something on him stank of sloppy violence and cowardice.

Will ruins his new suit within a matter of hours - red blossoms blooming over the white fabric, darkening as they dry. It’s worth it for the way Hannibal’s eyes flash at him as he unwinds the gagged man in their hotel bathroom, his hands pulling yard after yard of the man’s intestines.

“Another practical reason for your plastic murder suits,” Will quips, wiping his hands on his lap, since it hardly matters now.

“I told you you’d come to appreciate my incredible foresight someday,” Hannibal says. The dealer thrashes weakly, his body’s last frantic attempt to flee, even with his entrails partially extracted. Hannibal reaches down and covers the man’s mouth and nose with one hand. He leans over and
kisses Will, and when Will opens his eyes again at last the thrashing has stopped.

******

They bring home fresh meat twice a week. They don’t always go as far away as Miami. They cover their tracks, and drive home with a cooler in the trunk stuffed with organs and dismembered limbs. There’s a separate cooler for the torso. Sometimes, if they’re closer, or pressed for time, they throw the whole body in the trunk, and drive the car right up to the shed door. They clean the sight of their kills, leave nothing behind.

The freezer can’t hold the amount of meat and bone and tissue they bring home. Will builds simple wooden caskets of varying sizes, and they bury the pieces they don’t take to the kitchen in boxes of dirt, swarming with beetles, and slam a lid on each box. The boxes of earth go on the shelves of the shed, and stacked around the walls. Will worries at first about beetles escaping, infesting their home, but the insects seem content to stay by their food source. He worries, then, about the FBI’s attention being drawn by the fact that they’ve ordered 5,000 flesh eating beetles online, but weeks pass without incident, and Will begins to relax.

Weeks become months, soaked in blood and seasoned with salt, and Will empties the first box, sifting through dirt to find bare bones. He buries their newest kill in the skeleton’s place.

The days are bright and filled with pain, words that come to Will as he steers them home, his face tilted to the sun. They’re in someone else’s voice - Beverly’s voice, light and cheery as the sunlit drive. Another ghost he carries with him, on bright painful days like this one.

He sees them in the moments after he feels the life ebbing away beneath his hands - if he’s quick enough he can look up and see one of them stood and staring in the corner, or by the door, or just outside the window. Bedelia with her bottomless ink pit eyes, or Beverly, peeling apart like firm fruit. He sees Abigail more rarely, her neck wound with rubies and her skin impossibly pale. Three fates, he thinks, three furies. Three memories haunting the palace Hannibal helped him build of his mind. Will scatters them with the taste of blood when he licks his lips, or when he licks Hannibal’s, and they fly away like smoke upon the wind.

They stack long bones like cords of firewood in the shed. Empty and fill the boxes. Will dreams of his body, desiccated by beetles, till his bones are bared to the air and Hannibal can rearrange them into entirely new shapes.

When the turtles hatch, Will helps them to the water. Hannibal helps without having to be asked, walking behind Will and shooing away the gulls that circle and call frantically overhead.
“Some of these turtles will find their way back to this exact beach, years from now,” Will says, “to lay their own eggs. Scientists think they use the earth’s magnetic pull to find their way back to the place they were born.”

“Hmmm,” Hannibal hums, shooing a bird away with a casual arm. Their little parade gains ground towards the surf. “I’ve heard of this phenomenon,” he says, “and I’ve heard it is something in the struggle to reach the water that imprints the location in their memories. Well meaning animal lovers have picked up turtle young and moved them manually to the water, only to disrupt the imprinting process.”

Will watches Hannibal kick a crab to the side, making a safe path through the sand. He imagines turtles swimming in the deep saline sea, searching for a home they didn’t get the chance to make into a memory. It makes him think about himself, suddenly, as he used to be - swimming those same dark waters Hannibal had treaded so much longer, in search of the shore where he belonged. He curls his fingers around Hannibal’s, needing the contact. He can feel Hannibal’s eyes on him, but Will doesn’t look away from the line of little turtles scrambling over the sand.

“Their struggle is what shapes them,” Hannibal says, squeezing his hands. “Those who would be kind by alleviating their pain do them more harm than help.”

“Whereas you,” Will says, sardonically, “have done me more good than harm.”

“Certainly,” Hannibal says. Will feels his feet moving over firmer, packed sand, and then the cool brush of a wave rushing up to suck at his ankles. He watches as their small charges are born by the waves, one by one riding the foamy surf out into the deeper swells.

“How many times do I have to tell you,” Will says, watching them go, “I am not a turtle.”

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The last time they go to Miami they don’t bother checking into a hotel. They won’t be staying passed sunrise, and they won’t be returning to Sugarloaf Key. They park the car with their modest luggage locked safely in the trunk, and walk the quarter mile from the car park to the club.

Hannibal replaced the white suit. Will had found several other like items lining his half of the closet over the months - suits in soft blues, black silk button ups, shoes that show the reflection of his frown
in their shining leather. He’s chosen black for tonight, and his face - grown gold and healthy from his
time spent outdoors in the sun - glows above the top button, as he studies his reflection in the neon lit
windows that line the street. The scar across his face is noticeable, but, he thinks, not as immediately
obvious and memorable as it had been a couple months ago. No one does a double take when he
walks by, and the doorman at the first club they come to lets them in with barely a glance.

*It’s probably because of Hannibal,* Will thinks. He radiates with authority, as always; who would
dare question such confidence? Will rides in its wake, into the dim room swirling with colored lights
that offer little in the way of actual illumination. The walls and floor vibrate with sound, and Will can
feel the bass pounding through the floor, pounding through his body. It’s loud and frantic and
crowded - everything he’d usually detest, but because of their purpose he doesn’t even scowl at the
sound and sight of cavorting idiots.

Hannibal turns to him with a smile, incongruous and impeccable as ever in this loud dark throng.
Will can sense him, smell him, feel him pulling like a magnet as they move through the crowd. They
don’t bother with drinks.

Will can see them everywhere. He can’t explain - hasn’t been able to answer any of Hannibal’s
questions with anything approaching a clear answer. It’s as if they light up with a sick glow the
second he’s close, and he can see them illuminated in horrors and he knows. But it’s not visual - not
tied to any sense a normal person possesses. It’s like an echo he feels inside himself, when he stands
too near them.

Hannibal used to pick them based on discourtesy, but Will can see into their souls. They don’t need
to do anything, say anything. He just knows, and the knowing feels right.

They close in on the first one. It’s too loud to speak, but then they don’t need to. Will cuts his eyes to
their target, and Hannibal follows his gaze and they move together towards the dance floor with no
need for confirmation.

The song is familiar and dreadful. Will can hear his own voice, declaring his love in a stuttering
scratch of the track. It’s been playing all spring, in every club they enter. Will doesn’t need to turn to
see Hannibal’s face in order to know just how he looks - amused and far too satisfied with himself.

The song grates on Will’s nerves but it does have one upside - when the beat drops the reverberation
of sampled screams fills the air, and the crowd screams along as they jump and dance, so
extravagantly loud that the genuine scream of their prey is lost in the din. Will slides the knife up,
pushing himself close to the man’s front as Hannibal holds his shoulders from behind. To outside
observers, they’re a trio dancing. They brace his slumping weight between them as Will pierces the
heart, and move the slackening form quickly to an empty booth by the dance floor. They leave him
unconscious, head bent forward to rest on his arms on the table in front of him as his heart’s blood
beats sluggishly out to pool in the shadows around his feet.

Ten minutes later they seat a companion across from him. To the intoxicated dancers it is only a pair of passed out partiers, taking up space till they come to and either stagger home or score another hit to perk themselves back up and dance. No suspicion rises as they fill the empty corners of the club with corpses - for the human form cannot endure to dance without cessation, and everyone here knows the point of ultimate exhaustion. It’s not unusual to see a pair or a lone figure slouching in slumber or coming down too hard to communicate. They camouflage their kills - six silent bodies, then seven, then eight, then more - each one selected by Will and dispatched with rapid justice.

No trophies taken, they exit, and even though he’s had nothing to drink Will can feel the sidewalk swaying beneath his feet. He follows Hannibal’s graceful figure down the street, passed another disinterested doorman and into another blaring inferno of young flesh.

They leave each gathering places cleaner than they find it, clearing out filth as they go. Will knows which ones to take without knowing quite how he knows. He watches Hannibal pull the ones he indicates onto the dance floor, his blood thrilling at the way those strong hands move swiftly over vertebrae and windpipes. A dozen here, twenty there, bodies slumped on locked bathroom stalls, propped at tables. Nothing strange to see. Nothing that raises any alarm.

When the lights come on, and the living file out, they’ll discover the dead. That’ll draw the FBI’s attention, and Jack will be on a plane to Miami within twenty-four hours. They’ve left plenty of evidence. They’re on plenty of security camera footage. It’ll be a matter of days before they find the house in Sugarloaf, where the shed is now empty and the walls and floors of the pleasant little conch house are lined with a layer of clean bones. A mausoleum, a house of horrors. Will can imagine the ways Freddie Lounds will describe it.

By then they’ll be long gone. Driving to the marina and the new boat waiting for them there, they are already well on their way.

Chapter End Notes

This is the end of the second part. Plot returns next chapter. If you want a mostly not fucked up ending this is a good spot to stop!
the spine of your body/ and its bones

Chapter Notes

So I think I freaked people out in an unintended way. There are major character deaths upcoming, but I wouldn't do anything to Will or Hannibal Bryan Fuller hasn't already done, and I do intend for them to have a more or less happy ending. Sorry if this is a spoiler you did not want. It's also in the tags I think.

A wild heat, I can feel, I can see
Inside it all, as it falls, it's beautiful
The fallen sun, warms the skin, touches deep
The crackling, a melting grin, of a burning world

Fiercely, blood streams into a sea
Color grows, all is noise, all is red
The fallen sun, warms the skin, touches deep
The crackling, a melting grin, of a burning world

Come with me to the place where the walls are weak

Come with me

- from Sylvan, Esben and the Witch

two years later

The sky threatens rain, but Hannibal believes he will make it home before the deluge begins in earnest. Now and then a fat, cold droplet lands on and is quickly absorbed by the thick wool of his jacket. When one happens to land on his cheek, he lets it trail down his face like a teardrop, rather than rearrange the parcels in his arms to wipe it away. Home is just down the lane, beneath the shadows of the dormant jacaranda trees
Home for now, anyway. They have been here five months, already, and Hannibal cannot say how much longer it will feel safe to stay. They’ve haven’t stayed in one place longer than half a year, but Will hasn’t mentioned moving on yet, and Hannibal finds himself reluctant to broach the subject himself. Another month without making plans won’t hurt, he thinks, and knows he used to be more careful. Now he has more to protect, but finds himself grown reckless, feckless, careless and impulsive. They’re holding together, but he wonders how much longer it will be before one or both of them wants to tempt fate again.

For now they occupy a liminal space, somewhere between care and abandonment. When he stands close to Will, on nights when Will’s body perks like a doberman’s clipped ears, honing to their prey, Hannibal can feel the edges of his own being fraying, pulled by the vortex of Will’s visions. They are cautious with their kills, while they remain in one place, but when they move on they leave displays of such grandeur Hannibal knows he never could have dreamed them - let alone created them - on his own. He remembers Will’s first monument, the way he’d taken apart Randall Tier and re-assembled him as something greater and more fascinating than he had been in life. Such a promising beginning, and that imagination hasn’t disappointed.

Hannibal lets his mind turn to the TattleCrime headlines - Florida Death Disco; Beach House of Bones; Tijuana Torture Chamber; Carcasses in Caracas - and a fond smile plays across his face as he recalls the hysterical tenor of Freddie Lounds’ reporting. As they crept south, however, news of their works seemed to reach the US at a considerable delay. Hannibal has been tempted to send pictures of their last tableaux - twenty bodies in Chile hollowed out and lopped at wrists and ankles, stuffed with dry leaves that overfill their loosely stitched chests, and stood like scarecrows along the coastline. Their limbs sprouted golden foliage.

It’s intimate on a larger scale, now. He used to feel connected to his victims in a way he could not feel for anyone whose life wasn’t fading in his hands. Hannibal remembers an isolation so total it had filled him, as if he had fallen into a pit of ink that rushed over his skin and into his nose and over his open eyes and down his throat, till he had swallowed and breathed and become it. No part of him was clean, not an untouched part of his being left. Connection has always been difficult for him, and therefore important to him. He knows this - recognizes it about himself and accepts its unalterable nature. He can count on one hand the amount of people who have survived his attempts at intimacy for longer than half a decade.

If he tries, Hannibal can recall a time when he could not even speak. Other people felt so distant, so impossible to understand. They feared and wanted without care, as unthinking and chaotic as fire crawling across the melting snow. They screamed and cried and laughed and smiled and sneered, driven by unseen desires Hannibal could not feel kin to. It was only when he took them apart that he could see how they worked. Then the world saw what he made, and it was as if they saw him, too.

Hannibal has considered sending one or two images from an anonymous email address. These days the world back home seems to have forgotten them. TattleCrime - and according to Lounds, the FBI
as well - is occupied primarily with the recent string of flaying murders. Four women and a very young man so far, their bodies found in streams and rivers, swathes of skin cut from their backs.

Buffalo Bill, Lounds has taken to calling this new killer. Why Buffalo Bill, Hannibal cannot work out, but the name has caught on. Two big-city newspapers have found headlines in e. e. cummings’ deadly little poem.

… and what i want to know is

how do you like your blue-eyed boy

Mister Death

Hannibal’s own blue-eyed boy is waiting for him in the house at the end of the lane. There’s a high fence of wide, wooden slats, and the windows on both stories show only perpetually drawn curtains of heavy dark velvet. It’s not so different from his old house in Baltimore, on what feels like another planet now.

For years he had thought of unwinding time, un-shattering tea cups, had worked out pages of equations few minds could have read and comprehended in service of this pursuit. In the end he’d been unable to turn back the page; it was a far simpler thing to simply fold it in half and jump from their dimension into the adjacent one. In this new universe of light and blood and flesh and Will’s storm colored eyes opening to his, morning after morning, Hannibal feels that foreign thrill of contentment everyday now. It scares him more than his desire ever did.

The front door is locked, but he can smell someone besides Will the second he walks into the foyer, and knows there is someone else in the house with them. Hannibal sniffs the air, searching for the familiar scent of Will’s blood. He doesn’t find it, and so makes his way to the kitchen to put the groceries he’s brought with him in their place. Whatever Will wants him to find, it can certainly wait until after he’s gotten the perishable items to the refrigerator.

The kitchen is his space, as it is in every dwelling they occupy, yet traces of Will have crept in here, in ways they had not done in any of their previous residences throughout the past two years. Doubtless, it is some combination of the amount of time they’ve spent together, coupled with the amount of time they’ve spent in one place. There’s a small stack of books Will’s wandered in reading and set down, and atop it, a beehive, fragile as paper, which Will found empty in the garden behind the house. It’s in good shape, an excellent specimen. If they stay here for another month, Hannibal thinks he will try to find a small pedestal and bell jar to display it. They can use it as a centerpiece, for their final meals here - meats roasted in honey, honey comb spread over warm bread.

Hannibal imagines sucking the sticky salt and sweetness from Will’s lips. He closes the cabinet door
on the last of his purchases, and turns to search the rest of the house for Will - and their mysterious guest.

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He finds them in the master bedroom, which is somewhat of a surprise. They’ve never done this before, and at this point in their relationship that’s saying a lot.

“Do you know that you’ve been home over half an hour,” Will says crossly, the moment Hannibal crosses the threshold and freezes, face frozen and blank. “It’s taken you thirty two minutes to find us.”

“I had to put away the groceries,” Hannibal explains, after a pause. His voice is casual, his eyes trained not on Will but on the man Will has bound and gagged, spread out in a wide X across their bed. “Is he wearing one of my suits?”

“You already know the answer to that is yes,” Will says, his annoyance still coming across loudly.

Hannibal feels the corner of his lips twitch. “Very well,” he says, stepping further into the room, and towards the bed where the man in his suit blinks blearily up at him, just beginning to come round. The first blush of blue roses blossom at his throat. Hannibal takes in the contusions, the soft fall of sandy hair shot with strands of silver, the cheekbones that cut shadows across the man’s face, and he pictures Will strangling this mirror image of himself into unconsciousness. “Why is he wearing my suit, then?”

Will smooths a hand lightly over the man’s forearm, and Hannibal feels the ghost of the touch beneath his sleeve. “Do you remember,” Will begins, unnecessarily because he knows Hannibal always remembers, “when you told me that you wanted it to be me who killed you, when the time came?”

He notices the scissors on the bedside table - and the knives - and the dusting of cut hair around the pillows. Will has carved his image from the marble block of some tourist, and Hannibal can’t help the shudder that runs up his spine. “I remember,” he says, unnecessarily, because Will knows he always does. “Has the time come, then?”

Will snorts. “You’d give me more of a fight than that,” he says, “if you thought it really had. Think of this as a preview.”
Will gestures to the high backed arm chair he’s dragged to the foot of the bed, and Hannibal examines him without expression. “An opportunity to sit back and watch myself die at your hands,” Hannibal says. “That is quite the gesture, Will.”

It’s then that the man serving as his proxy regains the strength and presence of mind needed to struggle against the ropes binding him to the bed. Hannibal takes the offered seat, leaning forward in anticipation of what it is Will has dreamed up. “For what sins does our dear friend pay?” he asks. “Or could you just not stand to waste the opportunity when you came upon my doppelgänger?”

Will scoffs with a short sound like laughter. “He was hardly that when I spotted him,” Will says, “dressed in tattered khakis and sporting a man bun, but there was obvious potential. He also happened to be delivering a kick to a stray dog when I first saw him.”

The emotion filling Hannibal’s chest might be pride. “And how do you plan on punishing me?” he wonders.

The man on the bed twists, pulling at the braces at his wrists and ankles. Will makes a soothing noise, runs a gentle hand down the side of the man’s face. There’s nothing comforting about his expression, however, and the man’s struggles only intensify.

Will turns from him to examine the knives arrayed upon the bedside table. “The divine punishment of a sinner mirrors the sin being punished,” he breathes, and his fingers close around the smooth black handle of his sharp selection. Hannibal watches the curving of his fingers, as tied to physical reality in these moments as Will is loosed from it. He wonders, not for the first time, what it is Will sees.

“And what is my sin?” Too many to count.

The man on the bed freezes for a moment when the knife comes into view, held above his eyes for him to see. Then the muffled sounds of screams begin again, shriller and more pitiful than before. Will turns the knife, letting it catch the lamp light that slices through the room. His eyes are fixed on the other man’s face. “Seeing me,” he says, drawing a line in the air above the man’s wide and fearful eyes. He moves the knife lower, presses it over the breast pocket. “Making me give you my heart.”

He cuts away fabric first. Hannibal watches the threads of his suit come apart beneath the knife, until Will lifts three concentric ovals of cloth away from the man’s body and drops them onto the floor.
His eyes glitter as they meet Hannibal’s, and the knife turns in the light a moment before Will pushes it into the man’s chest.

Every house they’ve stayed in together they have glutted with blood. Hannibal imagines vengeful spirits, feeding on the living, growing strong and solid on their diet of carnage. He has no fear of spirits, however, and yet his heart trembles at the sight of Will’s hands, buried in gore and spreading skin and sinew to expose white bone. He finds himself on the bed, somehow, sitting opposite the blood-soaked angel of judgment, when Will produces a Finochietto retractor from the bedside table.

The man’s gurgling protestations cease as Will parts his ribs and extracts his heart, hands and blade almost gentle as they part the hot organ from its home. Hannibal’s chest rises and falls as he watches. He feels a bizarre urge to beg, though he’s not sure for what. The face that looks like his is pale and motionless. Will runs red fingers down one cheek and Hannibal feels the skin on his own face tingle at the caress.

“Will you eat my heart, Will? As I’ve devoured yours.”

Will shakes his head. His hair - despite the neater cuts he’s come to favor - is disheveled and flecked with blood. His face is speckled like a leopard’s. He holds Hannibal’s proxy heart in one hand, and lifts the knife with his other, moving to slice the man’s cheeks, widening his smile. “You’ll eat your own heart,” he says, and shoves the organ into the man’s perversely broad jaws.

When Hannibal kisses him he tastes of blood. Everything is red and wet in an instant, Will’s hands buried into his hair and gripping the back of his neck. The sheets are soaked with it, will need to be disposed of, perhaps the mattress as well, and Hannibal doesn’t care. He can smell Will’s arousal under the thick aroma of blood. When he draws back from the kiss, Will’s eyes are glassy and wide. Hannibal traces the full curve of his lower lip with his thumb, watching greedily as Will’s eyes flutter but remain resolutely open and trained upon him.

“What do you see, Will?”

“You,” Will answers, voice raw. “I see you. And I know you see me, too.”

Hannibal can see nothing else, anymore.

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He watches the pad of butter melt and spread across the dark iron skillet, and the aroma of garlic and fresh herbs fills the air. The liver sizzles, and Hannibal lets it cook for a moment as he takes a mouthful of wine. Perched on a stool at the expansive kitchen island, Will sips from his own glass, his eyes fixed on the page of his book. Hannibal examines him, unobserved, noting the rapid motion of Will’s eyes across the page. He recognizes the book as one he had purchased the previous week, from a roadside book vendor, surprised to see his favorite translation of a well loved text in so unlikely a spot. He’d set it down beside Will’s stack on the counter, and Will has evidently claimed it as one of his own. He’s been reading the same page for close to three minutes.

“Will you read to me?” Hannibal asks, at last, removing the skillet from the heat. He feels Will’s eyes flash to him before looking up to confirm the steady blue gaze directed towards him. Will takes another swallow of his wine.

“Now shall my oracle be no longer one that looks forth from a veil,” Will reads, his voice thick and slow with the wine he’s been drinking whilst reading in silence throughout Hannibal’s preparation of the meal, “like a newly wedded bride, but as a bright clear wind it shall rush toward the sunrise, so that like a wave there shall surge toward the light a woe far greater than this.”

They spend much of their time in comfortable silence, now, both accustomed to living alone and with quiet space for thought, but Hannibal still loves the cadence of Will’s voice. He listens with pleasure as he plates their dinner, enjoying the way Will stretches and clips the familiar lines.

“Do you see here sitting near the house these young ones, like to the shapes we see in dreams?” Will reads, and Hannibal watches his tongue dart to moisten his wine stained lips. “Children slain, as it were, by the hands of their kindred, their hands full of the meat of their own flesh; the vitals with the entrails I see them holding, a pitiful load, of which their father ate.”

A shiver runs through him at the lines. “Few authors have managed to capture the sense of dread Aeschylus did,” he murmurs, and Will pauses from reading to take a superfluous sip. “I remember first stumbling upon this text as a boy climbing the ladders in my uncle’s library.” It is not a memory he often deigns to call to mind; something about this day makes him want to acknowledge those dark corners where monsters lurk, those amphisbaena and Scylla waiting to devour reason and self control.

Will says nothing in response, and Hannibal suspects the other man knows how uncomfortably close to one of those holes in the floor of his mind Hannibal is treading.

“Is this what you think of,” Will asks, at last, “when you talk about prophecies and visions?”
“What is your unique and troubled mind, Will, if not a wind that whips the waves to clear points against the rising sun?”

Will frowns, but does not answer. Before Hannibal can pronounce dinner ready, three loud raps on the front door echo through the house.

In the wake of the sound, the kitchen is bizarrely silent. Hannibal locks eyes with Will, and knows everything he needs to know about how they will proceed in this moment at once, as if they have spoken, as if they have discussed and decided together on the best course of action.

“I’ll see who it is,” Will says, though it’s not necessary for him to speak. Hannibal nods, out of politeness rather than necessity. He picks up their plates and moves towards the dining room. Will slides from the counter, pocketing one of Hannibal’s boning knives as he moves in the opposite direction, towards the hallway and the front door.

For a long while, the only sound he can make out is that of the bone china plates settling on the oak table. He concentrates on that, on setting the plates at the correct angles, instead of on the sweat gathering at the nape of his neck, the fluttering feeling of his heartbeat as he waits for some kind of sign.

And then Will walks into the room, entirely whole and well, and clutching a thick manilla envelope between his hands. Hannibal lets himself breathe, relief slackening his shoulders for half a moment. Perhaps it is time to discuss moving on after all, he thinks to himself, as his heart rate spikes and then begins to normalize once more. This place no longer feels safe. They can stitch the skin of their victims in a sail, build a boat of the dead men’s bones. Hannibal can convince Will to let him at least mail Freddie Lounds’ the pictures, for old times sake, and certainly not because he misses the attention, as Will is certain to accuse. They’ve gone about as far south as they can get without catching a boat to Antarctica. Hannibal’s not entirely certain a winter spent overseeing a series of unfortunate accidents at the McMurdo Station is the right plan for them; maybe Spain, he thinks, or temporarily vanishing amongst the ex-pats in Southeast Asia.

He’s always been honest with himself about death. He does not imagine an afterlife, and no loss or trauma in his life has convinced him to entertain even the hope for such a thing. No trauma but love, he supposes, because a part of him he never knew existed does hope, in some vague way, for a universe in which they don’t part. All this time alone, he thinks, and the thought of separation, of cessation after all it has taken to become what they finally are, makes his knuckles white around the knife he holds.

His relief, then, at seeing Will returned from nothing more than a parcel delivery, is extreme. And yet he cannot help but note the grim expression that twists Will’s mouth. He cocks a brow in question.
“It’s addressed to me,” Will says, “from Jack Crawford.”
Dinner sits forgotten at their usual seats as they devour the contents of the envelope, spread over the rest of the oversized oak table. There are six small sets of photographs and coroner’s reports, each clipped together with one of the stainless steel gator clips Hannibal remembers Jack favoring for any important document. He can recall a folder of papers - prescriptions, pamphlets on treatments, articles on experimental remedies - flung onto the armchair in Hannibal’s office, steel clip flashing briefly in the autumn sunlight. The artifact transports him back abruptly, involuntarily. Hannibal frowns, just a slight downward quirk of his lips. It is unlike him, to lose control of the flow of his thoughts in this way.

There is a flat, cream colored envelope, as well. Will taps it on the table, listening for the slide of the paper within, then sets it aside to first examine the pictures.

It turns out to be five women and a very young man. The most recently discovered victim’s face is bloated and shredded from the time she spent in the water, but somehow Hannibal recognizes her without need of the coroner’s report. Perhaps it is the determination in her desiccated jaw, even hanging limp from the socket as it does in the pictures. “A poor ending for Miss Lass,” he says, fingering the photo. The one below shows her naked back, with its two diamonds of missing skin.

“She escaped from one monster only to find herself snatched up by another,” Will says, voice shaky. Hannibal looks up from the photos to watch him. It’s the same look he’s seen a hundred times and more since they stepped off their boat in Florida: Judgment.

Will used to do this for Jack Crawford, for the FBI. He’s known this and has always known it, and yet it seems less and less possibly by the day. The thought of Will, beautiful and entranced with his breath coming faster, his eyes flicking beneath their lids, on display for anyone stumbling by with a badge, turns his blood white with a bitter plaguing anger. This sight should be his alone, his and the men and women for whom Will’s oracular maneuvers compose a rapturous and terrifying final sight.

“The others were random,” Will says, several minutes later, as if he’s been silent for only a matter of seconds. “They were just convenient, safe choices. Miriam Lass was different though. He knew her.”

“How can you tell?” Hannibal asks. There is sweat on Will’s upper lip, the faintest shimmer of perspiration.

“She feels different,” he says, teeth bared in frustration. It’s an expression Hannibal recognizes from a long time ago, another world now. He watches Will’s eyes moving over the pictures, over the
coroner’s report. “Wait,” he says, “that’s it. She’s not the most recent. Just the opposite; she was his first victim. Look at the dates.” His frown deepens. “Look at her face, at the state of her. The others were bloated but she’s dissolving.”

“The first killed,” Hannibal says, “the last to be found. Why was this one so difficult to locate?”

“He weighted her,” Will says, as if it’s just occurred to him. As if he’s always known it. “He weighted her body but he didn’t bother with the others. With the ones who came after.”

Will looks up, and his pupils are wide and black as the night sky, rimmed faintly by daylight blue irises. “He chose her,” Will reiterates. “The others are meaningless. Livestock. He takes what he needs and discards the rest.”

It’s a familiar statement, but if Will feels that way, too, he doesn’t show it, face drawn in lines of stress and wonder. Hannibal’s eyes flicker towards the sealed envelope resting amidst the bloody pictures. Jack can hardly say more to ensnare Will; his best hand is already dealt, and Hannibal can see the way Will jerks towards the lure. “What does Uncle Jack have to say?” he asks. “Should we be packing our bags?”

Will scowls, momentarily returned to the mundane world of prison bars and extradition laws. His fingers twitch over the envelope, plucking it up and slitting it open with one of the knives set for their abandoned meal. Its contents slide easily onto the table, a single sheet of white paper embossed with Jack’s forceful scrawl.

_Call._

Will frowns at the number beneath the single word message. “It’s not his number,” he says.

“A burner phone, perhaps,” Hannibal offers, “or an attempt to suggest he has one.”

Will’s frown deepens, dark lines creasing his brow. Hannibal resists the urge to reach out and smooth them with his fingers. He finds he has to resist the urge to touch Will quite often, even now. Perhaps more, in fact, than before. When more is permitted, one grows to expect more. He has grown to expect Will to accept his touch, to seek it, and he desires him more now than he thought possible, as if the desire fed upon itself. “What the hell is he doing?” Will mutters.
Hannibal lifts his shoulder in a half shrug. “I should think it obvious,” he says. “He is attempting to elicit your aid in apprehending Buffalo Bill.”

The sneer Will gives him is vulgar and vicious, and Hannibal feels the heat of it settling into his belly like a shot of liquor. “Don’t call him that,” Will scoffs. “Another of Freddie’s stupid monickers.”

“Not so different from the Tooth Fairy,” Hannibal muses. He can’t help the wry look he sends Will, can’t help wanting to see the way his eyes cloud in anger. “Or Murder Husbands.”

“Or Hannibal the Cannibal.” Will is quick to retort. Hannibal just smiles, benignly. Any annoyance he has felt at either of these unfortunate sobriquets is lessened significantly by the radiance of frustration it produces in Will’s tempestuous face. “Jack can’t seriously believe I would help him solve a case again.”

“He believed you would after you were incarcerated, diagnosed with a brain disease, and attempted to have me killed. He believed you would after you warned me, and after you admitted to wanting to run away with me, and after you - briefly - ran away after me. And you always did.” Hannibal lifts the glass of wine that’s sat forgotten by his elbow all the while. It possess a rich, dark flavor, and would have complimented the dish well. “Jack’s behavior is predictable. When his investigation hits a wall, and when the stakes are high enough, he invariably turns to you.”

“Is my behavior predictable then, as well?” Will asks. “After all, I always say yes.”

“Indeed,” Hannibal answers, voice careful, “you do.”

A second of silence. Then Will huffs, raking his fingers through his hair and completely disheveling it in the process. “How did he even find us?” he asks, voice mournful. “Why didn’t he just come here himself? This feels like a trap. But why bother with a trap?”

Hannibal’s mind is racing over the same questions, the same scenarios and possibilities he knows Will must be considering. “He does want your help,” he says, slowly, “or he wouldn’t have bothered with a letter. He’s hoping to gain your trust because he’s desperate for your help. Again.”

“He’ll have something to offer,” Will adds, “in exchange for my cooperation.”

“It would have to be something quite compelling,” Hannibal says.
They drain and refill their wine glasses, and eventually Hannibal clears the table and returns with a tray of cured meat and olives. He watches Will’s fingers as he eats.

Eventually they agree on only one certainty (Jack is sincerely seeking Will’s help in the Buffalo Bill murders), and several uncertainties (is Jack contacting Will through his official capacity within the Bureau; is this a trap; how does he know where Will is; does he know they are together; should Will call this number). As ever, it seems they are left with more doubts than convictions. Will’s expression certainly says as much.

“Will you call?” Hannibal asks. He thinks of a letter he wrote, long ago, in another life, in another world, and he can’t bear to look at Will in this moment. Because he has one certainty he has not shared, but which he knows Will must also realize, although perhaps cannot admit to himself as true: If Will calls Jack, he will leave Argentina, they will separate - forever or for a while - and this part of their lives will be over.

“I don’t know,” Will says. Hannibal doesn’t need to look to guess at his expression - he knows that look of tortured conflict well. “What do you want me to do?”

His smile is, perhaps, a little sad. He doesn’t expect pity, and there is none present on Will’s face when at last Hannibal looks up at him. “What you were meant to do,” he says. Judge. Punish. Consume.

And Will’s face breaks, sudden and sorrowful. It’s as if the strings holding him up are cut, and he sags with exhaustion and confusion, and Hannibal finds he no longer wishes to resist the now overwhelming urge to take Will into his arms and press a warm, dry kiss to his soft curls. He smells of wine and candle wax and something that tugs at Hannibal’s stomach, something deep and heavy as moss or pine needles. There’s a hitch in his breathing, but his eyes are dry when Hannibal pulls back to examine him at arm’s length.


“I feel like I’ve lost blood,” Will laughs, and it’s a dry and scratchy sound.

Hannibal pulls him back into the embrace, his arms looser now. It is still foreign, still strange, to feel himself the comforter with no hidden knife. It’s been a long time, he thinks, since he loved without ulterior motive. The past couple years have been enough to familiarize him with the sensation, but not long enough to allow him to grow accustomed to the feeling. As often happens in these
moments, Mischa’s eyes flash briefly, dangerously, the swing of her fine golden hair, before she vanishes down one of the darker corridors of his memory. As if she’s been hiding behind a closed door, Hannibal thinks, listening. Hoping for a way back into this world, a place I never managed to carve out for her.

There are times when he suspects he’s found her, or brought a piece of her ghost over, when Will looks at him with that trusting, inquisitive look so like hers. In those instants, Hannibal finds his mouth flooded with the taste of her - sweet and succulent and delicious on his parched and starving tongue. His first spring lamb. He drinks the memories like poison.

Will’s head rests on his chest, Will’s forehead pressed against his collarbone. He runs his fingers through the mess of dark hair and breathes in, slow. “You can decide later,” he says, but the heaviest part of his heart already knows what the decision will be. “We can figure out the details in the morning,” he says, a more accurate statement by far.

Will lifts his head to regard him with one weary eyebrow cocked. “You’re not going to push us towards your own desired outcome?”

“I have hardly pushed,” Hannibal says, “since you left with me. This is my desired outcome, Will.”

He watches the dark circle of pupil in the center of Will’s eyes widen, like spreading puddles of ink on a blue-grey page. “Seems like you’d be extra keen to manipulate the situation, then,” he says, without malice, “to protect what you’ve sacrificed so much to achieve.”

“Any sacrifice I have made has been well worth the results,” Hannibal smoothly replies. “You are well past my ability to manipulate, now, Will. And I think I do not need to. This,” he says, pressing his hand over Will’s where it rests over his steady heartbeat, “matters to you as much as it does to me, I think. You will not abandon this life. I can do more than trust in our joint ability to preserve our lives and freedom.”

“I could be deciding our ending,” Will presses, and Hannibal feels the pressure of his searching gaze, watching for a tell, a sign of something Hannibal can’t put a name to. Doubt, or dishonesty perhaps. He twines his fingers between Will’s, feeling the drum of his heart beneath, feeling the matching pulse in Will’s wrist and thumb.

“I do not think so,” he answers, finally. “But if so, let us give them such an ending as to be remembered and feared long after we are gone. Let us give them something to speak of in hushed voices in the years to come. I would end in such a way with you, Will, and be more than satisfied with what my life had been.”
Will lets himself be led to bed, and crawls in fully dressed after kicking off only his shoes. Hannibal
does likewise, despite the discomfort, the terror of wrinkles he’ll content with in the morning. Will is
a warm weight on his chest, and Hannibal feels him sink quickly into unconsciousness.

Sleep comes harder for him.

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“This is all I ever wanted for you,” he says, and behind his words he hears the crash of distant
waves and the approaching wail of sirens. “For both of us.”

In the dream, he opens his eyes and sees the cliffside blurring by, behind a fringe of Will’s
windblown hair. It’s hard to imagine what would have happened, could have happened, in some
other world is happening. Falling forever towards an ocean of dark waves and cold stones. It seems
absurd to consider survival. He tightens his arms around Will’s shivering body and falls at the speed
of a feather. The world is a slow, never ending blur in which he rests, suspended.

In another world they are pierced on the stones below. They are battered against the cliffside by
merciless waves. Their bodies are shattered by the impact, corpses sinking to the sea floor, bones
picked clean by fish and detritivores, ribs and skulls hollow homes for squid and eels.

In another world the seas catch fire when they hit the waves, and the moon expands like a bone
white blanket over the night sky, till the world is bright as perpetual day, bathed in black blood and
flaming with the heat of their love.

In another world, they never stop falling, they never hit the water. Will, in his arms forever,
suspended in the air as they share a dream of a world that’s kinder to them.

When he closes his eyes he’s awake again.

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He awakens with the salt of the sea air still clinging to his nostrils, but the faint light of the rising sun
which filters past the edges of the heavy curtain illuminates the room enough to reassure him of his
surroundings. No dark waves, no apocalypse of fire and salt. Will’s back is to him, a vague shape in the half light of dawn, moving with the slow rhythmic motions of his breathing. Hannibal reaches one hand across the bed, but hesitates before his fingers brush skin, his hand hovering so close he can feel the heat radiating off Will’s silent form.

This may well be one of the final times - if not the final time - he wakes beside Will for a long time. In his head, there’s the ghost of a remembered tune, harsh and clanging, then softer and more skilled, simple notes picked out on the keys of a harpsichord somewhere in the halls of his memories. Morning sunlight, then too, and Will’s laughter ringing more beautifully than the quaint tune. I remember the first time we kissed, Hannibal thinks, and from somewhere even deeper in his past words float to him: There is nothing human left in you to love.

Hannibal swallows, tasting the bitter tang of rejection, loneliness, loss and isolation. Will hadn’t known how alone he was when they’d met, had never felt close to one person, mind a din of intimacy he didn’t want and couldn’t turn off. But Hannibal…he thinks of his youth, and what it felt like to be surrounded in love, soothed by soft hands and soft words. He had known what that felt like, what connection felt like, and what its absence felt like, too.

He lets his hand fall onto Will’s shoulder, and the other man sighs in his sleep. I will always find you, he thinks, drawing closer to wrap an arm around Will’s waist, relishing the warmth and solidity of the body in his arms. I brought you to me once and it nearly cost us both our lives several times over. I would carry on hunting you, if necessary; you will always come back in the end.

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Will makes the call on a burner phone of their own, sitting at the dining room table. The centerpiece is a firework of flowers, purchased in loose stems from a local florist and arranged at home, which Hannibal now realizes dominates the room inelegantly. It’s early afternoon, and grey winter sunlight illuminates the room. They’ve been sat at this table, or pacing beside it, since Will awoke and ventured out to join Hannibal at the unnecessarily extravagant breakfast spread he’d created. Hannibal hadn’t bothered asking whether Will intended to contact Jack; the important thing now was the details. It had taken them half the day to determine what those should be.

Now the table is cleared - apart from overbearing floral displays - and Hannibal watches Will’s tightly drawn face. He holds the phone cupped against his scarred cheek, frowning as it rings. Once, twice. Hannibal hears Jack’s voice, muffled against Will’s face, before the third ring sounds.

“Hello, Jack,” Will says. He pauses, and Hannibal listens to the indecipherable murmur of Jack’s voice on the other end of the line. Somewhere far away, he hopes. He thinks. It’s unlikely Jack would send Will the number and pictures, if he intended to come all this way in person. Hannibal imagines him in his office in Quantico, or possibly on his deck at home. Distant, remote, a vague
threat they could go on ignoring if they so chose. But he knows already what their choice is, and he supposes it’s his choice as much as it is Will’s. He wonders, briefly and, shockingly, for the first time, if he could stop Will from pursuing this course of action, if that was his desire.

“Yes, I thought you might,” Will says, and falls silent a moment more. “I’m supposed to trust that offer, Jack? You must think I’m stupid as well as insane. Has Prurnell even heard of this deal? Does she even know you’re contacting me?” His voice is disdainful, harsh. “What makes you think I even care about helping you catch him?”

There’s a long pause, then, and Hannibal watches in fascination at the way Will’s expression clouds. Something he didn’t expect to hear. Will’s eyes flick towards his and linger, and Hannibal abruptly regrets their decision not to put Jack on speaker phone - risking Jack’s suspicion at the tinny echo of Will’s voice no longer seems unnecessarily dangerous.

“I need to think about it,” Will says, and scowls at the murmur of Jack’s voice. “I’ll think about it,” he says again, more firmly, and then presses the button to end the call, and drops the phone wearily onto the table between them, and drops his head into his hands.

“Well,” Hannibal says, when he finds himself unable to endure the silence any longer.

Still, it takes a long moment for Will to respond, for him to lift his head from his palms and fix his gaze to a place on the wall just to the left of Hannibal’s head. “He’s offering me clemency in exchange for aide in solving the Buffalo Bill case,” Will says.

“As we suspected he would,” Hannibal says, pressing for more. There is something more, he knows.

“He thinks…he thinks you’re the killer,” Will says. “There are some details they kept from the press. They found…cocoons. In the throat of every victim.” Hannibal blinks at him, unable to understand for a second, what Will is saying. “You know, the same sort you put in Bedelia’s skull,” Will says, and it slides into place at once.

“Jack doesn’t realize you and I are together,” he says. He remembers Will’s words, voice quivering. The others are meaningless. Livestock. It had sounded familiar, and it seems so obvious now, why. “They’re offering your freedom in exchange for my capture.”

“Deja vu?” Will guesses, mouth quirking in a mirthless smile. “It feels like I’m usually being asked to trade your life for mine.” The smile fades as fast as it bloomed, giving way to a cloudy scowl. “I hate
to admit it, but I’m curious.”

*About who this killer is, and why he leaves the same calling card I once used. About what Jack knows and what he truly intends. About what it would be like to return. About what we can get away with. What we could accomplish, back in the States.* Hannibal can’t deny the curiosity coursing through his own brain with every pump of fresh blood, but, he thinks, this might have been one occasion on which the preservation of peace would outweigh his innate inquisitiveness. If not for Will. Above all things, and as ever, he is curious about what Will will do.

“We have already established you’re going,” Hannibal replies. “Why bother feeling guilty about the curiosity you’ll soon be able to sate?”

“We’re both going,” Will says, aggravated. “We’ll only be apart a short while.” He stands, moving to the window to look out across the fenced in yard. It is not raining, but the sky is overcast, casting a veil over the sun.

Hannibal takes a step towards him, rests a cautious hand upon the back of Will’s waist. “I have concerns about this plan,” he says. “I won’t pretend otherwise.”

Will shrugs, but leans back into his touch, and Hannibal spreads his fingers. Will is always so warm. “I have concerns, too,” he says. “Doesn’t mean it’s not the best course of action.”

“Perhaps,” Hannibal muses. “Perhaps best is also relative, though.”

“Is our aim the preservation of our own lives,” Will asks, “or is it the pursuit of ecstasy, forbidden knowledge?”

“My aim is to be with you,” Hannibal answers. “You described killing with me as a high, once. Do you still feel that way?”

Will nods. “Oh yes.” Hannibal thinks of the way the younger man’s heart beats slow and steady, the way his eyes grow glassy and distant, the deep slow rises and falls of his chest when they kill together. He half imagines, half remembers the taste of blood on Will’s mouth, deep copper and salt on his tongue when Will’s mouth parts under his in a hundred different blood drenched scenes. *It’s beautiful,* he thinks, and for a moment he feels the wind on his face.
“A high you have not come down from,” he forces himself to say, “since that first night when we slew a dragon beneath the full moon, years ago.”

Will frowns at the words. “That’s your concern,” he says, sounding incredulous. “That Jack and Alana’s plan to quarantine me from you till I returned to my senses would actually have worked, on a long enough timeline?”

Hannibal keeps his face carefully blank. “You can honestly say you do not harbor any doubts, about what you will think and feel when we are parted.”

Will’s eyes rake over his face, searching. “I’m not going anywhere,” he says, finally. His voice suggests he can think of nothing else to say. “Not really. It’s been years. I didn’t realize you had these kinds of doubts.”


“This is what’s happening,” Will says, voice harsh. Not cold, though, no. Will is always fire, a smolder or a blaze, but filled to overflowing with a hot red passion. Hannibal feels the heat of his words. “If we don’t deal with this now like I thought we had already planned, then we’ll just have to keep on the move until we’re forced to deal with it later.” He frowns up at Hannibal, and Hannibal lets himself touch the deep line between Will’s brows with the tip of one finger, indulging his desire to smooth the stress lines from Will’s face despite the huff of annoyance it draws from Will. It is more than worth it, for who can say with certainty when he will be able to do so - or think of doing so - again?

“I want to deal with it,” Will admits, softly, after a moment of silent soothing, during which time his annoyance slowly lifts. “We left things unfinished. And… I want to know more about this killer. Something about him feels familiar, but distorted. Like a reflection in a fun-house mirror.”

Hannibal presses his thumb to the curve of Will’s cheekbone, considering all the shattered and twisted reflections of themselves they have walked in and out of over the years. “I see myself most clearly when I look for my reflection in your eyes,” he says, and Will meets his gaze. “I worry, often, how I will seem to myself without that reflection to turn to.”

“I know,” Will whispers. “God, Hannibal, I know.” His hands dig into Hannibal’s forearms so firmly that Hannibal can feel bruises forming. He leans into the touch, wanting it, wanting the contusions, wanting something to remind him. Will’s expression shifts, tightness bleeding from his mouth until the corners of his lips slacken and his eyes go big and gentle. “I didn’t want to leave this place, yet. It
felt good here. And I… I don’t want to leave you.” His mouth does something between a smile and a sigh, and then Will catches his lower lip between his teeth, and regards Hannibal with a look so mournful and beautiful Hannibal finds himself momentarily captured, enraptured, unable to think of what they’re contemplating doing. He strokes a hand over Will’s rough cheek, forcing himself to memorize this, the way Will is looking at him, the way Will’s skin and beard feel. The memory will join a thousand others just the same, ballrooms of his mind filled with Will’s smiles and frowns.

“You aren’t leaving me,” he says, “are you, Will?”

Will shakes his head. His eyes, wide and tormented, meet Hannibal’s, and Hannibal sees the sincerity there, the guilelessness and the hope. Trusting, despite everything. “Never.” Will pauses, eyes sliding to the wall behind Hannibal. “He says he booked me a seat on a flight leaving for Dulles the day after tomorrow. He’ll be waiting for me in the airport.” Will laughs hollowly, but he looks to be on the verge of tears. “In case I’m there.”

“You’ll be there,” Hannibal hears himself say. Will blinks, but keeps his eyes locked on the empty wall. “Let’s not waste time pretending. There are scores left to settle.”

He watches the young man’s expression waiver, resolve weakening, even as he regains his own. As if there is only enough strength between the two of them for one of them to feel certain at a time, and spend that strength in convincing the other that fortune favors them yet. “You will not abandon me, Will. I know it. And I will guard you to the end, whether by your side or far removed, and I will not grow gentle to your enemies.”

“Is it worth the risk?” Will asks, tremulously. “Worth risking our safety, our…”

“It is worth it,” Hannibal says, “because it’s what you need to do. I should have followed you back to meet Jack, that day we left the hospital. We should have handled things then. This will follow us, follow you, until you have justice for the things that were done to you.” He smiles, soft. “And you’re curious,” he says. “And I’m curious.”

He can feel Will’s pulse beneath his fingers. He imagines his fingers sinking through the skin, melding to the flesh. I am closer to you than you are, he thinks, and Will’s eyes flicker to his again, as if Will can read his mind, which, in fact, Hannibal often half suspects. You are closer to me than I am.

He feels that panic - that new, awful anxiety that entered his life riding the back of that strange beast Contentment - the fear of losing what he’s fought and sacrificed to obtain. This peace, this unity. He can see the question in Will’s eyes, hears it in the air between them as if it has been asked: Are you so
willing to let me go?

I am letting nothing go, he thinks, and Will’s eyes widen, revealing nearly the full circle of blue pupil, as if he’s heard. No tethers hold you; what I want is your surrender, something that cannot be forced and held. You have not left me, yet. You will not leave me, now.

“My remarkable boy,” he says, holding Will’s head in place as he tips their foreheads together and breathes. “We are unstoppable. If they want to stop one of us - ”

“They’ll need to stop us both,” Will finishes, breath shaky and sweet against Hannibal’s lips. Hannibal smiles.

“They won’t stop us, Will,” he promises, voice low, fingers curling in the curls at the back of Will’s head, memorizing every touch, scent, taste, sound, and the flare of harsh sunlight on the beginnings of grey at the corner of Will’s temples. In a distant corner of his mind, he is aware that he shouldn’t make promises like this, but he can’t help adding, “They won’t imprison you again,” and Will’s form sags against him. Hannibal exhales, slow. “I won’t let them.”
He's very like the man Jack remembers. Not the feral, caged creature he was when they last met, but the man he was immediately before, when there still seemed to be hope of a normal life, despite all the odds, of a return to the quaint cottage life and his little pre-made family. There's a looseness to his shoulders, even as he's hoisted almost off his feet, hauled into the interrogation room and deposited roughly into the seat across from Jack at the little metal table. He rolls his shoulders, his eyes narrowing at the airport security who now stand at attention, watching him only in their peripheral gaze. Jack nods his gratitude and dismissal at once, and the two men leave stiffly.

And then they are alone.

“Sorry about the welcoming committee,” Jack says, when the silence has stretched for too long, when Will’s expressionless gaze has begun to make his skin crawl like worms over his flesh. “Didn’t want someone recognizing you and trying to claim the reward.”

“You said removal from the FBI’s vaunted Most Wanted list was part of the deal,” Will says. He’s staring hard at the center of Jack’s face, not quite meeting his eyes. His voice is casual. Dangerous, Jack thinks. Casual and dangerous just like Lecter.

“You were removed the minute you checked in for your flight,” Jack says. “Your picture and description were both on the FBI’s website for almost two years before last night, however, and attached to a sizable sum of reward money. And there’s always the possibility of someone recognizing you from Chilton and Lounds’ latest forays into the literary world.”

He watches the corner of Will’s mouth jerk. “What a blessing for the two great minds of our generation to find each other,” he says, voice dripping with familiar contempt. Jack finds himself strangely comforted by it, if only as proof that some things about Will remain constant, will never change. “I read their recantation of Frederick’s previous published work. Scintillating stuff.”

Jack tries not to grimace, but he’s certain some of his displeasure must show on his face. Hiding emotions from Will is an exercise in futility at the best of times. Still, he tries not to think about the
trouble Chilton and Lounds have caused for him within the Bureau. The reviews, the investigations, the reprimands, the humiliating meetings with Prurnell. He coughs, not thinking of it. “There were pictures of you in that as well,” he says.

“So you had me accosted by guards the second the plane landed,” Will challenges. “For my own protection.”

Jack spreads his hands, fingers wide, offering a truce, not quite an apology. “This was going to be an awkward reunion no matter what,” he says, “might as well have it in the safest way possible.”

Will arches an eyebrow at his words, but doesn’t comment, and Jack finds himself wondering at the expression. “It’s strange to see you again, Jack,” Will says, after a brief silence. “How’ve you been?”

He exhales, air leaving his mouth accompanied by a soft noise of disbelief, or possibly frustration. *Maybe some combination of the two,* Jack thinks. “Fantastic,” he barks. “Never better, just doing phenomenally well.”

Lines form in the space between Will’s brows. “Really?”

“No,” Jack almost shouts, and Will only frowns deeper in response. “How do you think I’ve been? Trying to figure out where the hell you went and how to bring you back, dealing with that damned book, now this lunatic pops up and starts peeling people like oranges, how do you think I’ve been?”

“I’d guess not well,” Will says, with infuriating sincerity.

Jack takes a slow breath and counts before releasing it. “Your freedom is contingent upon the capture - or termination - of the killer known as Buffalo Bill,” he grits. “You will never return to the United States after this case is resolved; you will be, effectively, banished from this nation. We will no longer pursue you. You will never again return.”


“You have a lawyer,” Jack states, not quite a question.

“I have an address and a name to which I want you to mail copies of the documents you’re going to
prepare for me if you haven’t already,” Will answers. “I’m not consulting on anything until that’s done."

Jack nods, as much at Will as at the agents they both know are listening from the other side of the mirror. “They’re being drawn up. How about breakfast,” he says to Will, “in the meanwhile? I know a spot nearby, does decent eggs.”

He watches Will’s nose wrinkle after half a second’s hesitation. “Not worried about any enterprising locals recognizing me and attempting to collect on a freshly defunct bounty?”

“It’s hole in the wall small,” Jack reassures him.

“Just the two of us?”

He nods. “The tail can wait outside, get coffee to go.”

“More decent eggs for us.”

Jack can’t help smiling. It’s a weak, pale gesture, with no real mirth behind it, but it’s a recognition of the familiarity of Will’s mordant voice. He finds that he missed it, the bitterness like an old friend. The memory of their first meeting flashes to the front of his mind, suddenly, and he finds himself wanting to lean forward, push back glasses Will no longer wears, just to feel the momentary return to a simplicity his rational mind knows they’ll never recapture. It was never simple, anyway. “It’s good to see you again,” he says, although he’d promised himself he’d keep this as impersonal as possible. He’d even considered forgoing given names, but “Mr. Graham,” or the more respectful but less currently applicable, “Professor Graham,” sounded too strange in his head to bother attempting out loud. It is good to see him again. It’s something Jack hasn’t allowed himself to hope for, except in the dead of night, all alone, when he sometimes finds the need to hope for something unavoidable.

“It’s less awful seeing you than I had feared it would be,” Will says, and the honesty forces a barking laugh from Jack. “Breakfast, please.”

The eggs are better than decent, yolks running beautifully when Jack pierces them. He drags a hunk of brown toast across his plate, and watches Will mirror the motion. It was something he noticed about Will when they’d first met, long ago, the way Will tended to take on the speech patterns and syntax and even mimic the gestures of his conversational partners. At first, Jack had thought it was a conscious choice, a tactic to gain trust. He’d realized quickly it was involuntary.
“Why wait to contact me,” Will asks, swallowing his mouthful. “You could have brought me in any time, I’m guessing. And this could be a very different conversation, with a very different deal on the table.”

“A deal like letting you keep your books and your toilet if you cooperate in helping us capture Buffalo Bill?” Jack suggests, wry voiced. Will is silent, but arches an eyebrow in what might be agreement. “We got your location a week ago,” he admits.

“Ah,” Will says, forking another bite. “Mind if I ask how? It’s not as if I’ll be hiding from you after this, anyway, right? I won’t need to.”

“That’s correct, Will,” Jack answers the challenge in Will’s voice sternly, before giving him an answer. “Video surveillance at one of the local department stores. Local police investigating another crime recognized you on the footage they were reviewing. The department store clerks were extremely helpful; they recognized your picture and gladly gave the police the address they had on file for furniture deliveries. You lived well in Argentina.”

“Yes,” Will says softly. “A life I’ll miss.”

“No reason you can’t return to it after this.”

“You always assume the work I do for you doesn’t change me, Jack, in some fundamental way. I can’t go back to the homes you pluck me out of when you’re done using my imagination. Especially not when that always necessarily means engaging with Hannibal Lecter.”

Jack’s heart stutters, but he forces himself to remain calm, face still. “How long has it been since you saw him?”

Will lifts one shoulder in a slow half shrug, his expression shuttered and unreadable. “Why are you asking? Don’t trust TattleCrime?”

Jack shifts. “Freddie’s attributed a lot of crimes to the pair of you,” he says, cautious of his voice and what his hands are doing. He forces himself to look Will full in the face as he speaks, watching for a shift in expression, a sign, but no sign comes. “We had no strong evidence linking you to any of them…after what we found in Florida.” He swallows. “If you tell me you weren’t involved in the things Freddie’s accused you of, I’ll believe you.”
“Provided I’m also willing to consult on the Buffalo Bill murders,” Will says, and raises a hand in objection before Jack’s mouth is fully open. “We parted ways almost immediately,” he says, “over two years ago. Haven’t heard or seen sign of him since.”

Jack’s face feels frozen. “Just like that?”

“Yes,” Will says, “just like that.”

“ Seems pretty easy.”

That same aloof half shrug. “Depends on your definition of easy, I guess. We both lost about a quart of blood, and I spent a week and a half treating my injuries from my bed after persuading him to leave. Hannibal didn’t fare a lot better. May have lost an eye, actually. Looking forward to finding out for sure. If it is him.”

“You can’t tell from the pictures?” Jack jumps on the last words. “It has to be him.”

“I can’t tell without those documents signed and delivered to my lawyer,” Will clarifies. “And if it is him, I doubt I’ll be returning to a quiet life in Argentina, or anywhere else he might be able to track me down.”

“He won’t be able to track you down,” Jack says.

Will’s expression is carefully blank for a moment, just long enough for it to be noticeable. Then his face slides into a scoff. “Because you’ll have him in custody,” he says, “or because you’ll murder him?”

Jack shrugs. “Figured you might want the honors,” he says, and watches as Will’s face does something like closing. He frowns, not liking the chill that settles between them, but before he can question it there’s a sharp buzz sounding from his jacket pocket.

“Yes,” he barks into the phone, then listens to the earnest voiced agent on the other end informing him that the documents he asked for are ready. “Good,” he replies succinctly, “have them sent to the Choptank team. We’ll be there in an hour.
“Come on,” he says, sliding the phone back into his pocket and pushing back from the table. “Your papers are ready, and the second you sign them you’re getting to work.”

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The May morning sun glints off the waters of the Choptank, as Jack leads him along the bank, a ways from where they parked the car along the side of the road. The drive had been a long one, with arduous stretches of silence interrupted by Jack’s throat clearing. Now and then, he made proclamations about the case, as if they were occurring to him in the moment - “He keeps them alive for about a week after he takes them, we think,” and, “The pupas we found in every body are identical to the ones we found in Bedelia Du Maurier’s eye sockets,” and finally, “He takes their skin, different shapes from each, removes it after they’re dead.” Will responded to none of it. Now they walk in silence. The mud sucks at his boots, releasing his feet with a reluctant squelching sound at each step.

“She was working security for one of those fancy grocery stores downtown,” Jack says. “She’d fallen off my radar - off everyone’s radar. When the hospital released her three years ago she made it a point to vanish. I only saw her once in all that time.”

Will has to look down to keep his balance as they trek through the soft river bank. He remembers Lass vividly, despite the briefness of their acquaintance. The quiet, fervent sound of her breathing, and the fear in her eyes when they spoke of The Ripper come back to him easily. Will wonders if, like him, she regained some memories in time, and, if so, if it made things better or worse for her. It’s not difficult to imagine the desire to disappear from that life. “Oh yeah?” he prompts.

“Right after her release,” Jack says. “She told me she was very sorry but she felt she had to end her involvement with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, in light of everything that had happened, and she hoped I would understand.” He gives a sad sound like laughter.

Will lets himself smile, lets a hint of sadness peer through in the corners of his eyes. “She must have felt like she was letting you down, stepping away like that,” he says, and holds up a hand before Jack can object. “I’m sorry. I just…know the feeling. You know she referred to you as The Guru?”

“I know.”

“Are we getting close?”
Jack nods. “There’s not a lot left to see of the scene,” he admits. “There never really was, to be honest. Just the body, pinned beneath a log. There were rope marks on her ankles, places where the rope had worn the flesh away in the water. We think he weighted her at the ankles, but the ropes must have come untied or become damaged after a time in the water. She floated down river half a mile, maybe, before catching on that log, there.” Jack points. “That’s where…that’s where we found her.”

Will can hear the sadness in his voice, feel the regret surrounding him like a thick cloud of smoke. “I’m not sure what I can do here,” Will says, quietly. His voice comes out gentler than he’s heard it in some time. Jack’s only answer is to step back, out of his line of sight. Will sighs, looking out over the stretch of cold water. It’s peaceful, bright and cold, the sound of birdsong and water filling him. He feels Jack pulsing with ambitious desire, the need to know all men like them lust after. He closes his eyes, and the day and the sun and the birds and Jack’s fervent, zealous energy fade away into a deep, heavy darkness.

It’s not enough to pile stones on top of her. I try, but some part of her is always bobbing up, caught in the current, hurtling against me. An inanimate object which moves, a paradox of moving but not moving. It’s my first kill, the first body I’m handling, and I’m already a disappointment to myself in this, as in most everything else. A tiny life of petty grievances interspersed with true agonies that have provided me with far too much familiarity with violence and pain. A litany of failures and this is just one more. I am determined, though. This time will be something different - the beginning of a transformation, the catalyst for change. The water makes her arms move like she’s trying to grab my legs when I attempt to stack more stones on her, and I scream, and fall, almost losing my grip on her, almost losing her down the river.

He can feel the wet spread of frigid water spilling over his body like a shock. It is dark at first, but his eyes adjust quickly to the pale glow of the horned moon hanging in the sky. Behind him, from the darkness, he can hear a soft flutter.

I can’t fail this time. This can’t be the end, already. I drag both our bodies to the bank, driven by determination more than strength, only to collapse in the mud, face to face with her battered visage. I see where the rocks have drawn bloodless cuts across her cheeks. Seeing her this way is terrifying. Will I ever grow accustomed to the fear? To the way they move and do not move?

Then it occurs to me to tie the weights to her, rather than stacking them atop her. Watching her body sink from view fills me with the same rush of quiet strength I felt when I opened her throat.

Not her. It.
Its throat.

It sinks out of view, and only I remain. Myself, and the things I took from it, the things I transformed into myself.

He pulls himself from the dark tank of the killer’s mind like he’s breaking through the surface of the water. He very nearly gasps for air. It’s clear now why Jack wants to attribute these crimes to Hannibal - beyond Jack’s own ambitions, beyond the curious reappearance of the chrysalises, there’s a familiarity to the violence, to the coldness. But there’s more there, a newness and a desperation. Will feels full of gripping cold panic, as if he’s drowning. His head’s above water, but he looks down to see one foot ankle deep in the icy water. He turns back to where Jack observes him with grim silence.

“Were you going to let me march into the river?”

“I was prepared to intervene if it became necessary,” Jack says.

Will snorts. “Always willing to push me right to the edge,” he scoffs. “Could my life ever have mattered more to you than all the lives we saved together?”

“It’s because of those lives that you’re here,” Jack says, “instead of in a cell in Argentina awaiting extradition. And because of the lives you’ll save now. What did you see?”

Will scowls, momentarily shaken by the force of the anger running through him. He forces his body to still, focusses his will upon calming his pounding blood, forcing his body out of its fight or flight responses. Soon, he promises himself. But not yet. “It’s not him, Jack. This was this killer’s first kill,” Will answers. “He wanted to feel like something other than the loser he perceives himself to be. And that transformation is what he wants more than anything - to be something better, someone who isn’t always coming in last place.”

Jack scoffs. “And killing made him feel like a winner?”

Will shakes his head. “No - no he felt terrified by the body, had to pretend it wasn’t a human being in order to regain any feeling of control. But something about killing helps him transform himself into something other than the loser he perceives himself to be. And that transformation is what he wants more than anything - to be something better, someone who isn’t always coming in last place.”

“She was his first,” Jack repeats Will’s words, unbelieving. “Seems like a pretty skilled kill for a
fledgling, but okay, if she was the first, why her?"

Will frowns. “She was different from the others,” he says, “I could tell from the pictures.”

“How?”

“I don’t know,” he admits, “I just…knew.”

“Different how?”

“He knew her,” Will says. “She was familiar.” He reaches into his jacket pocket to retrieve the photographs, pulling out one that shoes her body, a mottled mess stretched out on the muddy bank. He touches the glossy surface lightly with the pad of his finger. “He wanted her to see him as something other than he was, as if her sight would change him.”

“Why take her skin, then?” Jack presses. “Why not take her eyes?”

“I don’t know,” Will groans. “I can’t tell you anything more, right now, Jack. I’m exhausted.”

“Oh no,” Jack says, “no rest yet. Are you certain it isn’t him?”

“Who?” Will asks, voice biting.

“Don’t start,” Jack scolds. “Is. It. Lecter? Miriam Lass would definitely be different for him than the others.”

Miriam, Will thinks, did it feel like you were in the garden at the eye of the hurricane with this one, too? He wonders whether letting Jack continue believing they are looking for Hannibal could possible be to his advantage, but ultimately decides it doesn’t matter - the contract he signed grants him security with the capture of whomever the kill proves to be. “I know you want it to be him,” Will says. “It would put a bow on things, wouldn’t it? You could punish him for what he did to Miriam, and to me, and to Alana and you and all those innocent people, and I could redeem myself - not enough to come home, of course . . . . But I really doubt this is him, Jack. It doesn’t feel like him, so much as an imitation by someone with intimate details of the Ripper murders. I’m ready for a nap,
now, okay?"

Jack scowls, and looks to be on the verge of administering an admonishment about the necessity of solving this case before another victim went missing, but then he stops, and looks over Will’s shoulder with a deepening frown.

“What?” Will asks, and turns to look Freddie Lounds in the face.

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She gets the pictures she needs first. If they spot her, she can publish speculations - clearly labelled as such, at the behest of her lawyers - but she can’t fake images like these. Graham bears his teeth in a grimace that looks like a growl, eyes lidded and hair unkept. Demonic, she thinks, snapping the images and imagining headlines. FBI Seeks Aid of Brainwashed Serial Killer. Psychic Psycho Returns to United States: Why the FBI Won’t Protect You. By the Skin of Our Teeth: Hannibal the Cannibal’s Boyfriend Consults on Buffalo Bill Murders. She thinks Will would be especially appreciative of the last one.

Pictures taken and camera stowed in her purse, Freddie slinks forward, tape recorder in hand. She catches just a snatch of conversation before they spot her.

“ - really doubt this is him, Jack,” Will is saying. “It doesn’t feel like him, so much as an imitation by someone with intimate details of the Ripper murders. . . . What?” He turns, following Jack’s perturbed gaze, and Freddie raises her hand in greeting at his scowl.

“I wish I could welcome you back to the country, Mr. Graham,” she says, picking her way through the soft ground towards them, “but you aren’t welcome here, even if the FBI seems to feel otherwise.”

“Don’t you have better things to do,” Will asks, voice acerbic, “being a best selling author and all?”

The smile that tightens across her face feels unavoidable. “My duty is first and foremost to the truth,” she says, “to giving the public the truth, as they deserve.”

“Funny,” Will says, “I thought your duty was to make sales. Hannibal and I have been your cash cows for some time now, haven’t we? Maybe you ought to be paying me a portion of the profits. I
have to hand it to you, you even managed to redeem Frederick in the general public’s eye. No easy feat, that. He wasn’t well liked before being set on fire.”

“Dr. Chilton suffered enormously because of what you and Hannibal Lecter put him through over the years. He suffers still, the psychological effects of what you each did to him.”

“You’re breaking my heart,” Will sneers. “I never laid a finger on him; you can ask him yourself.”

“He’s stronger than you think, though,” Freddie continues. “He survived the pair of you, despite your best efforts.”

Will’s face looks like he is about to speak, but thinks better and catches the comment in time. Freddie silently laments his self control; she misses the days when he would all but openly threaten her on tape, in front of witnesses. The headlines wrote themselves.

“Come on,” Jack says, clapping Will firmly on the back. Freddie notes the way Will’s eyes widen and then narrow at the contact, the old gesture of familiarity that feels as wrong now to her as it must to him. Her eyes dart to Jack’s face, which is pulled into tight painful lines.

“We’re all walking through the ghost of the past,” she says. “Jack Crawford seeking help from psychological wunderkind Will Graham in order to apprehend a killer one of them suspects is Hannibal Lecter.”

“I think I’d have to be a little younger to count as a wunderkind,” Will says. “It’s not Lecter,” Will says, feeling Jack’s glare on the back of his neck, hearing the growl of warning rising in Jack’s chest.

“Will - ”

“You can tell your readers it’s not him,” Will forges ahead, careless of Jack’s mounting anger, and Freddie’s eyes flash at her unexpected good fortune. “This isn’t the ending Hannibal would have planned for Miriam Lass. It’s is too sloppy for him, and it lacks all theatricality.”

“Theatricality such as a house full of bones stacked like cordwood?” Freddie queries. Her voice comes out as ardent and steady as ever, despite the rapid pound of elation in her blood at Will’s use of Lecter’s first name; readers will notice. She’ll make sure they do.
“Exactly,” Will says, and feels Jack’s hand come down hard on his shoulder at the same time he hears him making a sound like he’s swallowed his own tongue.

“Will, we’re leaving. Now.”

“Bye,” Will says, giving a half wave to the reporter before turning to face Jack as they begin a fast march back to the sedan.

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Like Freddie, Jack wears an expression of absolute shock, but his is clearly outraged whereas hers had been delighted. “What the hell is wrong with you?” Jack snaps once they’re out of what he must perceive to be earshot. Will secretly hopes they aren’t; he imagines Hannibal reading the impromptu interview later with a smile. “What are you thinking, talking to her like that? You practically admitted to Florida.”

Will shrugs. “So? I’m about to earn diplomatic immunity, more or less. You had plenty of evidence for that already anyway.”

Jack splutters, momentarily speechless with the force of his rage, and Will feels oddly calm in the face of it. Ordinarily, he’d feel the echo of anger rising in his own mind, find himself speechless and spluttering. But he’s peaceful in spite of the strong vibrations Jack is sending into the air between them, as though he can see the emotion without feeling it. As if there’s a wall between them.

The rest of the walk passes in silence, as Jack collects himself. By the time they reach their vehicle he’s composed enough to stick a thick finger into Will’s face and bark at him, “You do not speak to journalists while you work for me,” he orders, and Will looks passed the tip of his finger in order to meet his eyes. “You do not speak to anyone without my permission. Are we clear?”

“Don’t point at me,” Will replies, and opens the passenger door open to slide in.

Jack’s hand on his shoulder hauls him back to his feet before he can fully sit, however. “I vouched for you,” he says, “my reputation has suffered enormously because of what you did, and I’ve put what’s left of it on the line to help you, now. Does that buy me any loyalty or even gratitude?”
“Your reputation is poor coin to spend, Jack,” Will answers, shrugging out of Jack’s grip. Or trying to, because Jack’s finger clamp down harder, digging into his shoulder until he winces. “You aren’t doing this for me.”

“Oh?” Jack says, sounding slightly frantic. “What do you think Prurnell and every other person in the FBI wanted to do the moment we had your location? I’ll give you a hint - it sure as shit wasn’t to cut a deal bargaining for your safety.”

Will bites his tongue to keep from replying, because he’s pretty sure I don’t care is the last thing Jack wants to hear from him right now, and he’s started to genuinely worry about the way one of Jack’s hands is digging bruises into his shoulder while the other is clenching and unclenching by his side.

“Get in the car,” Jack says at last, releasing him so abruptly that it forces Will to stumble back and catch himself with a hand on the side of the car. He raises his eyes to Jack’s broad back walking away and, not for the first time, imagines what he and Hannibal have planned coming to fruition.

 Soon, he tells himself, and straightens with a breath, rolling his neck and shoulders before sliding into the car and pulling the door closed.
The house is large - their voices almost echoing off the high ceiling in the sparsely decorated living room. An austere sofa, a polished cherry wood side table, brass lamp curving to a corona of light obscured by the simple grey shade. It has the look of a room not often used - no book laid open on the coffee table to resume the following night, no forgotten mug of coffee or tepid glass of water, no signs of life lived here. Jack leads him through the living room and towards a door at the end of the hallway. A framed photo of Jack’s wedding day hangs on the wall across from the door, showing a smiling man Will’s not sure he would recognize if it weren’t for Bella in his arms.

“There’s a bathroom attached to the guest room,” Jack tells him, shifting his weight in a rare display of discomfort as Will’s unfocused gaze rests on his face. They’d discussed this in the car. It hadn’t gone well. “If you need something you can always call or text.”

Will doesn’t answer, and Jack coughs into the silence. “Look, Will, you have to have expected we’d take some precautions after what happened last time.”

“So if there’s a fire or something,” Will says, choosing not to respond directly to Jack’s statement, nor to point out that the precautions they’ve attempted to take with him in the past have never done much good, “are you going to remember to come unlock the guest room?”

“For God’s sake,” Jack curses, voice raising, “how can you ask that? And nothing is going to happen. It’s a temporary arrangement, anyway. The sooner you lead us to Buffalo Bill, the sooner you can be on your way. No more locked doors, no more federal bounty on your head. Think you can handle it till then?”

His skin itches at the sound of the door locking from the outside, head crowding with the sound of his own heartbeat and the memory of iron bars and unbreakable glass partitions, but he forces himself to breathe through the panic. It’s for a short time only, he reminds himself. He could slip these bonds anytime if he chose. He is here by choice. He is not a prisoner.

He will never be a prisoner again.

It’s still not entirely clear to him, what the outcome would be for him if he were to play by Jack’s rules. Would the deal stand? Or is it a trap - laid by Jack himself, or, more likely, Prurnell pulling Jack’s strings with half-truths? Would he find himself facing a cold grey prison cell, or one more like Hannibal’s old home under Alana’s care? Would he still find his head on the chopping block, or would cooperation buy him his life, if not his freedom?
He has no intention of finding out. Exhausted, Will falls back onto the bed, only bothering to kick off his shoes. It’s cool in the room, but not actually cold. Reluctant to stand again, Will wriggles the throw blanket under him free and pulls it atop him before closing his eyes with a sigh.

It’s not exactly a dream, what he falls into. More of a memory - Will remembers their last morning in Argentina. How he could hear water dripping from the eaves outside when he awoke, and the sky streamed with grey light between bouts of rain. How Hannibal hadn’t been in bed with him, when Will had opened his eyes. He’d felt annoyed by that, irritated at having been robbed of the chance to wake up and roll over to face Hannibal’s glowing eyes and warm arms, one more time before they part. He’d refused to let himself think the words that clamor at the back of his conscious mind: one last time.

Hannibal had been waiting downstairs, when Will finally stumbled into the kitchen. He was already dressed, suitcase at his feet, tablet in one hand and coffee in the other. He’d looked up when Will entered, nodded towards the coffee and plate of eggs waiting for him, and Will had slunk to his seat at the table forlornly.

Hannibal had sighed, setting the tablet down and turning his eyes to examine Will with a surprising degree of sympathy. “Take heart, Will,” he’d said, into Will’s mournful silence, “it will only be a short time.”

The force of his grief at the impending isolation had nearly crushed him then, and it had occurred to him that it was not his emotions alone that he felt. And that knowledge - that beneath the unflappable coolness of his exterior, Hannibal burned with a similar violent terror - forced the air from his lungs.

“You…promise?” he’d all but panted, when at last he found the air needed to form speech again. He’d meant it to sound ironic, but the words sounded closer to desperation to his ears as they hung above the kitchen table between the two of them. Will wished he could pluck them from the air and take them back. They echoed in the silence, foolish, childish, pleading.

He’d felt Hannibal’s hand covering his, and looked up and into those devilish red eyes, now grown earnest and sad. “I promise,” he’d said, staring intently into Will’s unblinking eyes. Then he’d released his hold on Will’s hand and sat back to retrieve his cup of coffee and return to the news app still open on the tablet. The headline said something about NASA, the discovery of new planets, new worlds. Will had wondered if there are other versions of themselves on them, leading other versions of this life. Could they reach those worlds, given enough time and resources, what would they have to say to themselves, for themselves? “And I always keep my promises.”

He’d smiled at that. Shook his head, and watched the way Hannibal’s eyes flickered to him heatedly
as he peered up through the fringe of curls he’d shaken into his eyes. He’d known he would miss that look, then, but he hadn’t realized how much. Now, alone, locked in Jack’s guest bedroom, Hannibal’s absence consumes him now, like sleet spreading from his core outwards, as if his marrow has turned to ice and the frost is reaching towards the epidermis. He imagines snowy skin peeling off him in diamonds, in rhombuses, in all the strange geometric patterns Buffalo Bill takes from his kills. Bodies missing patches of skin. Bodies washed up battered on river banks, or caught against fallen trees in the water. Bodies flayed in shapes that must mean something, but signify nothing to him.

“Tell me the plan again,” Will watches the memory of himself say to Hannibal, as if he’s standing across the kitchen table, watching. Watching the slight shake of Hannibal’s hand as it lifts his coffee - a tremor he hadn’t noticed at the time. Watching the ardent look in his own eyes. “We have to know it perfectly.”

“You’re certainly right,” Hannibal replies, and Will watches the way his own eyes seem caught in Hannibal’s gaze like waves drawn to the shore. “But we also need to know what to do if deviating from the plan should become a necessity.”

Will frowns now, as he frowned then. It’s not a scenario he wanted to consider in the moment. It’s not something he’s any more eager to contemplate now. He hears his own voice coming from across the table, “And what would we do, in such a case?”

“Anything and everything we need to do in order to bring about our desired end.”

“Anything,” he repeats, two voices blending as the past fades into the present with a sound like rushing water, and Will opens his eyes to the darkness of the empty room once more.

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“I know I said I was surprised you were back last time,” Price says, “and at the time I truly believed I was.”

“Jimmy,” Z warns.

As per usual, warnings do no good. “But that was only because I didn’t realize how surprised I would be now. Now saying I’m surprised to see you back doesn’t even mean what it could have; I should have said I was something else, back then.”
“You could say you’re something else, now,” Will offers, casually helpful. “You could be shocked now.”

“I already used that word, too,” Price says, “when you left last time.”

“Last time you said it was good to see me,” Will reminds him. There’s an exam table between them, but for half a second the expression on Jimmy’s face clearly communicates that obstacle might not be enough to keep Will’s jaw unbruised. Then his face breaks into its usual expression of sardonic and benign amusement, and Will is hard pressed to say which presentation is the true expression of Price’s interior self. Perhaps neither. More likely, both.

“It is good to see you,” Price says, now, voice lighter. “It’s always good to see you.”

“That’s a matter of opinion,” Zeller chimes in, but he shoots Will a look that’s almost kind. A little fearful, a little pitying, but free from overt malice. Gentle, almost. Not the way you’d look at a killer so much as the way you’d look at a survivor. Will frowns inwardly at the assumption of him as the victim in this situation, but as a cover it’s a good way to go. Let them think Hannibal had him brainwashed; it serves purposes well enough. They probably think I’m impressive, Will thinks, for breaking free from the power of his influence. Like he’s Dracula.

His imagination hitches on the idea of Hannibal as Dracula - both pallid, accented eccentrics intent on using their preternatural powers of manipulation to consume as many human victims as fate allows. It’s enough to make him wonder what Hannibal would look like in a dark velvet cape. He’d probably look ridiculous, Will decides, but pull it off through the sheer force of his confidence. Price brings him back to the moment, and the task at hand.

“No prints on any of the bodies,” he says, fiddling with a microscope as he speaks. “No evidence at all, in fact, except the cocoons.”

“Cocoons,” Will repeats, “Jack mentioned them. He said they’re - ”

“The same species we found rattling around in your former therapist’s empty eye sockets,” Zeller finishes, “except we found these ones lodged in the soft palates of all six of the victims, not in their eyes.”

“He shoves bugs down his victims’ throats,” Price interjects, “a true monster.”
“The insect larvae were placed post-mortem,” Zeller clarifies. He opens a drawer to extract a clear glass specimen jar, a long brown object laying loose at the bottom. It looks like a mummy. Z extracts the object using a slender set of forceps, and places it on a sheet of white paper beneath the light on the exam table. He swings a magnifying glass on a flexible arm over it and Will leans in to examine the insect, sheathed in a semitransparent cover that follows its general outlines like a sarcophagus. He can see the appendages beneath the covering, bound so tightly against the body, they might be carved in low relief. The little face looks wise.

It certainly looks like the same kind of creature Jack and Alana brought to him during his second stay at the BSHCI, lending further credence to the theory that Hannibal is the killer. “Could it have gotten into a victim’s throat by mistake? While they were in the water?”

“We contacted the Smithsonian,” Price answers, shaking his head, “just like we did with the ones we found in Dr. Du Maurier. It’s a species of night moth called Erebus Odora, colloquially known as the Black Witch Moth. It’s not common to this area, and wouldn’t have been the water, regardless.”

“The guys at the Smithsonian felt that these specimens were raised by hand,” Zeller adds. “Something about their molting and the seasons - they were some weird dudes, I’m not going to lie. Studying bugs all day must do something to a person’s mind, over time.”

“Right,” says Will, deciding to forego commenting on the normality of the work Zeller and Price do, the study of violent deaths as opposed to insects. “So we’re looking for someone raising giant moths at home? Is that a popular hobby?”

“Oh yes,” Price says, “huge hit with the ladies.”

“It’s less popular than you’d imagine,” Zeller corrects, “and you probably don’t think it’s very popular.”

“It’s mostly entomologists,” Price says, “and the silk industry, though they don’t raise this particular species, the Smithsonian guys said. The odd collector now and then.”

“Odd’s the right word for it,” Zeller says, “who’d want a bunch of big furry bugs flapping around their house? Give me the heebie-jeebies.”

“I don’t know,” Price says, “I kind of find moths fascinating after all those guys at the Smithsonian told us. Did you know, there’s a species of moth that lives exclusively on the tears of large
mammals? Fascinating!"

“Fascinating,” Will agrees, voice soft, “but often destructive. There’s a reason most people prefer butterflies.”

“Personally, I prefer cats.”

“The cocoons are one of three consistencies in all the kills,” Zeller forge ahead, and Will examines the insect beneath the glass as he listens. “All found in water, all gagged with cocoons, and all flayed - different sizes and shapes of skin missing but he takes it the same way each time. Their skin is loose - not just from their time in the water, but like they just lost weight.”

“He starves them,” Will says, “make it easier to skin them afterwards.”

Zeller nods. “That’s the going theory. And the patches he takes seem intentional, neat, even.”

“Why those shapes?” Will wonders. “What’s he doing with it?” He stares down into the wise mummy face, as if the unborn insect will have the answers he seeks.

The sound of the door to the lab opening, of heels clicking on the linoleum floor, interrupts the conversation. Will looks up from the magnified insect swaddled like an infant in fine silk, and his forehead immediately creases in a deep furrow.

“Watch out if you decide to leave the building any time soon,” Alana says, looking down at the umbrella she’s setting against the wall, and momentarily unaware that Will is standing eight feet in front of her. “Freddie’s prowling around the parking lot pouncing on possible ‘inside sources’ for ‘inside scoops’ on what lengths Jack Crawford is willing to go to in order to bring in Buffalo Bill.”

Her words taper off into silence, and then into a shuddering exhalation, when she lifts her eyes and sees him standing there. It feels to him then as if the air has left the room, and they stand frozen in one breathless silent second in which none of them know what to say. Price shifts behind him, the squeak of his shoes the only sound in the room.

“Hey,” Will says, finally, and his voice sounds cracked and dry to his own ears. He coughs, and opens his mouth to say more, but, finding no words to say, shuts it again and lets his eyes rest on the top button of her coat. He can feel the nervous energy, the fear and rage, and beneath that hints of
pity and affection, still, all overlaid by a patina of confusion.

“Will,” she manages, finally, mouth doing something that isn’t smiling, so much as a desperate attempt at it. “Jack told me you might be coming.”

“Didn’t expect me to accept the invitation?” he asks, “Pass up the chance to see all my old friends?”

Her face clouds at the words. “We’ve all worried about you,” she says, careful. “I’m glad you’re well.”

“So worried you want to strap me down and drug me against my will, again?” The words are out before he can stop them, cutting through the frail peace in the laboratory. He can hear Zeller suck air through his teeth behind him, sees the way Alana’s mouth flattens into a stern line, the way her eyes narrow.

“If we want to talk about inappropriate past behavior,” Alana answers, after a lengthy pause, her voice both wary and warning, “I think we’d better start with yours. Probably best to table discussions of the past for now, don’t you think?”

There’s a smoothness to her voice, a measure of control that isn’t natural to her, but rather something learned. It’s impossible to speak with her without noticing the ways she’s been forced to evolve for survival. The changes to her voice, her gaze, her face, her stance, stand out like lurid handprints, and Will knows exactly whose palm would fit into each one.

Still, he can’t quite fight his desire to push back, the anger that rushes through him, even though he knows he’ll regret fueling this animosity, hardly conducive to their schemes. “I never touched you, Alana, even after you used me, violated my mind, held me against my will.”

“Well honestly, anyone would be forgiven in assuming you liked that kind of thing,” she snaps, and then clamps her mouth shut tight as if to prevent anything more from escaping. From behind the exam table, Price emits a low whistle.

“Hey now you two,” he says, attempting for a light voice, “we don’t use that kind of language in this lab.”

“I’m leaving,” Alana announces, retrieving her umbrella. “Sorry for the interruption.” She halts by
the door, sparing a glance back to meet Will’s eyes with her hardened jewel blue ones. “Watch out for Freddie whenever you’re leaving the building, Will. She’s looking for you, I’m sure. I told her she’d be smart to avoid you, but when has she ever taken a single piece of good advice?”

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He catches up with her in the foyer, as she’s reaching for the door, and stops her with a hand on her shoulder and the sound of her name. He withdraws the hand quickly, when she rounds on him, wide-eyed and terrified. Hands raised in truce, he apologizes quickly.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have touched you,” he says, voice high and earnest, eager to keep her in his presence long enough to get the information he needs. “I shouldn’t have reacted to you like that, either. I was surprised. I apologize, okay?”

Her eyes narrow, but Alana nods, warily. “I can understand the feeling,” she says, “it was a shock learning you were back in town.”

“Yeah, I bet,” Will replies. “Listen, I really am sorry. I didn’t think I’d ever see you again, but I thought a lot about what it would be like on the flight from Argentina, and this wasn’t how I wanted it to be.” He takes a step closer, hands still raised in supplication, and Alana’s eyes flicker over his face but she doesn’t back down. *Always so brave,* Will thinks, *too brave for her own good.* “I doubt we’ll ever be friends again, but I’d like to be amicable, if it’s possible.”

He watches as her expression softens, and drops his hands when her eyes contain more pity than fear. “It’s good to see you like this,” she says, “you seem more like your old self than you did…the last time.”

Will nods. “I know,” he says. “Hey, can we talk somewhere? I could use a bite to eat and some coffee, if you’re game.”

“I don’t know,” Alana says, looking down. She bites her lip in that undecided way he recognizes from a time long before they became so intimately familiar with betrayal and pain. He smiles.

“I’m allowed to leave campus,” he adds, teasingly, “with a chaperone.”

His smile grows at the way her expression shifts, resolve breaking. “Lunch,” Alana says. “Your
The cafe’s dim lighting and deep set booths provide a safe place for the two of them to dine, uninterrupted by strangers and reporters alike. Will chews his sandwich deliberately, studying Alana’s face - the familiar waves of her hair shot woven throughout with the still rare thread of silver, the edges of her mouth sporting new lines, though from smiles or frowns Will would be hard-pressed to guess.

“How have you been?” he says, finally, because there’s really nothing else to say in this situation. “Price said something about you stepping down from your position at the BSHCI?”

Alana nods, her dark hair waving about her face. “I stepped down while the choice was still mine. Lounds and Chilton did a number on my reputation - and Jack’s - with that retraction Frederick made to his previous statements, and that damned book.” She pauses, maybe waiting for Will to express sympathy. When he doesn’t, she continues, unfazed. “It was just as well. Without Hannibal in residence, my reasons for being there were minimal,” she shrugs, “I never wanted that sort of power or responsibility.”

“It seemed a trifle ostentatious,” he says, “that title and that office. Not at all the kind of life I would have imagined you enjoying. Back when I first knew you, I mean, when you were all wrap dresses and adopting mutts from the pound.”

Alana’s smile is a little sad, but there’s a spark of humor in her eyes at his words. “Simpler times,” she acknowledges. “I’m afraid my current life would probably seem ostentatious as well; I left the BSCHI so Margot and I could focus on the Verger Estate’s philanthropic efforts.”

Will arches an eyebrow. “Bible camp for at risk youth?” he guesses.

“Animal rights,” Alana corrects, raising her cup of coffee with a smirk. “Margot’s idea.”

“How’s Margot?” He keeps his voice casual, unthreatening. Nothing to worry about.

“She’s well,” Alana answers. She laughs, and, shaking her head, reaches into her purse for her phone, flipping through photos with a finger while she speaks. “We decided to homeschool Morgan,
and Margot’s taken charge of history lessons.” She extends her arm, offering him the phone, screen lit by the image of Alana’s happy family, standing on the front porch on a bright sunny day. The very picture of domestic bliss. Margot’s copper curls have grown, swinging four or five inches past her collarbone. She wears a smile, and it occurs to Will that he never saw her smile in person. In front of Margot, a small boy stands, dressed in a miniature of Athenian panoply and staring with fierce determination as his mother takes his picture.

Will examines the picture with keen interest, memorizing the curve of Margot’s smooth shoulder, the determination in the little soldier’s eyes, and, above all, the house number visible on the front door behind them. He can make out the blurred shape of the the street name on the sign behind their perfectly kept yard. He forces his face into a calm smile, returns the phone casually. “You seem happy,” he says.

“I am happy,” she says. “I didn’t think I’d ever have this. And then - ”

“Then you worried you wouldn’t be able to keep it,” he says. This should be an awkward conversation - beyond awkward - but one thing he’s learned through his association with Hannibal is that moments are only awkward when one lets them be. Humans with a normal amount of empathy will still pick up and imitate the attitude of the person with whom they interact. He forces himself to sound open and casual, knowing Alana will mirror him. “I know. I’m glad for you. I’m glad one of us got to keep that life. I sometimes wish…” he trails off, shrugs, smiling, looking away. “I know what you’re thinking. If what I wanted was a peaceful life of domestic bliss, I sure barked up the wrong tree.”

“When did you see him last?” she asks, voice quieter than before, and Will lifts his eyes to see her looking down into the depths of her coffee.

“More than two years ago,” Will answers, giving the same lie he gave Jack. “We went our separate ways after Florida.”

“Why?” she asks, and Will frowns.

“We had…disagreements, about what our life should look like long-term,” Will says, hoping she’ll let him leave things vague. But her eyes are back on him now, gaze demanding, and he senses it will be easier to give her some further explanation now, senses also that a false confidence will help him gain her trust. “I wanted to disappear, live simply somewhere we wouldn’t be recognized. He wanted . . . more than that. He said . . . now that we had come together, it was time for us to paint the world red.”
He lets his voice break on false pain, lets his eyes lift sadly to meet hers for a moment, smiling softly at the pity he sees there. “Oh Will,” she sighs.

“You tried to warn me,” he says, “I should have listened, but I thought I could change him.”

“I’m not here to say I told you so,” she says, “I know what that feels like, with Hannibal. Warnings don’t work. He has a way of getting into your head.”

_Getting in other places as well,_ Will thinks, but bites his tongue on the traitorous thought before his tongue can make it manifest in words. He smiles again, instead, the corners of his mouth and eyes gentle with feigned sorrow. “Yeah, well,” he says, “I, of all people, should have known better.” He lets out a self-deprecating laugh. “You told me so, huh? But I went ahead and ruined my life anyway.”

She covers his hand with one of her own, her blue eyes peering sincerely into his. “This is your chance to get it back,” she says.

“I know,” he breathes, proud of the way his voice quavers on the words. He’s always surprised by his ability to act; fortunately, no one else ever seems to suspect it either. He squeezes her hand in return. “I feel so stupid. So grateful to have friends like you and Jack. I’m - I’m sorry. About earlier. And, you know, earlier than that.”

“It’s okay,” she says. “We both messed up. I don’t blame you, or myself.”

“No,” he says, “we have Hannibal to blame.”

“Exactly,” she says, eyes flashing, “and soon we’ll be able to hold him accountable. I can’t believe he was foolish enough to return to Baltimore; what could he have been thinking?” She laughs. “I guess that’s what you’re here to figure out, right?”

He frowns. “Miriam Lass told me that The Ripper intended to kill her last. Even after she was free of him, she carried on in the conviction that, as long as he lived, she’d never be free.”

“Explains why she was so quick to shoot Chilton,” Alana muses, “when she believed it was him. She must have felt like her life was on the line.”
Will knows that horrible, heart throbbing sensation too intimately to respond to the statement with more than a faint hum. “What was her treatment like?” he asks. “Was it successful?”

“What would success look like?” Alana counters. “In time she accepted that her memories had been manufactured, that she’d shot an innocent man. I think she regained some memories - I wasn’t involved with her treatment, really, but whoever handled her case judged her enough of a success to release her. She was deemed capable of living a normal life, no longer a threat to herself or others.”

“Did she still think she’d be The Ripper’s last victim?” he asks. “I don’t know how she came to that conclusion in the first place, if it was an assumption on her part or if it was something Hannibal said, or something he simply suggested because he wanted her to believe it. But when he gives his word, he usually keeps it. Whoever killed Miriam didn’t stop with her.”

Will cuts his eyes to Alana’s pallid face, before letting his gaze dart away again. Her voice, when she speaks after a long silence, sounds stricken, “Hannibal has been known to change his mind,” she says.

“I don’t think it’s Hannibal, Alana,” he says, “I really don’t. And if Jack really wants to catch this killer before anyone else goes missing, then I think he should listen to me, or at least be more open to the idea that the killer is someone other than Hannibal Lecter.”

“If it’s not him, then who is it? You said yourself the killer felt familiar.”

Will’s expression darkens further. He feels the prickle of an answer at the back of his mind, waiting to be shaken loose so it can drift to the forefront. Feels the familiar tickle of irritation at a mystery he can’t yet solve. “I don’t know,” he says, “yet, but I’ll find out.”

“Let’s hope so,” she says, “for your sake as much as any future victims’.”

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He hears the front gate swing shut, and steps into the kitchen, taking care to shut the basement door behind him. There’s the sound of a latch turning, then all noise from downstairs immediately stops - the heavy door blocking sound completely.
He’s standing at the kitchen island, pouring two glasses of white wine, when she walks through the front door. He hears her heels clicking, then a pause, then the soft slide of her stockinged footsteps after she slides off her shoes at the front door. He waits, heart hammering in sudden anticipation, till she steps into the kitchen a moment later. She throws her keys onto the island and takes the offered glass with a grateful smile.

“Long day?” he asks, basking in the radiance of her beaming smile. But her expression clouds at his question, and his heart sinks at her frown.

“Will Graham is back in town,” she tells him, tasting the wine before taking a deeper drink. “Jack offered him something - some kind of immunity, most likely - in exchange for consultation on Buffalo Bill.”

“Not even Jack could be so foolish,” Frederick jeers, but he knows Jack well enough to know that this is exactly how foolish he can be when there’s a case to solve, and when Will is involved. He feels his heart stutter at her words, before it kicks into overdrive. He takes a long drink, then a longer breath. Tries not to think of the way his voice has gone raspy, as if his throat were freshly scorched.

“Alana warned me to stay away from him,” Freddie continues, considering him with a slow smile and a toss of her head. Scarlet waves bounce around her shimmering skin, a red sea stroking the effervescent white sands of the shore. It is so perfect, so cream smooth and strawberry pink, even when she lets him run his reconstructed fingers over her, he knows he cannot fully feel the silken softness of her with his rebuilt nerves and grafted skin.

“You should stay away from him,” Frederick says, voice sincere and quavering just a little. After months of speech therapy, after all the reconstructive procedures, his voice sounds like him again. He hears the familiar way it breaks in fear. “After what we’ve written about him, neither of us needs to risk drawing his attention any further.”

“I spoke to him,” Freddie soldiers on, taking another sip and ignoring his frustrated groan. She is so brave, so reckless and beautiful; each time she visits him here, strolling in with the ease of someone who knows they are wanted, knows they belong, he feels as if he’s lured a wild animal into his home. He watches her throat work. Pictures his hands as soft and sensitive as her skin is, as fresh and alive as it. “He practically admitted to Florida, and he called Lecter by his first name. You should have heard how he talked about him, too, like he admired him, absolutely adoring. I can’t believe Jack doesn’t hear it. He must.”

He can hear the excitement in her voice, and her whole body seems to vibrate with frenetic energy. “Fredricka, please,” he implores, “he burned me alive when he was still holding himself in check. He has nothing to lose now. Do not put yourself in his way.”
“You want to just let him do what he pleases? Come and go as he likes? No consequences for the deaths he caused, for the lives he took - for what he did to you?”

“I would like nothing more,” Frederick says, “than justice. Or vengeance. But I lose something in each encounter with the pair of them, and there’s only so much a man can lose.”

Her eyes don’t soften, but there’s a smoothing at the corners of her mouth that signals deep emotion. “It’s time to take back some of what was lost,” she says.

“There’s no getting that back,” he says. She hasn’t paid the price he has - he prays she never will. “All of us whose lives intersected with theirs,” he tells her, “found ourselves altered, formed into distorted reflections.”

“Not me,” she says.

“Not you,” he concedes with a pained laugh, and wonders, for the thousandth time, why that is. How marvelous she is! So untouched - both her unburdened mind and her unblemished skin. His own shines strangely, stretched and imperfectly rebuilt. He’s no stranger to makeup, of course, and his new routine is well-practiced by now. Why, it takes no time at all, making his face look like his face once more. He covers as much of the rest of him in clothing as he can.

“Take back what was lost,” he repeats her words, pensive as he watches her gleaming like pale stone in sunlight.
He opens his eyes to Hannibal’s old office - the first room built in his memory palace, now the sitting room of his mind. The sun is setting behind the half drawn curtains, the fire leaping against the grate. The air is warm with the scent of dry wood burning. Hannibal would know the name of the tree, would have selected it intentionally for the sound, the scent, the quality of light as fire consumed it.

“What a dazzling light I gave, once,” Will sighs, leaning back against Hannibal’s heavy desk so that he can look up without straining his neck too badly. “I must have, for them to risk trusting me again, just to get my help.”

“Was it me consuming you, to make you shine so brilliantly?” Hannibal asks, turning to face the shelves, long fingers trailing over the spines of his journals. Will frowns.

“Come down from there.”

Hannibal moves unhurriedly to descend the ladder, languid muscles moving unseen beneath the memory of fine fabric, rich silk. The image of his hand fisting in the deep jewel green of Hannibal’s dangling tie flashes through Will’s mind - a memory, maybe, from another world’s version of himself. Standing here, in a place that does not physically exist, the walls between his world and the next feel weaker. The walls between Hannibal and himself are weakened, as well, that they can speak to one another from so far away. He has no doubt this is more than his imagination. Madness, maybe, but a kind of reality nonetheless, and undeniable, unexplainable as a miracle.

“Is this my memory,” he asks, without taking his eyes from the man in front of him, “or yours?”

“A shared room,” Hannibal guesses with a shrug, “a place the walls are weakest, where you and I have blended best.”
“One day,” Will declares, with a sudden timber to his voice that draws a tilt of Hannibal’s head, “I will stand in every room of your mind, and you will do the same to me.”

“Then we will be indistinguishable,” Hannibal says, after the slightest pause.

“If you were I and I were you,” Will murmurs, a line his brain plucks from the ether, from a memory that might not even be his. Probably isn’t his, “how could I love you, say?”

“How could the rose-leaf love the rue,” Hannibal continues, stepping closer, into the corona of firelight, but still not close enough to touch. Will watches him, warily. “Our two souls may sleep, and wake up one, Will,” Hannibal says, thickly accented words winding in the air between them - though there is no air, there is no voice, only Will, alone in Jack’s guest bedroom, disassociating - “or dream we wake, and find it so.”

Will laughs, soft, dipping his head to regard Hannibal from beneath thick lashes. “Miriam told me once that her arm itched, even after you’d taken it. She claimed the prosthetic gave her something to scratch.” Hannibal tilts his head again, eyes sparkling with amusement. Will’s mouth curls involuntarily at the pleasure of watching him. “I got so used to you touching me, near me, like an extension of myself.”

“Where does my loss itch?” Hannibal guesses, and Will laughs again. “Then we should hasten this plan to completion.” Another step nearer, but always too far in this place that is not a real place - though what is real? If they experience this - if they experience it together, no less - then it must exist, even without physical form. “Point me in the right direction, Will.”

He hums, feeling the vibration of air on his lips, though in another world he knows his lips are not moving, no sound, no movement. For a moment he exists distinct in both worlds, fully conscious in both, fully immersed in each separate reality simultaneously. His hair moves in a sudden rush of wind, blowing wild about his face for a second - a mighty wind in the stillness of a guest bedroom or a warm office. Then all is still once more, and Will’s heart gives a heavy thud.

“A weapon,” he whispers, “my own dog of war to loose upon enemies.”

“Cry havoc, then,” Hannibal answers, amused.

Will conjures the image to his mind - to both their minds - feels it projected across their shared
memory like an image on a screen. Small boy wearing a serious expression beneath his plumed helmet. Green grass beneath bare feet. House numbers painted matte black on the white door. Street sign blurred slightly in the background.

“Sycamore,” Hannibal guesses, after a pause.

“It begins with an S, definitely,” Will agrees.

“I’ll find it,” Hannibal states, and the deed may as well be done.

Will’s eyes slide shut and he releases a long breath. He can feel the heat of the fire on the side of his body closest to it, smell the burning wood, the scent of Hannibal beneath that stronger smell. If they were never able to find their way back to one another, if one of them was captured, if one of them was killed, would this world be enough?

“Where are you?” Will whispers, eyes still shut.

“It’s better if you don’t know,” Hannibal’s voice answers, closer now, and Will keeps his eyes closed as if opening them might shatter the dream, “but I’m safe, and I’m close.”

“If I need you…”

“I’ll be there.”

He breathes in his private darkness, caught between the infinite worlds that hold them. He can sense Hannibal - smell him, feel the heat of him, the vibration of his interest and gaze - and this has to be a version of reality as valid as the one he knows will greet him when he opens his eyes.

“What if this doesn’t work?”

“It will work.”

“But how can you know?”
Hannibal hums. “So many questions,” he chides. “How will this end? How do I know? How will we make it out and where will we go?”

“You’re the one who warned me,” Will says, “we were building to a bright and terrifying conclusion.”

“But this won’t be it,” Hannibal says. “Bright and terrifying, perhaps, but our story won’t end here. Not yet.”

“You can’t be sure,” Will presses, not knowing why he presses. He wants to let himself be reassured, doesn’t actually want to persuade Hannibal to agree with him. He wants to believe they’re unstoppable, invincible, better than the mortals they contend with. He wants to believe they aren’t here for a fight, but have come to pass judgment, as unbothered as angels.

“I’m as sure of our survival as I am of your love,” Hannibal tells him, “as impossible a circumstance as survival, that the day could love nightfall and its dew.”

The soft brush of warm fingers over his jaw shocks his eyes open. Will finds himself alone, in a dark, locked guest room, Hannibal’s voice still echoing darkly through his mind.

“Though night might love the day.”

It’s the young man’s voice that attracts Frederick’s attention, and his face that holds it. His green eyes peering from beneath the flutter of heavy lids, the boy is olive skinned, with the sweet roundness of youth still clinging to his cheeks and mouth.

His voice, however, holds no sweetness as he lifts it in a yell directed at the two men sneering at him.

“Get the hell out of this neighborhood,” the young man hurls his words towards the pair. “Every time the two of you show up, someone’s car window gets busted, or someone’s bicycle goes missing. People suddenly mislay their wallets and phones. The cops won’t step in, so I’m telling you - stay the hell off this block.”
His words and the passionate flush spreading across his comely face are enough to halt Frederick in his steps - his car keys still dangling by the ring as he pauses, arms laden with dry cleaning, to listen in on the dramatic conversation.

“You accusing us of something?” one of the men is saying, and the other spits onto the ground in front of the angry young man’s feet. “Why aren’t the police here, if we’re being accused?”

“I don’t want trouble,” the young man says, his voice steady. The dusky blush of rage sitting on his cheeks is the only sign of his emotion. He shifts his weight, balancing light on the balls of his feet. Ready to move fast. “You don’t want the kind of trouble you’ll get if you don’t move on, either. It isn’t worth your time.” His eyes narrow. “Or teeth.”

Frederick holds his breath in the silence that follows, wondering whether he ought to be dialing the police - or paramedics - in this moment. Then one of the men laughs - the one who had spit before - and the other one speaks. “No point hanging around a dump like this one,” he says, and gestures to his friend, and together the two men turn and carry on down the street, leaving the youth to collapse, and Frederick to stare on in amazement.

Such courage! Such verve! Those men could have clobbered him, but the young man never flinched. No, at no point did he seem to fear the beating Frederick had felt certain his words would draw. What reckless bravery, to risk life and limb in defense of the meager duplexes and crumbling three story apartment building that make up the “neighborhood.” Student housing, for the nearby college, Frederick reckons, and figures the heroic young man must be both a student and resident.

He returns much later, after the sun has set, with a car that isn’t registered in his name, wearing clothes he’d never wear in his normal day to day. He parks the van beneath the street lamp opposite the ground floor apartment he’d seen the young man enter earlier in the day, and unloads the couch from the back quickly, lest anyone see. He’s reclaimed much of his upper body strength, though strenuous work like this must be done carefully. In fact, there are times when Frederick believes that what he’s become is infinitely stronger than what he was before fate and a trio of serial killers disassembled him one piece at a time. What he’s rebuilt from the scraps they left him is better, bolder, braver, and strong in a way the mewling dandy he was before couldn’t even pretend to be.

Couch unloaded, Frederick pauses to wipe his forehead, handkerchief clutched in leather gloved hands that brush cool against his hot skin. He takes the sling from his jacket pocket, and wrestles his right arm into it with a practiced motion. He lets his right shoulder droop, and leaves his sterling headed cane laying against the van’s interior wall, ready for a fast retrieval when the time comes. Then he walks to the far side of the couch and begins to push half heartedly, cursing each time its weight fails to move under his pretend attempts to get it up the ramp and back into the van.
It takes longer than it should for Calvin to walk by and notice him; by the time the young man’s voice interrupts his curses Frederick is damp with sweat and must look a deal more convincing than he’d even intended. “Need some help?” Calvin asks. Frederick nearly sobs with relief.

“Oh, thank you,” he says. “I’d do it myself if it weren’t for…” He lifts his right shoulder, gesturing to the sling with a forced smile. “Say, you look strong.”

“Strong enough to move a couch, I hope,” the young man says, and Frederick steps out of his way to let him push the couch up the ramp, till it teeters, half in the van and half out.

“Can you get around the other side,” Frederick suggests, “I can push with my good arm while you pull.”

Calvin hops into the van without a moment’s hesitation, so good hearted and trusting Frederick wants to cry. “Ready!” he calls, from the rear of the van, and Frederick heaves against the couch and simultaneously slips his arm free of the sling, the fingers of his right hand closing around the cool wooden end of his cane.

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The champagne gold four door parked across the street draws far less attention than a black Bentley or white van would - in fact, no one in the residence takes notice of the vehicle in the slightest. There’s no reason to - and so many much more interesting and important things happening inside and around the well-kept two story home that the three occupants could hardly be expected to take note of something as mundane and unconcerning as a new car parked in front of the neighbor’s. It arrives mid-morning, and remains until the afternoon, and none of them - woman, man, or child - spare a second glance for it, or a second thought as to what or who might be behind the tinted back seat windows.

Margot’s attention is all for lesson planning. Her prodigy - young as he is - shows an aptitude for history she hopes to foster and guide. The boy’s wardrobe stands as testament to his mother’s efforts; costumes fill the right hand side, one for each civilization they’ve studied so far. Little suits of armor - from Athens, England, and Japan. A zip-up onesie wrapped in winding, tea-stained bandages. A crown and scepter, made of cardboard and painted with a child’s uneven strokes (and Margot’s careful touch-ups). She’s learned to sew and hem and plan, learned about ziggurats and pharaohs and wars and gods. She’s learned the heavy throb of love in her breast when Morgans’s small fingers close around his chubby pencil to practice his letters on paper with lines wider than her smiles.

She sits alone in the upstairs office, by the window that overlooks the street where the unremarkable
car continues to cause no alarm. Today is Thursday, and on Thursdays they go out. Sometimes it is
to the beach, or an art gallery, or to tour a factory, or to a museum or a children’s play. Today it will
be the zoo, to see the reptiles with which Morgan has developed a fascination since beginning to
study them with Caitling.

In the adjacent room, Morgan stares out the window as Caitling prepares his warm outer clothes,
laying them out on the bed in meticulous neat rows. Morgan sees the car, but does not notice it,
simply marks its presence as he would that of a squirrel or bird. Caitling calls him over to dress, and
he moves from the window without complaint.

“Will there be snakes there?” Morgan asks.

“You’ve asked me before,” his guard and tutor answers.

“I forget.”

“There will be snakes,” the man says, pulling the boy’s sweater over his head and working the
sleeves down his small arms, “and lizards and a gila monster.”

“Can I pet them?” Morgan asks next.

Caitling sighs. “Maybe,” he says. “Probably not.”

Morgan pouts, but lets himself be dressed without a fuss. When he’s bundled in sweater and jacket
and scarf - the spring air still chilly for someone so diminutive - Caitling leads him to the foyer,
where his mother waits, smiling and ready to sweep him up in her peony-scented arms.

“My bright boy,” she coos, and Morgan twists his fingers into her curls. “Are you ready to go to the
zoo and see the monsters?”

“They aren’t really monsters,” Morgan tells her solemnly. “They’re lizards. Monsters don’t exist.”

“Some do,” Margot tells him, stroking his soft cheek with her thumb to soothe away the frown that
forms at her words. “Some escape from their zoos. We’ve got mommy to protect us though, don’t
Morgan nods, characteristic look of somber and sincere reflection plastered to his face. Margot has never seen a child so serious. It’s ironic, for he’s brought her a measure of light and joy that she hadn’t known she’d been capable of experiencing. There are times when the emotion threatens to crush her with how huge it is.

Caitling watches mother and child from a respectful distance. When it is polite to do so, he nods to his employer, signaling his intention to prepare the car. He leaves them to follow, after Margot has had her fill of fussing needlessly and maternally over Morgan’s clothes. She could have dressed him, Caitling thinks, if she had wanted to. She prefers to straighten his clothes unnecessarily once he’s already dressed, prefers cooing over the little prince he becomes after Caitling oversees his dressing and grooming. He’s not complaining; it’s a good job. Pays well. Less stressful than Secret Service work had been, thought that’s not saying much. He supposes, after all these years, he should feel a stronger sense of attachment to the family he protects. He has no family of his own, and very few friends.

The air is chilly, and his breath hangs in the air spring air as he makes his way to the town car parked in the driveway. Usually, Margot prefers that the car remain in the garage, but it’s been left out in the driveway today following a unplanned trip to the grocer for milk this morning. The windows are rolled up, and Caitling hears the locks sliding back with a click when he presses the button on the key fob, yet someone has clearly been inside the vehicle. A single maroon envelope rests on the black leather driver’s seat.

Caitling picks the object up and stares down the street as he holds it. His index finger brushes over the back, feeling the thickness of the paper, rough and grainy, something made carefully, something rarer than what you’d buy from a drugstore’s stationary section. It seems needless to Caitling, to put whatever message awaits inside an envelope like this. His eyes scanning the empty street, Caitling notices the champagne colored car across the street for the first time, and pauses.

If a person were to attack Morgan Caitling would be on them before they’d gotten close enough to touch the boy. His training is the best; when they are out together, he is constantly alert for potential threats. This envelope feels like a threat. He taps the paper lightly against his hip, eyes locked on the apparently empty car, and slips the envelope into his back pocket just as Morgan and his mother appear at the front door.

“Ma’am,” Caitling says with a nod, opening the backseat door and stepping politely to the side so that Margot and the boy can enter. Neither mother nor child look at him as they slide into their seats, and Caitling stands like a soldier at attention for a second longer than usual, his eyes still on the tinted windows of the car across the street.
“What good is it going to do?” Will demands, hopping to keep up with Jack’s long, determined strides down the hallway towards the Senator’s office. “I deal with the dead, Jack, with crime scenes and evidence.”

“You deal with reading people,” Jack says.

“You think she’s hiding something?”

Jack stops, and turns abruptly, causing Will to nearly collide with him. He scowls, and Jack glowers down at him in response. “I think you’ll know more after you meet her than you do now,” he says, “and that will be useful. And who knows. Maybe you’ll help her find Calvin.”

“Yeah, right,” Will mutters, and hurries after Jack, once again on the move.

They’d gotten the call about Calvin Martin over a late breakfast of scrambled eggs and sullen silence. He hadn’t been missing long - neighbors had seen him less than eighteen hours ago - but he’d missed a morning appointment with his acupuncturist, and a friend had arrived at his apartment at an agreed upon time to find the door unlocked and the lights on, and Calvin nowhere to be found. Local detectives examining the area found a long, brown, insect cocoon in the tire treads left in the soft earth across the street from Calvin Martin’s apartment.

Calvin’s disappearance raised added concern because of his family; his mother, Senator Ruth Martin, specifically. Senator Martin, currently pacing the floor before her neat wooden writing desk, welcomes them into her office with a barked order to enter in response to Jack’s curt knock. She nods to them. “Thank you for coming,” she says, voice tinged by a Southern twang.

“Senator,” Jack nods, “by all means. I want to assure you that finding Calvin is our top priority at this time. We have our best people on this.”

“People like you,” Senator Martin says, looking to Will. “What you did was unforgivable. Unpardonable. If it were up to me - “

“Fortunately for Calvin,” Will says, “it’s not up to you.”
He hears Jack’s sound of choked fury, and the look the Senator gives him is cold enough to freeze fire. He thinks for just a second that she might actually slap him, or start shouting. But she breaks eye contact before he does, dipping her head. “I need your help,” she admits, voice gentler, though with no additional warmth. “How do I save my son?”

There’s a sharp wrap on the door, and a familiar form steps through to join them in the room before anyone can speak. Will can’t help the smile that spreads across his face, despite the disapproving glare Jack is casting at him. “Hello Frederick.”

“Mr. Graham,” Frederick says, after an extended pause. His voice is a good deal easier to understand than it was the last time Will saw him. His face is vastly improved as well. “I was told you had returned to the country, though I admit I had not expected to find you here.”

“With all due respect,” Jack says, voice straining for cordiality, “why are you here, Dr. Chilton?”

Will looks between them, notes the shuffle of Frederick’s feet, the rigid line of Jack’s spine. He can feel the animosity between them, the rage and resentment and humiliation rolling off Jack like fog off a mountain; the nervous frustration that clings to Frederick like a familiar stench. And something else, beneath that rot, something cold and hard edged that makes Will stand up straighter. He narrows his eyes, examining Frederick anew.

“I came to offer my services to Senator Martin,” Frederick says, in that familiar high pitched whine that grates on Will fiercely. The reconstructed doctor turns to Senator Martin. Addresses her. “Senator, I am so deeply sorry to hear about Calvin’s abduction. I come to offer my counsel. I have some…experience, let us say? With sociopaths, I mean.” His eyes cut to Will for a flicker of a second.

“How many have you managed to catch?” Will asks. He takes a step towards Frederick, immensely satisfied when the other man steps back in submission, in terror. But there’s something beneath the meekness and fear. Will feels as if he’s balancing upon a fulcrum, awaiting epiphany. “Senator, we don’t have time for this. If you want to save Calvin, you’ll listen to me. The news cameras are on there way; there’s a good chance our man will be watching. These kinds of people often want to hear about themselves.”

“People like you?” Frederick cuts in. Will carries on without reacting.

“Buffalo Bill works hard to distance himself from his victims,” Will says. “He wants to view them as
pieces of his transformation - he tries not to see them as people, as equals, but the truth is he does. He knows how base he is, knows he's not above any of the people he takes. You need to remind him, force him out of the vision he endures for himself. Make him remember Calvin is a human being, not a thing.”

“No,” Frederick says, voice faint. Will looks to him, and the burned man shakes his head as if to clear it. “No,” he says again, louder now. “Respectfully, Senator, neither Will Graham nor Jack Crawford can be trusted. Crawford has proven himself dangerously irresponsible numerous times over,” Chilton’s whining draws a look of such ire from Jack, Will can feel his scarcely contained anger flowing over him like hot water. He closes his eyes against it for a second, forces himself to breathe slow, till he’s back in control of himself, certain the feelings he feels are his own. Chilton keeps talking, “And Graham - well, he learned from the best. Talking to him is practically an engraved invitation for him to sneak into your head and rearrange your thoughts.”

“Maybe my mind isn’t as malleable as yours,” Senator Martin retorts. Will can feel the urgent, frustrated determination surrounding her. Fortunately, much of the frustration now seems directed at Chilton, rather than at himself. Curious, Will thinks, for someone’s instincts to lead them to trust a confessed killer over a reputable doctor. Then again, Chilton always was off-putting.

“You have my advice,” Will says calmly with a shrug, making careful eye contact with the Senator as he speaks. He keeps his gaze as tranquil as his tone. “Use your TV spot to humanize her - show pictures, use her name, force him out of the illusion he’s building for himself and back into the reality where she’s a human being just like him. It probably won’t encourage him to release her, but it could buy us more time to find him.”

“Oh and I’m sure you’re on the brink of discovery,” Chilton shoots, eyes wide. His voice is sarcastic, biting, but Will hears a high thread of fear stitched across the words as well. He wonders at it. Something sits in the back of his mind like a beast crouching in shadows, waiting to spring into fatal illumination. “Jack Crawford with his psychopathic bloodhound, sniffing out serial killers by means of psychic vibrations. Hardly the most scientific of methods.”

Will shrugs. “Gets results.”

“We’ll find him, Senator,” Jack speaks up, deep voice booming with sincerity and reassurance. “We’re close.”

Senator Ruth Martin scowls back at him. She is fifty-one years old, has been a single mother for the past two decades, and has climbed the ranks of the government in that time. Will imagines there’ve been precious little obstacles she hasn’t managed to overcome; the woman radiates indomitability.
A polite knock breaks the silence, and a moment later an intern’s head and shoulders appear in the door frame. “The news crew is here, Senator,” the young man informs them. “Would you like me to bring them in?”

“Yes, please, Javier,” Senator Martin nods back. “Gentlemen, thank you for your time. I’ll ask you now to be on your way. Dr. Chilton, thank you for your offer. Agent Crawford,” her voice lowers, eyes clouding, “do your job and find my son.”

“Yes, Senator,” Jack barks, stiff-backed and reminiscent of a toy soldier in Will’s opinion. Will nods to the Senator, then follows Jack out of the room.

“What the hell are you doing,” Jack growls, rounding on Chilton the moment they are in the elevator. “Stay the hell out of this and let us do our jobs. Surely you have some slanderous sequel to work on.”

“Only it isn’t slander, is it?” Chilton’s smarmy voice makes Will feel as if his mouth is full of live worms. He remembers that voice floating to him through a drug haze, remembers Chilton sitting in the witness box and declaring him a sociopath. “Everything I’ve said about you is true,” Chilton says, staring hard at Jack, “or else why haven’t you taken me to court? You and I both know, you don’t have a case. Everyone else knows it too, Jack.”

“You aren’t worth my time,” Jack glowers. “Some of us have work to do, Dr. Chilton. So I’ll say this only once: stay out of my way.”

The elevator bounces to a half on the ground floor, and Chilton’s eyebrow shoots up. Will can see the glisten of scar tissue in a place by his temple where the makeup has been rubbed off. “Is that a threat, Agent Crawford?”

“It’s an order.”

The doors slide open, and Jack shoves passed Frederick and heads towards the front door without turning around to see if Will follows. He waits a moment, long enough for Frederick to look his way, long enough to look into those flawed blue eyes. His expression clouds.

“Bye for now, Frederick,” Will says. “I’ll be seeing you soon.”
He can feel Frederick’s eyes watching him - or his one functional eye watching - as he stalks off towards the parking lot, but, like Jack, he doesn’t look back.
Wow. Sorry for the huge delay. In the home stretch and I really want to do the end right, not rush things. With that in mind, the final chapter will be up by the end of January. I'm really sorry; I'll do my best to finish and edit it as soon as possible. If necessary, I will break the last chapter into two parts in order to upload something sooner, though I'd really prefer not to do that.

Warnings for bad sad stuff (nothing that isn't in the tags; nothing that kills Will or Hannibal). Warnings for Pushing Daisies inspired plot devices. Warnings for sassy Will and sassy Chilton sassing over sassafras*.

Thank you to everyone reading and/or commenting, as always. You make doing this worthwhile. <3

*Sassafras not actually included.

It’s a strange feeling, being inside another person’s skin. Even stranger to be inside several peoples’ skins at once. Frederick is no stranger to the sensation, but the experience is not usually so straightforward and literal.

His original plan had been a ribbon. *Peel them like oranges*, he’d thought, imagining one winding crimson tape, but it had been harder than he’d guessed. He’d planned on wrapping himself like a mummy, back then, winding ribbon after ribbon of gleaming skin around his limbs and torso. The idea had lacked elegance in addition to practicality.

The sound of screaming filters through the half-closed door. Frederick frowns, his hand reaching for the volume button to boost the crashing sound of strings, music swelling nearly loud enough to drown out the shrieking. He can still hear it, though, wailing from the well in the room across the hall, like a strange instrument played out of tune. He’s not sure whether he enjoys the way it makes him feel. It certainly affects him.

One of the large, dark moths he’s been raising below in this subterranean world flutters by, lighting briefly on his shoulder, before finding a comfortable perch spread across the upper right hand corner of the full length mirror in front of him. The creature doesn’t startle him; there are many of them down here, descendants of the original insects he had ordered as pupae. They have never made him afraid. He’d watched the first one spin its chrysalis, watched it vanish in slow segments till it hung like a minuscule mummy from the juniper branch in its tank. When he watched it emerge, wings wet and dark as tar, spreading slow, he’d felt a strong connection to the little animal that experienced
such significant change. Frederick has experienced such alterations in his own life, though rarely as graceful or self-directed as this.

He straightens his back and examines his reflection more closely. A well made garment should hug the body, accentuate strengths while minimizing flaws. He’s hardly a tailor, but his hands, miraculously, remain steady when he needs them too. He’s worked slowly, taking great care, wasting nothing. The result of his careful labor is profoundly satisfying, if as yet incomplete.

It will only take a few more to complete the coat. The one in the pit now will fit nicely across the breast. It’s a good one - possibly the best, or second best - unblemished and bursting with righteous bravery. Yet Frederick can’t help the way his mind turns to a different donor entirely.

He’s been expecting Will Graham’s reappearance since he began taking donations. It had taken the Bureau longer than he’d anticipated to contact the shepherd dog that savaged their sheep; in the end, Jack had needed the push that the discovery of Miriam’s body had provided. Frederick remembers the way the body sank, its arms trailing up, finger tips and floating hair the last sign of it. He wonders what it looked like by the time Jack’s team found it. By then it must have been hard for even them to see it as a human being.

He strokes the smooth leather at his shoulders, and his body shivers with a sudden elation. In the mirror, his eyes gaze back, charged with a fresh strength, an unfamiliar bravery. Will Graham has returned, as Frederick has known all along he would. The man who took his skin from him - burned it from his body just as surely as Dolarhyde did. He may as well have lit the match himself. And now here he is, come home at the perfect moment to repay Frederick for what he took from him.

The scream reaches a thin, high wail, a jumble of words, begging, desperate. Frederick frowns. He prefers it when they don’t speak; it helps when he can pretend they don’t even know how. The thing in the pit gives him no such comfort, babbling on nonsensically until Frederick adjusts the volume on the stereo again. In a few minutes he’ll take off his work in progress, and return to the kitchen upstairs, and the screams will continue on unheard, blocked by the heavy metal door.

He smooths his hands over the home-made leather. Hunted, harvested, and tanned at home, with his own steady hands. There’s a freckle at the elbow of one sleeve.

As he drapes the fleshy jacket back over the sewing dummy - feeling the touch of hands on his own patched together skin as he smooths his fingers over the supple leather shoulders of the garment - Frederick is wrenched back to reality by the gentle buzz vibrating against his left buttocks. He draws the phone from his pocket to read the message illuminating the little screen. It’s from Freddie.
Frederick hums, a smile spreading like an oil slick across his reformed visage. As he ascends the stairs, eyes on the message he's typing in reply, Frederick barely recognizes the sounds that follow him up through the dark as human.

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The place Hannibal has decided upon for their rendezvous is aptly chosen. He waits, his chin and nose wrapped in gauze and bandages, in the bar of the Marcus Hotel, located directly across from one of Baltimore’s most popular plastic surgery clinics. It’s a popular destination for wealthy patients wanting a place to recover away from prying eyes, in luxury and privacy. His bandaged face and dark sunglasses are unremarkable in this bar.

Grim-faced and scarred, Caitling could pass easily for a patient checking in pre-op. Enjoying one final drink to calm his nerves before bed, destined to reappear here tomorrow with lips bloated like grave worms, skin shiny and raw from being resurfaced with lasers, ordering an overpriced mineral water or snake oil juice elixir, or, Hannibal notes with a glance at the other patrons seated around the bar, ignoring doctor’s orders altogether to mix martinis with pain medication. Caitling glances around the establishment, but gives no sign of recognition. He strides purposefully towards the bar, hands in his jacket pockets. Hannibal can hear him humming along to the Cole Porter tune being played on the bar piano.

He waits until Caitling has received his drink and found a seat at a booth in an unoccupied corner of the room before joining him. “Mister Caitling,” he greets, with a slight incline of his bandaged head. “Mind if I join you?”

“I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t want you to join me,” the other man says gruffly, gesturing open palmed to the empty side of the booth. Hannibal slides in, face cool and unreadable beneath the gauze. It had been a risk, contacting the bodyguard, giving him an exact time and location. Hannibal hadn’t been sure Caitling would show, still can’t discount that this is some kind of trap, or that Caitling may betray him later. But this is the most direct route to what Will hopes to achieve, and Hannibal has never been one to shy from a risk. So far his boldness appears to have paid off. “Let’s say you have my interest.”

“But money alone won’t sway you to disloyalty,” Hannibal finishes for him, “not with Dr. Bloom and Ms. Verger paying you so much already.”

“I highly doubt you can match my rates,” Caitling agrees, taking a sip of his beer before brushing the
foam from his upper lip. Hannibal smiles.

“You might be surprised,” he counters, “but what I have to offer you is something your current employers cannot.”

He shoves the envelope across the table, and Caitling takes it without another word. His expression darkens, face clouding like a stormy day as he withdraws the stack of photographs. “Where did you get these?”

Hannibal shrugs. The memory of Chiyoh’s dark gloved hand passing him the envelope as they passed one another in the crowd outside the art museum earlier today flashes briefly through his mind. Where she had found them, he hadn’t asked.

“The CIA couldn’t get these,” Caitling insists, voice an urgent hiss. “No one in the government could locate her.”

“No one chose to locate her,” Hannibal amends, “no matter what you were told.”

Caitling stares in silence, his face a mask of concentration and disbelief as he scans the photographs diligently. The girl is the right age, her hair the right shade of chestnut brown, eyes the right almond shape, and he knows, he knows. “How?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Hannibal says. “How I found her or what I want for her doesn’t matter. The only thing that matters is that I can take you to her.”

Caitling’s breath is harsh. His beer sweats forgotten by his elbow as he chews his lip at the photos spread across the table. Her face stares up at him again and again and again. That familiar smile. Hannibal can smell the rush of relief, sweet as dry grass. “She’s safe,” Caitling breathes. “She’s smiling.”

“She’s been well cared for,” Hannibal agrees, “but she will only be safe once the two of you are reunited.”

Caitling shakes himself, almost literally, his head wagging as he comes back to himself. “What do you want?”
Clouds of white cotton obscure Hannibal’s crooked smile. “Could anything I ask for possibly be too much for what I’m offering?” he asks.

Caitling doesn’t answer, but the look in his eyes is the only agreement Hannibal needs.

“The boy,” Hannibal says. “You will bring me Morgan, and I will tell you where you can find your daughter.”

Silence. Caitling shifts, the vinyl seat creaking beneath him. He cups the sweating glass with both hands, rotating it as he thinks. “What do you want with him?”

Hannibal shrugs, aggressively nonchalant. “It doesn’t matter,” he says.

The bodyguard chews his lips again. Hannibal watches, his red eyes hawkish. “What if I go back and tell Ms. Verger about this conversation?” Caitling asks.

Hannibal’s smile grows. “In the long run,” he says, “that won’t matter either.”

None of this will matter, he thinks but doesn’t say. Whether you give in or fight, the outcome will be exactly the same. It will be what Will wants it to be, because we will make it that way. And no one can stop us.

Caitling leaves with the photographs, returned to their envelope, and a second envelope, crammed with cash and a phone number printed neatly on the back of a coaster. Hannibal watches him go, watches his back disappear passed the lobby’s main doors, before flagging down a waiter and ordering a glass of white wine for himself.

“Are you sure that will be alright,” the young man asks, “with your medications?”

Hannibal smirks benevolently at the boy. No doubt he is new to the business. “I’m certain it will be alright,” Hannibal informs him, gently. “If I were you, I would trust your patrons to know what is best for their health in the future.”
“Of course, sir,” the waiter flushes. “Can I bring you anything else?”

“Nothing,” Hannibal says. “And take this beer away, please.”

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*I could go to Jack now,* Will thinks, as he turns the corner towards Chilton’s office - thoroughly redone in deep reds and browns since he’s been reinstated as the head of the BSHCI. As a former inmate under both Chilton and Alana’s reigns, Will has to say he wouldn’t have been thrilled with Chilton’s triumphant and wholly unexpected return to managing and directing the hospital, had he remained an inmate in the facility.

*I could go to Jack and he could take it from there,* he thinks. *I could head for Canada. Hannibal would catch on, meet me north of the border. We could go anywhere. Be safe.*

But he knows he won’t change course, knows he can’t. By the time he walks into Chilton’s office, hands in his coat pockets, forcibly nonchalant, Will knows it’s too late to back down. He thinks of Mason, thinks of that night in his house back in Wolftrap, standing off with Hannibal over which of them would dispose of the butcher’s boy. How much simpler life would have been for them if one of them had ended Mason’s life that night. How much simpler if they never left threads like Mason and Chilton hanging.

In some other world, Will imagines, where Mason died that night he fed his own face to the dogs, Hannibal managed to saw his head open and serve his brains as Jack’s last supper, uninterrupted by police turned bounty hunters.

“Mr. Graham.” Chilton’s voice is high and needling, irritating in a way Will recognizes from their long familiarity. His words are clear, voice un-slurred by careful hours with a speech therapist, Will guesses. All that hard work, and they couldn’t make him sound less whiney.

“Hello, Frederick,” Will says, unsmiling. “I wanted to apologize for any tension between us the other day when we consulted on Senator Martin’s son’s case.”

Chilton’s jaw twitches, an expression closer to a flinch than a smile flitting over his face. He stands, behind his desk, resting weight carefully on the cane at his side. “Is that what you wanted to apologize for?”
Will sniffs. He can feel the fear and excitement and loathing, and above it all the roaring indignation, the unfairness of it all. He has a mental image of Chilton as a very small child, fists clenched, foot stamping. It's not fair, it's not fair. It isn’t fair. Will remembers the feeling, the despairing disbelief. And suddenly, he also remembers a still morning that winter he was released from the BSHCI, when the snow clung to the ground like a thick wet blanket, and Chilton had shown up on his porch, dripping with blood and looking for a shower. It's not fair. Will had been someone he’d trusted, once, an ally of sorts.

“We have matching scars,” Will says softly, and hears the words echo through the corridors of his memory as he speaks. He takes a step further into the room, closer to the desk, and to Chilton, standing behind it. “I have to say, your recovery is simply remarkable. You seem to have regained yourself and then some. Remade a whole new man, as it were. I’m learning all kinds of new things about you these days, Frederick.”

There’s a flash of panic in Chilton’s watery eyes, a jolt of anxiety that slides along Will’s skin like a cold wet tongue before dissolving away as Chilton gets ahold of himself. “I am learning all sorts of new things about myself these days, as well,” the psychiatrist agrees. “What you did to me - ” he holds up a hand, as if expecting Will to object, “what you ensured was done to me, gave me an opportunity. To rebuild.”

“The doctors who stitched up your skin suit are to be commended,” Will sneers. “Perhaps, however, this one isn’t entirely to your liking. Not satisfying enough?”

“Oh, I am fully satisfied,” Chilton’s voice cuts icily through the scant space between them. This close, Will can see the line, just above his collar, where Chilton’s skillful makeup work ends, giving way to a ring of glistening scar tissue. “Or I will be, soon enough.”

Will shakes his head. “Quite the transformation,” he murmurs. “You’re as thoroughly changed as any of the Dragon’s other victims. You just happened to survive.”

Chilton shrugs with one ruined and rebuilt shoulder. “You made me a sacrifice to your dragon, Mr. Graham, but I managed to walk away from it. Dolarhyde provided the catalyst for my transformation,” Chilton admits, “but I consider myself a self-made man.”

Will can’t quite suppress the snort of laughter the remark inspires. “A self-made facsimile of the Chesapeake Ripper,” he sneers. “And a decent one, at that. You have Jack convinced Hannibal’s returned.”

Chilton smirks across the table at him. The expression makes Will’s skin crawl. He imagines the way
Chilton must have worked the knife beneath the flesh of his victims, imagines the disdainful and discomforted face he would have made. A decent enough copy to fool Jack, maybe, but Chilton cannot begin to approach the delight and exuberance of a true Ripper killing. Will’s heart aches with a sudden overpowering desire to be close to Hannibal once more, to tell him, at last, all the strange turns and twists this case has led him through.

“Compulsive imitation pays off at last,” Chilton says. “But Jack’s right, isn’t he?” He raises one eyebrow, and Will frowns. “Hannibal has returned, if you have.”

“We parted ways years ago,” Will begins to insist. “In Florida.”

“Of course you did nothing of the sort,” Chilton smiles. “Unlike your friends in the Federal Bureau of Investigation, I have no personal bias blinding me to what you are. I never have. It’s why I’ve always been able to see through the disguise you use to fool the rest of them so consistently. I see what you are beneath.”

“And what am I?” Will snaps, surprised at the annoyance that creeps into his voice. The conversation isn’t turning out as he’d anticipated. There’s something about the way Chilton is speaking to him, the way he’s afraid, but not afraid enough, and certainly not surprised by Will’s presence, by what Will is revealing he knows. “Beneath my disguise, what am I?”

Chilton considers him in silence, briefly. Then, “You are what you once told me I was not,” he says, “a killer, Will.”

Will pulls his face into something like a smile. “I was wrong about you,” he says, but Chilton shakes his head.

“Not wrong,” he says, watery eyes flashing. “As they say, people change. And none more than I, it would seem.”

“I have great empathy for you, Frederick,” Will says, “both of us eviscerated and reformed. Both of us accused while innocent.”

“You’re no longer innocent,” Chilton rejoins.

“No more than you,” Will agrees, and he sees the gleam of a threat in Chilton’s weak blue gaze. “I’m
not going to Jack,” Will says. “You know I could.”

“I do,” Chilton agrees, “which forces me to question why you’ve decided against the most logical course of action. Why did you come here? It can’t have been easy to shake your FBI escorts for the time this conversation is taking.”

Will shakes his head, jaw set. “You wanted me back here,” he says, “and Hannibal, too. Do you want to tell me the reason? Or should I guess?”

“You don’t need to guess.”

“I don’t,” Will agrees. “Eager to count us amongst your donors, Dr. Chilton?”

“It would certainly be fitting,” he replies. “Dr. Bloom once told me I wouldn’t be comfortable in Hannibal’s skin if I couldn’t be comfortable in my own.”

“Has something changed since then?” Will asks, eyebrow raised at Chilton’s willingness to share.

“Oh yes,” Chilton breathes. “You’ve changed. And so, I trust, has he. I know why you won’t go to Jack, Will. When the time comes, both you and Hannibal Lecter will come to me.”

*********

The wet grass squishes beneath his shoes, slick and slippery so that he finds himself watching his own feet, and the way the wet earth wells up around them with each footfall, almost as much as he watches his young charge, trekking diligently along beside him. Their pace is slow enough to accommodate the boy’s short legs. For someone so young, he shows signs already of being an experienced hiker, the result of many such journeys before. His experience is evident in the careful way he places his feet, in the silence of his steady breath, in the way he does not pester Lars with complaints and questions about distance.

It had taken some convincing, Lars Caitling recalls, the first time he’d approached his employers about the possibility of extending the boy’s education into wilderness survival. It was what he would have wanted the boy, had he been his parent. A little more than a year ago he had made the case that the boy was old enough to begin acquiring a familiarity with the wild.
“Not camping yet,” he’d been quick to clarify. “I own a cabin about two miles off the road.”

“The boy can scarcely walk on carpet,” Dr. Bloom had rejoined sharply, “and you’re proposing to take him hiking through the forests of West Virginia.”

“I can carry him most of the way,” Lars had insisted. “And what better way to gain balance than through practice. He’ll be safe with me.”

That had been the final word. By then, he’d been with the family long enough to earn trust. His mistresses knew their son would never be safer than he was with Lars guiding him, watching him. And so the trips into the forest became a sporadic but common occurrence. This time the women had jumped at his suggestion; with Will Graham back in the country, dragging the memory of Hannibal Lecter behind him like a bridal train, Dr. Bloom and Ms. Verger no doubt saw an obscure cabin in the uncharted backwoods as the safest place for their son.

Lars watches the little figure walking at his side, and feels a surge of almost paternal pride for the boy. He squashes the feeling at once. This isn’t his child. Whatever skills the boy has learned from him, whatever character traits he’s developed under Lars’ tutelage, he cannot claim the title of blood kin. Somewhere else in the world, there is one who already owns such a distinction, and Lars can afford no distraction in finding his way back to her.

“Look, look!” the boy’s call cuts through his thoughts, and Lars follows the boy’s pointing finger and gaze, to the doe that plucks its way gingerly through the undergrowth a dozen feet ahead of them. It places its feet gently, deliberately. Like a dancer.

He can remember another life, half a dozen years before, when he’d still had a wife and daughter to come home to, attending ballet recitals after work, arriving, the hero, with the forgotten slippers yet again. She always forgot something.

Lars watches the doe, one hand on Morgan’s shoulder, fingers a fraction tighter than they need to be. He remembers something besides his daughter’s graceful body maneuvering on the stage - a story, a very old story he heard long ago, about a father who sacrifices his child to the gods. Crueler than any Christian tale, this story ends with bloodshed, the only glimmer of hope the hint that maybe the child is replaced at the last fateful second with a doe, whose throat opens under the ceremonial knife in her place. The work of a benevolent deity, he remembers, remembers how in those ancient stories the gods were always crueler, always kinder, with loves more fierce than mortals, passions too strong for mortal bodies to contain.
Morgan twists in his grip, wanting to step closer to the creature. Of course she startles at his approach, and the last they see of her is a flash of black tail vanishing into the trees.

They make the rest of the hike in quiet, watching out for her, for other forms of wildlife. Lars tries not to think about what it is Lecter plans to do with the boy, but it is inevitable that this is where his mind would turn. The child is not his son; he does not need to remind himself who commands his loyalty. But it is difficult to imagine the boy coming to harm. The image of him suffering is anathema to Lars, who has given years of his life to the companionship of this child.

“That was a good long walk,” Lars says, when they reach the cabin. “Do you fancy a snack and something to drink?”

Morgan nods, solemn faced, though Lars can tell the boy is enjoying himself. “Yes, please.”

Lars leaves the boy to take off his shoes and jacket, and heads towards the kitchen with the phantom of Morgan’s tortured future in his mind’s eye. His employers had given him a very thorough briefing when he first began working for them, so that he would be fully aware, they said, of the threat he was agreeing to face in order to protect them and their son.

“All of this for a child, Lars?” he’d asked. “Surely he wouldn’t harm the child.”

“Took me a while to convince him, too,” the doctor had stated coldly. “In exchange for stepping aside, I earned his word that he wouldn’t kill me. But Hannibal never lets anything go. He told me once that my family belonged to him. He has a history of hurting children. Killing them. He sent Francis Dolarhyde after Will Graham’s step-son. He mutilated and murdered a teenage girl with whom he’d formed a close attachment. And what we’ve managed to piece together of his early years indicates he may have developed his unique tastes after eating his younger sister.”

She’d given him a hard look, eyes clear and brilliant, unclouded by hysteria. “Believe me when I tell you, it is in his character to sacrifice a child to spite someone else. And I will not have that happen to Morgan.”

She’d given him pages and pages of articles and reports. He’d dreamt of them for weeks after, of victims screaming as their lungs were wrenched from their chests, as knives pierced their flesh in careful patterns, as flesh peeled away to reveal muscle and fat and nerve and bone. He had sworn to himself, he would never let such a fate befall the stern faced infant in his care.
Lars frowns as he pulls the loaf of bread from his pack, and finds the jar of peanut butter in the cabinet above the kitchen counter. He finds a plate in the next cabinet, and begins to assemble the sandwich mechanically. Lecter had been right, when he’d said there was nothing he could ask for that would be too high a price to pay to have his daughter back. Lars would give anything. Even this. Even Morgan. He will give the boy over to death for her, he thinks, but not to gratuitous torture.

He pulls the pills from his front pocket, shaking them from the bottle onto the counter beside the open faced peanut butter sandwich. One pill, Lecter had said, would be enough to put the boy to sleep for eight to ten hours.

“If you need to give him the second, be sure to give him water between doses,” Lecter had said, pressing the bottle into his hand. “Space out the doses if you can. Or give him only the one dose, if possible. That would be best.”

Lars considers the two white tablets, his heart beating steady but his head a fog of pounding blood. He watches his hand lift a spoon to crush both tablets into a fine powder against the cutting board, watches himself sprinkle the powder over the two slices of peanut buttered bread. He adds a drizzle of honey, to disguise any bitterness from the drugs, and closes the sandwich before returning to the main room of the cabin, a smile forced over his face.

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There’s little illumination in the cabin when Hannibal arrives. The curtains are drawn, allowing scant light, filtered through the forest canopy already, to enter. There’s a solar powered lantern on a low coffee table, providing a wash of dim white light. Hannibal blinks, standing in the doorway, and allows himself a moment for his eyes to adjust before he steps further into the little dwelling.

Lars Caitling is sitting on the edge of the bed, elbows on his knees, head in his cupped hands. The little figure in the bed beside him is still as death.

“How long ago did you administer the first dosage?” Hannibal asks, stepping closer to check the boy’s pulse while he waits for Lars to answer. But neither answer nor pulse are present, and Hannibal steps back, eyes flashing at the other man. Lars, for his part, remains silent, only draws the little body into his arms, and stands to face Hannibal as if meeting his judgment.

“He’s ready to go,” the man says, finally, voice thick with emotion.
There’s an edge on Hannibal’s voice that wasn’t there a moment before. “Was there some misunderstanding? I requested the boy be delivered to me alive.” He surveys the silent form with a disdainful frown.

“No misunderstanding,” Lars replies, voice steady and rough. There are tears behind his words, burning and unshed. “I figured I’d save you the trouble. Let him go peacefully.”

“You’re so certain I planned this for him,” Hannibal murmurs. “Of course, Alana would have explained that my profile made it plausible I would murder a child.”

“Wouldn’t you?” Lars demands.

“Of course,” Hannibal answers, quick, without thought. “But Will asked me not to.” Lars blinks at him for a second, eyes darting about Hannibal’s face, looking for the lie and not finding it. “We were going to use him as bait to draw his mothers to us. Leave him somewhere, unharmed, before fleeing the country again.”

Lars blinks at him, eyes red rimmed despite their dryness. They look painful, and his stare is full of pain. Hannibal watches, keenly interested in the way the man in front of him has shattered himself on good intentions. The little body, still in his arms, sags like a frown.

“You let me think you meant to kill him,” Lars accuses, voice ragged with tears that aren’t coming. “You could have told me you weren’t planning to hurt him - torture him the way you did the others. You could have told me.”

“Yes,” Hannibal admits, “and you might have even believed me.”

“Then why?” Lars demands, face contorted by agony. Hannibal can see the tiny, bloodless crescents Lars’ nails dig into the soft skin they’re gripping.

“Because I was curious what you would do,” Hannibal says.

He moves at the same moment Lars does. The anguished body guard releases the little body he’s clutched so tightly, letting it drop like a sack to the floor as Lars lunges forward, a being of rage rather than reason, ready to rend and tear the man in front of him. Hannibal side steps, maneuvering quickly to place himself behind the roaring man.
The large man turns to face him too slowly, and in the time it takes for Lars to redirect his attack, Hannibal has launched his body forward, hooking one arm firmly about the thick throat of his victim. Lars uses his dwindling oxygen on an abbreviated howl, the sound ending with a choking gasp as Hannibal hangs on, tightening his grip even as he feels Lars twisting so violently that Hannibal’s feet momentarily leave the floor.

The pair come crashing down a moment later as the bigger man loses consciousness. It’s easy work, then, dispatching him to the afterlife. Hannibal grabs for the nearest weapon-like object, a heavy iron fire poker, and brings it down hard, point first, on Lars’ reddened throat. Most of the blood misses him, but a thin spray pulses over his right cheek and jaw. Hannibal wipes at his face, and wipes his bloodied hand onto Lars’ still dry pant leg.

Hannibal stands over the bodies - the one he killed and the one that was dead before his arrival. Lars’ large frame gives a twitch as the nervous system dies. Hannibal kicks disinterestedly at his leg, then turns his attention to the second corpse, the broken child laying where Lars dropped him.

Not a child, Hannibal corrects himself. No longer a child, or any kind of person. No laughter, no lisping voice reciting rhymes, no clumsy fingers winding through another’s or popping the blooms off daisies. Only meat, he thinks to himself, staring down at the pale little bundle peering up from the black cloth.

*******

The sun is drifting towards the horizon as Will follows Jack across the Quantico parking lot towards the sedan. There’s a bite of cold in the early spring air, and for a moment Will thinks of his old home in Wolftrap, and how it would have felt to stand on the porch and watch the red sun sinking into the line of skinny trees at the edge of his property, on an afternoon like this one.

Jack’s ire is palpable. No news from the lab, excepting the moth facts Jimmy repeats for them gleefully. Moths navigate by the moon! Moths are important pollinators! Some moths survive off the tears of large mammals! Will had practically been able to hear Jack’s molars cracking by the time they’d left the pair arguing over the merits of amateur entymology.

No news, meaning they’re no closer to finding Calvin. Or at least, Jack is no closer. Will has a pretty good idea of where Calvin is, in fact. If timing allows, he fully intends to intercept Calvin Martin in time to save his life.
“We need a new lead,” Jack says, as they slide into the front of the car and pull the doors closed behind them. He turns the key in the ignition, glances over at Will as he speaks. “I’m taking you back to Calvin’s apartments,” he says.

Will scoffs. “What for, Jack?”

“Maybe you’ll find something the police overlooked. Maybe you’ll pick up something you didn’t before.”

They make the drive in silence. Jack’s jaw works over unvoiced complaints or questions. Will can imagine all the things Jack is choosing to let go unsaid between them. It’s honestly extremely generous; for a moment Will feels a familiar stab of guilt at what he’s planning to do. What he’s going to do. The run down apartment buildings and drab colored community centers blur by outside his window, and gradually give way to sparse trees and pale green foliage.

“Having second thoughts, Mr. Graham?” Bedelia’s voice scratches across his mind. Eyes flicking to the rearview mirror, Will finds himself caught in the sightless black gaze reflected there. “Don’t tell me you’re getting cold feet, now.”

He doesn’t answer her, doesn’t look away. Never, he thinks, and then amends the thought, never again.

“What it must take for anyone to trust you,” Bedelia tuts. Her white blonde curls bounce gently around the pale face that frames those ink dark pits where her eyes should be. “I can’t fathom why anyone gives you these infinite second chances. Why they do. Why Hannibal does.”

She leans forward, dark eyes swallowing the mirror. Will feels as if he’s falling, falling, into a pit of ink, that the wide sea will have drops too few to wash him clean again.

“And salt too little,” Bedelia breathes, “to season your foul, tainted flesh.”

His body jerks forward as the car slams to an abrupt stop, and Will blinks, rapidly, trying to clear the phantom Bedelia’s blank gaping gaze from his mind.

“Wake up, Will,” Jack barks. The edge in his voice is expected, and not nearly the worst that Will’s heard it. Still, not something to be taken lightly. He sits up straighter, looking about to get his
bearings and finding himself faced with the dingy apartments they’d visited earlier, when the place had crawled with local cops. It’s empty now, abandoned by all except those who call it home, and the odd stray cat limping along the dumpsters in search of an easy meal. “We’re here.”

“Yeah, I see that,” Will mumbles, sleepier than he is angry. He follows Jack from the car and towards a doorway where crime scene tape stretches like velvet ropes across a club. Jack tears the tape easily, extracting a key from his pocket to unlock the door. Will steps into the linoleum floored mudroom, and it’s almost colder inside than it is outdoors. He draws his coat tighter around himself, not quite sure what more he can tell Jack without actually revealing Buffalo Bill’s identity in full.

He dreads the moment when he’ll sink into that mindset again, dreads the cold, pitiful dampness that will spread across his brain. The frantic insecurity, the jealousy, the feverish need to improve, transform, emulate someone better until his own self subsides. Will gives his head a shake, clearing the trepidation. Entering Chilton’s mind is bad enough without having to imagine the sensation in anticipation.

“What is it you’re expecting us to find?” he asks, walking further into the little duplex. The entire kitchen feels like a refrigerator. There’s a stack of dishes in the sink, and Will wonders idly what will happen to them, when this is no longer a crime scene. Will the landlord inherent the task of washing them? Or will they wind up stacked in the trash, unwanted - for surely Calvin’s senator mother has no need for his mismatched Ikea dinner plates.

“Anything,” Jack says. “You have somewhere better to be?”

Will shrugs. “I’m going to look in the bedroom upstairs, then,” he says mildly, and slips passed Jack to ascend the creaking narrow staircase. The temperature falls with each upward step he takes, so that he’s forced to clench his teeth to keep them from chattering by the time he steps into the second story hallway a few moments later. It’s an unnatural coldness, better suited to the depths of winter than this early spring day, and Will’s forced to question how much of the reality he’s experiencing at the moment is real. He sways on unsteady feet at the top of the stairwell. For a split second there is nothing beneath his feet but rushing air. Then the house solidifies around him again, and, releasing a shivering breath, Will makes his way towards Calvin Martin’s empty bedroom.

It’s the second time he’s stepped foot in the place, and it hasn’t changed much since the first time. The biggest difference by far is the absence of a crowd - it seems somewhat larger now that its only occupant is Will, rather than half the Baltimore PD and a dozen federal agents. The room, which had seemed cramped before, feels like a good size now that he’s alone in it. Calvin Martin is about his size, judging from pictures Will’s seen. This would have been a comfortable place, a little dingy but showing obvious touches of care.

Calvin’s decorated the room modestly, and Will wonders at it. Having met his mother, Will knows
the resources available to Calvin. He’s seen his SAT scores and COGAT results as well. They don’t
match up with his current GPA at the local college he attends. Highly intelligent but
underperforming, from a wealthy family but living like any other starving student, Calvin Martin
seemed hellbent on achieving mediocrity in his lifetime. Nonetheless, there must have been
something special about him. There’s intentionality behind Chilton’s selections, even if the reasons
aren’t immediately obvious. Something about Calvin drew him; some quality set the boy apart.

Will closes his eyes. He can feel the good-natured exasperation, the frustration, the twinge of anxiety,
the faint vibrations Calvin imprinted on the place. Will doesn’t need to identify with the victim or
killer in order to solve this crime, but it beats returning downstairs empty handed. Until Hannibal gets
word to him there’s nothing to do but bide time and keep Jack from questioning his motives. He may
as well waste time standing in an empty bedroom feeling the residual energy of its former inhabitant,
pretending his hands don’t itch for blades, his lips don’t ache for blood.

With his eyes closed, he can see it, the fate that awaits them, the doom they will bring. The sea of
blood that washes over them, dissolves them like sugar sculptures lost in the thick wet crimson. The
crest of red waves. He pours the ocean from the lacquered urn resting heavy in the cradle of his arms,
and the earth drinks his libation with a mighty thirst.

There’s a sound - high and wailing - like an alarm going off in his head. Heat bursts over him as if
he’s being licked by tongues of flame in this unreasonably - unbelievably - cold bedroom. And he
knows the time’s come.

His boots pound on the creaking stairs, and Will skitters to a stop at the bottom of the stairwell, trying
to compose himself as he comes face to face with Jack’s concerned glower. “Uh,” Will stammers,
eyes flickering from Jack’s stern and questioning gaze, to the front door and the car he can see
through the window. “I think we should go home.”

Jack’s eyebrows shoot up. “Home?” he asks, voice high in disbelief.

“Back to your place, I mean,” Will clarifies quickly. “You can lock me back in the guest room. I
want to lie down for a while.”

“Not feeling well?” Jack asks, sounding far from solicitous.

“Didn’t sleep much,” Will lies. “I can’t concentrate on anything here now except the cold. Let me
sleep a couple hours, give the lab some time to look over the samples again. Bill doesn’t kill his
victims right away, anyway. Calvin went missing less than 48 hours ago. He’s got another three to
five days based on the profile.”
Jack’s head looks like a heavy burden as he wags it in silent disappointment. “Can you hear yourself, Will?” he asks. “Can you hear how you talk about other human beings? Do you hear how you sound?”

Will shrugs. “I suppose,” he says, slow and deliberate, “I sound a lot like you sounded, when you justified trading my mental health for saving lives. Or how Alana sounded when she justified helping Mason capture Hannibal.” He sighs, and runs a hand over the stubble covering his jaw. “Let me sleep a couple hours, Jack,” he says again, “I’m no good to you as I am. I’ll wake up before nightfall, ready to face the case with a rested and alert mind. We can even come back here then if you want.”

Jack considers him skeptically, as if expecting a trick. But there’s no explanation he can think of that makes sense other than Will telling the truth, no reason to return home other than the one he’s stated as his reason. The simplest explanation isn’t usually the correct one, in Jack’s experience of Will and Hannibal, but in this case he genuinely cannot see a reason not to return to the house.

Will watches Jack closely, trying to make his sharp gaze appear sleepy. “Alright,” the agent finally relents. “Let’s head back to the house.”

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“You place always smells so good,” Freddie announces, taking a mirthfully deep breath as she steps through the front door ahead of Frederick. “Aaaah. It always smells like something is baking, but I know there’s nothing baking.”

“There’s nothing baking,” Frederick confirms, “but that doesn’t mean no dessert.”

Late lunch and drinks by the water had been glorious. Frederick is full of radiance, the kind of brilliant warm glow Freddie emanates. He loves to spend time with her, loves to bathe himself in that glow, hopes always that some of it will someday choose to stick to him, and make him shine with the bright clever energy that sings from her skin.

Freddie plops onto the plump leather sofa, kicks off her leopard print pumps, and smiles up at him with just a hint of mischief. “I don’t think I could eat another bite,” she says, “those oysters were incredible.”

“You may change your mind when you see what I have,” Frederick hums, leaving the room.
reluctantly, if only for the time it takes to retrieve the bottle and two glasses from his kitchen.

Freddie chirrups in delight when he returns to pour the rosé. With the pink wine held against the backdrop of her red red curls and flushing face she looks like a Valentine. When they kiss, after a few comfortable moments of silence punctuated only by Freddie’s small sounds of enjoyment, she tastes as sweet and cool as the wine, and he buries his hands in her hair with careful precision. This is the most he’s usually capable of, after what his body has gone through, but she never seems discontent.

He remembers their earliest encounter, when she’d seen him taken apart and held his life in her careful hands. She’d seemed like an angel, as she stood over his dying form and forced air into him. White wings and red curls, the light shining behind her. He’d woken up in the hospital room alone.

She is so powerful and so good, her mind like a diamond, her smile like pearls. Frederick feels overwhelmed, bowled over by her utter perfection. His arms draw tighter around her. Tighter. If he could only hold her, like this, so close they are almost one, so close he could slip into her and touch the bright crimson core of her power.

She is so powerful and so good, and if Frederick could only be like her he would never fall victim to the wolves of the world again. Her Valentine face is framed by red fire, by battling flames, beating wings. A great red moth, copper wings unfurling, rises from behind her. From within her. His hands grab, beat, subdue, and finally hold.

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“So you think he’s a copy cat,” Jack says, as he opens the door from the garage to the den and steps into the chilly house. He shrugs out of his heavy black outer coat, but retains the sweater and scarf beneath it.

Will follows, slinking behind with furtive eyes, watchful for any sign of change in the house. “No,” he corrects, annoyance plane in his tone, “not a copy cat. I didn’t say that.”

“You said,” Jack sighs, “that it felt familiar, similar in many ways to the Ripper killings, and almost definitely committed by someone with intimate knowledge of those cases.”

“Someone aware of them, surely,” Will says, “someone influenced, maybe directly impacted by them. But not someone copying. This is an original composition, Jack, played on a bold new
instrument. The first of its kind. Our man would be insulted to be thought of as a mere imitator.”

Jack huffs. Will takes a step further into the house, across the sparse room and towards the hallway door, and Jack trails him. “I don’t really care about not hurting a serial killer’s feelings,” he says.

“Well,” Will says, stepping from the den into the hallway, “not this serial killer’s, anyway.” He flicks the switch to bring the hallway lights to glowing life, and Jack’s face is tense and humorless in the sudden illumination. “He’s familiar,” Will says. “He’s someone we both know, someone who was connected to the Ripper investigation, touched by it.”

“A victim’s family?” Jack suggests. Will shakes his head.

“More of a victim,” Will says, “someone who felt powerless, after whatever happened to him. Because of it. He sees this as his path to transformation,” Will continues, watching Jack closely from the corner of his eye as they cross the hallway to the dining room side by side. “He takes something from each of his victims - a piece of the skin that covers them. He sees these people as possessing the qualities he feels he lacks himself. If he could just…”

He trails off for a second, feeling the twist of desire as if it is his own. His voice, when he speaks again, is lower, softer. Jack leans closer, in the dark doorway of the dining room, to hear what Will says. “If he could just cover himself in them, in the pieces he takes, he could take on those qualities.”

“Are you saying he’s wearing the victims?” Jack’s voice is incredulous. Will thinks of the moment, years before, when he’d spoken to Jack from the wrong side of a set of iron bars, and told him he knew what the Chesapeake Ripper did with his trophies.

“He’s making himself a person suit,” Will confirms, “a totemic robe that will allow him to absorb the power of each donor.” He takes a step into the dark dining room, the light from the hallways casting deep shadows around the long table and high backed chairs. “A raiment made from the flesh of those he reviles and admires.”

“You’re talking like you know who he is,” Jack says, and Will can sense as well as hear the eagerness in his voice. It rises in him like a wave, the anticipation of knowing. The older man takes a step closer, towards Will, positioning himself between Will and the kitchen door, effectively trapping him against the hardwood table.

Will lets his hands trail over the back of one of the chairs, feeling the cool slopes of its wooden
frame. He pictures the table set for dinner. “I have an idea,” he admits, his fingers closing over the arched point of the seat. Behind Jack’s shoulder, the light in the kitchen flicks on.

Jack’s eyes widen, and he wheels to face the kitchen doorway. There’s a dark shape standing there - tall and broad shouldered, impeccable angles contrasting dark with the brilliance of the light as Hannibal steps towards them. After all these aching days apart, Will’s heart thuds loud at the sight of him. He forces himself to shift his attention to Jack, back onto the task at hand.

“Hello, Jack,” Hannibal says, voice almost sympathetic, after the lengthy silence that stretches between them. There’s barely enough time and air for Will to draw breath before it starts, then, just like it did in his long ago vision of the best possible world, a world in which they all left together - him and Hannibal and Abigail.

Jack’s right hand blurs towards the holster hidden under his jacket, and Will catches his wrist. Holds it, firm and final as steel shackles snapping shut. The look Jack gives him is familiar, even though he’s never seen it in this life - Jack’s eyes wide, mouth opening on a yell that won’t come, an expression he hasn’t seen before on Jack’s face, but immediately recognizes as betrayal. Will stares back, meeting Jack’s wide eyes with his own. And he knows, fully and clearly, the deal was real, Jack wanted to do right by him, as best he could. He knows, and it changes nothing.

Hannibal draws the kitchen knife along Jack’s throat, like a paintbrush traversing canvas, before the moment between them can break. The blade reveals meat and tissue, and Will watches as blood sprays from Jack’s neck like a fountain, showering Hannibal’s face, chest, and arms with crimson. Jack pivots on his heel, turning the hot rain of blood on Will now. His mouth opens wider, on a shout that still remains silent, save for a wet gurgle almost lost in the sound of Will’s own shuddering breath, his deepening heartbeat. Jack’s hands scramble at his, one wrist still locked in Will’s grip, and his mouth opens to reveal a dark scarlet pit welling up from the back of his throat. Will’s eyes widen and his heart quickens. And around them, the room fills with blood.
Muscles better and nerves more

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone for your patience! It's finally over, yay! Thank you for reading. I can't believe how long this got. Thank you to everyone who got through it and made it to this point! I hope the end doesn't disappoint.

Extra special thanks to Kossandra for doing a Polish translation, here:
http://archiveofourown.org/works/13342926

Warnings for suicide (not Will or Hannibal), and graphic violence in general.

The walls are scarlet, melting. They stand in a house made of blood - Will and Jack clinging to each other’s hands, and Hannibal, his cold face dripping with gore, standing apart and watching. Will can feel his gaze, as red and violent as the liquifying walls. Jack gurgles, choking on blood but still strong enough to claw at Will’s arms and jacket.

Will shakes him off, freeing his hands to clamp one, palm down, over the ragged wound traversing Jack’s throat. He can feel the blood pumping hot against his fingers, and brings the other hand up as well, to cradle the back of Jack’s neck, forcing more pressure to slow the flow of blood. Jack leans on him, hands tangling in the sleeves of his jacket, his eyes wide and frantic as Will holds him for a moment on this side of death. It can only be for a moment, he knows; nothing either of them do could save Jack’s life now. Nothing anyone could do, to make Jack’s life last longer than a moment. But a moment is all Will needs.

“Shhhh,” he says, to the wet, strangled noise Jack is making. His voice is gentle. “Listen, Jack. You can’t talk anymore, so just listen.

“There’s a reason everyone holds you accountable for my actions, Jack. I was harmless when you came to me.” Will’s lip twitches. “More or less. You forced me to look at the darkness that was out there, to see the darkness in myself resonating there. You were relentless, Jack. So many times you could have let me go.”

Jack splutters, trying but unable to speak. His lips part on a red bubble of blood, and Will’s mouth twists into a sneer. His fingers press into the flesh of Jack’s neck, holding him tighter, delaying the inevitable, holding him quite literally in the moment before death.

“You can feel yourself dying, can’t you?” Will murmurs, voice thick. “A part of you knows you deserve this. A large part of you, I think. In a way, this must be a relief.
“You made me what I am, Jack, every bit as much as Hannibal. The deaths I’ve caused, I lay at your feet. You are responsible. This is what you deserve.”

He releases Jack’s throat, then, letting the other man’s blood rain over him again. Jack’s eyes widen, and his hands scramble at Will. Only for a moment, though. The jet of blood slows, and Jack’s eyes begin to droop as he sinks heavily to his knees, no longer supported by Will’s hands at his throat. Will watches him sway, watches the blood flow sputter and slow as the light in Jack’s eyes dims. Jack falls, at last, slumping to his side in the red pool of blood on the floor, and Will lifts his eyes to Hannibal, standing on the other side of Jack’s lifeless body.

And his breath comes in a sudden, ragged gasp, as if he’s been holding it for days without noticing. Hannibal stares back, as slick with red as Will himself, his expression frozen, eyes burning. Will feels his skin heating, feels the bloom flushing across his cheeks, invisible beneath all Jack’s blood. He breathes hard, one time, and then he’s moving, with the same quick instinct that came to him above Chesapeake Bay, when he’d rushed forward with his blade drawn.

Hannibal smells only of blood, but his arms and hair feel the same under Will’s hands. Will brings their mouths together in a frantic collision, and Hannibal’s opens in a gasp against his, and Will can taste the copper of blood as his lip catches on his own incisor in his eagerness to get closer. The room spins and steadies, and Hannibal’s hands are gripping him, and Will grips back, and waits for the wind in his ears to die down.

Hannibal seems like a creature of blood, red and hot and slick, hands flowing liquid-like under Will’s shirt and over the warm skin of his chest. Will half opens his eyes, and with their faces so close and the lights so dim he swears for a moment he sees the shadow of horns rising from behind Hannibal’s sandy fringe, dark prongs clawing at the white ceiling above them like black fingers spreading across the sun. And then Hannibal has looped a finger into the waist band of his jeans and is drawing him closer, fighting to get his flat palm between denim and skin.

“I missed you,” Will manages to pant, when Hannibal’s mouth moves off his and closes over his throat instead. “What took you so long?”

Hannibal’s chuckle is almost soundless, just warm air breathed over Will’s skin and the curve of a smirk pressed just below his jaw. “Always so impatient,” he answers. “I’m here now, anyway.”

Will hums, his fingers carding through Hannibal’s hair, leaving crimson highlights in their wake. “Finally,” he sighs. “You brought the boy?”
Hannibal stiffens, almost imperceptibly, and then relaxes, his face still buried against Will’s shoulder. Will cranes his neck, trying and failing to spy the expression on his face. “He’s here,” Hannibal answers, with a press of his teeth against Will’s skin too light to leave a mark for more than a few minutes, but too much to ignore. Will shudders, draws him closer still, his legs parting as Hannibal backs him against the table. “He can wait.”

Will nods in agreement, letting Hannibal push him up and onto the edge of Jack’s heavy oak dining table. And then Hannibal’s hands are on his ass, pulling him close to the curve of Hannibal’s body, into a kiss that obliterates suspicion and thought entirely.

But only for an instant. Will sets his hand on Hannibal’s chest and shoves, just enough to indicate his intent. He shakes his head, pulling back from Hannibal’s parted lips with a soft exhalation. “It can’t wait,” he argues. “We have to act fast, before Jack’s missed.” He pushes harder, not wanting to but knowing one of them needs to, and Hannibal steps back after a pause. Will shivers at the loss of contact. All he wants is to rush back into Hannibal’s strong arms, Hannibal’s hot, coppery kiss. Soon, he thinks, but not yet.

The sound of a soft chime breaks him from the trance Hannibal’s put him in, and he hops from the table. Hannibal draws a small black rectangle from his back pocket. Will can see Alana’s name lighting up the screen.

“The bodyguard’s phone,” Hannibal explains, reaching into his jacket pocket as he speaks. “The protective lioness checking in on her cub.”

Will barks a laugh. “Do you already have a picture of him to send?” he asks. “Or should we take a video? We need her to come here alone, without alerting the police.”

The only answer is a silence that stretches long enough Will knows something is deeply wrong. “Hannibal,” he finally says, voice edged with a familiar feeling of dread, “where is Morgan Verger?”

“In the kitchen,” Hannibal answers, and does not follow as Will walks in that direction.

He is quiet still when Will returns, after several long moments of silence, looking pale and weary.

“We agreed,” he says, words slow to keep from breaking. “Hannibal, you promised me you wouldn’t harm him.”
“I kept my promise,” Hannibal insists, and Will feels his right eyelid twitching. “The boy’s guard took matters into his own hands, gave the boy twice the amount of sedative I recommended.”

Will’s face doesn’t know what expression to wear, his voice doesn’t know how to sound. His stomach pitches, mind hanging on the image of the small figure draped across Jack’s kitchen island, the little shirt open to reveal a delicate torso glistening with sea salt and oil. “Why would he do that?”

Hannibal shrugs. “I believe he thought of it as a mercy killing,” Hannibal says, and Will is almost overcome by the sudden urge to strike him.

“Surely,” Will speaks slowly, “you explained to him that no harm would come to Morgan, that you intended to use him as a hostage and nothing more.”

“You know it completely slipped my mind,” Hannibal says, utterly unapologetic. Will can feel his stomach tightening into knots at what he’s made himself accomplice to, at Hannibal’s smug and inquisitive expression.

He shakes his head, trying to clear it. “You gave him the motive and means,” he says, gluing his eyes to the floor. “Why? Did you want to hurt me? Why?”

Hannibal steps closer. Will feels his warmth, blinks his eyes but won’t look up. “You do suffer so beautifully, Will,” Hannibal says, and Will feels himself flushing in outrage. “Like a saint, shot through with arrows, or Christ himself on the cross. Seeing you in agony would be a worthwhile goal in itself.” Will can’t help but look up, his nostrils flaring in rage, but Hannibal’s face is calm. “But no, it’s not why I did it.”

Will isn’t sure if the sound welling in his throat is a sob or a laugh or a scream. He grits his teeth against whatever it is, and only a rush of air escapes him. Hannibal watches, that familiar, maddening curiosity written across his face. Will wants to grab him, wants to sink his fingers into the soft skin and wrench something hot and fierce from him. “Why?” he demands voice barely controlled, and Hannibal blinks, expression shifting.

“To watch you in the final stages of your transformation,” he says, raising a hand to Will’s face, and Will wants to flinch away but can’t help leaning into the touch instead. “To see what you’ll do, presented with an opportunity such as this. Because it is an opportunity, Will, and when the rage inside you dies down enough you’ll recognize it. Do you push through your revulsion, Will, do you carry on becoming?”
Will snorts in derision. Hannibal’s hand is hot against the side of his face, nails scratching soothingly at his scruff, and all Will wants to do is curl up in his arms and savor this reunion. But there’s a pain inside him, a bright and blazing hatred that roars like a fire through his soul, and Will feels himself glowing with it like glass in a furnace. Malleable, dangerous, and sharp, like molten glass he feels himself solidifying into something weapon-like and brilliant.

“Will,” Hannibal starts, but the chiming sound coming from the device in the palm of his other hand takes them both out of the moment. Breath shaking like a loose door on a tempestuous night, Will takes the phone from Hannibal’s hand and swipes to bring the screen to life. Hannibal must have disabled the passcode, Will thinks idly, reading Alana’s text to himself.

*How’s Morgan?*

He scrolls upward with the drag of his finger, reading back far enough to get the gist of the guard’s text pattern before replying in like style.

*Safe. Enjoying the woods. Bad reception.*

It only takes a second for her reply to flash across the screen.

*Good. Keep him there till the weekend.*

Will passes the phone back to Hannibal, and runs the back of his hand across his mouth. There’s a bad taste there, as if something inside of him has begun to rot and the stench is rising up his esophagus before any outward signs of decay become visible. He’s too aware of the way Hannibal is watching him, the way those inquisitive red eyes follow him as he retrieves Jack’s phone from his pocket. There’s a passcode required, of course, but Jack’s enabled touch ID, so it’s just a matter of wiping one of Jack’s fingers dry enough to unlock it.

Will opens Jack’s messages. Alana’s name is near the top. He spares a second to read back through their previous conversation, learning Jack’s texting pattern with her. He’s gentler with Alana over text than Will’s ever heard him in person, but not by much. Courteous might be a better word than gentle, Will considers. He grimaces at the texts concerning him - Jack insisting he’d be their best shot at apprehending Buffalo Bill, Alana objecting it was too dangerous - then he pulls up the keyboard and begins to type.

Hannibal watches him, his face betraying no emotion besides curiosity. Will ignores him. He finishes
his message and hits send, then passes the phone to Hannibal.


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It’s dark, and her throat burns as if she’s inhaled fire when she awakes. She’s aware of the pain before she’s aware of the darkness. At first, when she opens her eyes and sees nothing, she thinks she’s blinded her in addition to the strangulation. It’s only after her eyes have had a few moments to adjust to the dim light that she realizes the truth: there’s nothing to see.

The room is a small circle, seven feet in diameter at most, she guesses. There’s a mattress with a lump of blankets resting atop it, and a bucket beside it, across from her. She’s laying on the concrete floor, she realizes, and pushes herself carefully to her feet. Around her, walls stretch up, towards a dim bulb hanging far above. She’s in the bottom of a well, she realizes, or some other sort of pit.

Freddie reaches a hand out to trail over the rough wall in front of her. It feels cold, hard but crumbling slightly, light brick, or dry mud. Not something she could dig into or climb. She runs her fingers over the surface, looking for a handhold. She finds someone else’s torn off nail, instead, and wonders how long it will take before she’s clawing her own fingers to shreds attempting to escape.

She swallows, trying to moisten her bruised esophagus. Her first attempt at a cry dissolves into coughing. “Frederick!” she manages to croak, when the coughing subsides. “Frederick!”

From somewhere high up, over the circular lip of the pit, Freddie can hear music. She screams again, wordless frustration culminating in frantic gulps for air. When she catches her breath she stares up at the dim corona surrounding the bare bulb, silent for a second. Then something closer draws her eye.

Across from her, close enough to touch, the dark mass of blankets atop the bare mattress begins to move. Freddie screams, her voice cracking, and she manages to avoid another round of coughing as she backs up against the curving wall. The shape unfolds, growing longer and shedding its covering to reveal a man. A disheveled but familiar man.

“Hey,” Freddie manages to say in a tone somewhere between a croak and a whisper. “I know you. You’re Calvin Martin, the Senator’s missing son.”
The young man blinks up at her from his position sitting cross legged on the mattress. His eyes look large in his face, and Freddie thinks about him, down here in this pit for the past two days. She thinks about how she will look, two days from now, if Frederick chooses to leave her here.

“Everyone is looking for you,” Freddie says. “Your mother has the FBI on it day and night.” She pauses, noting the way his face doesn’t change at her words. “What happened to you?”

He’s quiet for so long, she thinks at first that he won’t answer. Then, “I was taking the trash out,” Calvin says, “and there was a man across the street, trying to push a couch into the back of his van. His arm was in a sling, and it looked like his leg was hurt, too. I watched him fall before I crossed to help.

“I asked if he needed help and he said, yes, he did. He asked me to pull the couch into the van - I remember, I thought that was weird. I could have pushed it in fine. But he insisted he could help me by pushing it if I got in and pulled, so I said sure, and hopped in,” Calvin says, trailing off for a moment. His breath is shaky, and Freddie can feel his wide-eyed gaze drilling into her. “We got the couch in, no problem, and I started to make my way back out of the van, when he pulled his arm out of the sling and grabbed something like a heavy stick from the van’s floor. I tried to dart passed him…and I felt whatever he had coming down on my head,” he raises his hands, touching the back of his skull, “and when I woke up again I was here.”

Freddie waits, but Calvin Martin has nothing else to add. “What did he look like?” she asks, at last.

“Older than me,” Calvin says, after another pause. “Dark hair. About my height.”

Suddenly she can feel the chill that’s seeping into her muscles from the damp coldness of the pit they’re in. “We need to get out of here,” she murmurs, and tries not to hear the panic rising in her voice. *This can’t be happening,* she thinks, even though she knows it is. *This can’t be real.*

There’s the sound of music, louder, from up above, and then the slamming of a door. Then Frederick’s face appears, and even though he’s far above, Freddie can tell her’s doing his best not to look at her face.

“Frederick!” she rasps, cupping her hands around her mouth. “I’m hurt! Please help me out of here!”

Calvin laughs bitterly beside her. Above them, Chilton makes a breathy sound, eyes fixed on a spot to her left, always to her left or right, or just above or below, even when she moves. Then his eyes
are on something in his hands, and when he looks back up, through the scope of the gun, his eyes are fixed directly on her at last.

The dart hits her just above the collar bone, and the hand she lifts to tear at it is already lethargic and heavy. Freddie slides into unconsciousness seconds later and collapses.

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The setting sun paints long shadows across the lawn as Alana pulls into Jack’s driveway, and dusk settles heavy and abrupt over the house and car. Beside her, Margot’s curls catch fire in the gold glint of the sunset, and Alana feels her fingers tighten reflexively around the black leather wheel.

She forces her hands to relax, lays them in her lap, then fishes her phone from her pocket and reads the text Jack sent to both of them a couple of hours earlier.

*Dinner at eight at my house. Bring Margot. We’ve got him. Will’s leaving the country tomorrow.*

He hadn’t bothered responding to any of her replies. She gnaws on her lip, until Margot’s thumb glides across it and makes her aware of the nervous tic. “Remind me why we even came here?” her wife asks, voice terse. She lets her hand rest over Alana’s, and Alana tangles their fingers gratefully.

“We’re saying goodbye,” Alana says with a shrug.

Margot sighs. “Closure is important,” she concedes, frowning, then tilts her head toward the door. “Shall we?”

Alana follows her lead, out of the car and up the walkway to Jack’s front door. It opens before they set foot on the porch, and Alana takes a jerking half step back as Will greets them with a smile that’s almost a grimace.

“Alana, Margot,” he says, and Alana can’t quite still her heart, “it’s good to see you. One last time.”

He steps back and gestures to welcome them inside. Alana’s heartbeat hammers, her chest filling with a sudden overwhelming panic. Margot steps forward without pause, however, and Alana moves
along at the tug of their interlinked hands. Into the door that gapes like a maw, swallowing them whole. She takes a deep breath, and the image dissipates.

“I suppose Jack told you we have reason to celebrate,” Will is saying, leading them both down the hall toward the dining room. The curtains are drawn back to reveal the fading crimson of the setting sun, shadows of trees lengthening over the back lawn in the gloaming. The room is softly lit, dim wall sconces and candles on the table. “This time time tomorrow Buffalo Bill won’t be a threat to anyone.”

Questions crowd Alana’s head as she watches Will and Margot moving - so calm, so natural, as if this were all just normal. Why are they waiting till tomorrow to apprehend Buffalo Bill? Who is Buffalo Bill? How does Will know? (How does he ever?) Why this elaborate dinner party, inevitably haunted by the memory of other dinners over other tables, long ago? But the most pressing question is the one she gives voice to: “Where’s Jack?”

Will looks back towards her with a smile. He seems serene now, but she has no doubt he can feel the panic bristling within her. “Didn’t he text you? He had to run to the store for dessert.”

As if on cue there’s a vibration against her hip, and she sees Margot reaching for her own phone. Jack’s text to them reads, *What flavor of ice-cream do you prefer?* There’s an attached photo showing four different flavors of a high end brand gelato in what appears to be the frozen foods area of a grocery store.

_Salted caramel,* Margot’s text flashes at the bottom of Alana’s screen with a buzz as she reads. She looks up to see Margot sliding her phone back into her pocket with a half smile aimed back at her. In the soft light she appears cherubic, with her round face and pink cheeks framed by blazing curls. “You know me,” she says lightly, “incurable sweet tooth.”

There’s another buzz from her phone. This time Margot doesn’t bother, just waits for Alana to read. “He says we should start dinner without him,” she reports, “there’s some kind of accident blocking traffic.”

“What’s for dinner?” Margot queries.

“Lamb,” Will says. “Don’t worry - Jack made it. I helped minimally.” He smiles, and it feels so normal and harmless, even with the suggestion in his words, so like the old Will she knew when she was still her old self. She thinks of those versions of themselves as children now, beings at a different stage of development and maturity. Back then an innocence clung to them she wishes she could reclaim. Maybe the best way, she thinks, is simply to trust.
“How about a glass of wine and some hors d’oeuvres first?” Will suggests. “Give Jack some time to get here.”

“I think we could all do with a drink,” Margot agrees, darting an amused glance back at Alana’s pale face. “But is wine the best we can do?”

Will smirks. “I think I saw a bottle of Bruichladdich in Jack’s pantry. I’m sure he wouldn’t mind, given the occasion.”

“I’m sure,” Margot smiles. “On the rocks, if you don’t mind.”

“Neat,” Alana remembers to say before the pause lengthens too uncomfortably. Will steps from the dining room with an incline of his head that almost feels like a bow. *Theatrical*, Alana thinks. The gesture is familiar, in a way that has nothing to do with Will Graham.

“I’ll be back,” Alana declares, unnecessarily, and follows Will into the kitchen without looking at her wife’s face. She’s not sure what she’s expecting to see, but the view is entirely normal. Her heart stumbles, slowing towards calm. There’s nothing shocking, nothing gruesome. There are three tumblers already waiting on the granite kitchen island. Will emerges from the pantry with the black bottle in hand, and smiles at her.

“Hey,” he says, voice as rough and guileless as it always was, when his pain and torment simmered upon the surface for anyone to see, nothing hidden, nothing held in. His pleasure, too, his happiness, so clear and untainted. Like one of his dogs, she supposes, a being of pure unclouded feeling. So different from the way he’s become.

“Hey,” she says, and follows the word with a nervous burst of laughter. “Sorry, it’s just -“

“I know,” he says, cutting her off, and she finds herself relieved at not having to finish her sentence. “It’s one thing to grab lunch in a public place and another to be alone with me.”

She nods, stiffly, not wanting to admit it but unable to deny it. “I suppose we’ll get along easier with that out in the open,” she says.
“It’s only reasonable,” Will replies, keeping his eyes on the drinks he’s preparing. “But it is a shame. Hannibal twisted us around until we were tearing each other apart. I regret the loss of our friendship, Alana. We’ll never get it back, but I asked Jack to invite you and Margot here tonight because I’d like to leave on good terms with the three of you.”

“Closure,” Alana murmurs, and takes the glass Will passes her.

“Something like that,” Will replies, and brings their glasses together with a chiming crystal collision.

Will produces a circle of steaming golden pastry from the oven, sliding it carefully onto a waiting platter of toasted bread. “Baked brie,” he tells her, “with honey and chopped pecans. Shall we?”

She takes her drink in one hand and Margot’s in the other, focussing on the sensation of one warm hand and one cold one, rather than on the way Will carries the platter with the same graceful motions she used to watch Hannibal perform. Margot smiles at them as they return, and Will sets the platter on the table, handing the knife to Alana to slice into the hot pastry, releasing a flood of melted cheese and honey. Margot coos in delight.

“Looks delicious!” she exclaims. “Pity Jack isn’t here to enjoy it.”

Alana frowns, but lets the feeling of unease pass over her. The scotch is good, and so is the food and the conversation. Will tells them about his travels, how he hopped continents to explore Cambodia and Thailand for a year after parting ways with Hannibal, then worked on a shipping line and crossed the Pacific to start fresh in Argentina. His stories focus on the local flora and fauna, the cuisine and culture, the scent and sound of crowded streets, more than they do on evading detection and illegally crossing borders. There’s an air of mystery and danger to his tales, but the way he spins them makes it seem charming in a way she knows it shouldn’t. In a way it really isn’t. Charming, she thinks, was never a word anyone would have associated with Will in the old days.

“You make it sound so pleasant,” she laughs, a short breathy sound somewhere between amusement and exasperation. “The fugitive lifestyle.”

Will laughs as well, and it’s a far gentler sound coming from him, which seems somehow unfair, all things considered. “Uh, I’m not sure pleasant is the word I would choose,” he rejoins, voice warmed by the rich scotch. He licks a droplet of sweet cheese from the webbing betwixt his thumb and index finger, eyes closing for a moment at the taste, and Alana frowns at something familiar, something half remembered jostled loose in her memory by the motion. “It’s been stressful, mostly. But I guess in some ways it’s forced me to change, live a life I wouldn’t have pursued but that I find myself oddly suited to. Still,” he continues, “I regret what it took, to bring me to this life.” He pauses, long
enough that Alana lifts her eyes to his face, to see him staring intently back. “I’m sorry, Alana, for hurting you.”

Will was never one for eye contact, but now Alana finds that she is the one squirming to look away, only she finds herself fixed, unable to drop his gaze. She can feel herself flushing, hot from alcohol and emotion.

“I’m sorry, too,” she says, almost whispering, and he nods with the slightest incline of his head.

“Where is Jack?” Margot asks, stepping closer to disrupt the tension between them. Will drops his gaze and Alana breathes a sigh of relief, suddenly able to breathe deeply again. She says a silent prayer for Margot. “Shouldn’t he be here by now?”

“I texted him ten minutes ago,” Alana confesses. “He hasn’t texted back.”

“He’s probably driving,” Will says. “Or the bureau may have called him in for something.”

“Does this mean you’ll tell us Bill’s identity before Jack gets back?” Alana asks, quickly. “Why are you being so secretive about it, anyway?”

“Patience,” Will scolds lightly. “Let’s eat first.” He gestures to the table, moving to draw out the chair at one end for Alana. The place at the head of the table is set for Jack, and Will stakes his claim to the spot on the right by placing his glass down there. “I’ll be back in a moment,” he promises.

“How about another drink?” Margot calls after him.

“I’ll bring the whole damn bottle,” he calls back.

“Won’t Jack mind?” Margot says, to Alana, once Will has vanished into the kitchen.

“I suppose he should hurry up and get here, if he does,” Alana says with a shrug. She finishes the last of her drink and sets the glass down with a defiant firmness. “I don’t like him not being here,” she says. “It’s not like him.”
“It’s completely like him,” Margot laughs. “From what you’ve told me the man is impulsive and risk prone - that’s what makes him so good. For all we know he’s gone after Buffalo Bill himself.”

Alana frowns. It’s not entirely untrue. And yet she can’t help feeling there is more here than meets the eye, something simmering beneath the surface.

Will re-enters the room, wheeling a serving cart with a heavy covered dish, its belled lid reflecting the flickering candlelight. He pulls the black bottle from the lower shelf and tosses it almost carelessly to Margot, who catches it, fortunately. Will hoists the tray onto the table as she pours them their second round, and removes the lid with a flourish. The scent of sweet, succulent meat wafts from the roast - Alana inhales the scent of lemon and peppercorns, sighing in delight. “Jack made this?”

“I helped,” Will admits. “He let me chop the vegetables.” He carves the roast, lifting hunks of juicy lamb and braised vegetables onto each of their plates, except Jack’s. “Should we serve him as well?” Will asks, tilting his head to indicate the empty seat at the head of the table. “A serving at an empty seat, like a dish laid out for a prophet or a god.” He lifts an eyebrow at her, smiling so easily that she finds herself mirroring the gesture, as if he’s turned his empathy inside out and now projects his emotions onto the canvas of her brain.

“Isn’t there a seat left empty for the prophet Elijah at Passover meals?” Margot asks, before lifting a bite to her lips. “My god, this is delicious.”

“Mmmm,” Alana agrees, as the flavor bursts against her palate, juices running thick down her throat. “I can’t believe Jack made this. He’s a fine chef, but this is beyond anything he’s ever served, to me at any rate.”

Will smiles at her, at Margot, looking peaceful. Again, she can’t help smiling back, and can’t help bringing another mouthful of glistening meat to her lips. Will mirrors her, closing his eyes at the first bite. “He’s definitely outdone himself,” he breathes.

“Yes,” agrees Margot, “a pity he doesn’t seem to be joining us any time soon.”

“Alana,” Will says, fixing his eyes on her with an intensity that is as unfamiliar as it is overwhelming. She feels herself resisting the urge to squirm under the burn of his gaze. The way the shadows dance in the candlelight makes it hard to look him firmly in the eyes, but she gives it her best attempt.
“Yes, Will?”

“Are you enjoying the meal?”

“Oh, yes, of course, Will,” she smiles, and takes another bite as if to prove her enjoyment. Will’s smile seems to creep over his face like vines.

“I’m happy to hear it,” he replies, “and happy we could come together like this, one final time before I leave for good. We’ve been many things to each other, haven’t we? Over the years?”

Alana shrugs one shoulder, frowning. The food is delicious – distractingly so – but there’s something in the way Will speaks that makes her stomach lurch, even though he’s said nothing untoward. A premonition, maybe, though she’s not sure she believes in them. “Many things,” she agrees, “but above all I hope we have been friends.”

Will hums, and lifts his glass to her. “Friends,” he says, “colleagues, almost lovers.” Alana feels her lip twitch, and notes the huff of air Margot exhales through her nose. Will seems oblivious to any discomfort his dredging up of the past has caused. “Hunter and hunted,” he says, no longer smiling, “jailer and prisoner.”

Alana doesn’t speak. She puts down her fork, the ding of silver on the plate absurdly loud in the growing quiet. She clears her throat, but no words come, and Will speaks before any can. “Do you ever think about the day Jack Crawford came to you about my consulting for the FBI?”

She nods her head, feels the tear drops dislodged by the motion. They cling to her lashes like mist in tall trees. “Yes,” she says, “I think about that day a lot.”

“What do you think about, Alana?”

“I think,” she starts, feeling pulled by the heaviness of his tone, the simpleness of his question, “about the consequences of that day. I think about how much pain and death would come from it, that none of us could have foreseen.”

“Do you ever think,” Will continues, and she recognizes an edge on his voice that brings her back to
a pale winter morning in Wolf Trap when she’d told him he’d defied her expectations, “you should have said or done something to keep Jack from ruining my life?”

“Will,” Alana half sobs, suddenly overcome, at the same moment Margot barks, “What the hell.”

“I tried, Will,” Alana pushes on, over her wife’s indignation. “I really did. I told him - ”

Will remains calm and cool, though, taking a bite of his dinner before speaking again.

“You told him, what?” Will says. “Don’t let me get too close? Made him promise you he’d be careful with me? Refused to evaluate me yourself because you were just that noble? You gave Jack free access to my mind and pushed me right into the hands of Hannibal Lecter, Alana.” He raises his glass to her again, this time standing as he does so, his black suit seeming to drink the light around him. “Behold, the spring you stained with mud! We wouldn’t be here without you, Alana, our guest of honor.”

There’s a clatter of dinnerware and cutlery as Margot begins to stand as well, a little too drunk to do so gracefully. Her hand knocks the glass of amber scotch over, and she sinks back into her chair, watching the liquid spread across the dark surface of the wood table with a look of utter dread. Will bends, drawing something small and flat from his pocket and holding it toward her. Alana watches her take the object with one subtly trembling hand, watches her brow furrow as she turns it over to examine. Then a buzzing in her pocket draws her attention, and the world falls apart around her all at once.

Time seems to slow, and the sounds and smells around her feel further away, as if she’s visiting the dining room an hour or two into the future, when the table will have been cleared and only the impressions they left on the energy of the room will remain, suspended like shadows on dust. Will and Margot are on the other side of a frosted pane as she draws her phone from her pocket, taking her eyes off Margot to glance down at the lock screen, unlocking at her touch and sliding away to reveal a text from Jack that stops her heart. She touches the image attachment to enlarge it, to confirm what she already fears - already knows. Morgan’s face is still in tact, somber lips slack and stormy eyes wide and staring. His chest is spread open, rib cage cracked and parted like a blown blossom, yawning to reveal a hollowed out body crammed full of white roses. Flesh hangs from his little limbs, arms and legs cleaved down to the bone. The image is a mess of swirling color and darkness, an impossibility, an idea her mind keeps trying to throw out. She feels her meal roiling inside her.

The sound of Margot’s shriek slices through her like a blade, and reality snaps back into place. Alana’s head jerks up, her eyes locking onto her wife, who has unfurled the flat little object and revealed it to be a white cotton handkerchief monogrammed M.B.V. in flowery embroidered script. Alana’s stomach turns, her jaw locking before a scream can escape.
Margot screams for her. Again and again, her high voice piercing the air in waves of panic. Alana can see the realization in Margot’s eyes - the same one shaking through her own mind and turning her blood to ice - that wasn’t lamb he served them. Alana’s eyes dart across the scene - Margot’s wide mouth, Will standing calmly over them with a crystal tumbler raised to his lips, the table laden for feasting. There’s a tray still covered with a silver lid - something saved for Jack, she’d assumed - and she bats at the lid with her hand. It rattles out of place and clatters to the floor, revealing a slender arm, cracked and roasted, its tiny fingers smelling deliciously of honey glaze. Alana can remember the way those fingers pulled at the hem of her dress, the way they wrapped around her curls. She closes her eyes.

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Will watches the full realization spread across Margot’s face, the knowledge that she’s consumed her own child settling hard in the center of her. She’s beyond screaming, now, and he watches the flare in her eyes as her mind breaks. It’s the third time she’s had her child stolen from her, and by far the worst. Will had wondered how she would react to it, and he finds that her reaction so far meets his expectations to a tee.

Then she does something surprising. He’d expected her to resort to violence at some point, and indeed he has been eyeing the knife by her plate since the moment he stood, unsure whether to expect her to direct the force of her rage at him or at herself. Now she does not fail to live up to his expectations, and in fact surpasses them by a measure so extreme he finds himself momentarily stunned and shaken by the severity and suddenness of her actions. There is no space for thought, internal debate, decision. Her shrieks clammer to a crescendo, and then quiet. He sees the flame of defeat blaze and die in her pupils. Her eyes fixed on her son’s glazed and roasted arm, Margot lifts her hands to her throat and begins to dig into the flesh with her short, blunt nails, as if attempting to rip the bites of her child from her throat. Regurgitation apparently not a suitable option, Margot pushes her fingers through the flesh of her throat with a slow and unrelenting force. Will watches her fingers disappear into the welling blood. There’s a wet, gurgling rasp of breath from her as her hand closes around her own trachea. She tears it with a jerk, using the last of her thought and strength to send a fountain of blood arching across the table. The hot droplets rain over the breast of Will’s suit. His expression doesn’t change as he watches her bleed out and slump face first into the blood-soaked plate, nor does it change when he turns his face from the wreck she’s made of herself to examine Alana instead.

Alana stares in shocked horror, her eyes so wide Will can see white all around the ring of blue iris. Her chest heaves with the rapid rise and fall of her breathing, the only sound escaping her the rattle of those shuddering breaths. She makes no move towards her dinner knife, no motion to stand. Catatonic, Will guesses, frozen with shock. Looking at her face, he has no doubt she understands what’s happening.

The sound of her ragged breaths stretches between them, rhythmic as a ticking clock, for several
seconds. Then comes the sound of Hannibal’s feet, clad in shoes again, moving towards them from the kitchen. Will feels his own heart trip at the approaching footsteps, and his lips part in a soft, inaudible gasp when Hannibal stands at the head of the table, at the place Will has already set for him, dark suited and clean and radiating the kind of blood red energy that sets fire to Will’s nerves.

“The gods delight in tragedy, Alana,” Hannibal speaks, words rolling rich and velvety over Alana’s tortured noises. “Like the earth, you have swallowed your own increase. Didn’t I tell you that your family belonged to me?”

This draws a reaction from the stunned woman. She launches across the table, finally grabbing for the knife beside her, but Will is faster. He grabs her, pins her arms to her sides and feels her struggle like a bird beating its wings in desperation for release. He keeps his arms around her, flicking the cap from the syringe in his hands and slipping the injection into her straining neck. Her body loosens almost immediately, becoming heavy and slack. Will lowers her to the floor, brushing the hair from her warm face. She sighs in her sleep, once, and then her breaths come steady and slow.

Will looks up, from his position kneeling on the floor over Alana’s unconscious body. Hannibal looms over him, resplendent and terrible. “Well done, Will,” Hannibal says, voice dark and soft, “you’ve found your revenge, I think.”

But Will shakes his head. “Not yet,” he says. He lets his gaze return to the prone body before him, and his mouth curls into a frown. “No more loose ends,” he reminds Hannibal.

He can see the lift and fall of Hannibal’s shoulders in his peripheral vision. “I made a promise,” Hannibal says, simply.

“Aren’t your promises to me worth more?”

“I didn’t promise to kill her for you, only that you would be triumphant, and we would not be caught.”

Will considers Alana, the soft curve of her jaw, the slow rise of her chest, the knife loosely held in one hand. He can hear the jibe in Hannibal’s words. If he pushed it long enough, Hannibal would wear down, he thinks, and relent. But Will isn’t certain that’s what he wants at all. The cruelest thing would be to let her live. She would wake up here alone, surrounded by the remains of her family, with nothing to do but suffer. Will doesn’t think she would take her own life. She’d hunt for them, the way she helped Mason hunt them once. Someday she might even find them.
In that regards, the cruelest punishment might not be worth it. Will imagines an eternity of looking over his shoulder, leaving every place just as it starts to feel like home. With Hannibal beside him, it’s still a better future than anything his life here had to offer, but why settle when a better possibility is so easy to achieve? Justice needn’t always be cruel, after all. Will might even feel a spark of pity in his breast, looking down at her now, remembering a time he called her his friend. He lets his hand rest on hers, the hilt of the knife between their interlinked fingers.

His fingers slip from hers, to curve around the knife instead. Will can feel Hannibal’s eyes on him as he lifts the blade to Alana’s exposed throat. His heart beats steadily in his chest, and the sound of Hannibal’s sigh behind him is of greater excitement than the feeling of the blade pushing into her neck, or the spurt of blood that burbles up, not high enough splash his face but immediately staining his hands. Alana’s eyes don’t open. She bleeds to death peacefully, limbs twitching, and Will stands to face Hannibal.

He lets his hands hang at his side, palms forward, fingers dripping blood. Vengeance is in my heart, Will thinks, death in my hands. Blood and revenge hammer in my head. All the guilty ones, all the ones who brought me to my fate, cut down and dealt justice. All except Hannibal.

His breath is ragged, suddenly, no longer tame and silent but wild and overwhelming. He does not think he can speak, does not think he could make himself heard over the panting din of his own breathing. It scares him. Feels the way dying on Hannibal’s floor felt. Like his bones are made of light and air. He stares across at Hannibal, and feels the ocean of unsaid words still hanging beneath them, things so close to the surface they don’t need to be given sound.

There are no right words to pass between themselves in this moment. Instead, Will watches Hannibal step closer to him and to the table still set for dinner. Hannibal plucks a slice of succulent meat from Will’s plate with his bare fingers, raising it in a clear offer. Will takes a step towards him, takes hold of his wrist, and snatches the bite from him with bared teeth.

“Spring lamb,” Will whispers, eyes blown, lips wet. Something about the richness and rapture of flavor reminds him of the ortolan Hannibal served him long ago. An initiation, then, as this is, now. “Should we cover our heads with our napkins to hide our shame from God as we eat?”

Hannibal’s eyes flash, a gleam of pride, Will thinks, or wonder. “Neither of us feel shame at this act,” he answers, “unless I am mistaken.”

Hannibal holds another slice of succulent roast meat up for him, and Will leans forward to receive it, eyes locked with Hannibal’s as he draws his tongue along the older man’s fingers to clean them of the savory juices running over Hannibal’s knuckles. No shame, he thinks, and, looking into Hannibal’s eyes as his lips suck at the finger between them, he is fairly certain the message has been conveyed.
“You really are something from a fairy tale,” Will chuckles, and closes his eyes as Hannibal strokes his hair and cheek with one hand, and feeds him with the other. “A fairy tale villain. A monster under a bridge.”

“Waiting to eat the children who cross it?” Hannibal asks, voice amused. “That makes us a pair of monsters.”

Will doesn’t answer. Instead, he opens his eyes and snags a piece of the roast child with his fingers, pressing it against Hannibal’s smile till his lips part. Will runs his finger along Hannibal’s sharp teeth for a split second before retreating. A pair of monsters, he thinks, but when he looks at Hannibal the man seems anything but monstrous. Will’s face shifts at the thought, at the memory of how he once saw the pair of them - dripping in darkness and wreathed in horrendous antlers, sharp fingered demons lurking through the night. His guilt is gone now. Hannibal no longer seems a monster to him, and Will finds that he feels nothing like a monster himself.

“A pair of angels,” he answers, “the avenging kind.”

“The fallen kind,” Hannibal corrects, and Will shrugs.

“That too,” he says. “Angels or demons, it doesn’t matter what we are, as long as we’re a pair of it.”

There’s a softness in Hannibal’s expression that doesn’t belong on the face of a man who just fed a toddler to his parents. It’s a look Will only sees directed at himself. There’s a watery feeling in his chest, as if inside of him there’s nothing solid keeping everything in place. He focusses on the lingering taste of herbs and meat on his mouth, watches as Hannibal pushes his chair back and pats his lap silently. Will rises without thinking too much about it; he’s found that to be a relaxing tactic over the past couple years.

Settling in Hannibal’s lap, Will reaches for his glass of wine and takes a drink, making sure to press his lips in the wet spot where Hannibal’s mouth has already been. Hannibal’s arms settle around him, hands at his shoulder and hip. Hannibal’s thumb traces a circle round and round his hipbone, and Will sets the glass down again with smack of his lips.

“How long I’ve wait to see you like this,” Hannibal breathes, and Will concentrates on his face, the look of veneration there so plain it cracks his heart. “Beyond all barriers, beyond all laws, free as only the gods can be, Will, transmuted into one yourself. At ease at last.”
They push the plates and candles off the table - staining the carpet with soot and wax, wine and oil - and Hannibal slams Will’s back onto the wooden surface with enough force to knock the air from the younger man’s lungs. They shed their clothes without taking their mouths off of one another - Will fixes his lips to Hannibal’s shoulder the second the skin there is exposed, feels Hannibal’s teeth scraping the underside of his jaw. Will digs his fingers into the smooth skin of Hannibal’s hips, feeling the flesh bruise beneath his grip and hears the low release of breath Hannibal gives at the pain. It makes Will want to hurt him more.

His hands are slick with grease from the plates he’s pushing aside, the sweet melting fat of the lamb they’d served, and Will takes himself in hand, throwing his head back at the slide of his own hand. He can feel Hannibal’s eyes on him, watching him with ravenous desire. Will can feel the echo of it blasting through him, and for a moment he’s certain he’ll come like this, at the first touch of his own hand.

“Hannibal,” he chokes out, and even though he can’t say more, Hannibal seems to understand. He moves slow but purposeful, pushing Will back further onto the table before climbing over him, legs straddling his hips. Will gasps as Hannibal’s body sinks over him. It’s far from the first time he’s been inside of Hannibal, but it’s never felt quite like this before. Hannibal’s body is hot and throbbing, and Will’s head lolls, his hips jerking upwards in an uncontrollable spasm of lust. Will lets his hands rest on Hannibal’s hips, thrusting up again and again as he pulls Hannibal down around him.

It goes on and on, until Will thinks they must be stuck in one ever repeating moment, suspended in time, trapped in this moment. His heart thunders with a sudden panic, and he feels Hannibal’s body tighten around him at the same moment. Hannibal buries his groan into Will’s neck, sinking his teeth into the soft flesh there as he comes, and Will lets himself thrust harder, losing the rhythm of their coupling to lose himself in desperate, rough movements. He comes with Hannibal’s name on his lips, his eyes fixing on the pale curve of Hannibal’s shoulder illuminated in the dim ambient lighting.

Hannibal’s forehead rests on his shoulder. Will can feel the way his sweat damp hair clings to the skin there, the way Hannibal’s breath warms his neck. He could stay in this moment forever, he thinks. “I could stay in this moment forever,” he says.

Hannibal chuckles darkly, the sound muffled but sinister against the crook of Will’s neck. He feels the sound vibrating in his chest. Hannibal pulls back, at last, shifting so that Will slides from him with a sigh. He looks down with an affectionate smirk. “I think you will,” he says, “I think we both will.”
“What do you mean?” Will asks. “In our memories?”

Hannibal shakes his head. “No,” he says, “I mean just what you say. We hang perpetually suspended in time, frozen together.”

Will looks at him like he’s gone mad, but Hannibal does nothing but smirk back, and Will isn’t sure what to say. Finally, Hannibal speaks for him. “Think hard, Will, about the night we killed the dragon, the night you ran away with me. Remember it as vividly as you can, the pain in your cheek, the blood hot and slippery between your fingers, the moment you decided to throw us both into the sea rather than be taken. What do you remember the most?”

Will lets out a soft laugh, sadder than it is bitter, and rakes a hand through his curls, eyes fixed on some empty spot a few feet ahead. That absence of ground beneath his feet. The sound of the wind. “I remember,” he says, “standing with you on the cliff overlooking the bay. I remember you pulling me out of the waves.”

Hannibal licks his lips. “Do you remember hitting the water?”

For a second the world melts away - the table beneath them, the bodies of their former friends propped around it, the walls and ceiling, it all peels back like the skin off a fruit. Will tries to remember, and he’s falling again, arms locked around Hannibal, toppling headlong into the frigid water of the Atlantic. He can feel the bite of the air rushing over his skin, through his hair, drying his lips and eyes until he closes the lids over them tightly and finds himself once again in Baltimore, spread out nude beneath Hannibal Lecter amongst the remains of their Thyestean banquet. He can tell, from the chill on Hannibal’s skin and the look in his eyes, that he isn’t alone.

Will laughs again, shaking his head. “I remember,” he chews his lip, releases it glistening and ruddy, “falling.”

“When you close your eyes,” Hannibal says, and Will knows he could as easily speak in first person, “when reality begins to blur into imagination, reason into magic and the absurd.”

“A dream,” Will mutters, “a hallucination shared in the moments before the inevitable end. Are we dreaming these wonders, the past two years, every touch, every kill?” His fingers press against Hannibal’s skin, one hand gripping Hannibal’s left hip, one hand splayed over his chest. “Suspended in time,” he breaths. “And then none of this is real? You must think I’m as crazy as you, to believe that.”
It’s almost fitting, Will considers. It’s been too good to be true, in so many ways. Surviving the fall in the first place was a minor miracle. Everything that followed has been no less miraculous. Coming together so effortlessly, resisting psychoactive truth serums, escaping the BSHCI, evading the FBI - it all feels too good, has always felt so on some level. Will feels himself reeling, feels the tug of gravity behind his navel as beneath him the table’s solidity waivers.

Hannibal’s arms, tightening around him, keep him from falling away entirely. “A dream?” he asks, incredulous. “This is reality, Will. This,” his arms tighten further, till Will feels himself struggling to breathe deep, “is our best possible world. All the right cards dealt to us, all the right turns, as if Fortune herself guided us. If a miracle has occurred, it is that we managed to escape that old world for this one.”

Hannibal nuzzles against the side of his face, and Will feels the other man’s breath warming the side of his face. “If we are still falling,” Hannibal murmurs into the shell of Will’s ear, “in some other world, let us keep falling.”

“Falling,” Will repeats. “Always falling, with you.”

“Yes,” Hannibal breathes, his mouth descending finally over Will’s. “Yes.”

Will arches his back, his body curving beneath Hannibal’s in search of as much skin to skin contact as he can find. In some other world, maybe they will hang suspended in the dream of this moment for all time, bodies moving in slow motion towards the surface of a sea they never reach. Maybe all of this, Hannibal’s mouth on his, Hannibal’s hair twined around his fingers, the taste of Hannibal’s mouth and the slide of his skin, maybe it is all taking place in the space of seconds, a trick of the mind that stretches their final seconds into a lifetime. Maybe, maybe, but it doesn’t matter.

“Nothing matters, now,” Hannibal whispers, against his mouth, as if plucking the words from his head. “Your enemies lie dead at your feet, and none remain to stop us. Let's leave, Will. We can go anywhere, now.” He stares down at Will, at the short cropped curls that stand in disarray about his face, and at the way Will’s pink lips part for his breaths. He drags a long finger along Will’s cheekbone, relishing the little shudder his touch draws. “There are so many places I want to show you, Will. Paris, Venice, Florence, of course - real or not, I want to experience it all with you.”

Will twists beneath him. “There’s one last thing we need to do,” he says, “before we go.”

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When she wakes again there’s a pain in her head that doesn’t feel healthy. *Something abnormal,* she thinks, *not just a bump to the head when I fell.* She remembers the stinging sensation she’d experienced in her hip a moment before Frederick’s horribly contorted face began to bend and streak across her vision. Reaching down, she extracts the dart from her skin. She winces as she pulls the syringe free, then clutches it tightly in her fist as she scans her surroundings, blinking fast.

It’s all very much like it was before. She’s at the bottom of a well with unclimbable packed earth walls, a dirty twin mattress and a pile of blankets shoved against one wall and a stinking bucket pushed close to the other. There’s still no light, except the faintest glow shining distant beyond the ringed horizon high above. There’s still a foul smell in the frigid air. But now, Freddie sees, she is alone.

A wave of pain slams through her head, and her stomach twists. She rolls onto her back, and pushes herself into a sitting position, her back against the wall. Whatever he gave her, it’s not out of her system yet. The walls crawl like cracking brown serpents, and the pain washes over her again with such intensity she thinks she’s about to lose consciousness again. The dark world blurs, somehow, gray shapes losing clear edges.

Calvin is gone. She has to mouth the words to understand them, her dry lips cracking around the silent syllables. What she wouldn’t give for a bottle of water and an aspirin.

What she wouldn’t give to wake up and realize this has all been a dream, a twisted nightmare. It feels like a nightmare, like something unreal. Her throbbing brain cannot wrap itself around this reality.

The hardest thing to accept is that she didn’t see this coming. For all her cleverness and keen observations, she overlooked something vital. *Consequences,* she thinks, and frowns at the wall before her face. There are scratch marks etched into the earthen surface. Freddie’s stomach pitches at the sight.

She draws her knees up to her chest, presses her eyes shut. Forcing herself to breathe deep and slow, she sinks into a deeper darkness, a place where her only aim is to remain calm, not wonder where Calvin has gone or what has become of him, as she waits for inspiration or doom to strike her from above.

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They park Jack’s car in the driveway of Chilton’s aggressively modern house, and move in silence up the dark path to the front door. In his chest, Will’s heart is a steady drum. He doesn’t start at the light touch Hannibal lays on his wrist, only inclines his head to catch Hannibal’s eye before the taller
man steps off the path and vanishes into the shadows around the corner of Chilton’s home. He understands, without discussion or explanation. In his mind there’s the echo of words that aren’t exactly memories, but maybe something said at this moment in a parallel world similar to this one. 

*Let me be your sword, the flaming blade of the angel of justice. Let me be the instrument of punishment you wield against the deserving.*

He carries on towards the front door alone, then, but with the pressure of Hannibal’s presence pressing against the stem of his brain. For a moment, as his finger presses the doorbell, he scents blood in the air, and licks at his lips to be sure it’s not there.

From the left side of the house, Hannibal hears the bell chiming within. The sound is loudest to his left, where light streams from a cracked window out onto the black lawn. He waits crouched beneath the sill until he hears the sound of footsteps passing inside, then swings himself up, over the window sill and into the familiar kitchen. Hannibal scans the austere room, listening for the sound of Chilton’s footsteps moving further, towards the front door.

His eyes catch on a heavy looking metal door along the back wall. He remembers there is a stairway behind it, leading to a basement and a wine cellar, but the last time he was here there was no door. He moves towards it, noting with gratitude that the door is still ajar. There’s a rank smell wafting up the dark spiral of the stairs, the faint odor of decay riding the cool air below. Hannibal opens the door wider, peering down into the darkness.

There’s something at the bottom of this darkness that needs to be seen. Hannibal takes a step down, letting the door close behind him with a muted clunk, and finds himself blind at the top of the stairs. He lets his hand rest on the balustrade, surprised when his fingers close around a cloth strap. He pulls the object off the railing, examining with his touch before bringing the goggles over his head and flicking them on.

The stairwell lights up in red. From somewhere below, there’s groaning sound that escalates abruptly into screaming. Hannibal makes his way down, towards the sound.

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He’s been expecting Will, expecting the knock on the door, imagining it so hard he’s almost unsure whether it’s real now, as he opens the door to greet Will, standing in the circle of porch light with a characteristically grim look on his slim face.

“Good evening, Will,” he says, feigning a calm he doesn’t feel, because even if this is a figment of his imagination, Frederick still desperately wants to appear in control. *For once,* he thinks, *finally.*
His stomach churns like it’s crammed with fluttering dark wings.

But he stands aside, face placid and movements unhurried and unbothered, his arm extended to welcome Will. It’s almost too much, when Will steps inside, and when the door clicks shut and the deadbolt thuds into place Chilton thinks for a moment that he’s going to pass out from sheer excitement. How many times he’s pictured it, looking and feeling exactly like this.

“I suppose you’ve been expecting me,” Will asks, and the tilt of his head could almost be described as coy. His hair is neat, clothes clean, but there’s a smear of blood behind his left ear, visible when he turns his head. Frederick’s mind reels at the spot, at what it could mean, and at the thoughtless way in which Will bears his neck to him, as if he senses no threat. “Hope I didn’t keep you waiting.”

“You aren’t the only visitor I’ve been expecting,” Frederick says, a beat too late, perhaps, for the words to sound unaffected. Surely Will hasn’t come here alone; Frederick had been so certain it would be the both of them.

“It’s just the two of us, Frederick,” Will says, lifting a cool eyebrow. “Just us left to contend with one another.”

Frederick’s eyes flicker involuntarily to the dark smudge of dried blood on the back of Will’s neck. He stands a little taller, resting one hand on the back of the sofa for balance. “I’d like to show you something in my basement,” he says. It’s not subtle, but he doesn’t think it has to be subtle to work on Will this time. They both know what this is going to come down to - only Will doesn’t yet realize they won’t be contending on a level playing field.

“Alright,” Will says, “lead the way.”

Heart hammering, Frederick walks Will through the house, into the kitchen, and towards the heavy metal door. He plucks a flashlight from the counter beside the door, flicking it on as he lets the door swing open. “After you,” he gestures, and Will gives him a hard look before stepping downwards, in the stripe of light Frederick provides him.

Frederick smiles, unseen. His hand reaches for the strap of the night vision goggles, but they aren’t where they should be, and his smile creases into a grimace at the unexpected set back. He curses himself for his carelessness; they must be somewhere in the house upstairs, or perhaps he left them somewhere in the basement when he was dealing with what remained of the last donor.
A minor inconvenience, Frederick decides, stepping after Will, flashlight held aloft. The door thuds shut behind them, and Frederick touches the key in his pocket at the sound. Even without the goggles, the upper hand is his. He knows the landscape of the basement, every hard edge and hole. It won’t be hard to lure Will, in the dark, to the edge of the well, and push him in. Frederick can already imagine how that skin will feel, laid bare and lying cold for the harvest.

“You want me to see something down here?” Will asks, voice laden with irony.

“Well,” Frederick admits, his finger resting heavily on the switch of the flashlight, “not exactly.”

He flicks the switch and the room plummets into pitch black.

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For a paralyzing moment, the darkness presses in hot and horrendous, like oil filling his nose and ears. He can feel his heart racing, unsteady and frantic where it had been calm a moment before, and there’s a cold sheen of sweat forming on the skin beneath his shirt. And then there is wind, and the smell of salt, and Hannibal’s mouth speaking into his ear, words that are lost in the din of the air rushing past them in slow motion. Will clings to him, lost for a moment in the world where he is still falling from the top of that dark cliff, years ago, the world in which all of this has just been an imagined glimpse that he and Hannibal are sharing. For how long, though? Will they fall forever, as Hannibal said, always covering just half the distance to the surface, so that the space between themselves and the ocean grows ever thinner but they never get wet?

Isn’t it real, he thinks, forcing himself to breathe, forcing his eyes to close, and opening them again onto the blackness of Chilton’s void-like basement, if we both experience it? Isn’t that shared experience a kind of reality? He can feel himself relaxing into the blank blackness, and realizes he hasn’t moved, hasn’t stepped in any direction.

Frederick is watching him blindly, Will knows, but they aren’t alone down here. He can sense Hannibal, lurking somewhere in the darkness, as if his presence causes the air to glow faintly. Will can feel his hunger on the air, that familiar insatiable desire for blood. Let me be the flaming sword of righteousness, wield me as a weapon to cleave the wicked.

“It’s no use, Frederick,” Will hears his voice echoing through the basement. He wants to take a step, wants to run in any direction, back up the stairs towards the door he knows must certainly be locked. His heart has slowed, but still flutters in his chest, and his instincts are screaming for him to flee. He forces himself to be still. There are traps here, he thinks, traps you find when you try to run.
“You think you can kill us,” Will calls to the darkness, “and then what? Wear our skin? Eat our flesh? Become us? You can’t even become yourself.” There’s a noise to his left, and Will’s head jerks towards it, but of course it’s impossible to see. The darkness is like a heavy curtain. Will has to close his eyes for a moment, dizzy with vertigo from staring and not seeing. He waits, but Chilton doesn’t speak.

“You accused me of setting you up,” he calls into the darkness. It’s so black his eyes are beginning to see sparkles in the air, illusions, as if the air is black silk. “Do you know why I did it?”

A rustle of sound behind him. Will wheels to face it, uselessly. He plants his feet, bracing himself. “I did it,” Will says, “because you deserved it. I couldn’t have done it otherwise. But doing bad things to bad people feels good, and you, Frederick, are a bad person.” This time, when he hears something behind him, Will stays put, not bothering to do more than tilt his head so that one ear faces the sound. “Don’t believe me? Just look what you’ve become. A killer? The king of the bottomless pit.”

Will breathes deep, feels a shudder run through him, a sensation like the caress of Hannibal’s fingers over his spine. He feels himself expanding, feels himself blending and blurring, and for a second the room around him is bathed in red light, and he sees it so clearly, sees the blood streaked floor, the body of Calvin Martin slumped against an antique sewing table, the edge of a well, Chilton’s contorted face frothing blindly at him, and behind him, staring right into Will’s eyes, Hannibal, knife in hand. Will breathes out, and the lights dim, and he’s not sure, can’t be sure. What’s real. If any of this is happening. If he’s even still alive. But the feeling unfurls within him, leaves him hot and panting and overcome, so that it doesn’t matter.

“Hear this, Frederick,” Will shouts towards the empty space in front of him, and somehow he knows that Frederick, standing across from him in the void, flinches. He isn’t sure where the words come from, though they sound like something he’s heard before. They bubble over, and he manages to keep his voice just short of a scream. “If you still have ears, listen: judgement is living and active, justice sharper than any two-edged sword. I see you, Frederick, down to your joints and marrow, soul and spirit.”

There’s a shriek from five feet in front of him. The sound of tearing flesh, then, and a series of screams, but still nothing to see. Will’s chest heaves. The feeling of vertigo he experienced before returns, and he stumbles backwards half a step, trying to keep himself still, trying to remember the exact location of the well he’d seen in the maybe-real flash of red he’d envisioned. Someone’s hand closes over his right arm, firm as shackles.

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Hannibal watches Will move with a swell of indescribable pride. More than any composition or drawing, any arrangement or meal, Will is his finest artistic effort, a living and evolving masterpiece. Hannibal would hesitate to say that Will is a finished piece; there was a time in his life when he thought in such absolutes, but that time has been erased by the spectacle of Will’s transformation. Each new iteration eclipsing the last, his metamorphosis has reached an apparent crescendo, but Hannibal still would not pronounce him done, would not pronounce either of them done. Who can say what they may yet become in the coming years, however many they have left?

There was a time when Hannibal considered himself a finished piece, unchangeable, static. It was a comfortable way of life, but not one he misses. Staring through the darkness, at a world painted red, listening to Will’s voice prophesying doom reverberating off the basement walls, Hannibal’s heart feels too large and hot in his chest. A creature dies shortly after reaching its final form, and so perhaps mutability, however painful, will prove their immortality.

Hannibal forces his attention back onto the figure between himself and Will. Chilton wears a half finished coat of mottled leather. Hannibal recognizes human skin when he sees it. Chilton’s done as clumsy a job tanning the hides as he has assembling them into a garment. He looks a proper monster, something from the silent film era, a living gargoyle. Hannibal allows himself to sneer, unseen, at the mess Chilton has become.

He keeps his shoulders pointed at Chilton, but flickers his eyes briefly to Freddie’s figure, bound and gagged and glaring. He’d found her at the bottom of the well, and bargained quickly. Miss Lounds had always been passably intelligent, for all her shortcomings; faced with certain death and an uncertain future as a serial killer’s hostage she made the right choice. He’d apologized for the gag, but feels certain, watching her now, that she must understand this as the safest course of action.

A movement draws Hannibal’s eyes back. Chilton stumbles towards Will, teeth bared in a snarl. The half-finished cloak of mismatched skin flutters around him like wings - not red and leathery like the Dragon’s, but pale and ashy as moth wings, frantic with anxious energy. Hannibal breathes slow, noting the curve of wings, the glow beneath the skin. A vision, he knows, a vivid projection from Will’s imagination and memory, pushing through to his mind where the distinction between their thoughts has blurred. It is a breathtaking experience, Hannibal reflects, to view the world as Will does.

Chilton is bathed in red by the night vision goggles, as if shining with a sheen of blood. And then Hannibal steps forward, blade bared to Chilton’s unguarded throat, and the man does shine with a sheen of blood as well, now. His shriek pierces the air, and Hannibal can see and hear Will gasp, over Chilton’s bleeding shoulder. The scent of fresh blood floods his nostrils, and he finds his mouth inexplicably filled with saliva.

He brings the knife down again, and again, sloppy and cathartic, giving in to all the carefully held emotions. There’s a freedom in the darkness, in knowing no one will see if he deigns to be inelegant
in this instant. He can feel Will’s excitement, hurrying his hand on.

At last his hands are soaked with blood, and Chilton’s screams have ceased. Hannibal looks up, in time to see Will stepping backwards, his heel inches from the rim of the well. Hannibal lets the knife drop, steps forward and takes Will’s wrist without hesitation. The little sound of surprise, and maybe fear, brings a snarl to his lips, and Hannibal tugs him close, out of harm’s way - or into its embrace.

Will clings to him. For him, Hannibal knows, the world is nothing but darkness. Hannibal closes his eyes, but it’s not enough. He reaches up to flick the goggles off, and joins Will in the total dark.

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The air seems crisper, the light brighter. The kitchen smells pleasantly of something freshly baked, though she knows it is only some candle or air freshener. The sound of ice rattling from the dispenser in the fridge door into the glass Will holds sounds impossibly loud and clear, almost like the clanging of a bell. She watches him fill a tall glass of water, listens to the fountain like stream. He puts the glass of ice water down on the kitchen island between them. He lets her make eye contact, then, and she keeps her gaze on him as she reaches warily towards the glass.

It tastes so good - so pure and fresh, the best thing she’s ever tasted - that she knows it’s not drugged.


“She deserved better,” Freddie mutters.

“We agree on that, at least,” Will says. There’s the sound of a car engine starting outside. Will begins to round the kitchen island, coming towards her like a dark wave. “Time to go.”

He takes both her wrists in one hand before she can run, and she follows him to the front door and into the backseat of the town car in the driveway. Hannibal turns to smile at the two of them from the front. Freddie resists the urge to spit in his smug face. Barely.

“Let’s get out of here,” Will groused, forcing the seatbelt onto Freddie and then sits back to look out the tinted window.
“Whatever you say, Will,” Hannibal agrees pleasantly. The car glides onto the road, and Freddie tries to memorize the turns they make. Her mind turns to bread crumbs, as they merge onto the freeway, heading north, about a trail of white stones gleaming in the moonlight.

She lets herself glance, from the corner of her eye, at Will Graham. He’s still staring out the window, but she knows he can see her reflection in the glass, just as she can see the tense line of his jaw reflected back at them. He doesn’t have a weapon visible - no gun trained on her, not even a knife. But then, he doesn’t need one. He is a weapon. He himself is a bigger threat than any pistol could be. She remembers fleeing from him, many years before, through the snow near his old house, remembers the strength in his hands as he’d knocked her car’s window in and dragged her through the snow towards his shed. She’d been certain he meant to kill her, and equally certain that he could do it. His hands were so strong on her, she could easily imagine the way her neck would snap between them.

She’s imagined it on many nights since then.

Even if she managed to incapacitate or kill him before he gouged her eyes out and twisted her neck into a pretzel, Freddie knows there’s no escape with Hannibal Lecter at the wheel. If she were to somehow kill Will, she can easily imagine the older man driving the two of them into oncoming traffic. One last grand gesture, turning themselves into a blazing funeral pyre.

“Did you two know Frederick was Buffalo Bill?” Freddie asks. If they’re going to kill her, they’ll kill her whether she’s quiet or not. If she somehow, miraculously, makes it out of this alive, she’ll wish she was dead if she doesn’t get some good quotes from them now.

Will snorts at the question. “You certainly didn’t,” he replies. “Were you two dating?”

Freddie glares across the back seat. “You’re hardly one to criticize,” she says, with a sniff. “We had a mutually beneficial relationship. “How did you know?”

“It’s my job to know, Freddie,” Will answers. “You spend so much time publishing articles about how it takes a psycho to catch a psycho, and suddenly you’re surprised that I caught one?”

“What the two of you did to Frederick doesn’t count as catching,” she says with a shiver. Will practically snarls.
“She has a point, dear,” Hannibal says from the front seat, and Freddie’s skin crawls at the casual term of endearment, the teasing levity in Hannibal’s voice. *If I survive*, she thinks, *my readers will devour this.*

“I don’t care about semantics,” Will growls, “or anything you have to say, in general, Freddie, so take this opportunity to reflect in silence.”

She does. For about twelve seconds. “You’re driving North,” she says. “Heading for the border? How do you expect to get across?”

They don’t answer her, and after several seconds she gives an exasperated huff and resigns herself to staring out the window. Her head still hurts, and there are aches in her limbs that should be checked out by a medical professional *not* well known for cannibalism. She rests her head against the cool glass of the window, watching the trees blur by. At some point she must fall asleep, because the sun is overhead, climbing the sky, when Will shakes her awake. The car is stopped, pulled over on the side of an empty forest road. “Come on,” he says, “time to go.”

“Where are we?” she asks, but she isn’t surprised when she receives no answer. Will starts to walk into the trees without looking back at her. There are no keys in the ignition. Freddie clambers from the vehicle, casting her eyes up and down the road for some clue to their location.

“You heard the man,” Hannibal’s elegant voice rolls languidly from the other side of the car. He smirks across the hood at her. “Time to go.”

She follows Will’s path reluctantly. With one of them behind her and one ahead, in the midst of an unfamiliar forest, Freddie’s not sure what the best course of action is, or what they intend with her. There’s a thread of anxiety unspooling in her gut, but she forces her mind off it. She always feels better asking questions; it makes her feel in control, somehow. “How far are we going?” she asks.

“Not far,” Will answers, barely visible ahead of them. She’s following the sound of his footsteps through the undergrowth, as much as the sight of him through the trees.

“You’re not planning to kill me,” she says, and hopes that it’s the truth. “You wouldn’t have bothered taking me with you. You’d have left me in the well or killed me back at Frederick’s.”

“Maybe we decided you’re more trouble than you’re worth,” Will offers. “I’ve been known to change my mind about things on occasion.”
She keeps quiet after that, and follows the sound of trampled leaves deeper into the tall trees. She can hear Hannibal at her back. The sun climbs higher, until at last, with it hanging overhead, they stop.

“This should be far enough,” Will says.

“I think so,” Hannibal agrees. He tosses something to Freddie, who just barely manages to pluck it from the air. She lifts a quizzical gaze to him. “You phone,” Hannibal explains, though it’s hardly the explanation she desires, “I found it in the basement.”

“And?”

“You’ll need it to call help.” Freddie glances down at the screen, pressing the center button with no effect. “There’s about 20% of battery life left,” Hannibal says. “I ran it out on purpose before turning it off. You’ll want to wait to switch it on. There’s no reception this far out. If you walk straight forward for about an hour you’ll come back to the road; it curves around a lake. You can follow it until you reach somewhere civilized, or until a car picks you up, whichever comes first.” He looks up at the sky, at the sunlight filtering through the leaves. Shadows move on his face. “You should make it to a gas station before nightfall, even with your injuries.”

“Don’t follow us,” Will says. “You can tell anyone you want what we were driving; by the time you get to the police it won’t matter.”

He turns, and begins to walk back through the forest in the direction they came, without so much as a parting word. Hannibal smiles briefly at her, then turns as well. “Wait!” she calls, suddenly breathless when they do. “Why leave me alive?”

“We talked about it,” Will says, “while you were sleeping.”

“Someone has to tell the story,” Hannibal says, his smile aimed at Will now, and Freddie’s stomach pitches at the look that passes between the two of them.

“What happens to you next?” she presses, before they can turn again. “Where will you go?”

“Now,” Will says, and he steps further into the trees, dragging Hannibal along by their interlinked
hands, so that his answer reaches her as a disembodied voice, “we’ll disappear.”

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