Lives, Loves and Predators

by thequietscribe

Summary

In a world where omegas are the top of the food chain, and alphas desperately try to win their favour, Will Graham struggles with what society and biology demand of him. The elite gather at his family's estate for a Grand Ball, a place where alphas show off and try to find a mate, Will is forced into the fray as one of the most coveted and unmated omegas in the city, but can he keep his anxiety from causing untold harm?

Notes

This is my first real step into fanfiction. Set in an alternate universe that is loosely based on Regency Britain. I have tried to keep the characters as close as possible to how they would act, but due to the changes from the tv series, and the circumstances in their lives and physiology there will obviously be some differences. The first part of the collection was a set of agony aunt letters that Will wrote for a newspaper, which should give more information on the general world this is set in.
See the end of the work for more notes.
Will stared into the long mirror, taking in how he looked. It was not an idle or narcissistic endeavour, but one to remind him of what others would see.

The suit was much like the others he owned but had not tailored himself: a delight. The tailor had worked wonders to make him look tall, sophisticated and refined. The dark blue seemed to shimmer to black as he moved, the white shirt and light grey tie only highlighting the fact that his neck had no bonding marks, his hair trimmed to seem artfully casual to give the hint of what he might look like upon waking. It was a strong lure, he knew that. This was what they would see when he went down there into the rooms filled with people; an unmated omega of prominence and worth.

That would be what they would see if they neglected to notice the slight trembling of his hands, one he could see, could feel himself as he tweaked the shirt cuffs into a slightly better position. That would be what they would see if they didn't seek his scent too deeply past the smears of ointment he had rubbed over his glands and the oil he had added to his bathwater. So long as they only saw what he wanted them to, they wouldn't find themselves pressing closer, trying to touch in order to reassure.

Stop. Just stop.

He focused on his hands, trying to get them to stop the shaking. He had to do this. Jack wouldn't let him sit out this time, not when he would need to find another alpha for his next heat. He could do this. He wouldn't be left unguarded by the alphas in the family, and they knew how to deal with his... quirks. So long as he didn't freak out at something, it would be fine. Unpleasant, but fine.

It wasn't like these balls were an uncommon affair. The omegas of high society held them frequently, a place to mingle, a place for alphas to show off and for both to find entertainment and mates.

Staring at the slender white of the cuff that was showing against the suit jacket, he could admit to himself that he wanted to find a mate. Indeed, perhaps now was the best sort of time to remind himself of this, just before he would have to leave the soft quiet of his rooms into the loud chaos of the Ball. He did. He wanted a mate. He just didn’t think he would find one that suited him.

There was a sharp rap on the door, before it was opened to reveal two of Alana's alphas. His mother had seven, which was bordering on high in number. Jack was not one of them here, for he would never leave her side tonight, but the fact that Zeller was one of the two who was here to be his escort for the night told him well enough that Jack was taking no chances of him ‘getting lost’ on the way to the ballroom. They both knew he would much rather spend his night in his rooms, or with the dogs.

Picking up the wire-rimmed spectacles from the side table, he put them on, regarding himself again, trying to force that image into reality, before turning and making his way out the door. Neither of the alphas moved to touch him. They knew better.

Moving along the corridors past the other family rooms, walls tastefully wallpapered in soft green and white damask that held no calm for him with the noise from below only growing more pronounced from below, more instant and imposing. Usually he might be tempted to take the back stairs to avoid being so immediately on display, but the servants would be just as busy, and it was likely the chaos would be as off-putting there as here.

It was a difficult task not to let his steps slow or halt as the noise of the Ball became more pronounced as he neared the stairs. He didn't want to go down there, but both the necessity along with the presence of the alphas with him prevented him from leaving. It wasn't that they would
physically force him, but words would be said to Jack, and it was shameful enough that he struggled in the types of environment that omegas were meant to thrive, without adding Jack's displeasure on top of that. He could feel Zeller's gaze upon him, and, having taken his already bossy attitude along the same route as Jack's, but without as much niceties, he could almost sense the sneer just waiting to appear. The male, he knew, would much rather be elsewhere with Alana or perhaps mingling, rather than guarding him. The feeling was fairly mutual.

The noise became suddenly so much worse the instant that he turned the corner onto the large curving stairs. He hated this place the most when the family were entertaining, the place where he could be seen, his arrival anticipated, gazes picking up on his presence. Nowhere to hide, and no way to escape those that immediately came towards him.

"Ah there you are, Will. The man of the evening! Shame on you to have kept us waiting so long, though I dare say that suit is very becoming, so perhaps it is forgivable. Not to mention that the wait makes them all the more eager to see you."

The elderly omega was a cousin of Jack's, and tended to come to most of the Balls, loving the society and socialising that her youth had enjoyed just as much. Now in her greying years, the omega was just as vibrant, especially in dress. It was a huge ruffled thing that demanded just as much attention as her words did.

"Speaking of those who wish to meet you, this is Mr Edwards, who is staying with us for a time."

The man was an alpha, and dressed in the more traditional black and white suit, which appeared to be well maintained but not quite as well tailored as his own suit was. It wasn't noticeable except for the small details that Will tended to pick up naturally. There was a scent about him that told well enough of a love of the pipe, and the more subtle scents of the soap he had used, the polish on his shoes, and leather, likely from the gloves he would have worn on travelling here.

"Charmed, I am sure."

"Have you known Mrs Baucroft long, Mr Edwards?"

"Alas, no. I consider myself a good friend with her son, Robert, whom I met while I apprenticed in Exeter. I visited with him to his family a number of times, and found myself the grateful recipient of their invitation to stay when business brought me this way."

"Of course you did, you are a very welcome guest!"

She leaned in closer to Will, in a conspiratorial sort of way. Far closer than Will wished, but he knew better than to let it show. For now, at least, he could subdue the impulse to shift away.

"It is so good to have a strong alpha to lean against, don't you think, my dear? Although my bloom is long gone, I dare say he might do well for you!"

She chuckled heartily, seeming to be oblivious to the slightly scandalized look on Mr Edwards' face, as well as the discomfort on Will's.

"Of course it would be my honour to write in your dance card, Mr Graham."

Will didn't need any skill in perception to note just how dutifully this was said. The sheer fact that the man did not seem overly enamoured of the idea of courting him, made him almost wish to accept for the sheer novelty, but instead deferred to his previous strategy.

"That is very kind of you, but I am not often given to dance, and have not a card tonight."
The man seemed taken aback. It was fairly unheard of not to dance at least once during such a Ball, especially for an omega, especially an unmated one. Will could see him weighing the words, perhaps trying to work out if it was a rude rejection, but seemed to settle on the fact that there may be other reasons not to dance.

"Then I will not pressure you to do so, though I am sure the dances will be poorer for the lack."

"Thank you, Mr Edwards. If you will both please excuse me, I need to find mother."

He bowed to them, and quickly made his exit away from them and the stairs, and into the main areas of the house. To give them credit, the two alphas with him did a fair job of giving him space from being jostled, but that wouldn't continue as the evening progressed, and people congregated together more. His best hope was to find Alana, and get as many of the necessary introductions done as soon as possible so that he could retire for the evening.

"Do you know where she would be?" he asked Price, who was to his right.

"Your guess is as good as mine. She should still be in the dance hall though, seeing to ensuring people have partners for the dancing. She usually does that."

The one good thing about this time in the evening was that until he was formally introduced to a guest by someone he knew well, usually only close family, etiquette forbade them from approaching. In a Ball like this, where at least half of those here were strangers, more if you counted the omegas and betas that he had no real cause to talk to, he was relatively undisturbed moving through the rooms. They might discreetly watch, even question amongst themselves, but they couldn't introduce themselves to him without someone to vouch for them. It was as much a vanity of the aristocracy as it was a safeguard against the unworthy. He didn't find much praiseworthy in all the pomp and primping that these Balls inevitably encouraged, but in this he was pleased.

Entering the ballroom, he moved aside from the bustle of the doorway to review the room, hoping to see his mother instead of having to walk the entire room to seek her, and the inevitability of delay and conversation that would bring.

Although still early in the evening, the room was filled with scents, mostly perfumes, along with the ever-present smells of the people in it. Betas didn't tend to have a strong scent, but both alphas, of which there were plenty, and omegas, tended to have stronger scents, especially in a place like this that triggered the body to unfurl scent like a mating display. Will's own scent had never been strong, milder than most betas except for when he was anxious or afraid, as if to mock his wish for a quiet life, especially when his own sense of smell was acute, making him far more aware of what was going on around him.

The room shone and glittered around the formally dressed guests within it. An ostentatious display of wealth and prestige, from the shining gold leaf on the cornicing to the eight hour candles of such quantity that it was almost too bright in the room. Alphas roamed in their suits or form-fitting dresses, betas in looser garments, beautiful and tailored, but somehow less formal, and omegas shone the brightest in vibrant colours, eye-catching suits, and flowing or even overflowing dresses. His own suit, he knew, would not immediately mark him as an omega, not bright enough in colour, but it was bad enough the attention he got without actively encouraging it.

He had thought, perhaps hoped, that with age he would gain less attention, that the fact he was still unmated at eight and twenty would deem him unsuitable. Unfortunately the opposite seemed to be true. While most omegas had settled down with at least one alpha by the time their heats had settled between sixteen and eighteen, the fact that he had not chosen any by now seemed to be viewed as a challenge, and each season more came to try and win him than before. His nerves as well, he would
have thought to be off-putting, but he had learned very early that this was not the case. Biology
dictated the alphas respond. He still had nightmares sometimes about that lesson.

"There she is."

Price gestured to the far end of the room, and yes, there she was, still so youthful, beautiful and
utterly in her element seeing to her guests.

A quick glance told him that she would be making her way towards him here at the door, tending by
habit to make a circuit of the room in a clockwise direction. Forcing himself to move, he eased
through the gatherings of people towards her. Hopefully he could be seen here now, and be therefore
able to avoid the large ballroom in favour of the smaller quieter rooms for the rest of the night.

Sidestepping to avoid a flouncy dress that one of the visiting families' omega was wearing, he
stepped up to his mother when she had moved on from her last conversationalist.

"Will, you look lovely. Not ambushed too much I hope?"

"Only by Mrs Baucroft and her guest Mr Edwards."

"What did you make of him?"

"Formal, gracious, not as moneyed as we are, and blissfully uninterested in trying to mate me. I liked
him well enough."

Alana laughed, linking her arm with his own as they moved slowly through the place, her alphas
keeping people from approaching for now. Jack said nothing to all this, not as uncouth as to shame a
family member in public, no matter how he disapproved.

"Well there are quite a few new faces here tonight. Perhaps you will find someone who you will like
well enough that does."

He made an unconvinced and dissatisfied sound, hating having to do all this. She just chuckled,
patting his hand as they started the round, as she chose to stop at different guests' groupings to speak
to them, to introduce Will, to ensure they have dancing partners when desired. Each time he was
asked, he allowed himself the gift of declining by not dancing at all, and Alana smoothed any ruffled
feathers afterwards.

By the fifth group he was tense against her, though the ointment kept that from being scented for the
most part, but she knew when it was best to release him. None of them wanted him to have an
episode in the middle of such a big event. And yet she didn't immediately let him exit to one of the
more private rooms to calm himself, but moved them up the ballroom further.

"I really wanted you to meet someone," she confides in him as they walk. "Do you recall I
mentioned inviting a friend of mine to visit."

"You have mentioned many people."

"True, of course, and it was some months ago now. His name is Dr Lecter, a surgeon in the medical
profession. We met at one of Anabelle's balls, and have kept in contact ever since. Although he is not
the sort of alpha that suits me in the home, perhaps he might be in yours." She paused, her fingers
idly running over the slim white of his cuff, her gaze downcast in thought. "He is clever and
considerate, and controls himself very well. I... would not see him shamed. Please."

The last few words were but a murmur between them, a plea from her, asking him to keep control of
his anxieties and fears around this man. He was so shocked by this show of protectiveness for this alpha that his steps faltered. Usually his nerves were never so directly mentioned, never so directly cautioned, since they all knew the results of such things. The rejection by an omega in fear or distress could socially ruin a man.

The low rumble of a growl from Jack behind him made Will step quickly forward to Alana once more, using the excuse of being closer to her as a mask for stepping away from Jack, who clearly didn't like her protectiveness over another, especially one not in their family. She gave Jack a slightly frustrated look before returning her attention to Will.

"Originally from Lithuania, he holds the title of Count there. His family line is strong and fairly pure. He travelled here to study medicine and has stayed here since, having purchased a large house in town. He doesn't usually come to Balls like this, focusing on his work. I thought that might suit you more, having that space."

The time for private converse was at a close as their alphas parted to reveal the man in question who bid those he had previously been speaking to, farewell so he could focus on the hosts.

The first thing came to Will's mind when seeing him, was that this alpha was much older. However that brief illusion showed itself on closer inspection when it became clear that grey hair was in fact some sort of platinum that came from birth, not age. His face was all sharp edges, his eyes the most so. Those eyes could slice a man, he was sure.

Will looked away quickly, flickering elsewhere, taking in the cut of the suit the man wore. Traditional suit, and yet the material was rich, a hint of maroon in the fabric that one had to be close to notice. Understated elegance, dark ruby cuff-links, no heavy cologne. In fact he could hardly pick up any scent from the man at all. Was he wearing ointment as well? His shoes were perfectly polished, no stitch of clothing or hair out of place, and, in short, Dr Lecter appeared entirely affluent in his situation.

"Hannibal," Alana greeted him. The warmth of his mother's voice, as well as the use of his forename brought Will's gaze up sharply. Usually one would never use a forename when in public, and while the gathered alphas offered some privacy, her use of it here was bordering on shocking. He could smell Jack bristling behind him at the familiarity, along with two others from the family, though not as prominently. "I am so pleased you could make it this evening. I know you are tremendously busy."

"It would have been unconscionable to stay away when you were so good as to invite me."

"I would have done so far sooner had you not been staying so far from this city. But please, allow me to introduce my son, Will. Will, this is Dr Lecter.

Will bowed a little in greeting. He didn't offer his hand as was usual in omegas, both hands now being held behind his back since approaching. It was less about being diffident and demure as it was to hide the trembling that had been consistent for a while now from the stress of being paraded through this meat market.

"Pleased to meet your acquaintance, Mother speaks highly of you. I believe you are a surgeon?"

He had had so very many of these conversations over the years that such polite platitudes were well habitualised, although Alana's regard for the recipients was not. That, and her very pointed concern for the man's reputation spoke far further and that alone only made his anxiety worse. In knowing that it was important not to become stressed, the worry that he 'would' only seemed to force the unwilling result. Why had she left to introduce the man now, when he had already been tense with
the press and expectations of the crowd?

"That is correct. I work at the Foundling hospital, having gained the position of head surgeon there last year."

Prideful of that, clearly, but what alpha, what person would not be, truly? This pride was on display though, accomplishments, much like the richness of his clothes, shown to those who came close enough.

"Congratulations on your post."

It was not exactly an elegant response, but what should he give except that? The man knew his own worth, clearly, and to sing more praises would feel too much like oil from his mouth, thick, cloying, greasy and just as unpalatable.

There was a minutest of pauses, an expectation that Will might say more, and when it became clear he did not intend to, Lecter continued as if such a pause had not taken place.

"Thank you. The years of study and practice have stood me in good stead, and using my skills for bettering people's lives has it's own rewards, something I think you know about yourself. Although I have not had the fortune of being at one of your lectures, I have often found myself reading your segment in the Sunday Press."

The man was polite, and, much as Alana had said, considerate in his words. Too considerate? Usually he could gain more insight on a person, but for all that the clothes offered information, the words, the tone hid far more than they revealed. Perhaps it was in response to the control he and the other alphas around him were having to exhibit due to his scent, to not crowd him. Alana didn't often pre-warn people, but for a friend she would have.

"Did you find them interesting then? What aspect of the discourse on the societal constructs of the sub-genders intrigued you to return to it? Or was it the question and answer column you were referring to?"

The question was lightly given, not truly meant to offend, but he had heard many variants of this conversation. Four in fact just tonight. Most, he found, had no real interest, and had only read the last couple when they found out they would be coming. That didn't bother him as much since it showed that they were, at least, trying to be attentive to his interests. What bothered him was the lies.

"In truth, I read both, for life is better filled with knowledge as well as some levity. Your theory on the physiological necessity for omegan families I found especially intriguing, being that it crosses closely to my own field in a way. I saw hint of the philosopher Lavoie in your words. Do you read him often?"

Will found himself glancing up, briefly to the man's face. Not mocking, as far as he could tell. Not lying either. No comment on whether he had liked or agreed with the piece, but Will wasn't interested in hollow praise, he would much rather have honest discussion. It did not bypass his notice that that particular article had been published over four months ago.

"Often enough to be familiar with his theories, as well as their down-sides. He was too deeply fixated on destroying all societal roles, and it left him blinded when it came to dealing with biological responses."

The alpha hummed a little in response, inclining his head a little to conceded the point.

"I fear I have to cut in," Alana said apologetically, "I am up at the next dance, and it is due shortly. I
know you are not dancing tonight Will, but perhaps you might show Dr Lecter the buffet room while the food is still at it's best?"

Compromise, of course. This gave him adequate reason to retreat without having to, yet again, rehash the words of denial over dancing, while at the same time tied in company to this man, at least for a time. Alana wasn't usually this pressuring, but perhaps Jack's nagging had finally gotten to her.

"It would be my honour."

Not pleasure, he couldn't stretch that far. Although this Dr Lecter had shown himself to be well-mannered and clever, attentive to Will's work, he was still an unknown factor. Still someone he was now forced into socializing with.

Dr Lecter bowed in acquiescence. "I hope we have some time to speak again soon, Alana. But I will not selfishly request it tonight, but soon."

The man was charming, and as Will looked in a stolen glance, there was more going on here than mere politeness. The use of his mother’s forename, echoing the fact she had used his own, along with the implication that he had the ability to make demands of her time was daring, especially when her alphas were all right there. That Alana acquiesced, only proved her inclination towards the meeting, and then she and most of her alphas dispersed into the crowd leaving them largely alone together.

"Do you have something against Mr Crawford that you would needle him with mother’s regard for you?" Will asked, curious. Alana had intimated that a relationship with Dr Lecter was not an option for her, but did the male feel the same way. It was almost petty the way he had spoken, though he doubted many would have noticed. As it was, he was acutely aware of responses around him, and Jack's were familiar.

"Nothing so acute as that," was the reply as they made their progress towards the door, Price staying with them, for which Will was grateful. At least Zeller was freed to roam however he liked now, instead of being forced into his company. "I hold your mother in great esteem, and would see her do better for herself."

"With you?"

Crude and obvious. He knew his words were unflattering to them both, but the crowds and the noise were getting to him worse now. He could barely think for it all, along with the rising claustrophobia of people.

A loud laugh off to one side, the perpetrator unseen, and unseeing of the flinch it caused. He knew the laugh though. Knew it to avoid it. He couldn't deal with him right now. Just the thought of having to keep his cool through any conversation with that one had him change direction abruptly, Price having moved between Will and the sound. Price wasn't a very strong alpha, but his heart and instincts were in the right place.

Dr Lecter said nothing to this, not immediately at least, for the time it took for them to change direction. By the time he answered, they had stepped into an antechamber that would lead to the main hallway.

"Indeed not. For all that my respect for her is high, and my friendship an unceasing offer, we are not suited for more. In my selfish wish for her betterment, I merely feel she could do better."

"She seeks safety and stability. Jack offers her that, and he does well by her, as do the rest of the
family."

"Of course. I would not wish to offend."

Will glanced to him, trying to place the curious way it was spoken. Just a hint of something. Amusement? No, not truly.

"Likewise. The press of people have probably rendered me rude. I apologize."

It seemed best to do so. It was exhausting trying to work out the tones, the undertones, the hidden meanings, the references amongst the truth. They stepped through the hall, with Will ignoring people as they passed, never inviting conversation, even from those he had a decent acquaintance with. With Price on one side, and Dr Lecter on the other, they made it into the large dining room without incident.

"We, all of us," Lecter said, "endure unseen pressures that render our responses less than optimal."

To this, a small park of a laugh from Will. Unexpected and genuine at having his suspicion of rudeness confirmed and forgiven in such elegance that it rubbed like velvet, soft and smooth, not meant to harm.

"Indeed so. And what of yours, Dr Lecter? What unseen pressures haunt you?"

He could feel the regard upon him, even if he wasn't looking. In the relative openness of the dining hall, he could scent the man a little better, take in that elusive scent, so faint still, but still pleasant. It teased him into wanting to seek it further.

"Rudeness," came the reply, "but I find myself quite forgiving the sensation in present company."

It was ludicrous that the words, spoken mildly in that slight foreign accent, sent a flush of pleasure through him.

"You practice charm as much as your skill with the knife, Dr Lecter. Does it see you satisfied often?"

Fuck. That was rude, and the immediate knowledge of that made him duck his head slightly in apology. He should just keep his mouth shut so that he didn't end up shaming his own family more by his behaviour.

"Yes, often. A failing of mine to seek the gratification of others' regard, something I have clearly failed at with you. And yet, I am not dissuaded by the challenge."

Will could have sighed in frustration. Yet again, he was seen as a challenge. Something to be tackled and won. There was no doubt the man was charming, and despite Will's dismay, the affirmation that he was interested in him, even for this, was appealing. He had long ago had to come to terms with the fact that his biology seemed to seek such reassurances of intent. It didn't mean he would let himself be swayed by them though. After all, a challenge was only interesting until it was overcome. After that, there would be little left, and Will wasn't about to shatter what sense of stability he had against a neglectful or uninterested mate.

"Do you have a particular interest in fine foods, Dr Lecter?" he asked in lieu of answering the surgeon's statement. "Mother brought in the chef from our country estate for the two Balls, to supplement the one here. Both have been praised highly, though I know little on the subject."

They had manoeuvred over to where the large tables were laid with different concoctions and delights. Show-pieces to astound with visuals rather than merely taste. He absently picked up one of
the canapé and popped it into his mouth. He didn't think his stomach would hold much, maybe not even that for long, but he didn't want to explain that, as he always had to when alphas wanted to get him a selection, and then inevitably became put-out or clingingly trying to please him by finding him something more suitable when nothing was. By feeding himself, he had found it the most expedient way of negating all that. He knew it was a denial of care, but not an overt one. He had to tell himself it was a lesser rejection than would occur if he didn't. After all, by feeding himself, no offer had yet been made to give a denial to. It was safer.

If Dr Lecter noticed this, he didn't show, merely pointing out to one of the servers which items he would like, before taking the carrying plate offered.

"That I do," he said in response to Will, "Cooking, in it's own way is so much more than sustenance. It is skill and timing, of strength and precision. In many ways it is like my own work, but ultimately more controlled in circumstances."

"You sound as if you practice it yourself."

"I find it calming."

Will regarded him with this very unusual of admissions. Not that a surgeon would find cooking to be calming, but that he would do it at all. Alphas and omegas didn’t cook their own food, it wasn't seen as a worthy part of their day when others could do that for them, moreover that those people would take great pride and pleasure in doing that task for them. To admit to enjoying cooking was tantamount to declaring oneself a beta, something no alpha of prominence would conceive of, especially when courting. And yet Dr Lecter offered it to him with a calculated openness, testing perhaps how he would respond. In truth, Will wasn't entirely sure how to respond. As the chance for insult was fairly high, and especially as he had misstepped several times already on that count, and so he forced himself not to merely respond in the first way he conceived this man. This Dr Lecter did nothing, Will thought, without a vast amount of forethought and planning. There would be no winning in an argument with him, but the man might conceded points in a discussion if it was well-made and appropriate to do so. Unfortunately Will's ability to make decent conversation or even grant thoughtful answers was curtailed vastly by their surroundings.

"Bettering one’s skills and knowledge should always be lauded."

It was the best he could offer, a much used quote from his mother all during his childhood. Familiar enough to trust it wouldn't be intrinsically insulting, which at this point was all he could hope for.

Dr Lecter was interrupted from offering a reply by a couple of alphas that came over to speak to him. Will did not know them, and Dr Lecter was not close enough to the family, or to him, to make the introduction they clearly hoped for. The fact that no introduction could be given, left Will a bystander while Lecter spoke with them. He was brief, and the slightly more casual tone he had used with Will was gone to a far more crisp and formal tone that sent far clearer a sign, to Will's mind, of the man's dissatisfaction with the interruption.

The pair lingered long enough that it became clear that there would be no introduction, but were polite enough, just, to not directly ask for one. They left with the promise to speak with him later in the evening, bowing lightly to them both before retreating, their covetous scents lingering enough that Will let his steps move them from the place to one of the other tables where drinks were being served.

"I apologize for the interruption. They should have known better."

Will nodded a little, his gaze lingering on the glasses on show, before deciding that he truly couldn't
afford the risk of getting drunk when his mother's friend was in attendance. A fruit juice with ice was best for now, at least until he could retreat to his own room.

He wanted to say something clever, or at least something acceptable, finding that he didn't like leaving the impression that he was just an abrasive idiot that couldn't guard his own tongue enough. Perhaps it was because Alana thought so well of this man to plead caution to him, or the fact that Dr Lecter had such a clear disdain for Jack, who sort of typified the straight-forward thinking. It was frustration then that was his inner companion when no witty or clever response or conversation announced itself within his mind, instead having to return back to the well-traversed list of subjects and sentences that had been deemed generally appropriate to discuss in polite company.

"They will likely find more pleasure in dancing and at the card tables. Do you play, Dr Lecter?"

Even to his own ears, although worded as it had been in the past with different names and faces, he felt the lack in his own skill. The smells of the food and the people was all the stronger now that they were not chilled from coming out of cold weather, and the noise of the place was pressing uncomfortably as more people made their way through after a dance.

Once more they moved, Lecter seeming as content to let Will lead the way as Price was. Considering he could feel the glances from others in the room now, he could only applaud the alpha in his mind for the restraint that took.

"I don't play cards often, but I do adequately at them."

"False modesty, Dr Lecter?"

"Ah," there was a slight pause, the touch of a smile on those lips, "I can see I should never play against you, Mr Graham. Most card games rely on memory, evaluating expression for tells, and only giving your opponents what you want them to see. My training at work leaves me at somewhat of an advantage."

Will allowed a smile at this, preferring the truth to the half-lie, his steps leading them through to the large sitting room. It was still mostly empty of people, as they sedately chased relative quiet.

"I am fair at reading people, but the rest leaves me a poor card player. I learned early to play only games that rely on chance. Although my luck tends on the unfortunate side, better that than the certainty of defeat."

"Your skills reside in other areas, ones far more useful and insightful than of social pastimes that are based on trickery."

Flattery, clearly, but not false, and not, he found, unappreciated.

"Thank you."

It was unusual to feel that gratification. Usually such things tended only to elicit annoyance or discomfort in him. Not that he was particularly comfortable, but it didn't make him want to scoff or hit the man, which was hopeful at least. What was also hopeful was the fact that he was still in his presence, and had likewise not felt a greater need to escape. A quick glance to Price almost made him smile, for the man wiggled his eyebrows, silently intimating the same thought. Perhaps finding a partner for this heat would not be as much of a chore as the last had been. He was sorely tempted to just leave the Ball entirely after this meeting and not return, but he knew that wouldn't be allowed, not on the first Ball of the season. It was expected he would be around for the majority of it.

"Perhaps we can talk more on your lectures another time, when circumstances and quiet are more
He had probably let the silence between them linger too long. Long enough that the man was allowing a graceful exit, while still showing his continued interest.

"I'd like that, I think."

He was intrigued by this clever man, this surgeon who played with people like they were his toys. Perhaps the man liked him for his crudeness, making him unlike the rest, or perhaps it merely was just the challenge inherent in bedding the oldest unmated omega in high-society. Either way, he did indeed find the thought of seeing more of him in future, especially if he himself was in a better frame of mind to respond. The latter, of course, was not a guarantee, but at least a possibility.

"I shall look forward to that then, Mr Graham, and, having received your good will, at least for now, I shall impose on your respite no longer. I wish you the rest of the evening as pleasant as possible, having quite brightened my own."

He bowed, but didn't assume to try and take his hand to kiss. Clever man.

"And you, Dr Lecter."

Will watched the man move off, back through the way they had come, whether to get more food or merely to pass off his plate, he didn't know.

"Seemed to go well."

The comment from Price was hopeful for him, and he made a slight nod in return. But now released from company, he had only one need in mind, and that was peace. The alpha didn't comment as they made their way along the back halls to the discrete stairs there that would take him to the family rooms. They only passed two servants, thankfully not disrupting either.

"Could you give me a tap on the door at the third-to-last song?" he asked Price, who smiled and nodded, easy in his own way, to please. Likely pleased also to have some time on his own.

"Sure thing."

And then he was alone. Blessedly alone with the door closed in his apartment, and it slowly became easier to breathe as he stripped out of his suit.

Shaking hands filled the waiting glass from the decanter as he sat down on the chair by the fire in nothing but his underpants and toweling cloths to soak up the lingering damp of the anxiety from his skin. He would need to wash and reapply the ointment before going back down later, but this was a well-practiced routine. The ointment was one of the few really expensive items he used with any regularity. It was so difficult to manufacture correctly that only two alchemists sold them, and those supplies were exceedingly limited. But for him, it wasn't an indulgence, but a necessity. Without the ointment they would all have been able to scent his unreasonable distress and react to it, and he didn't even want to consider what a bloodbath that would be.

He could hear the soft sounds of the servants pouring buckets of heated water into the bath in the next room. He would get up in a few minutes, when the alcohol had helped reduce the shaking, when he could forget for a little while that he needed to go back out there.

--

It was just over two and a half hours later when that knock came on his door. It didn't immediately
open, which told him, much as the scent did, that it was Price there. Bidding him to enter, Will straightened the jacket a touch more, or tried to. He could feel the alpha's attention on him. Knew he would already have noticed the empty decanter and the fact that his body had a fine tremble to it that the alcohol had neither caused nor prevented. As much as the break was necessary, returning to the Ball was always harder. By now, gentility and manners would have slipped, by now both alcohol and frivolity would have loosened tongues, freed inhibitions. The place would be louder, more ruckus, and exuberant, and the scents were always stronger. So much stronger that he could choke on it. Sometimes he did.

"Jacob and Nathan will be up shortly. They were just finishing up a dance."

Will just grunted a little to show he was listening. He knew Price was likely wishing to have more, and Will felt just a little more broken because of that.

"That Dr Lecter, you were right about him being good at cards. He cleared out those two that interrupted you earlier. They knew it was coming too, when he sat with them. Seemed like they expected it almost. They took it good naturally, no matter that they lost over £700 to him. Not what Jack would have done for a rude imposition, but it was pretty impressive. Remind me not to ever play cards with that man."

£700 was a vast amount of money, around a full year’s worth of a professional’s income. There was another pause when Will didn't respond. He just didn't have it in him, and didn't want to do this.

"Come on, kiddo," came the soft encouragement from the alpha, one that made his eyes burn. Shit. He couldn't deal with kindness just now, not if he was to make it out of the room. Price seemed to understand that, because he cleared his throat, turning to the door at the sound of footfalls. A worthy distraction.

When the other two alphas were let in, and to their credit, they didn't try to talk to him, or come to him. He knew it was probably working a Hell upon their instincts, because while he was fairly certain that they couldn't scent his skin because of the ointment, they knew him. They knew his posture and demeanour well enough, and the scent from before would still be saturating the room.

"I left my cuff-links in the bathroom. Could you get them for me, please?"

Left on purpose. They likely knew it, just as they understood he hadn't specified who was to get them, letting them judge which one would find this the most helpful, to provide for an omega in distress. But he couldn't let them close, not as they wanted to, needed to, but he could do this. Giving them something small to do, something he could have done himself. It was an apology, in his own way, even though it looked like a needless, even lazy request.

It was Jacob that emerged with them a few moments later, hovering briefly, likely wanting to help him put them on, but chose, wisely, to set them down on the table beside Will instead. Jacob was Alana's newest alpha. Young and earnest. He was about the same age as him, but made Will feel old. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Price set a hand on Jacob's shoulder as he went back to the door. Silent support and camaraderie between warriors on a battlefield they were ill-equipped to handle.

Perhaps he could get Dr Lecter to remove his omega organs, Will thought with a fatalist sort of humour, at least then he wouldn't have to continue this farce. He had been tempted by similar thoughts, though not the means, many such times, when being seen in society was necessary. However the stigma towards even mentioning a thought of such a thing was so great, that it would likely gain him only a ticket to the asylum, and he had heard enough about that place, even as
modern and scientific as it was meant to be, to make him utterly discard the idea each time.

So heats and society it was then. No escape.

He downed the last of the whiskey in his glass and fixed the cuff-links with trembling fingers that made the effort so difficult. Impossible even. In the end, he had to hold out the cuff from himself towards the three alphas, because struggling with items was proving only to raise the panic in him towards more dangerous levels.

"Don't touch the skin," a low murmur from Price to Jacob, whom he could scent coming closer. He wanted to tell the boy he was sorry, but he could neither get his mouth to move, nor would saying it ease the young alpha. Will kept his gaze looking elsewhere, as he felt the careful tug of the shirt, before it fell into place with the weight of the cuff-link, the same on the other side before Jacob retreated again. He could scent the alpha's distress at not being able to calm him. He could almost wish for Zeller's sneering attitude, and perhaps Price had the same thought to, or one similar, because he nudged Jacob towards the door, then the sound of footsteps retreating.

No one spoke. They waited. A few minutes later, Zeller's unmistakeable footsteps could be heard, and Will washed his mouth with some water to get rid of the taste of alcohol, before making his way to the door.

The scent of distressed alpha followed him down the corridor until it disappeared into one of the rooms they passed. He wanted to go to Jacob, tell him he was sorry, calm and reassure him, but knew he could not. He didn't have the fortitude or lies it would take to help the boy. Best he could do was just let him deal with it himself until Alana could see him. For now, it was pretty much beyond him even to deal with walking through the lower portions of the house to let himself be seen. He hoped to all that was lucky, that no one would speak to him.

He made no pretence of even considering using the main stairs this time. Zeller could sneer all he wanted, this wasn’t about creating the right impression any more, it was just about surviving without causing a catastrophe, until he could leave for the night. He had no idea why Jack and Zeller seemed adamant that this was a good thing to be doing.

Down the back stairs, steps clearly heard on the stones polished by centuries of busy footsteps. Price moving ahead to delay any servants, because an ill-timed surprise meeting would certainly not be good right now.

The corridor empty, they made their way towards the noise of Hell beyond.

The shock of it, the noise, the scents, caused his steps to falter, his hand gripping the door frame, unable to make his body take him closer, not until he spotted a group of guests. Movement was necessary then, to escape them, because Mrs Hayward was amongst the group, and would be delighted to corner him to introduce them all. Retreat was seriously considered an option despite having to deal with Jack later, but he was already enough of a failure in this respect, and, while horrible, what if Jack was right? What if he just needed to get used to the noise and people, and then it wouldn't be nearly as bad?

He lurched forward, steps far faster than was demure, but fuck it, he was not going to be stopped by Mrs Hayward tonight. No way was he together enough to deal with that.

Ruckus laughter, harsh and loud, conversations filled with scents of promise and need, a couple, hand-in-hand cavort past towards the dining room. The sound of the musicians, the call for the last dance. Good, he made it for that at least. Jack and Alana would be dancing in that, and it was a more sedate piece, always, to ensure guests would take the cue that it was time to gather and return home.
"William, darling, there you are!"

No, no no... not now. Not tonight.

But of course tonight. Of course him, who had somehow managed to get invited despite Will having denied his advances in the past.

"Mr Froideveaux," Will said, an acknowledgement, not much more. "I didn't realize you were here tonight."

"Where else would I be, when you are here? Oh, but it is a splendid Ball. The music and the food, but I was quite beside myself when I thought I had missed you, hiding yourself away to make everyone yearn. But here you are! So handsome! Ah, William, how I have missed you, I could barely think! But yes, you are here now, and all is well again. Come, I hear you have not danced all night, and I simply couldn't bear such a thought, so I found this card for you, see? So we could stand the last dance together."

He was in a nightmare, he was sure now. Forced to think up a polite way of getting rid of Franklin Froideveaux without shaming him more than he already was himself. Not an easy task on the best of days, and fairly impossible even then, because it was Franklin

"As I mentioned to others, I have no wish to dance tonight," he said with as firm a tone as he could manage. "I've also had enough to drink to stumble the steps," he added, not wanting another alpha distressed tonight because of him, and Franklin could end up in a state, poor man. Unfortunately for Will, it only proved a distraction the man was better able to counter.

"Oh, don't worry about that. You can lean on me. It's always the slow one last. It'll be lovely, and I can guide you to the music, and all the candles twinkling, it will be so romantic!"

His hand was grabbed, and his arm tucked firmly in Franklin’s before he had realized what was happening.

"Darling William, you are so tense! There's no need to worry. I'll help you through it. Come on, it's almost ready to start!"

Breathe. Breathe and don't freak out. Don’t just... tell him no. Tell him.

Zeller's low growl, limited enough to warn Franklin, to try and reassure Will he had backup, but Zeller couldn't do anything if he seemed willing. Rules by society, put in place to stop overbearing family ruin youngsters chances at finding a mate. He knew that. But he couldn't seem to make himself speak, and there were dark spots starting to grow in his eyes.

"Mr Graham, is everything all right here?"

Not Zeller, nor Price. Not family, but the cool accent of someone in control as he was not. Yes, no. He managed to shake his head a little, just enough it seemed, to convey his meaning. He hoped.

"Dr Lecter, I think Mr Graham might be feeling a little unwell. Some fresh air might do him good."

"Oh William," Franklin, so clearly Franklin speaking, "I didn't mean... of course, some air. I should have thought of that. We can go now, and maybe a drink to. That will help you, darling, won't it? Yes, we should get you some air. You are shaking like a leaf!"
The urge to strike out was strong. So strong.

"Perhaps Mr Froideveaux you would be kind enough to get Mr Graham a drink and his coat so that he does not catch a chill outside. I shall escort him out myself to ensure his health."

Franklin looked between Will, who was really not looking that well, and the confident medical professional offering assistance. It was clear he was struggling to give up being with Will, for even so short a time, especially to another. But his instincts to provide seemed to win out along with the logic.

"Yes," came the slightly more hesitant reply, before repeating it to Will. "I won't be long, darling, don't worry. The doctor will help you outside, okay?"

He managed to nod his head, and only then because anything, anything to stop Franklin touching him, showing a claim on him, was necessary.

As soon as Franklin’s back was turned, Will all but flung himself in the opposite direction. He could feel, smell, all the attention that the little episode had brought. Fuck. Fuck. He could feel their gazes as he moved past, Price and Nathan carving a path, while Zeller stayed behind, and Dr Lecter keeping pace with easy, fluid strides.

A call of his name from down the hall, but it was impossible to stop now. He had to get out, away from them. Away from it all.

"Not that way."

Price’s voice. He let himself be guided, barely aware other than his need to get out.

Fresh air suddenly, the cold of it burning his lungs after the heat of the Ball.

"Mr Graham, slow your breathing, or you are likely to pass out."

As good as passing out and not being aware of this nightmare any longer, he was also aware that passing out would only make things worse. He had already been the cause of enough trouble and gossip at the Ball tonight, and his family didn't need more. So he tried, he really tried to calm his breathing. Unfortunately that seemed easier said than done.

"Maybe take a seat by the Wall of the herb garden. You will be out of the chill wind there."

A good idea. Logical. He could appreciate the logic, especially when his body was being so chaotic, and he directed his steps over that way, forcing himself to sit, rather than to stand and pace.

Mortification when a tiny distressed sound escaped his lips when he heard Franklin’s hurried footsteps on the grass, ones that were soon accompanied by the scent of his admirer. He clapped his hand over his mouth to staunch any other sounds, only to do it with the wrong hand, and instead got the inundation of Franklin’s scent from where it had seeped into his suit jacket like a contagion.

Fuck. Fuck that. He started to struggle to get out of the suit jacket, even as fluid steps over crisp grass went over to meet the man responsible.

"Thank you Mr Froideveaux, that was very helpful."

"Oh, it was no trouble, Doctor. I would do anything for my darling, William."

Footsteps started, then halted just as quickly as they were interposed.
"I will give them to Mr Graham for you. He needs time alone to steady himself right now."

"Oh, of course, but I can give them to him myself. I'll sit with him. He will like that."

"I'm afraid that would defeat the purpose Mr Froideveaux. I was not mis-saying when I used the term. You will note the alphas of his family are also giving him space? You need to trust his family to know his needs and wishes."

"Yes... yes of course, you are right. It's just, it's been such a long time since I got to see him last."

"I am sure he feels that time keenly, Mr Froideveaux, but you are best serving him by allowing him space to recover himself."

It was with hesitant gestures, and even more hesitant steps that the man retreated. Will had managed to get out of his suit jacket, losing a button in the panic, and the offending article of clothing was now held by Price.

"Your coat, Mr Graham."

Will looked up, his breathing still too fast, but as he drew in a slight breath to scent the air, no lingering one of Franklin remained on the coat that he could detect. Reaching out, he took it, smelling instead the hints of the surgeon's elusive scent, a careful over-marking to remove the scent of a rival.

"Thank you."

He pulled it around himself, struggling with the buttons, before giving up on them and just using his arms to hold it closed. None of the four alphas offered to help him with it. He was supremely grateful.

Dr Lecter moved to sit on the other end of the bench, leaving a good distance between them. Will was aware that he was now the only one wearing a coat, but he knew better than to mention it. All alphas were stubborn to some extent, but even so, they didn't react to the cold as much as the other genders, their bodies running hotter.

"Your family should be proud of you tonight," Lecter said, and Will looked over to him. Of all the things he had thought he might hear from the man, polite mockery was not it. It didn't show in the tone, or the demeanour, only the words, but the words were damning enough. There was, after all, nothing even remotely praise-worthy about what had just happened. "I have seen a great many things in my life, but never have I before tonight witnessed such a depth of self-awareness during adversity and selfless willpower not to harm, as I saw in that ballroom tonight. Mr Froideveaux will likely never know the gift you gave him tonight, or what it cost you to give it. But I am not unaware, and neither should your family be."

"I don't want him."

"I am not unaware."

Will took that in, his hurt having been turned into unexpected understanding. The silence of the cold evening remained, both seeming content to leave it so for now. Will deep in recurring thoughts that had, now, a counterpoint. That was a gift as well, in many ways far more precious to him than others.

"Thank you."
How long it had been since the statement of gratitude had been spoken when afterwards he lapsed into silence, he didn't know. Long enough for his breathing to slow, for some of the trembling to ease a bit. Long enough that he had started to yearn for the easy warmth of the house once more, despite the coat.

Standing slowly, he stretched his legs a little, watching out of the corner of his eye as the slender gentleman beside him did the same.

"The evening reminds me it is cold and sensible people should not linger outside for long. I... appreciate your gift to me tonight."

"It was my pleasure, Mr Graham. I believe the evening whispers of home to me as well, so I shall bid you a peaceful evening."

"And you."

They both made polite bows. So genteel, this play of manners, after the cascading nightmare of before. Moving back to the house, the coat tucked tight around him, he was glad that there would be no need to go back to the Ball. He had done enough, put up with enough that he felt no guilt for taking the back stairs to his room and having no intention of exiting there again in the near future.

"I didn't see him hand you a gift. What did he give you?"

Will looked over to Nathan at the question.

"Understanding."

The alpha looked confused, Zeller looked like he wanted to scoff. Only Price looked thoughtful on the matter.

"Goodnight."

He nodded to them before stepping into his room and locking the door. A firm and practised movement that would do little to stop the nightmares that were sure to follow.
Hazy Mornings and Golden Bribes

Chapter Summary

In the aftermath of the first courting ball of the season, Will struggles to find the stability and clarity after the near-disastrous events of the evening previous. The world will not wait for him to recover, however, and soon the pressures of society's expectations are once more demanding his attention.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Morning came with a bleary eyed resistance to the idea, fuelled by lack of proper sleep, whiskey and nightmares, both real and imagined. No one called him down for the first meal, one that perhaps only a couple would make it down for, but the regular fussing of the servants that came and went to tend to the fire, the bath, to lay out clothing, all pointed relentlessly to the conclusion that avoiding his family for longer would not be tolerated.

They should be proud.

The words, first thought of as a slight, but then transformed into the compliment he had never thought to get, not for that. Never for that. It sat with him, along with all the worries and inadequacies. They should be. Alana would, maybe, if she knew what happened, but he doubted Jack would understand. Those words though, they hadn't merely been meant for him. A man like Lecter didn't seem the type to only give one reason, one answer. No, it had been a reminder to the family that they were treating Will's nerves too lightly. A warning perhaps that they should take better care at protecting him. Zeller wouldn't have grasped that, but perhaps Price would have told his mother at least. He could only hope it was so, even if it resulted in a quiet luncheon without the pressuring.

By the time he made it down to the family dining room, he was late. His hands weren't steady, and it had made doing up the various buttons difficult. Stubborn, Jack thought, that he continued to avoid having a servant dress him if he had such issues. Like the Grand Balls, he thought Will would get used to the touch. After last night, he was more given to believe in his own assessment, that it wasn't so simple or as clear-cut.

Despite what the servants had laid out for him, Will had forgone the offerings and instead opted for loose, comfortable clothing that was the instant topic of criticism from Jack.

"God, William, must you come down here looking like a destitute beggar? What if we had company! I mean, look at it! That jumper is vastly out-sized, and so threadbare it should have been sent to the rag man years ago."

"It's comfortable."

"Then choose something else to wear that is comfortable. It isn't like you lack a choice. Your mother likes her comfort as much as you do, but you don't see her wearing decrepit rags like that."

"You wish for me to change."
"Yes."

"But after lunch, dear. There's no need to trouble yourself right now. How are you feeling?"

Alana's words were mild, trying to ease the tension in him with conversation. Unfortunately it was a topic he loathed.

"Tired."

"Well, perhaps you can take a nap after you help me sort through the gifts."

The gifts. He had conveniently forgotten about those. Presents from attendees for the family, or more correctly, the family's omega. It was a show of wealth and prestige from alphas, a way to buy affections, or hint at what other things they had to offer. It had always felt far too contrived and subversive on both sides to make him feel easy. Most of the time he had the gifts sold off and invested the money in one cause or another. It had been a set of homes for the worthy elderly last time. He hadn't given any thought as to what it would go to now. Jack, of course, didn't approve, not when he felt Will should be hoarding the money, or investing it for himself and his future family. In truth, there was a lot about Jack and him that would never find common ground.

"I have had Hettie start organizing them in the blue drawing room."

Not the place he wanted to sit right now, south-facing and sunny. At least the alphas wouldn't be there, as the gifts were traditionally dealt with by the people they were intended for. He supposed the fact that Alana and Hettie were helping at all was a boon. He said nothing, still trying to gather himself to even contemplate doing anything productive today.

"A lot of gifts from alphas this time. Enough to invest in something sensible at least."

Like a business to pressure for profit, like furniture hand-crafted for the home and mate he didn't have.

"I was thinking an animal rescue charity this time."

This of course sparked an outburst of incredulity and outrage from Jack. There was something so satisfying to have accomplished that after what Jack's orders had put him through the previous evening. For some reason Jack had never really responded to his distress as other alphas had. Part of it was because of his position in the family as lead alpha, but Will suspected it was also that Jack truly believed his ways would make the situations better, and wasn't above being incredibly pushy to get to that. It didn't help that his large size and swift-forming temper only made him that much more intimidating.

The comment had been initially more of a joke, a consideration that had gone to unlikely to certainty when met with the force of Jack's temper. Perhaps it was petty of him to rile the man so, but he would never be the omega that Jack truly wanted as a son. Too broken, considered to be not trying hard enough, and unable to have his own space like any other omega, because he couldn't seem to tolerate any of them as a mate, forced to keep house with his mother's mate who disapproved of him. So Will used what little power he had, how he wanted it.

Will forced himself to take a small bite of food, flinching when Jack's fist met the table in a resounding bang. He chewed the piece of potato carefully, trying to focus on that rather than the angry alpha whose aura and scent were pressing down on the room's atmosphere. He didn't bother picking his fork back up again, knowing his hands would be shaking too much to offer the illusion of calm he was trying to project. Jack could not dictate what he spent the gifts on, but he could try to
change his mind. It didn't matter that he knew Jack would not hit him, or that it had been his intent to irritate the man. The reaction made his body want to submit, to cower, to give over the power to the one who knew best, who would protect him. Jack wouldn't smell or notice the distress coming off him, but the rest of the table were not oblivious. All the other alphas at the table were in various levels of upset, and Jack ignored them, while Will ignored the desperation to make the situation right. He didn't want to be the cause of it, Jack knew that, and used that to pressure him to. The alpha didn't say anything, but he didn't need to. He would have liked to have said something sassy, something clever and articulate, but it was all he could do to merely keep breathing steadily. He might have walked out of the room if he had thought Jack wouldn't merely command him back, like an unruly pup, as was his right to do as head alpha of the family.

So Will sat, his clothing now soaked with stress from the residual memories and nightmares, and Jack's relentless pushing.

"Jack."

The quiet chastisement from Alana was enough to ease the air, ease the tension. It did not ease the distress in Will, nor the other alphas around.

"It's ridiculous, Alana. I've never heard of something so devoid of good sense!"

"Jack, let's not discuss this at the table. We had quite enough excitement at the Ball, and some relaxation would do us all some good."

"Yes. The Ball," Jack's anger now having a different target to focus on, and Will could have groaned if he wasn't already using all his considerable willpower into not giving Jack the satisfaction of seeing him bend to his wishes. "What the Hell were you thinking, Will, walking out of the Ball like that, completely ignoring Ms Hamill and causing a scene!"

"Jack!"

Alana's voice had changed from the sweet placating tone, to one that was as sharp as Dr Lecter's eyes. The entire room was saturated with scents of angry and distressed alphas, and as he sits there, Will can still feel the lingering grip of Franklin on his arm, dragging him away from the safety. The touch. The touch had been bad enough, more than bad enough, but it had been the fact that he had been unable to deny the action that had terrified him the most.

"Will?"

Talked over, ignored and used like a marionette. Voiceless to stop being treated like that. I found this card for you. None of them had stopped him. Don't worry, you can lean on me. It'll be so romantic.

"Will!"

The dining room sharpened, too bright, panic clawing at his throat. Alana was there, her hands cupping his face, one of the only touches his body didn't automatically react against. Her gaze was worried, but trying not to show it. He could smell it on her. Too close.

"Will, why don't you get up and get changed. I'll meet you in the blue day room when you are ready."

She stood then from where she had been crouched beside his chair. He hadn't even noticed her come over, but that was not unusual when he was struggling. Her hands settled on his forearms, not his hands, a gentle encouragement to stand. He could go? He could leave the table now, even though his lunch was almost untouched? Had everyone else finished then? No. Most of the food was
untouched. Strong hands on armrests, on the table, but all of them had white knuckles.

Oh.

She stepped aside and he moved past to the door, moving out and closing it quietly behind him.

"The thank-you cards and invites really need to be done today. I have sent Jack and Zeller into town to get some things for the weekend, and they won't be back until dinner."

It was two days since the Ball, and one since he had sequestered himself into his room, and he had not yet been beyond his rooms since then. But Alana was right, these letters could not wait any longer. It was already on the cusp of being rude by the delay.

So, with the promise that they would not accidentally meet Jack or Zeller, he merely nodded. He could do this. The blue drawing room was peaceful, though bright, but she would probably allow him to draw the curtains if need be. But more than that, he knew he would have to start to get used to leaving his rooms again, because for as much as he would like to give himself longer to stabilize himself, he was very aware of the second Ball this weekend, one that he would have to, unfortunately, attend.

"Excellent. I'll have the servants send in some lunch for us there."

He watched her go, annoyed but also grateful that she had left his door open. It shouldn't feel like such a barrier, especially since the servant's door had been left unlocked throughout, but it did. Remnants of the day before, when it had felt like the only thing keeping him safe. He didn't want to give up that feeling of safety, even knowing that it was an illusion.

Drawing on a soft belted cardigan rather than the old jumper he preferred, and supposed that was another win for Jack trying to turn him into a respectable omega. He forced himself past the door and out into the hallway. It was quiet, which usually would be good, but with his nerves, it made him feel like it was more of an unsprung trap he hadn't been able to detect. Unsettling to understand that the house no longer felt as safe as before. It would ease in time though, or at least he hoped it would.

The blue drawing room was bright and airy, and in this at least it was unwelcome. What was likewise unappealing was the sheer amount of boxes waiting for attention, pushy and demanding in the otherwise serene room. He remembered looking in awe at such gifts when he was young, the sheer number granted to his parents after a Ball had been a dream so far beyond the restrained gift-giving at Winter Solstice, a thing of wonder. Now an adult with a room filled with gifts of his own, it had quite the opposite effect, knowing what was likely to have been typically given, and knowing to the amount of list-making and letter writing that was now required of him. He shouldn't feel the task was so unwelcome, after all most of these would indeed go to fund something he would feel useful, but there was something about being given gifts that were so very far from what he would ever wish for, gifts that only set to remind him of just how great the gap was between himself and what other omegas wished for and craved, that it just made that gulf all the more evident.

"Hettie and I have sorted them into the different types, to make it a bit easier. These ones here are from people related to us by birth or mating. These ones on this table are from people who are not related, but not there for mating, and the rest are from those that are."

The last pile was by far the largest, both in number, and in size. It was also the pile that he was least looking forward to.
Will sighed, resigned. This entire day would be tedious letter writing and list making. After all, each gift had to be catalogued and noted for future records. It wouldn't do, after all, to be unsure what a person or family had given, especially due to the cost many of them had associated.

"I guess I'll set up on the far desk and make a start," he said, "Hettie, could you bring a couple of lamps please?"

It would be impossible to settle and do such a tedious job with the sun shining so brightly. That and the lingering unease from the day before meant that today was indeed a closed-curtains day. Still, he didn't draw them all, only those by the side of the room where he would be sitting, as there was no need to subject all of them to the dim lighting he knew they disliked when sunshine was to be had. Alana said nothing about it, both used to it by now, and perhaps unwilling to be seen as pushy after the stress of the last few days. His nerves were trying on her, though she was by no means free from anxieties after the attack all those years ago. He supposed the fact that he had been so young at the time meant that it had affected him far more deeply as a result, and he was grateful she didn't seem to suffer that at least.

So he sat himself down as the lamps were brought, soft lighting rather than the harsher blue of the sky, and set about the task, listening as Alana and Hettie did the same with the family and non-mating gifts. There was a sort of repetitive calm in the task, for while it wasn't exactly pleasant, it wasn't demanding anything of him that he couldn't give. Each small notation in the ledger and the brief thank you notes were of a known format, few deviating, and only then because some small comment had to be made about each gift. But it was dull, not particularly stress-inducing, although draining. More often than not he was just baffled by what people thought omegas would want. What he would want. Although gifts at this stage of the courtship to find a mate could hardly be that personal, it would be inappropriate if nothing else, the sheer gaudiness of some of the items made him wince.

"Do people really like this stuff? Really?" he asked, holding up a large bejewelled headdress. "What do they expect me to do with this? Strut and pretend I am some sort of Greek nymph with a pearl fetish?"

They looked over, Alana seeming amused, while Hettie stifled a chuckle.

"I agree that particular gift isn't exactly to your taste," Alana said, good humour making her eyes sparkle, "but many omegas like to dress up ostentatiously, to shine, if you will, and you have to agree that it would indeed draw attention."

"Not for the right reasons! Wearing more colourful clothing is one thing, but this is just horrific nonsense."

"Am I to assume then that the alpha that sent it has not won your favour?"

Her question was mildly put, but very clearly holding in laughter.

"I should say not! God, if that is what they want their future omega to wear, I can't think of a worse option than me."

He shook his head, amused despite his dismay, setting the offending item aside to be dealt with along with the rest, glancing up as she came over to look at the gifts. He sighed, leaning against the desk before going and pouring himself another finger of whiskey.

"Are there really no gifts that you truly like? What of those you have here?"
"Those are gifts from alphas I didn't dislike at the Ball, or ones I liked the gift well enough from."

It was a small pile, exceedingly considering the sheer volume of gifts in the room, but she looked over his choices with interest. On the whole, the ones he had chosen were more practical, or at least less gaudy than the others, although there was one exception; a great bejewelled necklace in an ornate box she was holding up.

"Why have you set this one aside? It is nearly as glittering as the headdress."

"There was a letter with it. They acknowledged that they didn't know me well enough to judge a gift properly, so knowing that, had carefully chosen the necklace for the ease in which I would be able to sell it. It showed a thoughtfulness I appreciated."

He watched the surprise meld into warmth at the explanation, setting the box back on the table, picking up a book that sat near it, the warmth in her expression turning into a smile. The book was a large one, finely bound with full hand painted colour illustrations on some of the pages.

"I hardly need to ask who this is from."

"Does Dr Lecter often give books as gifts then?"

She smiled, her fingers tracing over the pages, her gaze lingering on one of the illustrations before closing it and looking over to him at the question.

"No, but there is nothing else here that I can imagine him giving."

"I like it," he admitted, though considering how unusual the gift was amongst the others might well have swayed him either way. "I intend to make a start on reading it so I have something at least to talk with him about at the Ball on Friday."

A slight frown showed on her face as she regarded him, concerned perhaps.

"You spent a fair amount of time with him at the Ball, and while I know some of that was during a time of duress, did you really find conversation with him that difficult?"

He let out a breath, looking down into the amber liquid in the glass, tilting it a bit so that it swirled around the bottom. The whole night was a blur to him, barely remembered words to and from many people, scattered images and disjointed conversations. He had been rude, he remembered, though not the words said. He recalled because the relief when an apology had been accepted had stayed with him. There had been talk of playing cards, he remembered vaguely, though that could have been because of Price's comments the day after. Overall, he remembered the silence in the chill air better, how the man had just sat there, not talking, not pressuring him, not sitting closer. Lecter had understood, or at least seemed to understand what he was struggling against. Was that conversation, or merely observation given voice?

"I don't suppose I had any more difficulty speaking with him than with anyone, less difficulty than most perhaps. He has a clever mind and endeavours to use that complexity with others that I would likely find engaging in times of rest, but during a Ball, I know I struggle. Best to have topics on hand, prepared, than to be caught without and appear wanting."

"You like him."

Her voice sounded of fondness and relief, and he wonders how much of that is to do with Lecter being her friend, and how much is about he hope that Will might find anyone he can settle with no matter who it was. It isn't an idle worry, for it is one he has himself thought of often.
"From what I have seen, yes, but he gives little away as to his personality beyond the controlled exterior."

"It takes time to know a man like Hannibal, but equally I think you can trust in his patience to know you better as well."

He made a thoughtful but non-committal noise. To know and be known, it was a dangerous thing when knowing might bring fondness and affection, and he had reason to guard that in himself from others. After all, there was nothing to say that Dr Lecter would find him pleasing past his heat, especially considering the only people that truly knew him to a greater extent was his family, and even they struggled to deal with him these days.

"I had best get back to the list, so that they can be sent out today."

He could feel her gaze upon him as he walked back around the table and sat down, letting himself be seen as being busy with the task. He didn't want to talk about the wonderful possibilities of finding a mate, having heard that particular spiel so often now that it seemed like a mockery. Alana, with her sweetness and kind-heartedness would never be able to truly see the situation he found himself in. She relished in the close contact, in surrounding herself with people, and most of all alphas. She might understand on some level the difficulties he faced, but it was all logic, rather than empathy, and while she could sympathise with his position, he knew that she still really believed that he would find someone, and that once he did, his problems would largely melt away. He knew she didn't mean it to be insulting, but when his isolation and bitterness were ripe, he admitted that it did feel that way. A biological magic wand that had clearly worked for her in some respects in making herself a new family.

Did she realize that her wishes, if true, would render five and twenty years worth of terror and struggle little more than a gossip side-note, and render him into a new person. After all, so very much of his life, his habits, were based around catering to surviving with it. Would there be anything of him left if it suddenly melted away with a mating bond? Who would he be, if that was the case? Not himself, truly, and that was just as scary a thought as continuing to live with it for the rest of his life.

But more than that, the propensity for people to continue to feed him those words, those hopes and aspirations after eleven years, three and twenty fertile heat cycles in which hundreds of alphas had come to try and win his favour and none had fitted, it just made him angry. He knew they thought of themselves as being kind, of giving him hope, but it was insulting to his intelligence, as if he couldn't understand that odds of him ever finding a mate when so many had failed. He had snapped at a cousin last year when they were visiting and had brought up the topic, and she had not been at all happy with him for his response. She had been shocked and insulted that he would 'take her well-wishing in the worst possible light', and Will had wanted to punch her. Had wanted to punch her more when she told him he was just being too picky. Picky. As if the fact that just being close to alphas made him want to curl up on himself to get away from them, or strike them to make the situation go away.

"Will, you know you can talk to me, don't you? If something is bothering you?"

He didn't look up from the letter he was wording, just gave a vague sound of affirmation. He could talk to her, but it would do no good. The fact that she let Jack dictate more how he was treated lately only proved that at some point over the years they had taken divergent paths, no matter that he desperately wished they hadn't. He would have spoken to her once, told her his worries, his frustrations and concerns and know himself to have been listened to and his feelings and situation understood. Not so now.

He focused on the letter, taking care with each letter and word, ensuring that it was as well-written
and precise as the others. He could at least give the alphas that much respect and care for their gifts, aware of Alana moving off in the background while the words glided from his pen onto the paper. Time stretched and the stack of letters and lists in the ledger grew. Hettie brought him some food that sat on the side table, forgotten. The decanter slowly emptied.

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Within the house, the study was the one room outside of his apartment that he loved the most. It had a magic to it almost, the dim lighting and how the stray sunlight made the air seem thick with dust motes that hung in the air as if suspended in honey. Time seemed not to have as much hold, no matter the slow tick of the clock that for all it's steady pace almost added to the feeling of otherness, suspended time and place. The room was unapologetically dedicated to books and study, rather than people, and for that he cherished it. There was no intrinsic demand in this room that any conversation with others was the norm, that how he looked would be under scrutiny. No, if anything the room frowned upon words and gaiety, the knowledge-laiden walls condemning anything but the silent delving into others' thoughts within pages, or the gentle scratch of pen on paper.

Although he could not escape the occasional visit from family, the room itself gave him a reason for solitude that was deemed acceptable. Much of his writing for the newspaper and lectures was done here, as well as reading on what others said on similar subjects. Jack, in particular seemed to be fine with leaving him alone here, while if he had done the same things in another room he would inevitably have been interrupted.

For now he was sitting in one of the two long leather sofas, his feet propped up on a stool, a couple of cushions either side, and a dog in front of the fire. He let his fingers trace over the book he was holding, feeling the engraving on the leather cover under his fingertips, and wondered if Dr Lecter had done the same.

He had been reading 'The Marvels of European Travel' on and off for the last two days, both as a distraction from the preparations and pressures of the upcoming ball on Friday, but also to see what it was that had made this particular book the gift that was chosen. He remembered feeling that there was more than merely surface thoughts to the man, each word and gesture controlled and chosen for a reason. Little, if anything, would be left to chance. But was the thought behind the book merely an escape? It could be seen as in intimation of a love of travel, for Lecter did come from abroad, and it could be as simple as that, wrapped up in such a fine and undoubtedly rare and valuable edition. And yet reading it, there was something about the writing that was just slightly unnerving, that didn't sit right with the overall feel of the text.

For the most part, the book was a documentation of the experiences of the author while travelling, the sights he had seen, notes on the beauty and architecture, small moments captured in words that might detail a scene he came across or a notation on a snippet of history that was related. It read like he was talking to the reader, fond and informative, creative and sometimes even touching on the romantic in how certain things were written and what was chosen to be noticed. And yet... and yet sometimes there would be a comment made, something small, something easily ignored but that just didn't fit the persona being put across. They were sometimes disparaging, or frustrated. Small glimpses, even just the choice of one word over another, that showed a crack in the persona being portrayed.

Although the details of the travels were interesting, it was these small fractures in the dialogue that kept Will's attention far more. For instance, here in the discourse on Florence, something that had primarily been on the romantic notions, the socially extravagant lifestyles that led the reader to delight in these same things, a comment, a brief note on a former Grand Duke of Tuscany, Francesco I de' Medici, and how he and his mate, a former mistress during his previous mating, had likely been
poisoned to death by his brother who inherited the position after him. It was another historical note, one of many that punctuated the book, and not mentioned again as the previous rendition of the town continued as if it had not been said. The text continued, seeming to venerate this more fluid and free lifestyle that cast aside some of the more rigid structures that were more common, and yet for Will, it was like that one sentence was a warning.

Would many people even pay it notice, or would they dismiss it as perhaps, while interesting, ultimately ignored for the wish of adventure and escape that the rest of the text offered? It perplexed him. A reader can, and should, read what they wished to read, and so it should not matter what they took from it, and yet with how the book was written as if being spoken to in person, it left him unable to set such thoughts aside. What game was the author playing? The impression of a genteel, friendly acquaintance was how he was truly, or perhaps even that was merely a façade that fooled those readers into his world. How much of what he offered was how he truly saw things, and how much seemed almost like a test, and if it was a test, how could any author judge the outcome?

Will closed the book again after leaving the finely woven marker in place. Such ruminations would have to wait a while longer, for he could already hear the distinctive footsteps of his mother coming to get him to help with the preparations today. Perhaps if he was lucky, she would task him with writing up the requests to merchants, or scribe the dance cards for people, because at least then he would have reason to stay in the study for the remainder of the day. He glanced down at the book, and wondered, not for the first time, if Lecter had noticed the same thing he had, and what he made of it. Something he could perhaps ask him at the ball.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this took so long to get up. I write a chapter ahead to give my beta-readers a chance to check over them and to make any changes. I ended up having to cut about 1/3 of this chapter out and move it to a later chapter, and then re-write something to take it's place. Then I got hit with a major bout of depression, so fun times. Hopefully there should not be so much of a delay between chapters in future.
"So, I heard it was the bi-annual, alpha-strutting parade again. So, of course I couldn't resist coming to watch. I hold out a fervent hope for a good deal of the ridiculous from them this year, although I am not sure we can top the man caught humping the pillar last spring."

Beverly had turned up at the house less than an hour ago and now sat on his bed, half sprawled, her large skirt kicked out as she let her feet relax from the likely uncomfortable yet highly fashionable shoes she had on. His relationship with her was a strange one, for although she was family only by the fact that she was the mate of Alana’s cousin, she was far more like an older sibling to him than any he actually possessed. Which of course was none, since all his siblings were younger, and vastly annoying. That wasn’t to say that Beverly wasn’t annoying, because she could be, and often was, but there was a sort of devil-may-care about her attitude at times that he found refreshing, especially since it was often used against the unspoken societal rules that seemed to strangle him at times.

"The man was drunk. It was probably more just a lack of balance."

"Not with the erection he was grinding against the marble. Give it up, you aren't even convincing yourself."

He made a non-committal noise and pulled on his other boot. He remembered what he saw, but he didn't want to think about it. It was pointless to hope that no one else had seen the man, for it would be mortifying both socially and personally to have lost so much control as to do such a thing in public view. He hadn't known the man, and the fact that he had not seen him at any of the balls since then only confirmed the social exclusion he had suffered afterwards.

"Stop being so serious about all this. The balls are meant to be entertainment. Where are your pocket squares?"

She had hopped up from the bed and walked over to where he gestured. It was pointless to try and stop her, and that was part of her charm, but only because he knew she wouldn't push him too far. For all her chatter and pushiness, her clever mind was always active, usually more than those around her. She looked through the drawer of handkerchiefs and after a critical glance to the suit he had on, navy, but with a shimmer of ocean blue through the threads, and picked out one to match that shimmer, glancing up when Price came in.

"Ah, right on time. I was wondering where you had gotten to. I hear you are Will's shadow these days, which is good, because he needs one in this madhouse."

Price looked both amused but also just a little bit trapped as she stalked over to him. Beverly had that effect on people. He tried to ignore how she murmured quietly to Price, her words unheard to him at least, but he could feel his gaze like a pressure in the back of his mind, smelling the protective scent coming from him raise in the room and trying not to think about what she was doing while he finished lacing his boot.

"There now, stand still so I can tuck this in."

He startled at her voice, closer than he would have liked, but did as he was told, appreciative of how she didn't try to touch him without making sure he was aware of it first. She did that sometimes,
when they were around the house, casual gestures that challenged him not to strike out, practice if nothing else. But she didn't do that today, merely waited for him to straighten up before tucking the handkerchief into his upper pocket, tweaking it until it sat nicely. The scents from it were clear to him, of both Price's protectiveness as well as her own scent, neither over-marking each other, having likely been pressed on different corners, but mingling to a reminder of support and family that he could carry with him.

It was such a simple thing, he thought as he watched Price fiddle with his shirt to cover his neck gland again, and if it had been others in the family he might not have been as willing to accept it, but the scents didn't fill him with irritation at their proximity, and he knew that as the evening progressed this small reminder of care would help him where touch and proximity would not.

"Right then! We are all looking fabulous, so let's head down and get this party started!"

He wasn't ready to go downstairs for that, would never be ready if he was truthful with himself, but for all that she was pushy and demanding in her own way, he didn't doubt she would act outside of social niceties if she felt he needed more protection.

"Beverly," he said, making sure he had her attention from across the room at the door, "If Mr Froideveaux has managed to get invited again tonight, don't let him touch me."

"Sure, I can do that. I don't know why you still allow him any attention though. The man is an imbecile."

"He's not a bad person, Beverly. He doesn't deserve to be locked out from events where he might find someone better suited to his happiness."

"You and your bleeding heart," she said fondly, "Very well, I'll try not to entirely shred him if he turns up. Now come on, I heard that the Boland's snooty little omega had something special made to wear tonight, and I want a good view when they get here. Heaven knows what monstrosity it will be this time, and I am eager for amusement."

So it was that Will let himself be guided out of the room far earlier than he would have liked, Beverly chatting to him the entire time, fairly needless talk about things he knew he wasn't required to heed other than to use the reassurance of her place beside him as they made their way downstairs.

"...and then she had the audacity to try and make out like she hadn't been attempting to outdo her by making the haberdasher set aside a full box of crystals to add on. Aside from the fact that it was about as subtle as a slap in the face, she didn't seem to grasp that adding such embellishments to that material will just make it seem gaudy and tasteless. Speaking off... Ah, Mrs Boland, it has been so long, and you brought your daughter as well. What an astounding dress. I imagine you will turn a great many heads tonight. Alas I cannot linger, we are due to meet with my cousin, and I shouldn’t keep her waiting. I hope you both have a wonderful evening."

They moved off quickly, Will surprised that it was deeper into the house, to the farthest room, rather than the ballroom, having to lengthen his stride to keep up with her. Beverly stepped into the room, quickly closing the door behind them, with a terse movement before bursting into a flood of almost hysterical laughter.

"Tell me you both saw that," she said when she had managed to sufficiently calm herself enough to speak.

"It did seem a bit overdone," Price said, his voice couched in amusement, "I would hazard a guess at two boxes though."
This only brought out another peal of laughter, until she was clutching her side. Will allowed himself to relax enough to smile at her. He didn't see Beverly very often, and it was good to have her in such good spirits, her scent changing to something almost citrus in her gaiety. In truth he hadn't really noticed what was so terribly wrong with the dress, having long since come to terms with the bafflement of what others liked and expected omegas to wear. One gaudy dress looked much like another to him, and was pleased enough to leave the details of his own clothing to his family and their excellent tailor, Mr Baines.

"Considering some of the gifts I got last weekend, it wouldn't surprise me if she found someone," he said as she tried to settle herself enough that they could return to the ball, "Remind me to show you the headdress later."

"Good grief, I hope not! Can you imagine what sort of mating gown she would wear? And I would have to sit through the entire reception and not let out even a chuckle. No. I refuse to think on it!"

"Perhaps you could invest in the haberdashers, or the company that supply the crystals. That way when they have children you would be rich."

"Will!" He grinned at her. "Just for that, I'm going to make you dance the last dance with me, you cruel man. I was going to maybe let you off before, but no more!"

"If I can, I will."

He knew she would be missing out on the dancing tonight, something she loved, in order to chaperone him. It was only fair he at least attempt it. He remembered watching her and Anabelle at the charity spring ball two years ago, the sparkle in her eyes as she spun and leapt to the music with all the exuberance she was known for. Most of the omegas at that ball had their gazes upon her that evening, but Beverly only had eyes for Anabelle, and it showed. Unsurprisingly, they were mated a few weeks later at Anabelle's heat.

"Where is Anabelle tonight anyway? She isn't ill I hope?"

"Nothing like that. She just didn't feel much like stepping out so soon after our journey back from seeing her parents. I left her curled up with our new second reading to her. He needed more time with her alone, so I don't feel too guilty. Come on, lets go find Alana."

The next hour became a blur of faces, names and scents that were just as overwhelming as before, but with Beverly there, it seemed less, due to her bright conversation that left less pressure on him. As much as he would have liked to have retreated before now, he was aware that this was his last main chance to meet someone for his heat, and to do that he had to be introduced first. So he stayed, although his attempts at conversation became less adept in time, it still seemed to serve the purpose.

"Time for a break, I think," Beverly said, guiding him through the crowds, Price at his back as she manoeuvred him out of the ballroom. Amazingly they managed to only get stopped once before she was unlocking one of the small sitting room doors, ushering him inside. He glanced back quizzically to Price who stayed at the door, watching him shift just outside it, his stance clearly stating he was guarding. The door remained open, the subdued noise of the ball still there, still very present. Private, yet not.

"Come, sit."

She was already there, seated beside the small table that held some drinks and small snacks that she had revealed from under the domed lid of the platter, an appreciative sound as she popped one in her mouth. Such a clever woman, clearly having organized this, but in such a way as to be done by the
family, so he wouldn't have cause to react against it. Not that he would have, necessarily, since she was family, but she was clearly taking no chances. She might be mated, but she was still an alpha, still wanted to see to his needs. Sitting, he picked up a glass, choosing his own, providing for himself, but truly, both knew it was from her, and were okay with that.

She was talking again, chatting about this or that, knowing in all likelihood that he wasn't following. It was freeing, not having to struggle, just to let the fact that nothing was untoward, knowing to that Price wasn't going to let anyone past him into the room to disturb them. He could scent them both, the real and the planted scents on his pocket square that mingled with the room around him, of the soft giving of the seat below him, the slightly dusty scent given off by the fabrics that would always linger due to age, the beeswax from the lights and the polish. Home.

"He wasn't wearing a mating ring," he said, not having even considered the words before they were uttered in response to something she was saying. "Perhaps he is here to find more than a second tonight."

The omega in discussion was from one of the other high-standing houses, and although rivalling Will's age, had only taken one alpha until now.

"Interesting," she said, and he could feel her sharpened gaze upon him, "So you are back with me now? Good. Price, stop loitering and come in. Lock the door behind you."

Will watched this, still a little befuddled and wary. No matter his trust or fondness for her, it was always better to be wary of her plans.

"Oh, don't look at me like that, Will. You will be wanting to wash and change before we go back out. The betas have just finished filling the bath on the next room for you. Off you go."

That was, unexpected. It made him uneasy to bathe down here, so close to the breach of the home by the guests, but he knew better than to argue. He was at least thankful that she had worked this into whatever plans she had made for the evening.

Setting his glass down, empty, so he must at least have drunk it during his time here, he made his way through to the next room, not bothering to close the door, such a thing would not stop her.

"Why do you even care why he is here tonight? I thought you dismissed him as uninteresting years ago?"

A quick look around the room picked out the changes, the bath and privacy screens being the most obvious, as well as the carefully hung clothing, towels and the discreet jar of ointment next to the chair.

"He is," came her reply, carrying easily through the open doorway, "but I live in hope he might eventually do something worth discussing. he really should try to be a little less bland."

He smiled a little, stepping behind a screen to start disrobing.

"Not everyone wishes to be the centre of attention, Beverly, you know that. Especially considering who you are escorting tonight."

"True, but it's like he does want it, but is purposefully not acting that way. I wonder if it's to do with his first alpha. Jealousy perhaps."

He made a non-committal sound, not wanting to fan the flames of her hunger for gossip.
"Oh don't be so concerned, I was just wondering. But since we are on the subject, what about your own conquests? I heard that you made quite the impression on Dr Lecter last week. An interesting man. I like him. We met when I was in medical training. The man is a genius when it comes to the knife, and he isn't bad to look at either. I approve."

"Not the sort of impression I would have wanted to make though. Barely able to think for the first half of the evening, and then a pinch away from a fully attack of acute nerves for the second. Considering that I haven't seen him around at all so far this evening, I suspect the impression I left him with was less than favourable."

He had been trying not to think of that fact, or how it left him feeling discontent, even uneasy by the absence. It was almost unheard of for an accepted suitor to neglect to meet when given the opportunity. His thoughts were interrupted by Price clearing his throat a little.

"Ah, well a note came earlier. Some work has called him away unexpectedly tonight, and he was unable to make it to the ball after all. He sent a message with his regrets."

His thoughts took a turn towards the morose at this confirmation. He actually hadn't initially expected that rejection. Dr Lecter knew Alana well, considered her a friend, so he had expected him to go through with the courtship at least until after the next stage, or even go through the heat with him. If he were honest with himself, he had been intrigued by the man, interested even. But the cancellation was such that it made it very clear that he wouldn't be perusing the suit. Considering what a mess he had been at the end of that night, he didn't blame the man. But he had thought there had still been interest there. Perhaps not. It was so difficult to judge with subtle interactions, and the harsh light of day can inevitably realign decisions.

"Disappointing," he said, "but not unexpected."

"When did the message come?"

"About an hour ago. Jacob told me."

"That's pretty rude, to leave sending regrets so late. Do you hear that, Will? Don't give up on the doctor just yet. If he didn't give the customary day's notice, it's likely that he is actually unable to come. He abhors rudeness."

He did recall that, but truly, the most likely situation was that he was merely returning the rudeness he had clearly received last weekend by Will. He had thought he had been forgiven, but this seemed too aligned with his own thoughts on the matter to be so easily dismissed.

"Perhaps," was all he said, clearly not convinced, but not wanting to argue over it either.

"I'm sure of it. Now come on, I'm not hearing enough sounds of washing, and I want to head back out there for some cards. You remember how to play, right? We will find a table in a quiet corner."

Considering that playing cards with her would not be nearly so onerous as many activities she could have planned, he found himself grateful, and renewed his actions.

"You know I am terrible at most of them."

"Don't be a spoilsport. We can stick to Trumps or Speculation if you really want."

He did, and said so.

"Good! That's settled then. If you can beat me more times than not, I will allow you to teach me how
to fish, even though it will likely kill me from boredom."

"And if you win?"

"If I win, well, let's just say I have some fun plans that you will go along with tonight without complaint. Nothing terrible, but I do want some amusement after all."

He groaned, already knowing his chances of success were limited, but at the same time, while the thought of what sorts of things would be considered entertainment to her, he trusted her not to go too far, not if he said something.

"I don't want people shamed, Beverly."

"You worry too much. Get dressed. You never know, you might win."

He didn't win.

Not that this came as much of a surprise to anyone, but what was a surprise was that it was the middle of the evening and he was still there. Still in the thick of the ball and coping. I mean, he wasn't coping well, but he was coping just enough to be there.

Part of this had to do with how things had been set up, with their table near the edge of the room, with him by the wall. Usually he would have found himself feeling trapped, but with Beverly on one side and Price on the other, it meant that no one could come very close. No accidental or purposeful touching, no suggestive murmuring in his ear, and best of all, really only those currently in the card game could really attempt conversation with him, and Beverly was boisterous enough to deflect much of that.

Aside from the three of them, there were two others, both alphas, that he had been introduced to earlier. One, a Mr Perrin of decent decent, sizeable income but a sad lack of intelligence, while the other, Mr Watters, a polite male of mediocre social standing and income, but one who was very careful with his assumptions and attitude, perhaps due to that very same social standing, not wishing to worsen it by unintentional insult. Conversation thus far had been more than a little stilted, and they were forced to rely on Mr Perrin for the majority if for no other reason than his ardent wish to talk, and needing no input from others to continue to do so.

So it was with mixed feelings that he spotted Jack making his way towards their table.

He hadn't known what to expect, but as Jack saw them and started to make his way over, the brief glances he managed to take from the card game seemed to suggest that Jack was not displeased with him. If anything he looked ever so slightly smug, but certainly pleased. It should have put him at ease, but he had lived in the household long enough with the man to know that whatever it was, it was unlikely he would enjoy what was coming. Jack never sought him out unless he wanted something from him, and so perhaps it was not unreasonable that he started to feel a little trapped, especially when it became apparent that Jack was not alone.

Will surreptitiously watched as the two men made their way through the room, and it was clear even from this distance that Jack was very well pleased. It didn't take much detective work to understand why when they crowd parted before them without word nor effort. Jack usually had such an effect, but not to this extent, where people were stepping aside from over three meters away from the route they were taking. Whomever this was, they were a powerful alpha, someone with enough personal aura to direct those in a room without noticeable effort. This didn't feel, as they came closer and that power's presence started to brush up against him, like it was a show. No, this was not forced as some
might do for attention, but seemed unconscious, a state perpetual to the man, and from the military attire, it was simple enough to explain why he was not used to making more effort to contain it.

As those in the room parted, their table got an exceedingly good look at the pair. The man at Jack's side drew the covetous gazes of omegas and betas alike, and Will was not as immune to this effect as usual. By the smug smile on Jack's face, he knew it to. It wasn't even like this new man was particularly handsome. Not that he was ugly, per say, but with a square jaw, narrow eyes and a nose that had been broken enough in the past that it sat a little deeper in the face, the overall look was more of sturdy than appealing. The black hair was well-trimmed, but he was also sporting the long bushy sideburns that were favoured in the military, but did little to add to his appeal.

However, he understood now why Jack was not here with Alana, for usually the man would never leave her side at an event like this. But with this man's aura effortlessly turning the heads of those in the room, he could see why Jack would not wish Alana anywhere near him. Usually such a traditionally alpha presence was not Will's thing either, but he could not dismiss this newcomer from his attention. Usually to, such a pressure would irritate him, but likewise the fact that this was also unconscious spill seemed to have the opposite effect. It sent a slight shiver through him, and no matter that he attempted to focus on the cards despite the imminent interruption, his instincts were too busy drooling over the possibilities of such a man. He attempted to focus on his cards again, which, true to form, were just as divested of luck as he was right now.

Disgusted by his biology's sudden need to preen for this new alpha, he instead put his cards down and settled on looking over, intent on being displeased with Jack. But it was hard being actively displeased with the touch of that power making his breath come a little unsteady and the inundation of the sudden influx of concerns over his own appearance and worries over the incoming introduction. It had suddenly become very important to his hind-brain that he looked good in his own suit to impress this stranger.

As they came to a stop beside the table, it also became difficult to think with the scent of the man, so close as it was. Will could no more spare Jack his attention now, not with this man so near. It was like all his braincells had cut out and realigned until only this man's attention mattered. This man, his biology told him, this man could keep him safe.

He had to make a conscious effort not to breathe through his nose, not only to avoid the new alpha's scent, but also knowing that it wouldn't be a good idea to take any reassurance from the on his pocket square, since it would swiftly be proven inadequate. Neither people whose scents were on it could protect him from whatever Jack had planned, though that plan wasn't exactly difficult to work out. Instead, he let the now familiar drone of Mr Perrin distract his thoughts for the brief few moments before the direct interruption would happen.

"So of course I told the cheeky blighter that it was unacceptable to wait. Can you believe the gall of the man? As if I would be content to delay the trip merely because of his inadequate staffing issues. Preposterous! Oh, Mr Crawford, I didn't see you there. Will you be joining us for cards?"

"No, not tonight. I am merely here to introduce Lieutenant Anderson, who was eager to try his hand. Lieutenant, this is my mate's son, Mr Graham, Mr Price and Ms Katz of our family, and Mr Perrin and Mr Watters."

"Do you play cards much then Lieutenant? We should find you another seat."

"That won't be necessary," Jack replied, "Mr Price, our mate requires your attention."

Will could only watch as Jack ignored and trampled over the precariously balanced control he had of the evening. He was left under no illusions as to the situation, nor Jack's unstated demands of it. This
alpha, Lieutenant Anderson, was Jack's choice for his heat, a Navy man of rank, affluent, his attire donned with gold brocade and epaulettes showing his status. That he then sent Price away in order to give the man a seat, something that not only wasn't invited, but also stripped him of one of his two guardians, the careful security against proximity, left everyone at the table aware of it.

"Well, I won't keep you from your game," Jack said far more smug than before as the Lieutenant seated himself, as if Jack had achieved a victory worth savouring. Will, not given to easy conversation at the best of times, could only sit in silence as Beverly dealt the man some cards, and Mr Perrin took up the chatter once more.

"Well! That was a surprising turn of events, but I dare say the family knows best. Don't fret your heart, Mr Graham, for I will be content to stand aside. There was a lovely little filly in an adorable pink dress I saw earlier that will do well enough for me. So tell me Lieutenant, have you just recently come to town? I wasn't aware of any troops returning until next month."

As much as it had been a relief not to have to hold conversation, especially after such a shock-inducing event, the way in which it was expressed was both insulting and vaguely mortifying. As if Will had been swooning over this buffoon, but also the clear insinuation that he would automatically choose someone that his family had picked out over others. He was sure that the flush of anger was likely taken for embarrassment. He sorely hoped that Beverly appreciated this entertainment, and a quick glance to her seemed to suggest she was undecided as to whether to shred the man or merely laugh, but was attempting to do neither.

"Our ship, the HMS Viviana, docked only yesterday, and I arrived back in town this evening. I hope you will forgive it, Mr Graham, but I could not lightly pass up the chance to attend, even if doing so meant my stepping in, in such a tardy lateness."

He made himself look up at the man, taking in the attentive look granted to him. He seemed to have taken care to dress and appear his best despite him being late, though that could be down to any betas or servants he had in his home and might mean little other than their skill. The uniform was well taken care of, though again, that was not unexpected, especially since this was a dress uniform, and so unlikely to have too much wear-and-tear. Still, the way he held himself told Will more, paying little mind to the others at the table, at least until he had a response from Will. So, either he didn't really care for what they thought, or he cared more for what Will thought, which was not unexpected, but at least heartening since it meant that he didn't take the same assumptions as Mr Perrin had, that Jack's good opinion would automatically get him where he clearly wanted to be.

"I cannot hold you responsible for the tides, Lieutenant Anderson."

"Which only leaves me to wonder what you will hold me responsible for, Mr Graham. It has been quite some time since I was in the thick of society. Live aboard a ship is in many ways a great deal more simple than navigating the myriad of unspoken rules in a place like this."

Will glanced down to his cards, not wishing to see more of the calm earnestness in the man's otherwise slightly harsh-looking face. He could sympathize with the notion of feeling out of his depth in a place like this, even if it was merely in words, not in truth. For all that the man intimated a lack of knowledge or familiarity with his current situation, there was a calm assurance despite that which spoke of the fact that while he might worry, the likelihood was that he was far more aware and knowledgeable than he portrayed. A different tactic altogether than Mr Watters who had become silent except to ask for cards during the game.

"We have only just met, Lieutenant Anderson. There has been little opportunity so far to gauge much on which to base any opinion."
"A situation that I hope might be remedied soon. Ah, my draw it seems."

They played onwards, but the conversation, which had always been a little one-sided, was now far more stilted with the surprise addition to their party. It wasn't so much that the man was unwelcome, as it was that he was new, but also his presence seemed to have cowed the other alphas at the table. Even Beverly, for all her chatty nature, seemed to flounder a little, though between her and Mr Perrin, managed amicably. For his part, Will found that whatever skill he had previously managed to possess at the game only decreased as his pre-occupation with the man continued. For all that he had hoped one day to be swayed towards an alpha, such as he was feeling now, it did little to make him appear worth whatever attention he received, such was his inability to think through polite conversation.

In the end they played a couple more hands that ensured a level of attempt not to be utterly insulting to Lieutenant Anderson's presence, before mutually deciding that perhaps the appeal of cards had waned, and some other diversion should be sought. Price had returned to stand by Will, and none were displeased when Mr Perrin excused himself, and while Mr Watters was polite enough company, Will did not attempt too hard to dissuade him from also seeking respite elsewhere. It seemed cruel to keep the man with them when he stood little chance as Will's mate, and perhaps he might find someone more suiting elsewhere tonight.

He lingered there, gathering his thoughts after the two had left, Price a silent reassurance nearby, and Beverly having nipped off to briefly speak to a cousin of hers, Mr Rowan that she had spotted. He swept a hand over the tabletop, brushing away a couple of crumbs from a pastry that Mr Perrin had been eating. It was a lovely table, the deep mahogany polished to a shine, but by the pattern he knew, if he had looked underneath, there would be a couple of deep scratches on the underside of it, an enduring reminder of time as a youth when it hadn't been a table at all, but caves with blankets for walls, and cushions as barricades. Standing, he shuffled the cards, as much as for something to do with his hands as it was to help get the table set up and ready for the next players. Something to focus on other than the presence of the alpha beside him, to whom he had no idea what to say that didn't have the potential to come out odd or insulting.

"Mr Graham," the voice at his side, that of Lieutenant Anderson was close, but not unbearably so, set at a pitch low enough not to carry past them, as private as could reliably be called such in a place like this. "No matter what assumptions the head of your family may have as to my presence here, I would not see you made uncomfortable by it. If my attentions here are unwelcome, I would prefer knowing directly."

Will shifted from one foot to the other, made more keenly aware of his lack of respectable behaviour in public and the likely length of the silence if this was what was asked. He should be being more attentive at least to pick up on it before now.

"I am... not easy in society," he said at last. It was an understatement of course, but he could feel that gaze upon him even as his own was watching Beverly laugh at something said to her. "Or people," he added, casting his gaze down and away, taking in the scent from his pocket square in the action. "Your presence is not unwelcome, Lieutenant, but the night wears on me."

"Is there nothing that might be done to ease you?"

"Nothing that is not already being done, or to leave, which is ill-advised for a peaceful life."

He could see the incline of the man's head in response from the corner of his gaze, though whether he agreed or not, or merely acknowledging the statement he couldn't tell without looking closer. All that mattered at the moment was that no further questions were pressed upon him, nor gestures instigated that would result in the opposite effect than intended. No, the man let him be for the
moment, turning instead to Beverly as she returned to their side.

"Ms Katz, you appear quite delighted with yourself, should we be worried?"

"Hah! We have only just met, and you seem to be a good judge of people after all. Of course you should be worried!" She laughs, delighted that someone new would play her games. "The evening can get so unbearably dull, as I was just saying to Mr Rowan, and we decided to liven things up a bit."

"Ms Katz."

The name was made in such a tone by Will that contained both a fond exasperation as well as worried caution, the latter of which something that Will had quickly learned to hold close with her.

"Now, now, remember our bet. Come on, it'll be fun. You don't even need to participate, just judge."

He sighed, knowing her tone enough to understand that outside of a critical circumstance, he was not going to be able to escape this.

"And just what am I to judge?"

"Skill of course," she said as they made their way through the crowd towards the back of the room, closer, he noticed, to a door that would lead deeper into the house away from the ball and it's people if needed. It made him a little easier about whatever she had planned. Not much, but a little.

"Not Puff-a-dart. I'd rather not have to explain why furniture or guests became injured."

"What about the Bridge of Sighs? I am sure many would elect for that."

Will looked over to the man approaching whose voice had cut in, Mr Rowan, a cheerful fellow, playful but loyal.

"Certainly not!" she interjected, "Shame on you for suggesting it. Suitors have to work for that privilege after all." She grinned at Will, who was very much wishing he was elsewhere. It was never safe when she had that look in her eye. "Lieutenant Anderson, my cousin Mr Rowan."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance."

"And I suppose you will say no to Bullet in the Pudding as well. Hrm, Will?"

"Perhaps something less likely to cause harm or embarrassment."

"How about a recitation. People could play the part in a scene and we get to judge the victor."

"An excellent notion! Allow me to go and find the lovely Miss Harrop, she won't want to miss this!"

Will could only watch as the situation progressed with an inevitability of which he had little wish to oversee. He stood with the largely silent Lieutenant, and the equally silent Price while Beverly and those she knew went about with enthusiasm for such an interesting diversion. A couple of books were brought through from the Library to read from, and much was made of what would be better to use, and what rules should be made.

"No, no, I can't possibly have you judging Ms Katz, for you would be unduly influenced by my good looks, and it isn't your delightful company I am hankering for. Let the fairer gender be the judge."
"So you can let your good looks unduly influence Miss Harrop instead?"

"Exactly!"

There was general amusement, and if nothing else, Will was pleased to be left out of the discussion by those who were far more engaged by it. Although he had managed remarkably well this evening, he was fast approaching the stage where escape was the only thought on his mind. He could think little of the entertainment, and certainly not having to pay attention to the acting skills of those involved, and the various unstated reasoning behind them.

Price shifted a little at his side, stepping a touch closer, though not enough to brush up against him, for which he was grateful.

"One round?"

The question was asked quietly, and Will nodded, finding his words were curtailed more than he would like. One round was about as much as could deal with. In truth he wanted to be gone from here already, but he had to hand it to Beverly that this was a decent way of getting alphas involved in something that required very little of his active participation. He let his gaze drift over those here, not really with them, not really there, but the illusion was enough to let it slip by mainly unnoticed. He smiled a little when it seemed to be appropriate and Beverly and Mr Rowan diverted attention to themselves wherever possible.

"Mr Graham, might a drink help?"

The words were stated in a low murmur to his right from the Lieutenant, and it took him a moment to let that question filter through, and the fact that yes, an answer would likely be required. A drink. He had thought perhaps it could be given as a reward for whomever won the round, but that would require him to linger to drink it, and he had no intention of doing so.

"That would be good, thank you, Lieutenant."

Perhaps the taste would help bring him back a little more to the present. However as the man moved off, the space that was left, unfilled and open. He hadn't been aware, until that moment, of how he had unconsciously become acclimatized to and started to rely on that steady presence as he did on those of the family, a barrier against the press of the room. It started like a tightening in his chest, the feeling of everything being too close, too loud, too much. He focused on his breathing, measuring each breath, his hands held behind him to hide their now more obvious shaking. Turning his head, he drew in the lingering scents from the pocket square with each breath, but it wasn't enough, and certainly not without Beverly beside him. Even if he had been able to get his voice to work, it was better she stay where she was, diverting attention, rather than coming over to him and only focusing eyes more on him. He didn't want their gazes, their questions.

Movement at his side, his gaze moving too quickly to Price, and some of his panic must surely be showing, for there was a seat there, the man shifting how he was standing just enough to try and block out much of the room from him. He cast his gaze down as he took a seat, resting his hands on his lap, trying not to show whitened knuckles that would inevitably invite query. But even so, his breathing became slightly easier as he felt that aura return and draw close, the broad form shadowing him.

"I didn't know which you would prefer, so I got a fruit juice and a cocktail."

The glasses were offered towards him and after a moment in which he managed to unclasp his hands, he reached up for the cocktail. Usually he would avoid alcohol when in public, but right now
he needed it's sweet burn to steady him. He inclined his head in thanks, unable to formulate his words. No one else saw how badly his hand shook when he reached for the drink, but he could feel the Lieutenant's attention upon him like a mountain.

The bright voice of Beverly interrupted, causing the attention to turn, at least partially, from him.

"We chose 'The Flight of Baron Maruut'. Come, Lieutenant, you are game of course?"

"Of course."

The acquiescence was polite and sure, as if there was never any other answer he would rather give. Not that it was particularly effusive, but then so far little about him had been, other than his attention upon Will.

Their little group had grown in number, as Mr Rowan had returned with Miss Harrop and her chaperones Ms Thurston and her beta daughter of whom Mr Rowan was very fond, Ms Bale, a friend of the Ms Thurston, her omega niece and a family friend Mr Weller. Joining them was Mr Hodges, an omega of some note in society and a friend of the Miss Bale, who came with his older alpha brother and beta sister as chaperone as well as an alpha friend of the family Ms Felton.

Mr Hodges was not a particular friend to Will, but someone in the upper end of society whose presence you didn't go out of your way to provoke. He was, Will thought, content to play the courting balls until someone truly captivated his attention. Being only 19, and of an exceedingly wealthy family, he was in no need to rush such things, especially when it was clear he took great pleasure in the attention courting brought. With a clever, wicked tongue when roused, although friendly enough on the surface, he had about him the playfulness of Beverly but without nearly as much kindness behind it. It would not do to make oneself competition to such a man. Will might have found himself thus if it were not for the fact that he had been courting far before the other omega had started, and although he garnered the most attention due to that, Hodges seemed content to use such a situation merely to gather people without his own effort, and then attempt to lure them to himself. It had always been thus, ever since the man had been presented to society two years ago. Will was useful to Hodges and not primarily a threat, and he was careful not to raise Will's displeasure lest he himself be cast away from such lofty company before he had gained enough status to hold himself up in society.

"Come now, we have written the names the bag here. Three rounds, come, take your pick."

Mr Rowan shook the little pouch with the folded paper while each of those participating picked one out. Lieutenant Anderson, Miss Bale and Mr Rowan were to go first.

"Excellent. Here are your copies. Thank goodness we managed to find two. Let's do the scene where the Baron gets ambushed in the Tavern. Page eighty-six."

As Lieutenant Anderson stepped away to take his place for the recital, Ms Felton deftly stepped into the vacated place before Beverly could. Her perfume, now liberally spiced with her own scent, pressed too close for comfort. It was a small hope, one that was promptly dashed, that the recital would prove dissuasive to conversation.

"It is an odd sort of entertainment for a ball, but I dare say it has it's charms," she murmured conspiratorially to him after a minute or so of listening, "After all, put in a different situation, some may prove themselves adaptable, while others... fail."

She was no doubt referring to the Lieutenant, whose prose was spoken with a staid sort of manner that didn't suit the character he was portraying at all. Will watched for a short time more before
answering, "I am an odd person, but it was not my choice. Still, there are a great many things that show a person's character and skills."

It was easy enough for him to make out how the Lieutenant had angled his body in such a way as to be able to see him from where he was standing, notably distracted by the proximity of Ms Fleton at Will's side. That he was more concerned with Will than the task of impressing others was flattering, and reassuring.

"I am eager for my own turn, for I spent a great many evenings during my apprenticeship in debating and classical oration. I expect the difference will be clear."

She had pressed closer, a hand falling on the back of his chair, not going so far as to touch, but her presence, which had started out as vaguely annoying, was swiftly becoming smothering. He didn't doubt that the tenseness of his shoulders was showing at least a little.

As the short recital came to an end, there was laughter at the comedic prose, and applause. Miss Harrop's laugh was a small, delicate thing, pretty but almost completely lost underneath the more raucous laughter of Mr Weller, whose bearing was keen in drawing the attention of Mr Hodges, despite the fact that Hodges showed no sign of being interested in anyone in their group. Still, Miss Harrop was not so well fortified in position as Will was, and so it was best that the attention was turned from her. Those that might seek the company of Mr Hodges would likely not suit her anyhow. Perhaps she understood this, for she made no attempt to claim attention even from Mr Rowan, with whom she was a close friend.

Will used the distraction of the recital's end to rise from his chair, doing so in such a way as to put it between himself and Ms Felton.

"It perhaps already is," he said, offering a quick smile to the Lieutenant as he rejoined them, "However I won't be able to see it. I am feeling over-tired, and intend to retire for the evening."

He was spared hearing her response by Beverly being suddenly there beside them.

"Skipping out on me then, Mr Graham? Very well then, I shall have to make do with finding someone else for a dance later. I'll tell you all about it tomorrow at dinner."

Saying his good-nights, forcing himself to look to the Lieutenant specifically, not wishing him to be left with the impression that he was running away from him.

As the door closed behind them, as Price and he made their way along the corridor and up the stairs to the family rooms, well-earned relief and exhaustion settled over him. Even Jack couldn't complain that he hadn't done enough tonight.

"Remind me to invite Miss Hodges over at some point."

"Sure thing. She seemed a little out of her depth tonight, but Mr Rowan will look out for her, enough to divert Mr Hodges at least."

Will nodded as he got to his door, offering goodnight to the man. Only when he had locked the door behind him did he hear Price move back down the corridor towards the ball once more, leaving him with too many thoughts and shaking limbs that he had hidden as best as possible. It was done. No more balls that he would have to attend anytime soon, courting balls at least. It would be easier now, he reminded himself as he stripped out of the sweat-soaked shirt, the personal courtship invitations and meetings were not nearly so onerous. But for now, he could forget about it, for a while at least.

Yet, he couldn't forget, nor would he want to, just how his body had responded to Lieutenant
Anderson. He had never responded to an Alpha like that before, for even Dr Lecter's presence, although calming, had been a response to the keen awareness and respect for his space perhaps rather than the presence itself, for as far as he could recall, the man had exuded none except confidence. Anderson's presence was careful, civil, but far more traditional than he would ever have considered responding to before, and it made him wonder, perhaps even worry. Had Jack been right all along? Was this sort of strong presence all that he would respond to? He had never wanted to tie himself to someone like Jack, but what if that was what it took to make him more stable? It was an unsettling idea, but he kept reminding himself that the Lieutenant had not been overbearing in the traditional sense as such, merely... oh who was he kidding? The man was likely to be careful around him at first, that had been clear, but once he became more familiar, would he, much like Jack, merely use that power, that aura to press on him. Worse perhaps the idea that he might actually find his body responding to that.

It was this latter thought that had him shivering, wiping the cold sweat from his body before downing some laudanum-laced water and changing for bed. What if that was all he had in his future other than staying unmated? How many more years could he truly avoid tying himself to someone if his body decided it wanted this behaviour no matter what his mind said?

But Lieutenant Anderson seemed a nice man, civil and well mannered. He reminded himself of this. He was, all-in-all, probably a better match than the Doctor had shown himself to be, at least in attendance. And so as he lay down, shivering under blankets, he reminded himself that no matter what alpha he ended up with, if he ended up with one, they would want to see him happy. That was how it worked biologically. They would.

He closed his eyes, the laudanum starting to work, shifting him away from wakefulness, the memories of the evening blurring until sleep eased into him, the awful tension that had strained muscles loosening, relaxing at least for a while, as unconsciousness stole the waking world.

Chapter End Notes

Whoa, so glad I made it through this chapter, my brain got stuck on it so bad, but it's here, and it's done! I hope you enjoy. The next chapter may or may not have dogs in it, and perhaps a cannibal if you are lucky ;) Constructive feedback, good and bad, is appreciated.
In the aftermath of the courting balls, Will reminisces on the events before being unexpectedly surprised by a visitor to dinner that evening.

Heading home from the ball, the air chilled Lieutenant Anderson, but he refused any reprieve that ducking in closer to the large collar of his coat might bring. No, he sat perfectly upright on his horse, gaze coasting around, seeming idly to the near empty streets around. You never could be too careful, especially after dark, though it was more appearances rather than worry that caused such an action in him now. It wouldn't do to be seen as slovenly when out and about, especially in uniform. Standards should always be upheld, setting the proper example.

The cold seemed to have chased most people indoors, and he didn't blame them for that, especially not with his bones aching from old wounds that would only get worse when the snow actually started with more dedication than the few raindrops seen in the lamplight as he passed. Even the most poor were relatively unseen, likely in one of the many charitable poorhouses across the city. He wondered if Mr Graham would show patronage or even build his own when he found a mate, as so many omegas tended to. Perhaps he already did. He would have to ask his man-about-town to look into such things for him. There was much he didn't know about Mr Graham, infrequent as his own trips ashore to civilization had been in the last couple of years. There was a feeling of something indulgent and satisfied in him at the thought of a mate investing in caring for others, of investing resources in people, rather than baubles as some did. He had no reason to doubt that Mr Graham would want to invest in humanitarian charities, especially considering his past, what little he knew of it anyway. Most of what he did know was general knowledge, and he had been told once that ones that suffer from distress or low moods often have a greater wish to appease it in others.

His thoughts interrupted by the very welcome sight of his town house, the lamps outside shining brightly out onto the road, guiding him back. He had had the place for just over a year and a half now, though had used it little due to his promotion and related dispatch. He could not see much of it's face, despite the lamps, but it's simple stonework had appealed to him. Some might call it forbidding without the elegant carvings that were more popular, but would Mr Graham?

Dismounting and handing the reigns to the servant who had hurried down the steps to tend to him, he made his way up and inside, closing and locking the door behind him, knowing the servant would return to the kitchen entrance when he was done.

Tugging the gloves from his hands absently, he let his gaze linger on the hallway. It had been pleasing to him with it's more modest presentation, interspersed now with things from his travels. A large mirror near the doorway to his left, its frame made from a rich dark wood and carved in geometric patterns that you only really noticed if there was a lamp lit to the side, or the daylight in the morning coming through the long window beside the door. The long rug on the floor was a replacement, locally made, to welcome visitors and hide the initial dirt from boots that didn't quite get cleaned enough on the scraper by the door. A vase on the slender table beneath the mirror holds a
discreet arrangement that his housekeeper likes to upkeep, the vase itself a purchase from a market in Cairo that he had found himself lingering over despite not even having had a house at the time. Perhaps, he thinks with some droll amusement as he unbuttons his coat, the vase was the start of the purchase of this house, having needed somewhere to put it. There wasn't too much else on show, and he had never had cause to be concerned with his more modest tastes until now, but after seeing the luxury and extravagance that the Bloom's exhibited, would this place be seen as entirely wanting, or merely the clean start for what was to come of it?

"Welcome home, Mr Anderson."

The sound of his housekeeper, Mrs Becket, drew his attention as she bustled in to take his coat. She lived here with her husband and son, paid servants until he had a family. They would likely stay on as a pod afterwards, as they were all betas. In truth, he had no idea if they were good in standard of work to others from upstanding households, but they kept the place clean and his house tended to, saw to the cooking when he was in, the fireplaces lit, and went on errands when he required. That was enough for him, but would his mate think so? There was much he had not paid attention to in his youth.

"I wasn't sure if you were wanting food, but I kept the stew on the go if you want something hot, or there's some cold ham if not."

"Some stew and bread would be welcome, Mrs Becket, thank you."

"Bitterly cold weather, but perhaps the dancing kept you warm?"

He looked over to her as he undid the buttons on his uniform jacket, amused at her need for gossip. Despite his exhaustion and the lateness of the hour, he found himself more amenable to talking of it than usual.

"Bring yourself a mug of something warm with my food and I'll tell you of the evening then."

It warmed him to see the look of youthful excitement on those older features before she headed off quickly to the kitchen. It was rare they had time to talk on anything but household necessities, but he knew she probably got lonely despite her family, especially considering the ill-health of her husband, now bedridden and mostly nonsensical, or perhaps she just delighted in hearing of such extravagances. For the comfort of being able to return home from the chill weather, having a welcome, a fire tended, and hot food ready, he could spare her time for her own pleasure in listening.

And so they came to sitting room where the fire had kept the room warm, and he spoke of the things he knew she wanted to hear; of the dancing and the attire people wore, of the amusements he had been drawn into and of Mr Graham with whom he had spent most of his time there with. It heartened him that she seemed to approve of the fact that the man did not seem frivolous, despite her fixation on hearing of such things in others, and when she left for her own bed having taken the empty plate and mugs away, he let himself feel a manner of hopefulness for the possibilities the future may hold.

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_London, England, Monday the 7th of October_

_Mr T. Price, Largs, Scotland_

_Dear Tim,_

_Although you bid me write you at midwinter, you will I hope forgive me for doing so sooner. Did you think I would forget your birthday if you diverted in this way, especially when I have your twin living with me? If so, you should know better by now, for I may be forgetful in some respects, but not_
truly that much.

Although the time of year is likely poor for fishing, I hope you will none-the-less like and find use for the tackle box. Jimmy helped me pick it out for you, and I made the enclosed lures myself. He bids me send you his best wishes and to eat a slice of pie for him.

You might be surprised to hear that he has cut back on his drinking lately, although I am somewhat ashamed to say that my own consumption has increased. It's so easy to fall into the habit of reaching for it when other escapes, like fishing, are not readily available.

It's been exhausting of late, not only because the courting season has once again started, but also because Jack has me helping with those things again that I once spoke to you of. Overall it does a lot of good, but not for my nerves or for pleasant dreams. I felt sure that my mother would put a stop to it, should it show to be affecting me, but other than some general discontent over it, she has said nothing towards forbidding me go. I am not sure what to make of it, for she is aware that it is indeed affecting me, so either she agrees with Jack that it's worth it, or she is allowing me to make my own decision in this case. Of all the things she might use to try and give me more autonomy, I wish it was not this, for I hold little power in the house now. In truth, she is leaning in behaviour far more towards Jack of late that it sometimes feels like I am on my own when going against his wishes, and Jack has a talent for ignoring my discomfort.

But I don't mean to be morose or worrisome, especially when we hear from each other so infrequently. I should tell you of the courting season so far, for although I have yet to visit any of the alphas for the second step of the courtship, I have seen enough, I think, to give a basic accounting of some of them.

The most notable so far has been one that Jack introduced, strange as that may seem. A lieutenant of the navy by the name of Anderson. He is socially polite and thoughtful, and so far has not pressured where I would not have liked. There is little enough else I know of the man, much as any, other than he is a strong alpha, noticeably so. I suppose, despite it all, I find that strength reassuring so long as I could trust him. That, I suppose, we shall see in time.

Then there is a merchant by the name of Mr Cosgrove, an affable man of considerable wealth, but not so high in prestige as others. He had a jovial and relaxed air about him that I liked, and had an interest in curiosities that I found engaging to listen to. There was also a Mr Layton whom I met briefly at the first courting ball, introduced by my mother of course. He comes from a well thought-of family, and is a lawyer by profession. I cannot say I was as enamoured by his conduct as either the jovial nature of Mr Cosgrove, or the stoic solicitousness of Lieutenant Anderson, but sometimes for heats I find a less personable approach makes it easier afterwards when I return home.

Technically there is also Dr Lecter, a surgeon by profession. He seemed a clever and polite man who shares a close friendship with my mother, but I believe he may have withdrawn his interest, as he was notable absent the night before last, at the second ball. I know you have little interest in the socialites of society here in town, but he aptly compensated for my lack during our time together in a way that made the thing less onerous. I suppose you could say I am overall feeling a disappointment over his non-attendance, though it isn't unexpected considering the attack of nerves I suffered while I was in his presence (one, I should note that was in no way his fault, but that he aided me in recovering from).

Aside from them, there are a couple of others I have kept in mind due to the thoughtfulness of their gifts. A Mr Frampton whom I know little about, but seemed eager to defer to my judgement that I found pleasing, and a Mr Till who gave me a bottle of scent that I found pleasing, as few such things do.
I wish you were here, so we could both laugh at the absurdity of some of the gifts offered. I spent the late morning and afternoon sorting out and cataloguing the gifts from last night and am quite tired of it, though the task itself is easy enough and gives me time alone. I miss your company, for few here think it strange to try and win me with gifts so bedecked in jewels or gold as to be utterly ridiculous. I was considering, this time, investing the money from their sale into some manner of animal rescue center. There is little call for me to save the money, despite how often I am told to do so. This, at least, I can spend however I please.

Speaking of gifts, there is one more that is worth a mention, although I do not get to know whether to take things further with the alpha that offers it yet, for until I see it, and him, I cannot make much of a decision. The gift, you see, is first choice of a litter of pups he has bred. Wolfhounds by breed, who, I am told, are one of the largest hunting dogs around, but are quite quiet and docile at home. I plan to travel to see them later in the week to choose, and that will make the decision whether to add the man to the next stage of courting or not.

Considering the age of the pups, I don’t doubt he will reap the side-benefit of this further chance to impress me before the next stage of courting commences. It was risky of him, for the lack of immediate gift would be seen by many as bordering on insult, but the gift itself in this way is ingenious. It is no secret that I love dogs, but he is so far the only one that has thought to use that, so I suppose that in itself shows some intelligence, but also a knowledge that the choosing of the pups and potential future visits to see the one chosen will give him more time to try and win me over. I find myself eager to see what to make of the man.

Outside of the topic of gifts and the varied horrors of being social, things are as busy as ever here. The newspaper keeps hounding me to write more for them, or, depending on the day, to write more of one thing than another, or with more of a slant on this or that. The way they try to direct, they would be as well to write it themselves! I had another package of mail forwarded to me by them for the question and answer section. It always takes so long to get through those, for so many write that I cannot answer them all, for there is neither room in the newspaper, nor time in my life to do so. I do try to read them all, though I am somewhat behind with them right now.

I have a lecture coming up next week that I am preparing for as well. It is being held at the Foxglove Hall, and while it is important to me, I do wish that it was further away, date-wise, as too much has been happening of late to make my mind more at ease. While the presentation should be fine, I know the subject intimately of course, the questions in its aftermath always make me feel like a man being drilled for condemning. There are some that dislike my theories, mainly as they disprove their own beliefs and see demoting mine as a way of regaining their own superior position. After all, it is easy for people to forget, or not know, that not all omegas are good at debate, which only lends credence to their position when I stumble through answers.

There isn’t much I can do about that of course, except keep what calm I can muster and answer as such. I heard though that one of my main detractors, Dr Chilton, has lately suffered some setbacks in his life, so it is very likely he will take that mood out in my lecture. Again, I just wish it was a little further away from the balls, but apparently this was the only free slot they had that wasn’t pre-booked for the next seven months. I have to remind myself again that it is not only I who is busy these days.

I recall you saying that the Arnotts intended to host a ball this season for their daughter’s second heat. If they have done so, I don’t doubt you will have had a vast amount more work to do than usual, and less personal necessity to get you through it than myself. Still, look on the bright side, that such events are unlikely to be too common, for I don’t doubt the daughter will find a suitable mate, sooner rather than later, and the household will once more lapse into a more sedate pace as to be pleasant. Who knows, by the time the spring thaw comes, she may very well be mated and all you
will have to worry about is the vastly complex celebratory banquet!

Forgive my teasing. I know it isn't easy, but we do miss you, and missing makes me more eager to be familiar. Perhaps in the spring I will see if Jimmy and myself can be spared for the trip to come visit you, if that is agreeable? I foresee no happy situation of my own that would prevent it, for I have quite given up on that count, and an escape to pleasant company would be welcome.

Will you be doing anything for the equinox this year? I planned on going with my mother to the Weavers Square Community Hall to help with the children's event there. Not my preferred choice, children have never made me easy, but it was either that or go to something myself, and what with the lecture and balls, I sort of ran out of time to think of something. Not exactly a fine show of my sub-gender's characteristics, I know, and I didn't think that I would be afforded seriousness if I suggested celebrating it with Winston in the stables.

Anyway, I should go and have this sent off so as to catch the evening post. Mother's cousin and her two alphas are coming to dinner tonight which is pleasant enough. Ms. Katz, Ms. Annabelle Bloom's first alpha, I get on with very well. I hope at least that I can nab the seat beside her for the duration, as I have not heard what else happened after I left the ball last night, and she is always good for such news.

Please give my kind regards to Maggie when you see her. Don't worry, I won't forget to send her a letter this midwinter.

Your affectionate friend,

Will Graham.

As he stepped out of his carriage, a spacious and expensive vehicle he had indulged upon, it was already dark. Winter was swiftly coming, and even with the time being before the evening meal, the sun had already slipped away like a coy bride into her bedchamber. Amused by his own thoughts, and pleased by the chill in the air, he stepped up and knocked upon the door.

"Hannibal, welcome. Please do come in."

The familiar address and cheerful visage that greeted him was Alana herself, seeming in good form this evening despite the undoubtedly little sleep she had received due to the aftermath of clearing up after the ball. The light blue silk dress she had chosen called attention to the contrast of her dark hair, making her skin radiantly pale by comparison, with just enough ornamentation to distract from any slight fatigue showing through. It was a well-constructed presence she offered, and he approved both of the skill and effort she had put in on his behalf tonight.

"Thank you. The evening sees you well, I hope? It certainly appears to. You look exquisite tonight."

It was with his usual ease that he took the offered hand to kiss, the brush of his lips on her knuckles granting him the pleasure of her smile and the discontent of Jack at her side. Still, he was not here to cause problems tonight, and so as he was ushered indoors he turned to the man with a smile.

"Mr Crawford, I hear you have been somewhat in high demand recently," he said, showing clearly enough for even such a man, that he was not intending trouble, but to curry favour tonight. "Several times I heard your name mentioned in gratitude by the police for the help you gave them lately. Are congratulations in order for a promotion?"

They moved through the large hallway to one of the reception rooms, Hannibal handing off his gift of a small case of home brewed beer to Alana as they walked. She was quite partial to the stuff, and
he had brewed this for her in mind, as she would know. The floors, he noticed, had been freshly waxed and polished, and the surfaces dusted despite it being only half a day since the ball had ended. He doubted such things had been done purely to cater to his presence, but at the expectation of callers, for while official suitors were traditionally to wait for confirmation of their acceptance, it was not unusual to drop in to offer a letter or other small memento after a ball.

Jack, he could see, was torn between his general animosity towards him, and the clear need to preen at the accomplishment and pride of his situation.

"No congratulations needed yet, but I expect it will be soon. The current investigating chief is considering retirement."

"That is excellent news!"

Indeed, assuming the working hours of the post remained the same, the chances were that Jack would be far too busy with his work to maintain his hold as the family's head alpha, and would either have to step aside for someone else, or give up the post. In either case, the somewhat vindictive side of Hannibal liked it. It would be an enduring wound in the man who thought to control this family so inelegantly.

His attention was drawn from the man, a pleasant enough situation, but more so by the fact it was by Ms. Katz and what appeared to be her omega.

"Dr Lecter, I didn't know you were visiting this evening. Allow me to introduce my mate, Ms. Annabelle Bloom, and our second Mr Radley."

General pleasantries were exchanged, though certainly nothing particularly noteworthy. Alana's cousin seemed rather lacking in the acuity he had come to expect from the Bloom family. Perhaps that was a reason why she had chosen Ms. Katz, being of a like mind to Alana, though of a somewhat sharper tongue and more ruthless thinking. Although he would not call Ms. Katz a good friend, he hardly knew her, Alana had said that she had been Will's escort with Mr Price yestereve. It might well be worth the effort then to enhance that tie with her for that reason alone. He wasn't sure he could wilfully do the same for her mate though.

The conversation was polite but largely meaningless and eventually they moved through to the dining room, and he was gratified to be placed at Alana's right, as guest of honour, a situation improved upon by the appearance of Mr Graham who had a slightly stunned look of surprise upon seeing him there.

"Mr Graham. A pleasure to see you again."

Indeed it was, for although the man was not looking his best so soon after the strain of the ball, there had been some minor concern on his part that perhaps Will would forgo the evening dining with the family for that reason. Perhaps such a concern was not only his remit, for it was clear that Will had not expected his presence, nor, if his less formal attire was to be judged, any guests outside the family.

A polite greeting in return from the man, and a glance to Alana in query, who, charming as she was, merely smiled brightly.

"I asked Hannibal tonight, as a friend, since he was unable to attend last night."

"And I am grateful, for I would not willingly forgo either of your company without good reason. However I won't sour the dinner with details of such an indelicate topic."
The conversation was interjected then by Mrs Harris, entirely missing the point of his comment, or wilfully ignoring it. He was guessing it was not wilful.

"Yes, what a dreadful business. I read about it in the newspaper this morning. Or, I should say that I had heard, for it was from Mr Fall who read it out, as is his habit with the papers in the mornings over breakfast."

Mrs Harris' lack of delicacy of conversation was not a particular surprise, but did derail the starting of dinner enough to be felt, something that Alana was quick to more on from as the soup course was served.

It was interesting, but not unsurprising that he found Ms. Katz to be on his other side, and thus his conversational partner for the first course of the meal. It had been some time since he had been in her company, and although her manners could be, at times, lacking, she more than made up for it with the quickness of her mind and her clever wit. It was rare enough that he got to enjoy a challenging and amusing conversational partner, but that rarity only made it far more enjoyable. It also gave him a better chance to win her favour, for with such a person it would certainly not do to have her against him in his suit for Will Graham. He expected the man valued her good opinion highly, something he was coming to appreciate himself.

"You seemed to have made a good impression on Mr Graham when last you met," she spoke quietly to him as they ate, the murmur of other conversations going on around them far less circumspect in their volume than she was being. "He was disappointed not to see you last night."

"Alas, a circumstance I could not help."

"Your absence opened the field, so to speak. Mr Crawford introduced a Lieutenant of the navy last night, and his presence turned many gazes, including Mr Graham's. Aside from yourself, it is the first time I have seen him genuinely react well in such circumstances in a while."

That news, if true, was a little troubling. He hadn't expected any significant opposition, especially considering Mr Graham's past and continued unmated status.

"I am surprised his head could be turned by the type of man Mr Crawford would choose. You don't consider his interest to be pressured?"

Ms. Katz looked over to him, her eyes holding a wicked glint.

"No more than your presence here today is. It will be interesting to watch, these coming weeks, whether your charm and keen mind will win out over stoic courtesy and animal magnetism."

"You believe him to be influenced by such primal instincts then?"

"I think," she said, contemplating the man in question across the table for a moment before turning back to Dr Lecter, "that whether he does now or not, it has been a long time for him, and his body may respond far more instinctively than in the past due to that. Omegas' biology craves a family of their own, just as we are driven to protect and provide for that family."

"There are beasts within us all, underneath this veneer of civility."

"And are you then like Hades, come to walk amongst us to find your Persephone? The mantle of civility you wear is so strong, most would be fools to try and seek beneath. I am content to know that such a person would protect and make him happy, whomever he should choose."

"Should I have drawn up tonight then in a chariot led by four black horses, and feast upon the sighs
and tears of the vanquished?"

"Satisfying as that might be, I was rather looking forward to the roast lamb that has been taunting me from the kitchen for the last couple of hours. Either way, I do hope this Persephone will be far more pleased with the outcome of the courting than it was historically. As much as it would amuse me to see the results of the vanished, you know of course he would be troubled or upset over abject cruelty. I do trust you will offer up some entertainment however?"

"Oh, I think that could be arranged."

"Excellent! I knew you wouldn't disappoint. Ah, here is the main course. I do hope to hear of your exploits soon, Dr Lecter. Perhaps we could meet for a drink sometime."

"Of course. I shall send you an invitation once I have checked my diary."

And so the second course was served, and his attention was turned to the other side, to Alana, a pleasure of a different sort. She, he knew, would not relish the games he was now set to play, but she was not ignorant that they would happen, nor that he was carefully constructing alliances while enjoying the dinner. For her part, she allowed them both time to try the food, and he was glad to be able to compliment it without reservations.

Alana, he was pleased to note, had lost none of her skills in conversation that he had previously admired her for, the topics ranging enough to be varied and interesting, and the depth of intellect showing through in the comments and observations that she offered. He could only really fault her for her sometimes single-minded drive to think the best of people wherever possible, and that was as much a part of her personality as anything else.

By comparison, sitting, as he was, opposite Will, who appeared moderately ill-at-ease, he had noticed that while the man was generally polite and courteous, especially to a stranger (for Mr Radley was next to him in the second half), he was not comfortable in such a setting. Considering his own love of formal dining, this lack in Mr Graham would need to be addressed in some manner if they did become mated. It would not do, after all, for either of the hosts to come across poorly. That was an issue for another time however, though not one outwith his capabilities he was sure. There were, after all, a vast array of options for making sociability more palatable. For now, small steps to keep the man at ease would work best until he was more assured of their relative compatibility and connection.

The dinner, pleasant as it was, concluded, and they moved through to one of the sitting rooms and he contented himself with making sure that he was able to sit, this time, near to Mr Graham where he might observe and converse with him with greater intimacy. Alana had taken herself to the grand piano across the room and it was no hardship listening to her play.

Mr Graham, he was pleased to note, was similarly pleased to listen, though perhaps the diversion was more pleasing as it allowed him the socially acceptable reasoning for being quiet. Alana had not mentioned any particular skill in him for music, which was perhaps a little disappointing. Such a thought was reinforced when it was Annabelle Bloom that was next asked to play, rather than Alana's son. It was easy to see that the man enjoyed listening to the music though, and so perhaps that was enough. After all, even if Mr Graham did not play an instrument, Hannibal certainly did, and so at least one of them could fill the house with music. There was a sort of anticipation there, to see whether he could garner just as rapt attention and appreciation from those blue eyes as Alana had elicited.

Ms Annabelle Bloom, he was sad to say, did not pose nearly as adept a player as Alana. Although
technically correct, there was no soul nor feeling to the music that now filled the room. It was not painful to listen to, but neither was it a particular pleasure, much like her company.

In some respects he was pleased for this, for it would ensure Alana, forever looking out for people's happiness, would not minorly shame Ms. Bloom, by asking him to play afterwards. Alana knew his skill, having listened to him play a number of times in the past. She might, in truth, not have asked him anyway, for astute as she was, would likely have guessed he would wish to perform at his own home on the harpsichord the first time Will heard him.

It was with polite attention rather than true pleasure that he listened, picking up the faint sounds of children's tantrums heard under the piano music from deeper in the house. Glad as he was that they had not been at the dinner, nor here, he could still smell their scents lingering in the room, alongside the reminder of the ball last night from the ever-so-faint traces of spilled food and alcohol that remained in evidence on the rug on the far side of the room. Such things were to be expected, of course. He reminds himself that he will have to take extra precautions for when he would be hosting these larger and more public balls, where the precaution and care of whom one lets into your house has to be a little more lenient. It might be best if, when that time came, that there was a second set of rugs that could be used and removed afterwards for a more thorough cleaning between times.

At least the aspect of children would not be one he needed to deal with. What a pleasant circumstance, he reminisced as he watched Alana make her way over to them, that he had the good fortune to find an intellectually strong friend to have passed on her genetics to son that was suitable for him, so the issue of unwanted children's tantrums and messes by such illogical and irritating beings was not something he would have to cater for.

"You play as beautifully as ever," he murmured to her, his tone set low enough that it wouldn't carry past the small seating arrangement and disrupt anyone else's in the room who happened to enjoy listening to the rather soulless rendition being performed.

He did not find himself dissuaded by the silence of Mr Graham's presence with them there. The shock of having an extra guest after an excessively stressful night before it was perhaps expected. Indeed, he was also considering the fact that he had seemingly missed his company during that event was a strong indicator that the man did find his attention turned towards him, and that very interest may well be limiting how conversationally inclined he appeared to be. With a person who struggled to speak fluidly when under pressure, he may well have been more concerned if the man was chatting with him easily, for that would show a disregard for how important such a conversation might be between them.

And yet lingering here did little good for his plans. Alana, he found, was not as talkative while there was other entertainment going on, and he didn't want the silence between himself and Will to end up feeling strained for the man, or worse, leave him feeling neglected. It was better, therefore, to make an exit fairly early in the proceedings, but in a way that was beneficial to him. Once the current set of music from the piano had come to a conclusion, he set his now empty glass back down on the small side table and rose, buttoning his suit jacket up once more and ensuring it sat properly, both Alana and Mr Graham rising also.

"Well, I won't keep you any longer, it's getting late and I have work in the morning. Perhaps if it is not a great imposition, you could see me to my carriage, Mr Graham?"

He was gratified when Will nodded his head in agreement, and allowed his attention to return to Alana who accepted a kiss to her hand, much as he had done when entering.

"It was lovely to see you again, Hannibal. We, both of us have been so busy with work that is good to catch up again where there is time enough to actively speak."
"Likewise. What are life's accomplishments and frustrations if we are unable to share them with others."

"More than that," she laughs, "I tend to forget how it is to dance with words when not embroiled in some debate for work. Do have a safe trip home. Will? Remember your coat. It's chill out tonight to be outside."

So it was some brief farewells, and a knowing look from Ms. Katz, he let himself be led down the corridors towards the front hall with a rather silent Will.

"I can only apologize," he said as they moved, having ascertained that his companion was at his limit for social niceties today. Such stressful things like a ball was likely to have such lingering effects, but he was not about to give up on any conversation despite this, especially now they were out with the gaze of Mr Crawford. "I had every intention of attending last eve, but as I was on my way back to my office to gathering my belongings, a crisis arose that called me immediately back. One of the hospital's long-term sick had a psychotic break and attacked others. Nine were injured, including one of the wardens, before they were stopped. Three required immediate surgery to save their lives. As the situation was time-critical there wasn't enough time to call in another surgeon, and I sent a note with my regrets, and hoped you might forgive my absence under the circumstances. I can assure you that this sort of thing is exceeding rare and unlikely happen in future."

Will was silent for long moments before asking, slightly hesitantly, if they would all survive.

"I believe so. The first day is the most critical, but unless they get an infection in the wounds, or do something to rupture the stitches, I expect they will make a nearly full recovery in time."

"That's good."

Easy, yet meaning less conversation was not, it seemed, a skill that Mr Graham possessed, for there was silence after that fact, rather than addendum of words that served little purpose. He didn't doubt the man's intelligence nor aptitude in conversing or at least speaking of other things though, for having now read the majority of newspaper articles and journal essays he had put out, such things were a given. It was odd for an omega to struggle with such minor conversational normalities, but then there was something so gratifyingly exceptional about that difference that it only made him want to dig deeper.

He let the silence linger, rather than fill it, as he had done before. Perhaps it was less of a kindness this time, but the question still lingered between them, as yet unanswered, and he wasn't going to stoop so low as to back up his justification of absence. The words were enough of an allowance on his part, but if Mr Graham found them lacking, well, it would be a disappointment, but he could find another he was sure to fill the role as his mate. Perhaps not quite so good as this one, if the signs were anything to go by, and he would be disappointed, but he would not stoop himself so low as to sound like he might beg forgiveness. There were many things he might do to accommodate a suitable mate, but that was not one of them.

Thankfully however, such a drastic change of plans was unnecessary, for Mr Graham used the distraction of drawing on his coat to find his words.

"Considering how much I often lament the necessity of social engagements, and avoid them wherever possible without nearly as as good an excuse, I cannot hold your absence against you."

It was a concession as well as a warning, he knew, that if Hannibal was wishing to hold and attend many social functions, Mr Graham would not be that amenable to attend. He had guessed this well enough of course, but he suspected many, such as Mr Froideveaux, would have discounted it as a
small hurdle to be handled and then ignored. He didn't consider it a small hurdle, but then he had a far greater expertise in manipulating people for his own ends.

"Not all of us are required to be social. You, I hazard, would be much more content of an evening reading with your dogs at your feet, and perhaps the quiet company of another."

His curiosity given voice, an allowance to himself to find out what the man had thought of his gift. Now alone and in the slightly more confined space of the lobby, it was easier to pick up his scent. The soap he used and the fairly recent contact with dogs were easier to pick out, as is the lingering scent of old books that suggest he had spent some time today in the library. There are the lingering taints of stress and anxiety on his skin, something that stayed longer due to his discomfort, though not nearly so strong as the past. There was a faint smile at the edge of Mr Graham's lips that suggested a knowing amusement with the statement, and the reasons behind it. That such a thing was not lost upon the man was vastly pleasing.

"You would be correct. I spent some time today reading a bit more of the book you sent last week."

He fell silent, though it was a pause rather than a lack of intent to continue as he opened the front door and looked up to the sky beyond, Hannibal's carriage already there waiting.

"I have been finding it an interesting read. A puzzle that keeps my attention."

"What makes you say that? Of the multitudes that have read the novel on travelling through Europe, I doubt many would ever call it puzzling."

Although he kept the tone light, he couldn't help but seek out answers with his gaze, something that he knew Mr Graham noted, for a glance to his face was given, a slight change in that elusive scent that was all his own before those blue eyes deferred away again towards the garden.

"The game the author is playing with the reader. The hints are fairly subtle, but a clear once once you know what to look for. I have not yet worked out it's purpose."

"I am glad you found the gift pleasing. Perhaps you will have a clearer impression by the end of it. I would be interested on hearing your thoughts on the matter."

Mr Graham gave a soft hum of ascent, stepping of the stairs and down onto the gravel, his mood seeming to have taken a less anxious route and instead becoming more thoughtful at this topic. Following him down, he was momentarily confused by the sudden change in his scent, mild as most of his natural scent was, but clearly anger. It was when he noted the direction that gaze flickered that reason was clear, for Mr Crawford could be seen striding down the hall towards them, and wasn't that interesting. At the ball, Will had been verbal in his defence of the man, but it seemed that there was at least some anger there over the interruption. Perhaps it was something he could build on, or at least utilize.

"Mr Crawford, did I leave something in the sitting room behind?"

Usually he might merely have taken note and moved on, but he was too eager to see what the clever understanding Mr Graham would see, and how Crawford would react. After all, there was, unless something had happened indoors to call one of their presences, no need for him to come seeking the omega, not at his age, in his own home estate, and after so little time. He might have indulged in his own anger if not for that delightful response in Mr Graham.

The flash of presence the other alpha emitted in instinctive response to what was clearly irritation was almost laughable, as was the way the man tried to crowd them both with it, attempting, he presumed
to warn him away from Mr Graham, and for the latter to demurely accept it. The taste of Mr Graham's anger at it was delicious.

"No," Crawford said, attempting for some manner of mild friendliness with that supposed threat looming, "merely come to see you off."

"How thoughtful. The meal and company has been excellent tonight. I shall hope to delight just as much when you come to dinner."

The latter was said to Mr Crawford, but he let his gaze turn to Mr Graham for the comment was truly for him. It was perhaps presumptuous of him, for he had not been given the official letter to accept his courtship yet, but if he was reading the man right, that anger at Crawford's curtailing of his freedom would most likely see small open rebellions against it. This, if he had played it well enough, would give such an excuse, for the intimation was that it had already been agreed on. And, well, if he was using Mr Graham's reticence about speaking against him in order to gain the next steps in courtship, it was justifiable. In truth, with Crawford's presence pressing, he didn't expect a verbal response from him, but the nod, when it came still filled him with satisfaction.

"My mate speaks of your dinners highly."

The comment from Crawford was grudgingly complimentary in return, and he inclined his head in acceptance of it.

"I do try," he said, then turning more fully towards Mr Graham who was by far more pleasing company, "but I will not keep you out in the cold any longer, Mr Graham. The night wears on and time is not something even I can put on hold."

He had used the words to turn towards the waiting carriage, walking slowly enough the person to whom he was talking would unconsciously follow so as to maintain the distance to converse. Crawford, he was pleased to note, stayed where he was, a brooding figure of dissatisfaction.

It was when he was at the carriage door that he paused, ready to offer a final farewell, when Mr Graham spoke.

"Are you wearing scent blockers?"

The question made him pause, so unexpected as it was in it's content. Perhaps that was the reason alone for asking it, to try and get an unguarded response, or perhaps it was something he had been wondering about for a while. Either way, the question pleased him, and he smiled.

"No, I am not. Farewell for now, Mr Graham."

Will stood there, watching the carriage off, confused and intrigued by the encounter. As far as he could tell, Lecter hadn't been lying, despite the fact that whatever scent he had was so faint as to be nearly unidentifiable. But that smile had been so pleased, knowingly pleased at the question that there had to be more to it than that. Was he merely that satisfied by showing he was so different from Jack, by the fact he exuded no tell-tale scent to read? Could anyone truly be that controlled in their body's expression? Was it something else?

"Come into the house, Will."

The command from behind him reminded him more acutely of that difference. Despite all the discomfort and anxiety surrounding the courting, he was looking forward to time away from the Jack, something that was becoming less prevalent as the years passed. Jack seemed to view him more
as family property to command in recent years rather than an omega waiting to find a suitable mate, someone to see to and use as necessary. For a time around the heat at least, he could have some space elsewhere, learn to settle with an alpha of his own, get to know them better for the heat. No matter what Beverly thought, he didn't hold out any hope of being mated after it, but at least for two to three weeks, it would almost be like he had.

As they walked down the hallway after he had closed the door and hung up his coat, the weight of Jack's aura pressing on him, he was certainly looking forward to that break.

Chapter End Notes

Although in the tv series and books, Jimmy Price's twin brother was never mentioned, Bryan Fuller mentioned on twitter, in joking, that the brother was called Timmy, and so that is the name I have used. You can see the post here: https://twitter.com/BryanFuller/status/863928171309264898

Also, I am not particularly happy with the formatting available for the letter, as the initial address and date are meant to be on the right hand side, but I couldn't figure a way to do that here. Pretend it was on the right :)
Puppies and a Lieutenant

Chapter Notes

Language note:
'dam' is the term for the female parent of an animal, most commonly used in reference to a female dog. It is used in the same way 'bitch' would be used to describe them. In this case I used the term because it is a more genteel way of saying it, rather than the more crass term 'bitch', which has far more negative and crude connotations. I am aware however that not everyone knows the term, hence this note.
See Dam (2) at https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/dam

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hargreaves Residence, Merchiston Wynd, London - Wednesday 7th October

The carriage’s rolling gait as it jolted over the cobbledstones did little to settle Will’s nerves on the upcoming visit. He knew little of whom he was going to see, a man by the name of Mr Hargreaves, barely remembering him from the evening of the last ball. However the gift of a pup was one of the most apt gifts for him, and so today found him, rather than one of the other family members, making the trip.

He was taking no chances however, for although the odds that someone invited to the ball being a danger to him was minimal, it was best not to go unprepared for that possibility. That being the case, the afternoon saw him sharing the carriage with Price, Nathan and Zeller, as well as Jacob who was driving. It wasn’t merely for security either, but for his own peace of mind as well as general propriety that the upper classes tended to adhere to.

The grey of the streets passed by, shimmering cobbles in the rain punctuated once in a while by the glimpse of bright fabric being swiftly hidden from the weather by dour cloaks. Despite the new sewerage tunnels, the rain still lifted the smell into the air from a nearby overflow, which did little to settle his stomach.

The neighbourhood they were travelling to was certainly not one of the most moneyed parts of the city, but that in itself didn't bother him particularly. Although he was sure he would hear more of it from Zeller or Jack if this alpha proved to gain his interest, living in abject wealth did not concern him as much as comfort and security did. Unfortunately those that were the most able to see to such things tended also to end up in positions of wealth and prestige as well. Whether this was a societal or a biological happen-stance was still open for debate, but the sheer fact that the strongest and most able tended to gain the best positions in life did not bode well for this alpha. But there was much a person might do with time to improve his position, and may well already have done so. There was a fair amount Will was willing to overlook for the company of someone with whom he could be comfortably friends with. Whether this man filled that criteria was yet to be seen.

Still, the pleasure of seeing the dogs and choosing one of the litter was a good enough way of spending his time, though the timing was particularly good for the alpha in this, perhaps by design. To have a gift that required further contact when usually there would be none if he had not been chosen was a clever way of gaining some advantage, or at least a second chance to impress.

As the carriage pulled to a stop, he stepped out and onto the street, his gaze rising to the house as
they made their way towards the door. It was a terraced building, as most were in the more central areas of town, but it wasn’t one of the more cramped ones that tended to frequent the lower quarters, and the exterior at least seemed to be well maintained. Rented rather than owned, according to Nathan who had looked into it, which was certainly not uncommon, but at least the man had stayed there since his moving to town two years prior, a sign he had not merely rented it recently in the hope of winning favour above his income.

"Mr Graham! So glad you were able to make the time to come see the pups. Please do come in."

The man was well-dressed, though it would say a lot if he had not been, for warning for their time of arrival had been sent earlier.

"I hope the trip was not too arduous," he continued, "Sometimes the streets can be so filled with noise and effluent personalities as to be quite horrible. Why, I was saying to Ms. Cooper just last week how noisy it was getting. But please, let Miss Smithson take your coat and I can show you the pups. They are growing so fast, I fear my house will soon seem very small indeed!"

The man laughed, seeming jovial enough, though there was a sort of pressured edge to it that spoke of his nervousness. Will could withhold judgement on that count especially considering his own temperament, but also because for someone who was not quite as well positioned as others at the ball, this man had more to lose by making a mistake, for his relative lack of wealth and position compared to others would be a mark against him in some respects.

They were led through towards the back of the house where a cacophony of yips could be heard, and when entering the large room, it became clear that these dogs would not be small things, for even now at only seven of weeks old, the pups were larger than the more commonly used lap-dogs. They were scruffy looking things, with large paws that hinted at their future size, their long legs all gangly right now. Will wasted little time in bending down to pet the ones that scrambled across to see him.

"They will end up the size of the dam," Mr Hargreaves said, "or a bit larger if male. Beatrice here did well by them, didn’t you dear?" The man was patting a slightly exhausted looking wolfhound that had come over with her pups. The sheer size of the docile looking dog was rather astounding, and Will didn’t doubt that if she jumped up, she would easily be as tall as him.

"They are lovely."

Mr Hargreaves chattered on, but Will paid him as little mind as he could politely do, far more interested in the puppies clambering over the finely tailored suit he had on. One of these was to be his, and while there were many family dogs, it was really only Wilson that he owned, and the thought of having such a large dog of his own had a far greater appeal to it than he might otherwise have considered.

He found himself petting the large head of the mother as she came over, her curiosity a relaxed sort of thing, though her presence did excite the pups all the more, who were alternating between trying to get to her to be fed, and trying to climb on her and William both. She sort of towered over him while he was kneeling, but there was nothing threatening about it. If anything, the calm dog was a reassurance, which only settled his mind on the pleasing nature of having one of his own.

"Can I offer you a drink, Mr Graham? We have a very nice tea blend from the East Indies at the moment, or some fruit juice if you prefer?"

Will dragged his attention away from the pup that was currently playing with her brother while nestled on his lap, pawing the air as much as the other pup.
"Thank you, no. I cannot stay long. I do have some questions about the pups though."

"Of course, please ask anything you like. I would be happy to offer you anything you might need."

Not exactly subtle, was he? But then, Will knew himself to be distracted by the puppies, and so perhaps he had missed something before then that had been noted.

"I was wondering if you had the sire here, his size and temperament, and what sort of traits you had been breeding the pups for. I would also like to know of any health problems that the parents have had, or the breed has in general, and what you have been feeding the pups up until now, other than that from their mother, as well as how you have been socializing them."

The pup on his lap had been replaced with another one, a male this time, that had been trying to lick at his neck and ended up tumbled into his arms instead, and was currently squirming to be let up while simultaneously chewing on his sleeve with those little sharp teeth.

"Alas, the sire is with his owners in Portsmouth, owned by the Procter family who have kept wolfhounds for centuries. A very good line! They have bred them for their even temperament and hunting ability, but Beatrice here was chosen for her quiet nature. She hasn't been out hunting in years, but I dare say she still could if the opportunity was there, but she generally prefers lazing around in the house, don't you, my lovely?"

The man took some time petting the large wolfhound, who seemed to be very easy with the situation, despite several pups clambering for her attention.

"As for the health problems, I doubt there will be any, as neither parents have had anything of the sort. Of course, wolfhounds tend not to live as long as those little lap dogs that are seen these days, as larger dogs always tend to have shorter lives. I am told that it is heart problems that are the most common when older. Apparently you can tell when they might have problems with their heart if they start chewing on their paws. Lack of circulation you know. Not much can be done for it, but that's the way of things. Still, I hear they can live even as long as ten years if you are lucky. As for the rest, well, you would need to speak to my brother about that, as he sees to the day-to-day feeding. Allow me to call him."

He looked over to Price as the alpha left the room, only to get a slight shrug in reply to his silent and unspecified question. Nothing too worrying either way then. He didn't ask Zeller, mainly because he didn't trust him to keep his voice quiet with whatever commentary he might have on the situation. A house like this, not in the very upper-parts of society, Zeller would automatically sneer over, and he didn't tend to be quiet when he had something to say.

As Mr Hargreaves came back in with his brother, Will carefully set down the puppy and stood, not willing now to be in such a position when two strangers were in the room, puppies or not.

"Mr Graham, may I present to you my brother, Mr George Hargreaves."

The man was slender compared to his brother, and slightly taller, though you would never peg him for anything other than a beta, even without the muted mellow scent.

"Mr Hargreaves, I believe you can tell me more about what the puppies have been eating, and how you have been socializing them up until now?"

"Other than visitor's clothing and the odd piece of furniture? Mostly meat paste or stew if the pieces are small enough, though to be honest there isn't too much of a need to make the pieces that small with how large they are growing now. As for socializing, we have a fair number of visitors that come
to the house, some of them bring their dogs, and we have been taking them to the Patrick's estate a couple of times a week to get them used to travel, and the dogs they keep there. Overall they have been doing very well."

George Hargreaves had knelt down while he was speaking and was petting the puppies, who had all mostly gravitated towards him. It was clear enough that he spent a great deal of time with them from the way they interacted, and it warmed Will to see them so loved.

"They are clearly very well cared for, Mr Hargreaves. You do well by them."

Moving over to Price to gather his coat, the little female that had been playing with her brother on his lap earlier had chased after him, or tried to, ending up falling over before scrambling up to return to the task. Will smiled and crouched down again to pet her for her perseverance. She was an adorable thing, all paws and focused attention, the latter something that would make her easier to train.

"I think this one," Will said to the two Hargreaves.

"An excellent choice. She was the one I might have kept myself. Here, why don't you put this little collar on her, so she doesn't get lost amongst her siblings."

The alpha watched proudly as Will tied the bit of ribbon around the pup's throat, ensuring it wasn't too tight.

"I am afraid we cannot stay any longer, but thank you for the gift. The pups are wonderful."

"Of course, I am extremely glad you like them. I will be sad to let them go, but I don't doubt the pup will find an excellent home with you, Mr Graham."

As they carefully extracted themselves from the energetic pups, and headed back out into the cold air of the day, he was followed out by the alpha, Mr Richard Hargreaves, who was bidding him farewell.

"Visit any time, just send word to ensure we are in and able to receive you. With them growing so fast, I expect we will take them out more. What a mountain of chaos that will be!"

The alpha laughed, and Will offered a mild smile, though not for want of amusement.

"I shall do that. Thank you."

Back in the carriage, the door having been thoughtfully closed by Mr Hargreaves for them, they were once more alone as they headed back home. In truth they had nothing else pressing to do, but visits were best left short, for his nerves if nothing else.

"So what did you think?" he asked Price.

"The dogs seemed nice, if large. But we have the space."

"And the man?"

"You barely noticed him. The dogs had more of your attention than he did. I doubt that would be the case with some of the others you have met, no matter how cute the puppies were."

Will nodded, falling silent and thoughtful as he looked out of the window at the passing streets. It was true. If it had been Lieutenant Anderson, his aura alone would have drawn attention, and Dr Lecter, well, he wasn't sure he could see him being around dogs, which might be an issue, but he still
drew attention with his presence, even if it wasn't with his aura.

Will had been through too many heats, with too many alphas over the years not to understand when something was a lost cause. Mr Hargreaves would get another visit, but only so Will could see about the pups. If he had thought to engraviate himself with Will enough to be considered for his heat, there was no faulting Price's logic in that he just hadn't responded enough.

"I suppose you are right."

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**Anderson Residence, London - Monday 12th October**

Lieutenant Anderson stood in his room determinedly not reaching for the muslin over the window in order to keep watch for the carriage. They were not due for at least half an hour, and if anyone were watching he would show himself to be quite anxious by doing so. Likewise he had relegated himself to his bedchamber in order to resist the temptation of rechecking things in the house. He had ensured that much of the preparations had been seen to in advance, and only the food preparation was needing to be completed now, and he would only end up underfoot if he tried to go anywhere near the kitchen.

After some discussion with Mrs Becket, they had decided it was probably best to hire in a chef for the duration of the courting, especially considering the standard that the Blooms were used to. Of course she had aptly drilled him for all the details he could remember about such meals, and while useful, supposedly, he was by far more likely to think it was for her own curiosity. The fact that a chef would be dealing with the meal also had the added bonus, for her, of granting the ability to join them at the table. Considering that Mr Graham was bringing three family members, as was convention, the extra conversation not directly required of him would be a boon.

Behind him, Mrs Becket's son, David, was clearing away the tea he had left unfinished earlier, now long-gone. Not much past his steps into adulthood, he was still in-training to be a manservant, something that went better some days than others. As part of his agreement with the Becketts, he had paid to send him to a tutor to learn the apprenticeship skills for part of most days.

Today, with all its excitement and distractions, had not been such a good day for the boy, for he had upended a spoon of blackberry preserve onto his tunic earlier when clearing the table from luncheon.

Glancing over, as much to preserve his own peace-of-mind as anything, Anderson's brows furrowed at seeing the boy still wearing the same tunic, though some effort had clearly been made to remove the stain, it was still visible.

"What are you still doing in that tunic? Go and change. They will be here soon."

The hesitation with both action or reply did not bode well, and the Lieutenant turned more fully to face him.

"I would, but the spare is in for the laundry tomorrow, Sir."

"You cannot have soiled them all. I wrote with instructions two months ago to get five sets made."

"Ah... um... I only have the two. I could maybe borrow one of Da's old ones?"

Lieutenant Anderson was not a man of casual angers, and in most cases he maintained a rigid control on it, but with much hinging on this initial meeting going well, he would admit upon hearing this, he was struggling to contain it.
"What will it look like," he asked the now cringing boy, "when you serve the table dressed in a dirty or ill-fitting tunic? It will look like I didn't provide those of my household with what they require. I sent orders, and funds, to get those tunics, and when I give orders, it is your job to follow them, not to do as you see fit!"

He had to take a couple of long moments to try and control both his anger and his aura, aware as well that his raised voice had likely been heard by the rest of the house, at least in volume.

"Go and speak with Mrs Becket and see what can be done before they arrive."

Turning away from the boy's fear and apologies, he let him escape out the door, aware that even this could affect the outcome tonight. It was foolish of him to let his anger out now, no matter how justified, for if that taint of fear lingered, it wouldn't look good, no matter that he usually never raised his voice to the boy. This wasn't a ship, and although servants, he needed to be more careful in how he reacted around them.

Seeking distraction, he walked over to the small shelf above the desk, running his fingers over the small wooden jars there. They were not particularly pretty, but then he wasn't a professional woodturner. Taking one down, he opened it to see the rich colour of the powder within, the scent of the spices transporting him back to the exotic markets abroad, but then further back to the warehouse he grew up around. Back then, he had never tasted the exotic spices, far too expensive to waste on a child, but the smells reminded him of those lazy afternoons playing around the bags and boxes in the warehouse, pretending he was a mighty king of the desert, or a sea captain fighting great monsters for his cargo.

Now older, and never a king nor a captain, he did at least know the flavours these jars held, as he took each one down to let their scents mingle enough like the past as to offer distraction from the coming visit.

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Stepping out of the carriage, Will could see little of the building in the evening darkness despite the lamps, but he remembered what it looked like well enough from having passed it before. Like the owner, it wasn't a handsome building, but it did give the impression of solidity that had no-doubt pleased the Lieutenant. He admitted curiosity to himself over what the interior would yield about the man, or if there would be anything at all considering how short his stay in town had been so far.

Jack was at his side with Alana, and Price offering him a hopeful smile before taking the carriage to the nearby stable yard, for until they were ready to leave later on. Jack had been far more pushy and demanding about this visit, seeing as how he wanted it to go perfectly to his own plans, and Will must not mess those up. As if he had been willingly rejecting mates during heat before now. Jack wanted him to appear to be the ideal mate, and the sheer lunacy of that idea was what kept him from speaking back to the man and earning his ire. Best overall if Jack remained pleased, even if he was trying to sell a lame horse to a racecourse. Alana, for her part, said very little on the journey, and had limited herself to the usual placations of positive outlook that he had heard so often over the years as to render them meaningless when inevitably they proved false.

They were welcomed at the door by the Lieutenant, dressed this time formally but not in his uniform, perhaps to convey that he could be more than merely his job. Inside was sparse but functional with small touches of home that were likely at the hand of his servants, for he could not see the man turning his hand to flower-arranging, tastefully discreet even as it was.

Jack was in good spirits now they were here, and wasted no time in engaging their host in conversation over the location of the property, before swiftly going on more about his work. Alana
linked her arm through Will’s as they made their way to the sitting room to wait for dinner to be ready, and while it was clear from the looks granted his way that the Lieutenant wished to include him into the conversation somehow, Jack was at his most demanding, and there was little that could be done without being rude or point out the relative offence this posed.

Will, used to this, merely gave the man a slight shrug to indicated that he didn't hold it against him. After all, there would be time to chat during and after dinner when he was given a tour of the house where they might converse better. Jack often thought himself like a rock, but in truth when he was of a mind to be, he could just as easily be an avalanche, and stepping carefully to avoid triggering it tended to be the safest option.

They were joined in the sitting room by the Lieutenant's housekeeper, a friendly and amiable woman by the name of Mrs Becket, who, quite at odds with the stoic employer, was almost excessively chatty and curious, seemingly unafraid of stepping over into talking too much, but despite this managed to charm his mother very much by her enthusiasm for all the happenings in town, and her work in it. Will found himself disposed to like her, for when directing conversation his way, she didn't push where it was not wanted and yet still made him feel welcome.

The conversation flowed naturally enough through to the dining room, which although had been done up for their visit, was fairly sparse in terms of decoration. The table itself seemed to be a good and sturdy construction, and fairly new, which perhaps said a lot for the type of man he was visiting.

During the soup he was beside Price, who had returned from seeing to the carriage, while Jack talked work with Anderson and Mrs Becket teased more detail about the happenings at the ball from Alana. The food was served by another servant, a youth whose nervousness was fairly apparent.

"My son," Mrs Becket elaborated when the soup had been served, "he tries hard, bless him, but still has a ways to go in his apprenticeship. Makes me proud of how hard he works."

Her tone was set to a volume that carried just enough to be easily heard by others. The Lieutenant, he noted, had paid little attention to the boy when he entered. It was reassuring that the paid servants felt comfortable enough to press views and assertions while in company, for it was clear that Mrs Becket held some fondness for her employer, something that was likely reciprocated since she was at the table, as family would be. He clearly intended to keep her on once mated.

As the main course was served, it was the Lieutenant that became his conversational partner, though Jack, across from him, was unapologetically listening in between his own with Alana, and as a result neither of them felt particularly at ease in the interaction and kept their topics to the weather, general health, and the relative crowded and busy nature of the town these days. It was almost painful.

The issue was, of course, that it was incredibly frustrating, because Will found he wanted to be away from the invasive presence of expectant family so he could get to know the man better. He had no idea whether the impulse to hoard the man was purely biology or not, but for once he was glad his rather beautiful and accomplished mother was at the end of the table furthest from the Lieutenant. Not that he thought she would try to take the man, but she did have a tendency to gather strong alphas, and for once he was on the same page as Jack in keeping her at a fair distance. For all that Jack liked and approved of the man, he didn't want a challenger to his own position in the household.

Still, biology or not, this was at least the last time he would be so greatly chaperoned, for the first visit was always the one with the family, both for security, but also for his own comfort. It would only be Price and maybe Nathan coming with him in future, and even then they would be making themselves scarce, so used to this procedure from over the years that it was routine.

Finally though, the dinner was over, and they retreated once more to the sitting room, though Will
didn't sit, instead lingering a little closer to the door.

"Perhaps you would be good enough to give me a tour of your home, Lieutenant Anderson?"

He had no worry that such a request would be refused, both because it was expected, but also because he got the feeling that he wasn't the only one wishing a reprieve from Jack's intense attention.

"Of course, it would be a pleasure. If you would excuse us please?"

"By all means, Lieutenant. Mrs Becket was wishing to hear of our last trip to Norfolk, and so we shall aptly amuse ourselves.

And so they escaped, the quiet click of the sitting room door dimming Mrs Becket's avid and enthusiastic response to the topic.

In the hallway it was quiet by comparison, the lamplight far dimmer than it had been in the room, and it was a relief to be free, of sorts, for a time anyway. He followed the other man through to what would be a more informal sitting room.

"This is the sitting room that is used the most. I have had little chance to think about decoration choices since returning. I know it is much less ornate and furnished than you are used to."

"The precise decoration and furnishing of your home is not something I would consider judging, other perhaps than to learn more about you. What people put in their homes tends to say a lot about them."

This particular room was comfortable looking, though, as the man had said, not particularly well filled. The pieces that were here seemed, much like the dining table had been, to be sturdy and well made, while the only non-functional items were an exotic looking rug between two seats, and a modestly sized painting of a harbour above the fireplace.

The Lieutenant hovered a little, not closeby, but the odd pressure of his intent to speak lingered in the air while words were carefully chosen before he finally spoke.

"Mr Graham, I would like to know how to make you more at ease, as you have not been since entering my home."

"Only time, calm and familiarity will do that. I do not wear scent blockers when going to these meetings, as it's best if you know what you would be signing up for, so to speak. You do not make me particularly ill-at-ease Lieutenant Anderson, it is just a state for me that is more normal than not."

A slightly troubled frown from the man, but he did not dispute it at least, as others had, perhaps having wished to be the exception to such nerves.

"Might I enquire what you tend to be doing in the times that you are the most content and at ease when home?"

A man of logic and problem-solving then, seeing a problem and working through possible practical ways of solving it.

"Usually I would be reading in the library, or writing for one or another reason. I would listen to mother playing the piano, or talking with one or another of the family. Sometimes I fish or walk the dogs."
"Perhaps then we could sit here for a while where it is quiet, and I could answer any questions you might have. Familiarity has to start somewhere, and I doubt my more usual introduction of shouting my name and rank to newly recruited Landsmen would be what you are looking for."

Will found himself smiling at this, small, yes, but none-the-less there.

"That would be good. Your home shows hints of nostalgia, perhaps we could start there," he said, sitting down on one of the seats by the hearth. Anderson's scent lingered on it. "The painting above the hearth, you chose it for a reason, clearly. What does it remind you of?"

Choosing not to sit yet, Anderson moved over to the hearth, better to look at the painting in question, his hands clasped behind his back. He was, Will thought, perhaps more at ease standing in company than sitting. The painting in question was a rough pastoral of a harbour view from a hillside, that, while rough, did capture both the tranquility of the land as well as the bustle of the town below. The quality of the painting itself, although decent enough, was not of a standard one might expect to see on show in a house. This then, in a more private setting, meant more to the man than it's relative skill.

"It is no great mystery," the Lieutenant said, his gaze tracing over the lamp-lit impressions of small houses near the shore, and waves lapping at the beach and boats alike. "It is the harbour I grew up around. My parents were both merchants and had a warehouse there, though we lived further away from the shore. I used to climb the hill this painting was created from, and play with friends there where we could watch for the ships coming in. Some of the captains we knew, and when we saw their ship we would all run down the hill to meet them. It's frankly astonishing that none of us broke our necks doing it."

"It's where you decided to join the navy."

"I suppose it is, at that. Living in a port town, it's the usual thing for youngsters to consider I expect, though the threat of spending my life working the warehouse made it that much more appealing. So when I came of age and the recruiters were in town, I signed up. There were times, especially at first, that I regretted it, but overall it has been good to me. I will miss the travelling the most, but perhaps a holiday might be taken once in a while to ease that. Have you travelled much yourself?"

He turned to look at Will as he asked the question, choosing to lean against the mantle there rather than stand without anything to soften the stance from looming. It seemed like a conscious choice rather than an automatic action. Perhaps it was, in its own way, as difficult for the Lieutenant to relax while in company as it was for Will, both of them needing to find some ease with each other.

"Not abroad. We have the country estate we sometimes go to escape the city living, and friends we visit in York, Aberdeen and Ayrshire. Usually the family is too busy with varying projects to make time for such a trip, and I have never really thought much on it myself, though am not against the idea. Travelling of any sort does tend to put additional strain on my nerves, but it can be done, however. I was hoping to visit with Mr Price's brother come the spring. You must have journeyed quite a lot. Did they send you to many of the same locations, or was it quite varied?"

"Most of the trade routes. We were often guarding important trade vessels, or trying to secure better landings for them. Mostly through the hotter areas down through Europe to the Aegean Sea with the Spanish trade vessels or around Africa to the East Indies. We often got to stop at the ports along the way. Life is so different there, the weather, people's clothes and habits, the food, even the styles of tableware they use is different. Some of it, the noise and the chaos of the markets you would likely find too much, but there are other places that might appeal. In some of the larger buildings in Morocco they have open courtyards in the center of buildings, sometimes with shaded pools and strange spiked plants in pots that I was told have some medicinal value. They drape fabric in long coloured sheets to keep off the sun, and although the outer walls are often white-washed, or done in
beige or tan, the interiors are often brightly decorated with colourful tiles of varying geometric designs. The high walls of the houses block out much of the city noise and it can be quite tranquil within.

The Lieutenant's gaze returned to the present to find Will watching him, some of the tenseness and sour anxiety in his scent having dissipated. Heartened by this, he moved over and took the seat opposite.

"Perhaps it is fitting that I, who grew up around many exotic goods of trade would end up travelling to their places of origin. In many ways, the vast differences in culture there only added to the allure of them. It is one thing to see an item and know it is different, but it is quite another to remember the other world from which it came."

"Who would guess that behind such a stoic mask, lays a man delighting in the extraordinary. Quite opposed to the norms here of being dourly displeased with everything. It suits you."

The Lieutenant offered a mild smile, still perhaps unsure of how much he could really show of such differences, especially to a man of upper class breeding and status. But it was a start, a tentative acceptance that might bring a greater truth in time.

With a growing sense of ease, they spoke of such places, of the allure of locations, of busy marketplaces, serene temples, the heat hazes that seemed to make things shimmer like liquid and the way that the oceans seemed to stretch forever when travelling. Will recounted memories of tranquil walks, of watching storms crash waves against the harbour from the warmth of the home, and the tree he used to sit under that seemed to him as a child to have roots that must reach into the very center of the earth, such was it's size.

So it was that when the knock came at the door, it was a surprise to find that a full two hours had passed without his realizing, and it was time for them to go.

In his coat at the door, both Alana and Jack having already stepped out to the carriage, Will looked up to the Lieutenant. Some of the ease they had managed while alone had disappeared when back within company, but enough still lingered that allowed him to offer his hand without difficulty. The Lieutenant's hand was rough and calloused from a lifetime of work and combat, but his lips were soft enough against his knuckles, the touch leaving Will a little breathless with the flurry of excitement the touch brought. He mentally berated himself for reacting like a boy only come into his adulthood, and managed to give his good night without faltering over the words.

It was good, and when alone, the night had gone well. Sitting in the carriage watching the darkened streets pass by, he missed the low mellow scent of the man and the unassuming company. It would, he thought, be no trial to spend his heat with him.

Chapter End Notes

The chapter has a couple of references to places and culture that may not be as strictly true in our world, mostly referring to Anderson's travels. In our world, the British Navy would not be found guarding Spanish trade ships, and the buildings in Morocco are slightly different etc. Chalk it down to the changes that history would have made due to the biology etc, or artistic licence :)

Another thing I would mention is that it will likely not be until the end of December, or
the beginning of January that I will be posting the next chapter. Both my beta-readers are massively busy with overtime right now, and the run-up to the holidays, and chapter 6 also has things that I want to spend some extra time getting right without as much of a pressure of deadlines. In the interim, there will be a xmas-themed agony uncle post I will put out at the beginning of December.
London - Thursday 15th October

The waiting was one of the worst things. Usually in a place of quiet, Will could relax and de-stress, but there was none of that to be had here, where the air of the static carriage was suffocating in the knowledge of what was to come. It was worse for the fact that he never knew when he would be called out, nor how awful the situation might be. He might be left waiting for hours, as had happened before when Jack couldn't get the rest of the police to leave quickly enough.

No one was to know that he got in help with solving the crimes, and certainly not from whom. If anyone found out, it would be a scandal of vast proportions that their family might never recover from. People did not, after all, subject omegas to traumatic situations purposefully. Unless of course it was Jack Crawford, whose need for solving murders and getting the promotion for 'the good of the family' overruled such humanitarian concerns.

It wasn't even like Will didn't understand the harm this was causing him. He did, all too well. But when what he could do was able to save lives, his own already compromised psyche seemed like a worthwhile gamble. He knew he was likely broken beyond repair for his own sub-gender, the toll of years without being able to bond with a mate showed that all too clearly. What were another few cracks in a shattered glass, when his understanding might save others from a similar or worse fate?

He kept telling himself that as the time moved on in the silence of the unmarked carriage, the well-meaning concern from Price, who was sitting opposite, a usual thing.

"We should go home."

The words from the man were said without any real hope of them being heeded, having had made many such comments in the past. Will didn't disagree. There were far too many reasons why that was the good and sensible thing to do.

"I know," he murmured quietly back, their voices barely there, not willing to have questions asked by others, should they be heard. He knew, but that didn't stop people being killed, deaths that could be prevented if he could just understand their minds, as well as that of the killer.

Across from him, Price was unhappy and seemingly unable to restrain the scent and feel of it from infusing the carriage. But they both knew why he had to do this.

The knock on the door made him jump a bit, but that was the signal that the coast was as clear as it was going to get.

Fastening his long coat up the front, he drew up the hood and secured the obscuring cloth over the lower half of it, so only his eyes were showing, and even then, they were in shadow. It was a
familiar device in towns, unremarkable enough not to be questioned, and, much like the heavy use of scent-blockers by him, hid his identity from any of those around.

One last glance to Price, assuring himself that everything was in order, before he stepped down out of the carriage where Jack waited. For this he couldn't take Price with him, and it was best the man never see the full extent of what he was subjected to.

"Seems the season has started early this year. We think its the Ripper Artist. Go look. Tell me what you see."

As always, Jack was demanding and to-the-point. If anything, he was more harsh out here where others might see or hear, lest they think he had brought in a civilian, or worse, an omega. Will silently thought that, if the man was given enough reign without social norms, he would have been subject to much more of this without the mediating presence of the family or society in general.

As eager as he was to be away from the attitude that could be domineering and caustic if riled, he was also leaving behind his only backup. Alone out here to face the monsters in their own minds. Jack had been wrong before about the identity of the killer in the past, and Will was divided on what he was hoping he might find. If it was indeed the Ripper Artist, whose chilled precision distanced himself from the victim, it made it easier for Will to bear the process, but on the other hand if it indeed was the Ripper, then there would be little to find, and little hope of catching him. The murders would likely continue unabated by his insight.

He followed the path trampled by many feet, and he could pick out at least eight, which meant that this hadn't just been handled by Jack, but by the current head of the police department Mr Deakin. That alone told him that this was going to be bad.

Every time, he forgot how bad it was, no matter how much he tried to prepare himself. He didn't want to have to look, nor did he want to have to witness it through his imagination, the killer, or the victim. But he would have to do both. He knew that.

It was unsurprising that he was trembling, just glad for the over-thick coat that hid such motions.

His footsteps halted of their own accord, having been following the footprints of one of the visitors here, probably a lower ranking policeman from the shape of the boot, one that didn't match the head of police, Jack or Zeller.

This, he decided, was far enough. He would be offered a good view, for many had paused here to stare. It was obvious. He didn't want to look.

But he did anyway.

The body was set in a small wooded area, a glance around telling him a park of some sort, for they had certainly not travelled enough out of London for it to be anywhere else. It was easy enough to understand why this place was chosen, considering the victim had been made into a sort of gruesome tree using the bones from his own limbs.

There was no doubt that this was the work of the Ripper Artist. The work was too clean, too precise and steeped in meaning for it to be by anyone else. The Ripper had been hunting in London for years now. Too meticulous, too clever to get caught. Sure, he had a certain way of doing things, and a style that was near impossible to mistake, it never helped catch him. Or her, really. No one knew what gender or sub-gender they were for certain, only other facets about the kills.

Winter, for example, was the time they hunted the most. It was always in sets of three kills, but a
winter might have many such sets, while any killings during the rest of the year were rare in the extreme. This murder here, done late at night, would have been lit by strong moonlight, for it had been relatively cloud-free, and frigid as a result. And although the area was clear of it now, it was very likely the place had had a coating of frost when it was done. There would be more of this, in the coming days or weeks, if history was to repeat itself from previous years.

All of that didn't detract from the fact that even now Jack was waiting for answers, a silent but thunderous demand at the edge of the area, and only that distance because Will needed some peace and calm to let himself see things clearly enough. That would be the most important here, because the Ripper Artist was no casual criminal or enraged individual who made mistakes. There was likely, as always, to be nothing here to find that the murderer didn't want to be found, and he had to find something to placate Jack with.

With shallow breaths to take in as little of the scent of the decaying corpse as possible, he let himself take in the scene around him, the finished piece, then slowly retreat in time until he could imagine the scene as it would have started, the park in the cold evening air, the moon shining down and the crisp sound of frost beneath feet as the unconscious man was manoeuvred into place.

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The body is heavy, despite the fact that I have already amputated the legs. He is still alive, of course, as my skill would not let him expire before I wished it, and his infractions are such that he will gain no escape from what I have planned. Not for a while yet.

Yes, this place will do very well. Sheltered enough in the trees that the city around almost seems far away, and that alone grants me time enough to do what is needed. This is the first of the season, and while all of my work is exceptional, it is better to make a larger statement with these early ones. My art, after all, should be viewed by others, even if they are largely unknowing of the true complexity and beauty that they see.

The man is starting to regain consciousness as I finish securing him upright on the cold earth. Stakes driven in deeply to the ground and tied to his body so that he cannot slump and ruin the effect. Or struggle effectively.

I have carefully selected a patch of ground that has some thicker undergrowth so that while he is naked, those viewing need not be disturbed by the crass vision of his genitals.

The night is quiet, no matter that he is conscious now, for I have taken the liberty of cutting his vocal chords. A delicate manoeuvre, and at another time I would have been pleased by hearing his pain and despair, but I don't wish to be rushed tonight, and with what is to come, I don't wish him to drown himself in his own vomit if I used a gag, should what I am to do causes such an upset. No, that wouldn't do at all. His method of death has already been decided upon, planned down to the last detail, and I will not have something like that cause such a disruption.

He struggles ineffectually, perhaps hoping that the change of scene may have improved his chance for escape in one way or another, but he should know better, especially after the time spent with me already, getting him prepared for the journey. Too much blood and mess if I had done it all here, after all, and I needed to prepare the bones from the legs, hands and feet properly for best effect, stripping all the meat from them, and securing them with fishing wire, to be added later to the rest.

I have more of the wire here now. Such useful stuff, and so easy to get ahold of. Untraceable in it's very mundainity, and so fine as to be nearly invisible in the air. I secure some to the trees around, satisfied that their branches will hold aloft my latest creation. It is fitting.
Ah, but now the preparations in the area are complete, I turn my attention back to the man. Time to make something better out of him.

His arms, previously tied behind his back, are bleeding from his struggles, the severed wrists having pulled the severed flesh a bit, but that doesn't matter, as they were never going to remain even that whole for long.

My cuts are precise, leaving some meat and tendon on the upper arms, enough so that the taper to the bone isn't abrupt. I secure them to the wire, ensuring that they remain raised. He is still alive, despite all this, though barely, having slipped in and out of consciousness during the process. He may not remain so for long though, and judging the tasks still remaining, I take up two of his leg bones and strangle him with them. I don't crush his throat as some amateur might do, but instead cut off the blood flow to the brain. It doesn't take long.

Resuming my work, the smell of the man's bowels emptying what little is left in them doesn't bother me. Natural fertilizer you might say.

In the moonlight I carefully strip the lower arm bones, my knife never slipping or erring despite how dark it is. I know the human body too well, or perhaps merely bones. I don't wish them to be marred by such sloppy work. It would be beneath me.

I secure the cleared bones to the ones already raised, both the leg and arm bones, as well as that of the hands and feet, into the arch of tree boughs I had planned. They hang there, white like snow-covered branches, arcing down in part to wrap around the man's own neck, holding his head aloft.

He did this to himself after all.

I pause to take in my creation, but it still lacks. Taking my knife, I carefully cut away slices of meat and skin from the torso to look far more like tree-bark than it did previously. I don't trust those who view it to have adequate vision to understand the reference, and so I am making it clearer, but it also satisfies me, this melding of skin and meat, beyond that which I would usually do.

Yes. This is what I want them to see. I am proud of this one. It is a worthy start to the season.

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Will came back to himself, staring at the corpse, the iron, self-assured confidence of the killer slowly slipping away, leaving him only looking at the victim. The one whose torture had been hours long, whose screams and hope had been utterly stripped away.

It was that, rather than the murder itself that had him shaking, his arms wrapping around himself in self-comfort. It was too reminiscent of his own struggles, for although he was not being butchered at the time, the powerlessness and voicelessness were the same.

"Well?"

Jack, of course. For all that he was glad of the familiar presence, he could have done with more time to compose himself and his thoughts. But that tone didn't allow for such things. Jack wanted answers. Now.

"It's the Ripper. Amputated the legs and hands somewhere else then brought him here alive to finish. Cleaned the arm bones here though. Skilled with knives and bones. Could be a butcher maybe, or a chef, but they knew how to keep the man alive long enough to do this. Army medics are trained like that, or doctors. They are strong, to lift a man of that weight without great issue, so I would lean towards army medic, or someone who regularly takes exercise for strength. It's probably an alpha,
but alphas tend to have far stronger emotional responses to those that anger them, so it might not be."

"You aren't really telling me anything we didn't guess from previous years. People are going to die. You need to give me more than that."

"I can't give you what isn't here. I can't perform miracles, or create evidence or answers that aren't there. I don't know, Jack. The fact he has been made into a tree is important, that's about all I can say right now."

"More important than the fact he appears to have strangled himself?"

"I think so. The tree icon and where this was done is part of what they are trying to convey. It's only part of the story though."

"You're saying we just need to wait for the next death for more answers? Unacceptable!"

Will had to use all his hard-fought resistance not to cower back from the man, even though that was what almost every part of him was wanting to do, especially considering what he had just gone through, but it was too dangerous lest they were seen. That Jack didn't even seem to be trying to limit his anger towards him and the situation in general just made it that much more difficult.

He managed to change the motion from shrinking away into merely turning from the alpha then, having not looked up into his face. He had no more words for him, his throat having closed up, his thoughts ceased like machinery with an obstruction. His need to get to safety was almost all-consuming. It was easier to walk away when he couldn't see Jack staring at him, and while the man could call him back, and had in the past, it seemed like Jack perhaps had grasped that he was pressing too hard to get any more answers today. Will was not an alpha that could merely be shouted at and have answers demanded of him, and no matter if Jack thought he was overreacting or not, there was nothing more he could give him today.

When he got to the waiting carriage, it was with a hand on the door that shook so badly that he fumbled the latch, before he pulled himself up into the nondescript carriage, and rapped on the panel behind him when he was seated to get them to set off. Near instantly the whole thing lurched into motion, taking him away from the place, and what was in it. Private as this was, he was not home, and he was not safe. He knew that such things would be long in the coming, not only because they would have to take a convoluted route home to ensure that no one was following, but also because what he had seen would not merely flit from his mind, but linger, heavy and choking for days and weeks to come.

Price was still there. An unhappy presence opposite, but he didn't look over to him, much as he hadn't to Jack. He left the hood and it's veil on, allowing himself to hide, this time, in what small ways he could from having to deal with his family's expectations, worries and disappointments. Price didn't mean to pressure him, out of them all, but his worry was a grating thing at times like this when all his attention was set on not shattering apart.

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**Bloom Residence, London - Saturday 17th October**

It had been two days since Will had been pressured into viewing the crime scene, and while he couldn't say that he was feeling greatly better, he was at least well-practiced at finding ways to help him function as best as could be expected. This largely constituted him avoiding people as much as possible, and trying to forget the entire thing.
Unfortunately for him, Jack seemed to have focused his mind upon the fact that should he manage to capture the Ripper, his promotion would be assured, something that meant a lot to the man considering he was hoping to get Alana pregnant this season and would want a higher stable income. No matter that such a capture was about as likely as Will waking up one day and having no mental instabilities, this was what Jack seemed driven towards, especially with the winter season of Ripper killings just starting. He would be unlikely to change his mind.

It was little wonder then that Will was making himself as scarce as possible, for although he had little doubt that Jack would find him should a murder happen, he was not willing to put himself through anything else right now if he could help it. Should Jack have him easily at hand, and think it expedient to ask him to look into something rather than doing it himself, he would.

Which was one reason he was, even now, not in the warmth of the house, but out in the stables with the dogs.

They lived out here with the horses, a fact he had never liked since their move to the city years ago, but he'd had to concede to since he was not in charge of such decision-making. Alana and a couple of the senior betas had decided that the extra work in keeping the house clean and smelling fresh to the standards expected of society here, was too great to justify the dogs staying inside permanently.

That was not to say that they were never allowed in, but such times were rare, and Will often missed the tumble of dogs playing in the house, or merely sleeping lazily around the fires or on the bed. Even the country estate had disallowed such things.

For all that Will missed the dogs' understanding company in the house, he couldn't say that they were not content out here, nor were they suffering for it. The stables had been purposefully built abutting the back of the kitchen, the large chimney there kept both the horses and the dogs amply warm, even in winter.

No, it was more that he just missed them, and would have liked to have them close when trying to do things around the house. What with it having been raining earlier, he knew better than even asking, for the scent of damp dog did tend to linger, at least until they had been properly bathed and dried, and the household seemed ill-inclined to facilitating that with all the social functions going on in town right now. In all honesty, Will didn't even know if he was feeling up to traversing the minefield of family needs and subtleties right now to even try.

Still, with his lecture tomorrow, something long worked towards and vastly important, he had to find something to lift his mood a bit, something that require little of him, and so he had sent a request to the Hargreaves household to see if they were available for him to come and visit the pups.

As the months and years passed, and the family estate became less restful for him with the changing of the lead family alpha when Jack was accepted, he needed something that was just for him. Trinkets and gifts were fleeting, possessions that might be sold or claimed by the family should circumstances prompt it. He wouldn't put it past Jack, especially after he 'squandered' his courting ball gifts. But there was no way that even Alana at her most demure, would allow Jack to take a puppy from him. Puppies knew nothing of social pressures, and could revel in the simple pleasures of life without reprimand. Such things held an appeal that he sorely needed right now, something innocent and joyful after everything lately.

So it was that when Peter Glen, one of the family betas returned from the shopping trip to town, one in which he had detoured to hand in the request, Will was excited to receive the note in response. He would have to change of course, but perhaps leave the scent of the family dogs on his hands for the pups to get to know. Or he could bring one of the many dog toys that were scattered around, that might be better, for puppies always seemed to go through so many of them with their sharp little
teeth.

Except, when he opened the letter, it was proved to be an unnecessary thought, for Mr Hargreaves was, apparently, not home that day to receive him, and had left no word on when he might return.

Will thanked Peter for going out of his way, but no, he wouldn't be needing the carriage after all.

He listened to the retreating footsteps as he moved to settle on the blanket with the dogs, his mood, briefly buoyed as it had been by his intent to see his pup, fell once more as the adrenaline that might once have been used to make the trip, drained away.

Winston came up, pressing in against him until he obliged to stroke him, already hearing Jack's voice from within the home. In his current mood, it felt all too fitting that despite being a grown man, it was he that was relegated to sitting in the stables to avoid the alpha who had taken over. He was, after all, the one who didn't really fit here any more. Much like the dogs. Brought out only when he was presented correctly, or was useful.

Before his thoughts could get any more maudlin, Mr Glen returned to the stable door.

"Mr Crawford is calling for the carriage. If you come in by the kitchen, you will be able to bypass all the kerfuffle. Mrs Platts has made some of those little pies you like."

Will smiled a little, and hauled himself up, patting Winston a bit in regret from having disturbed the dog, who had made himself comfortable by laying over his lap.

"Thanks, Peter."

He was thankful, not only for a way to further avoid Jack and his expectations and demands, but also for the reminder that the family did still care for him, despite the extra work and stress he put them through.

This thought in mind, he brushed himself down, knowing he was still smelling of damp dog and covered in fur, but nonetheless still made his way through to the kitchen, the warmth of the place surrounding him as he picked up one of the small meat pies on his way through, taking the narrow back stairs up once he heard Jack was heading towards the front door.

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**Hargreaves Residence, Merchiston Wynd, London - Saturday 17th October**

George Hargreaves liked to think of himself as a level-headed and practical man, on most occasions at least, but some days he found himself astoundingly unable to be those things. This was one of those days, and, as was usually the case, his brother was the cause.

Richard Hargreaves, younger by three years, and head of this household having moved from their parents' home some years ago seeking to improve their lot. He had gone with him, as much because Richard would need an able beta to run his household as anything, and he had wanted his own space away from the daily struggle to keep the family fed, that they had both grown up with. Their moving lessened the burden on their parents, while hopefully improving their own lot. After all, while there were inevitably more bills to pay, at least Richard need not worry for the extra expense of a servant to run the household with George there.

They both knew that their best chance of success would be to find an omega for Richard, to guide their household, but Richard had always been ambitious, that alpha drive to better his position that was always there behind every thought. Often such things tended to be the cause of their disagreements, for unlike his brother, George would be more than happy to find himself in a position
where daily life and adequate comfort were assured no matter how high or low in society that was. But Richard wanted more. Always more.

Sitting himself down at the table next to the window, he let himself take in the morning view beyond the expensive glass. Much of the noise of the street still filtered inside despite the barrier, aided by the silence that surrounded him.

No. He would not think about that.

The house, sitting as it did facing the length of Pulley Street, gave a good view of the hustle and bustle of humanity. Carriages passed by with a never-ending frequency, and the shops had the constant traffic of people. Unsurprisingly the haberdashery was one of the busiest, as people desperately sought to better their chances during courting season by the purchase of new ribbons or trim, by the making up of their clothing, or the embellishment on a hat. It all seemed so far removed from his life as to be a dream.

An argument down the street nearer midday, some posturing and straight-backed tension until it disperses. A woman in a pretty dress drops a box she was carrying. He has no idea if her day is ruined because of it, and wonders what was in the box. Her face is hidden by her hat as she gathers it and hurries off once more.

The smell of meat pies as the pie-cart moves past with an agonizing slowness that calls to the hunger long set aside.

Later, down Merchiston Wynd, the lamplighters have started their rounds, the first few on the far side lit in the slowly dimming light, when the front door unlocks, the clatter of boots, the thud of a bag dropped. His name is called, but he stays where he is, silent.

Three men come out of a side-street, their laughter can be heard, just, over the clatter of horses hooves, street chatter, and the voice behind him.

"Why have you started a spring clean so early? The place looks positively barren! Is the dinner nearly ready? I'm starved!"

The mirthful gentlemen on the street have paused to talk to a couple they seem to know, an easy conversation by the relaxed and open body language.

"No."

"What? Why not? I swear, I leave for a couple of days and you seem to feel it a holiday! Come now, some bread and ham will do very well, and don't be so morose. You have not even welcomed me home."

George Hargreaves drew his eyes away from the lives beyond the window to the darkened room in which he sat, and the man there.

"Eight days. And there is no bread and ham."

"A few days, whatever. Why do we not have ham?"

"With what money should I have bought it? The housekeeping allowance you give me on Sundays while you were away?"

"Ah, well, I dare say we can get something from the chop-house tonight then. Send Miss Smithson, they always give her more."
"Again, with what money? And I cannot send her anyway. She left."

"Gods man, do you not have any good news? Here, for goodness sake just go get us some food!"

George looked down at the meagre offering of coins on the table, then back to his brother.

"That is all you have? That is all you brought back?"

"Yes. I'll get more tonight. Not every gamble pays off you know."

Richard Hargreaves was starting to bristle, but George was so far beyond caring right then.

"Yes," he said, the cold anger in his voice giving the alpha pause, "I know."

He picked up the large envelope from where he had set it beside him, and put it down on the table next to the coins that would struggle to buy one night's meal. Outside, the lamplighter had made it to them, and the glow from the post outside filtered enough light through the window to read by. Just.

"You have ruined us, Richard. They took everything."

"What do you mean everything? Who?"

George just stood there, his arms crossed, the evidence sitting between them. A signed bet, legal documents from the debt-collectors that had been arranged and visited. George watched as his brother looked down at the letters on the paper, his own writing and signature clear enough despite the low light. Each subsequent addition added in handwriting that became more of a scrawl. Bets made with amounts that they simply didn't have.

"You just couldn't restrain yourself, could you? They took everything because of that. Not just your own, but mine too, because I am not a paid servant, but family. You will find not one item in this house of any worth that is our own, only those belonging to the landlady remains. Even the spare clothing and bed linens are gone!"

"No, no no no. This can't be happening! Everything was going so well!"

"Yes, until you started drinking too much when gambling and lost it all. You even gambled away the dogs!"

"Yes, well, the pups 8 weeks now and will be fine without their mother. I am sure you said so."

"It was twelve weeks I said. But you don't need to concern yourself over that because they took Beatrice as well to cover the remaining part of the debt."

"Wait, they took all the dogs? All the puppies? No! Why didn't you tell them one was Mr Graham's?!"

Incredulous, but honestly not surprised, George looked at his brother straight despite the aura pressing down around the room. He was too angry himself to be cowed so easily.

"I did, but unlike the bets, you didn't actually leave any proof. And seeing how I was on my own with Miss Smithson at the time, there was nothing I could do against a lawyer, and two debt-collectors that had legal right to enter and do their jobs. I have never been so humiliated in all my life as I was that day. And you were not to be found. Seven days I waited for you, not knowing if you were even returning. Seven days of living off what few scraps of food were left from last week. I had to go to one of the community halls yesterday for a roll and soup when the hunger got too much!"
Faced with the very real failure to provide for his family, Richard's anger dissipated, his frustration at the situation swallowed back in lieu of attempting to make amends with his brother.

"Look, I'm sorry. This weekend will be better. I'll get us some new stuff afterwards."

"If you want me to stay, you can pay me wages. I'm not willing to lose everything again. I don't even have the box that grand-sire gave me any more."

"What?! I'm not going to pay you wages like a common servant. You are family!"

"Then I will find someone who will, Richard. If you had paid me, we would not be looking at being destitute in two weeks. There would still be food in the house, and I would still have my belongings, and we would have Beatrice to make another litter next year. As it is, we have nothing!"

"So it's like that, is it? Things get a little rough and you just up and leave?"

"Like you did this last week? I supported you through everything! Where the fuck were you anyway?"

"Ended up at Mr Laverick's estate, out of town."

"Have fun did you?"

"This isn't about fun, George. It's about building contacts and alliances. Why, I bet he would loan me some money for cards this weekend no problem. Look, why don't you go get yourself some food, then see if you can get the stain out of my waistcoat for tonight. I'll bring us back some winnings for the bills over the weekend."

"Two weeks, Richard. You bring the money in for the bills, and pay me, or I am seeking a new household. Now give me your coat. It's cold and you gambled mine away."

"All right, George, all right."

He knew that this was the best he was going to get. Not much of one either. He scooped up the coins from the table and pocketed them. It was doubtful that his brother would stick to his word, even if he currently intended to. Too easy to delay payments, especially because he was so used to getting his own way. Shoving his hands deep into the pockets of the ill-fitting coat, he made his way down the street and into the blissful warmth of the chop-house. Surrounded by the cacophony of conversations, he wondered how on earth he was going to find another household he could settle in if his brother's behaviour didn't change.

Chapter End Notes

This was a bit of an odd chapter, in that the last section I had never intended to include in it, but it was written, and figured you guys might like to have a bit of background on the Hargreaves'.

In other news, I have made a facebook page, so that readers can contact me directly about questions or if you are interested in beta-reading, as well as get updates when I post more chapters etc.

https://www.facebook.com/AO3thequietscribe
Sunday afternoon found Dr Hannibal Lecter in the large lobby of the Foxglove Hall listening to the rather inane conversations of those he was with. In some cases, he was even forced to call them colleagues. Their often dull chatter did little to quell his good mood however, no matter how long Dr Houlton, an otherwise gifted physician, related the inadequacies of the cleaning that had been done on Masons Row.

Usually, he would have taken control of the conversation before now, turning it, and those listening, to his own preference, but he allowed himself instead to merely listen and nod where appropriate, and consider instead how delightfully his weekend had gone.

Of course, it was also quite convenient that he keep a low profile this evening, at least at the start, for better effect later when he would choose to be noticed.

Mr Graham, or more correctly in this setting, Professor Graham, had not yet made an appearance, however this was not something out-of-character for the man, no matter how common pre-lecture mingling was. Considering the topic of the lecture, Dr Lecter didn't doubt that he would wish all his faculties geared towards the presentation rather than something that would make it more difficult for him to do afterwards.

He allowed Dr Houlton to come to the end of what he was saying, before drawing the man's attention to the now open entryway to the lecture hall room, people already filtering through.

"Ah, right you are. We wouldn't want to find ourselves in a sub-standard position," the man continued as they made their way over. "Have you read the document that he is to talk of yet? I regret I have not found the time. I expect it will be interesting no matter what, as I was fortunate to get a seat for his lecture on 'Social Mobility in Sub-genders' during the summer. It was capital! I dare say he is not the most sociable of people, but by Jove he knows his stuff!"

"Yes, I read through it yesterday evening."

"No doubt you did. I hear you are courting him this year, and why should you not! A fine man, and as clever as his mother. Ah good, these seats will do very well, don't you think?"

In truth, Dr Houlton was an easy companion to spend time with, as eager to be pleased about things as he was to be displeased over others, but always courteous. It was one of the reasons Dr Lecter had chosen to spend the time with him before the lecture so that he could be assured of that attentiveness to the subject being presented. Others might make irritating attempts at currying favour with him, even during such a thing, but Dr Houlton would be attentive once the mingling had ceased. That the man knew he was courting Mr Graham would also only enhance the already sturdy approval Dr Houlton had of Mr Graham, and thus help champion the cause he was speaking on this afternoon. Best that such enthusiasm be turned towards this cause tonight, rather than if he had perhaps sat with someone like Chilton, who would not be favourable to what was going to be said.

"I don't doubt you will find it of great interest," Dr Lecter said to his companion, "It heralds the necessity for immediate change in the treatment of trauma victims. But I shall let him detail that in his
own words for you. I believe that is him arriving now."

As Mr Graham walked out, the lamps around the semi-circle of raised seats were dimmed, focusing the attention away from companions, the gracefully carved woodwork and personal conversations, and onto the soul person moving to stand in the centre of the floor.

Tonight Mr Graham was in a rather drab and formless suit that did nothing to show his rather appealing figure as the previous one he had seen him in had presented. That was, of course, likely the point, for he would wish and need to be seen less as his sub-gender, and more of the professor he was here as. Indeed, the fact that it was trauma in his own past that had left him, so far, unmated, would be something he likely wished to distance himself from, lest he be thought of as influencing the results by his own biases. He wouldn't put it past Mr Graham's detractors to use that particular tact when discussing the findings later, for he had noted at least a couple of them from conversations in the lobby earlier on.

Mr Graham gave no time to scan the faces in the room, but rather spoke to the room in general, his gaze coasting over the shadowed form of his audience and settling in places where people were not. Hardly unexpected. The fact that Mr Graham was here at all showed just how strongly he believed in the need for this particular issue to be heard, no matter how strong his own personal discomfort at such a spotlighted position. His voice was clear and precise, and while his words were clearly written as being more conversational in tone, his oration of those words came out more abrupt and pointed.

"Trauma, much like any effect that deals primarily with the mind, can be difficult to fully understand and treat. This is doubly so in the cases involving omegas, whose biology makes them far more susceptible to it, but also have a further reaching impact on others as a result. While an alpha or beta may suffer trauma, that trauma tends to be limited to themselves alone, only impacting on others when flashbacks or circumstances overrule their normal behaviour. Omegas, on the other hand, will affect all those around them due to both the higher intensity of scents and pheromones they give off, but also the impact that their distress has on all those around them.

"An omega who, say, might take a turn of terror while in public not only is distressed themselves, but will acutely prompt betas' need to coddle and mother. More importantly for public safety, it will also trigger the protective instincts in alphas in the area. In the worst cases, this can cause violence or even to prompt rioting to break out if non-family alphas don't believe those closest to the distressed omega are doing enough to help with it. These responses are usually beyond the control of those involved.

"For these reasons the successful treatment of omegas that have and do suffer from trauma, acute nerves and suicidal depression has always been at the forefront of medical priorities, and a topic that has interested me on a personal and professional level most of my adult life.

"In the preparatory work for the winter lectures I was to give on the long-term effects of trauma on the family, I started to look into this subject for more detailed information, and became aware that while there were excellent records made about omegas upon release from the institutes, none of them were taken more than the 2-5 week period after the patient's release. As my lectures were to be on a far longer scale, I took it upon myself to make enquiries to interview some of the people involved in those interviews in order to cross-reference them and get a better understanding on any long-term effects of the trauma that might still linger.

"Although initially I had intended to conduct this research myself, and have brief interviews with five or ten omegas that had undergone such treatment, enough to form a general basis for my lecture, the reactions and results of these interviews deemed it necessary to rethink this.
"The interviews were, in the end, not conducted by myself, as we swiftly found that it was counterproductive having an omega there, especially an unmated one, as it made those we were trying to speak to too insecure and distracted by the security of their position with their mate. Likewise, having an alpha that was a stranger to them present either made the omegas nervous, or we generally found that the alphas from the mated pair were less open about discussing their situation. For these reasons, the interviews were conducted by my colleague Professor Fennel, a beta.

"When making initial contact with these former patients, we also found, to our dismay, that many were in abject fear of being returned to the institute. Contrary to the popular belief that these places are a refuge for healing, these particular patients seem to have found the time so traumatic that even the unsubstantiated worry that we might have been from there, sent several into a state of panic so acute that we had to return another day.

"We found it of vast use bringing in the esteemed Mr Jonathan Clamp, of 'Shand, Clamp and Sons' Lawyers, also a beta, not only to record and witness the interviews, but also to reassure those involved that we had no legal standing in which to influence their return to the said institutes.

"As you can imagine, this reaction alone brings into question how accurate the follow-up visits were by the medical staff if those patients were not seeing the place as a safe-haven for healing, which only reaffirmed the necessity of doing these interviews more thoroughly.

"Troubled by the reactions, what had started out as a personal interest swiftly became something far more detailed and in-depth in order to answer the questions this brought up. We wanted to know why the patients viewed the institutes as some place to avoid, so that improvements could be made. We also wanted a far greater transparency of what life had been like, both for the omegas involved, but also those of their families, during and after. If the follow-up interviews by the institute had been biased through fear of being returned there, we wanted to know what life was actually like for these people now. If their lives were not as happy and contented as we had been led to believe, only by knowing the details might we be able to improve their situations and the situations of those that come after.

"Unfortunately, I have to report that with the exception of three, two of whom were voluntary in-patients, the fifty-one other omegan families we were able to interview were not living happy or productive lives. Indeed, a full third of them are now deceased."

There were sounds of dismay from around the room, and he had to pause to allow his audience to settle enough again to continue. Many seemed ill inclined to do so in a timely manner, turning, much as Dr Houlton did, to inquire of their companions if they had heard of this before now, though to the man's credit, he restrained himself at the placid look from Hannibal.

Professor Graham allowed the room a few moments to get over it's surprise, before being forced to raise his voice a little more to draw attention back to the lecture at hand. It must have cost him to do so, possibly heavily, being surrounded as he was on all sides by a plethora of alphas who were being less than discreet in their restraining their auras.

"Although the compiled document carries all the interviews in full detail, it is perhaps best that I read an excerpt from one that is typical of those that were spoken to.

"An alpha whom we shall call Mr X., has been with his mate for four years now after the treatment, and told us how most days are a struggle now.

'At first it seemed for the better. She wasn't crying all the time and she seemed content, if quiet. But I do not believe it helped her, just pushed everything, even sadness, so deep as to be unseen. It is still there though, worse for the fact that there is no warning. One time I came looking for her, only to
find her pouring boiling water over her hands. Another time she calmly tried to drown herself in the bath. She smiled softly at me afterwards, and told me that the tulips would be nice in the spring, then didn't say anything else for a full two weeks. She takes turns, like she did before, but worse. There is no relief for her now, no crying, no curling in against me as she once did. Now she just shuts down in fear or distress. Becomes empty. She cannot even see me, never mind take comfort from my presence. It's horrific for us both. It's clear to me she is not happy, not even really surviving in life like this. Episodes like the bath are common enough as to happen several times a year. In truth, I am often left wishing us both gone, for she is forced to suffer this life like this, and I do not know how much I can take. One day, I think, she will succeed when I am not at her side, for I cannot watch her every minute of the day. I know not whether I will endure long after her.'

This time Professor Graham didn't wait for people to settle down, but instead merely continued to speak, forging on with what he had to say, perhaps fearing he would not be able to restart if the emotions in the room were allowed space to grow much stronger.

"Unfortunately this sort of story was all too common. Mrs B., whose mate poisoned herself after two years, despite having children and a family. Mr J., whose mate has ended up so catatonic that they are rarely even able to get out of bed. Even some of those who are more functional, such as the mate of Ms. F., who often meets others for tea in the afternoons goes easily into a catatonic state, or sometimes even screaming fits if exposed to non-family alphas.

"With so many former patients having similar levels of trauma and lack of functionality after being released from the institutes, as well as the prevailing fear in most of being returned to these places, we then turned our attention to the current treatments being provided by the institutes involved. Although for reasons of confidentiality we were unable to link specific people to their case files, were were able to gather information about the types of treatments that are routinely given to cases such as those we had interviewed.

"The current treatment for omegas, as I am sure you are aware, revolves around forcing their bodies into accepting the biological core needs of their sub-gender at their most instinctual level in order to attempt to reset the body's natural responses rather than the trauma-induced learned ones. This is primarily done using omega's heats as a doorway into these instincts as those are naturally in far stronger during those times. These strategies, I was told, are rarely deviated from, as the results of these treatments are generally believed to be highly successful.

"Up until this point, the general consensus has been that this type of treatment, while possibly stressful for the patient in its inception, especially with removal from their home environment, swiftly overcomes this phase and delivers the anticipated results of overcoming the trauma and nerves, and heralding a calmer and more contented individual from then on.

"Those that champion these methods will tell you that the end justifies the means, and that those who are beyond the remit of normal help from family, who are even suicidal, are better for being put through such things than not. Unfortunately, this can mean that even omegas that have been victims of abuse or even rape can end up in forced heats against their clear-minded will, and forced to endure through more of the sort of trauma that resulted in their ill-state in the first place. Although the forced heat will ensure that, during it, the omega is all-too-willing to accept their biological responses, the interviews we have here shows very clearly that the aftermath of such tactics is damaging beyond compare.

"The untold harm such forced heats put the body through, as well as compounding on possible pre-existing abuse, can, and does, strip the omega of their will, rendering them often catatonic in the aftermath. This is not serving anyone well, for although the omega may well end up outwardly calmer, we have seen that those who have been through such treatments tend not to recover much of
their sense of self, but merely become mostly vacant receptacles for whatever is imposed upon them. They may smile, they may do things, but the spark that made them individuals with life and personality will be so deeply buried as to be almost impossible to retrieve.

"This is not merely a tragedy to the omega involved, but also to those they are mated to and the rest of the family, for they are left with this vacant half-person, unable to offer much conversation, nor interest, unable to balance the relationship as biology and society intended.

"The end certainly does not justify the means, and it is not serving anyone well.

"We were also concerned as to why even those in stable families were not doing better, despite whatever trauma they had suffered. After all, given a secure and stable home environment, people with trauma generally are better off. This, we found, was in fact both true and not, and some of our own assumptions were called into question.

"Society often thinks of mating as a cure-all, but while it can often give stability and reassurance, it does not make the underlying issues disappear. It can, in cases like this, stop people from seeking the help they need, as they may feel that they 'should' be fixed now and don't want to admit to themselves or others that this is not the case. Alternatively they also might not want to admit it, to avoid the possibility that their mate might feel inadequate in providing the support should have worked. They worried that such doubt may weaken the mating, and therefore jeopardize one of the main stabilities they have in their life.

"These were some of the reasons that we were told, by omegas themselves, as to why they were unable to confide fully in their families. Indeed, in two cases specifically, Professor Fennel was the first person they had dared to speak to about such feelings, and only then because they knew and trusted that what they said was confidential and would not impact on their life further.

"I ask you to imagine now, what that must be like, to go for as many as 8-10 years, carrying the aftermath of trauma, and not being able to confide or feel confident enough to confide in another about it, to share that burden. This alone would only have made their situation worse, but in finding this out, it does perhaps give some insight as to what sort of support might be given to them in future.

"As we have seen from the examples and the many more listed, this method of care, far from aiding the majority of these patients, is actually harming them further. Taking already vulnerable people out of their home environment, a place where they are biologically predisposed to consider a place of safety, their nest, and to place them to a strange and unknown location without the comforts and familiarities of home, nor the backup of family, would be bad enough. To add onto that a notably distressing set of procedures, including forcing a heat when they are not feeling safe, is a checklist for trouble.

"The only reason that this has gone unnoticed for so long is largely because of just how severely the individuals went into a state of distress, retreating so deep within their own minds that even the usual signs from the body that would give signal to others, such as scent, were cut off.

"No matter how much we might wish otherwise, there will likely be no ability to reach out and help these people with the current methods. Only by taking a new, more cautious and supportive route, might they engage at all. For those that are still alive. To do that, we need more insight into the types of treatments and support someone with as severe trauma as this might be helped, rather than merely retrying old and previously used tactics that have traumatised them in the first place.

"In short, this type of isolating and shock-style treatment of trauma in patients needs to stop, and an in-depth inquiry into other possible solutions needs to be found.
"I propose, in addition, that it is of paramount importance that each case be treated individually, that the patient's personality be respected as well as their wishes and hopes for the future. Treatment for trauma, depression and nerves should not result in that person losing all of what made them who they are. A rethinking of the current methods is needed to find far more humane and successful treatments, rather than destroying individuals and families as these results seem to conclude.

"It is for these reasons that I bring this report to you today, so that a reform of the treatment of omegas who are in trauma, depression or have acute nerves, can be treated more effectively and in ways that actually improve their life situations rather than making them significantly worse. Too often, the short term results are lauded without looking further on, and it must, in this case, stop for the untold harm it is causing to the individuals and families involved.

"Thank you."

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The applause that filled the lecture hall was mostly enthusiastic, though as Dr Lecter let his gaze coast around the room, there were some far more reserved responses from those who likely disliked the implications of the report. While many would have let the applause go on for much longer, Mr Graham drew it to a halt far sooner, his voice rising above the noise just enough to be heard.

"If there are any specific questions about the details of the report, I will take those now."

It was intriguing that Mr Graham seemed eager to get over the lauding of his work, though it was difficult to tell the exact reasons why in this situation and without knowing him better. It was unusual for omegas especially to be uneasy with public attention, though he knew that Mr Graham was an exception of this. Perhaps then it was an eagerness for it to be done with, his task completed, though it was also possible that the applause itself, loud in such a space, was trying on his nerves. Usually it would take violence or a threat of some kind to trigger an omega's responses, but that wasn't necessarily true for someone who had suffered trauma, as Mr Graham's report so clearly showed. Of course there was also the possibility that the man merely felt it was in poor taste, considering the subject matter.

Overall, the questions started out pleasant enough, vague congratulations on such a detailed report, and praise for bringing it to the medical establishment's attention, followed by questions about the interview process. Dr Lecter had no specific questions, and so merely let his attention follow the room, watching for those that were clear supporters, and those who would need a bit more encouragement or silencing.

"Yes, each person interviewed was posed the same questions. They are listed in the report in Appendix 2, as well as within each of the interviews listed."

A lot of the earlier questions were reaffirmations like this, or so simple that it took him little effort to keep abreast of them while still allowing his mind and gaze to wander around the room.

Dr Hardbrook's dress was distractingly hideous. While she was, apparently, trying to adhere to the latest fashion in deep purples, the dress ended up looking far more like a rotting aubergine than anything to be seen out in public wearing. The thick silk had likely cost a fair amount of money, but it was worse than wasted on such a garment. Dr Fuller had likewise chosen this most unhappy of hues for his suit jacket, and it made his face look quite pasty and unwell. There was little else of note, other than some minorly ill-mannered whispering amongst people while they waited their turn to ask a question.

"If this is such a problem, Professor Graham, why has it not been seen before? Surely with such high
instances of mental ill-health, it would surely have been noted, if not by the general public, then at least by the wider family or friends."

Although the tone it was stated in was of a generally friendly, if curious tone, there was an undercurrent there of criticism that made Hannibal's attention more keenly focus on the man while Mr Graham answered.

"In short, because they did not wish it to be seen. It is rare that any of them are out in society, having ended up becoming reclusive, even with wider family. Above all, either from fear or shame they do not wish to be seen as struggling, and many of their coping strategies have revolved around becoming unseen in this way."

Having seen fit to hold off until now, it seemed like the insidious tide of discontent was starting to lap around the edges, now that the more reasoned questions were dealt with. This piqued Hannibal's interest far more, though he didn't expect too much out of them. For all that they were medical professionals, most were blind to a larger picture, and certainly not passing far from their own self-interest. Something that was easy to predict.

Question after question continued, some more accusatory than others, now that those with praise had already enthusiastically spoken, leaving mainly those with more serious questions and criticisms to speak.

"There are detailed accounts of each of these individuals where possible, and their mates and family in my paper on this topic. The names have been changed for their anonymity in it, but the interviews were taken by Professor Fennel, and recorded by Mr Clamp, a lawyer, to provide professional witnesses."

It was interesting that Mr Graham's detractors appeared to be working as a group, scattered across the room that were working together in their criticism. No matter that they were not seated together, their questions seemed more strategic than solitary. A clever way to appear more numerous than they actually were.

"No, Dr Dimmond, I cannot guarantee the truthfulness of their statements. No one could. However they would have no reason to lie, as they have nothing to gain by doing so."

"With all the names wiped out, there is no way to verify these people even exist."

"We had to sign legal documents guaranteeing their anonymity to get them to talk. The interviews were, as I said, witnessed by a professor and a lawyer, both professionals in their fields who will testify to the truthfulness of their existence."

It was then that a voice from the far side of the room rose, one that Dr Lecter had been waiting for.

"Mr Graham. You are not a medical professional, and therefore cannot know the inner workings of the treatments nor the reasons behind them. Trying to disrupt and dismantle core support for trauma victims for your own ends, treatments that have been proven to work for decades, is selfish, destructive and irresponsible."

It was entirely unsurprising that Chilton spoke out against the findings and the one championing them, but more notable that he had waited until now to do so. It showed a far greater premeditation to the comments than an impassioned outburst would have been. The man tended to have a single-mindedness towards his own interests above all else, and in different circumstances Hannibal might even laud the man for his keen interest in survival, but too often Chilton had proven, while conniving and cunning in certain aspects, to be devoid of wisdom and intellect in others. Sadly for the man, he
had set himself against Mr Graham in this instance, and that was a flaw that set him directly at odds with Dr Lecter, whether the man knew it or not.

He should have.

"I would remind the good gentleman that we are not here to besmirch the reputation and character of Professor Graham, but to review the evidence he has supplied for the betterment of that treatment."

He let his voice ring clearly around the hall, his civil warning there, more as a gesture, for he didn't believe the man astute enough to take it, not when he saw this report as a direct attack on his reputation and methodology, and therefore his career and status.

Gazes in the room turned to him, many only now noting his presence, though Chilton didn't appear surprised, his weasel's gaze likely having spotted him once they had been seated. Even across such a distance, Hannibal could make out the slight narrowing of those eyes, one that told him clearly enough that the man was indeed not going to back down, before Chilton spoke and proved that theory correct.

"We are now to give such credence to a report written by someone whose main claim to fame is an agony-aunt column, rather than scientific proof by trained medical professionals?"

It was disappointing, in a way, that Chilton had so thoroughly damned himself like this. A person could survive changes in their profession and social standing if they were clever enough, but such was not necessarily the case if they were particularly rude towards one of Hannibal's close acquaintances.

"Professor Graham is indeed not medically trained. I believe you will be forced to concede, Dr Chilton, that as chief surgeon of Foundling Hospital, I am. Having read through the report in full, I can only commend Professor Graham and his colleagues in such an extensive and thorough document, one that more than adequately fulfils the needs and methodology that follow-up interviews would have provided under the current system. Indeed, there are only three other similar reports into trauma sufferers in Europe written in the last decade, and none of them spanned the number of individuals involved, nor went into the depth we see here. I could only wish that other reports we get could go into such detail. So no, I have no issue, Dr Chilton, in this report being used as grounds for the reform it asks for, and in my opinion, must get. If we, as a society, ignored new evidence of a better way of living, then you can be assured we would still be living in mud huts."

There was general amusement at this, lightening what otherwise might have been seen as either a vindictive dig at a colleague, or merely a man blindly defending the one he was courting. Both were true, though he was not blind in this, indeed, he was perfectly cognisant of the fact, but it was best to leave such a rebuff in amusement to best silence the man. Anything he could reply trying to re-engage his position now would merely appear childishly naive, and Chilton, while sometimes inept, knew enough about political and social survival to keep his mouth shut.

There were not many questions after that, and he was pleased to note that they were in by far a more civil tone than those directly before.

With the lecture now done, Dr Lecter and Dr Houlton made their way, not to the exit as some others were doing, but to where Mr Graham was gathering his papers and likely wishing he could make a quick exit, but knowing better than to try. The content of his report was critical, but in order to best succeed in getting the changes he wanted passed, he would have to further win-over those that came to speak with him. People were fickle, and without that lasting impression that he was talking to them individually, counting on each person specifically to help in this matter, it would be far too easy for them to count it as another person's problem, and mentally dismiss it from their own agendas.
Thankfully Dr Houlton would provide ample voice of his dismay at the situation as well as his public support of the change, turning people's attentions towards that viewpoint while allowing focus on the fact that Mr Graham was lingering to talk to people, enough for others to come forward.

Oh, he didn't doubt that the man was very much wishing he was elsewhere, but if this meant enough for him to go to such lengths to research and then present the findings, then it was best done properly, no matter the discomfort. If Mr Graham was to be his mate, he would endure through this to see the result he wanted, and if he crumbled, well, his mate needed to be more resilient than that, and Dr Lecter's search for one would continue.

Dr Houlton did not disappoint in his reactions, for he launched quickly into his chatter to Mr Graham.

"Professor Graham! Oh what a dreadful business this is! Why, I was just telling Dr Lecter before we entered, at how much I was looking forward to your presentation, and by Jove you did not disappoint! Of course you have my full support in this matter. Anything you need, just send word my way and I will see to it with much haste! Imagine how long this terrible situation has been going on, it just beggars belief! Why, I shall tell my dear mate of it tonight and she shall be beside herself with the need to help in any way she can, you can be sure of that!"

"Your support is very much appreciated, Dr Houlton."

"I could do no less! The rigours and passion you put into your work is a credit to you. But alas I cannot linger today. We are to take our visiting cousin to a courting ball tonight and I cannot be late. Be assured however that any resources we have that might be of aid to you in this will be at your disposal, you need only ask."

"That is most gracious of you. Thank you."

As Dr Houlton left, offering his goodbyes to them both, Dr Lecter took the momentary reprieve before others stepped up, to offer his own affirmation of support, and to ensure Mr Graham knew that it was not merely the courting that was the cause of it.

"Threatened positions and reputations will make some resistant, but the thoroughness of your work will ensure it is not swept aside."

"I hope so. The institutes are meant to help people, not traumatize them further."

Their attentions were turned towards three more that came with congratulations over the uncovering of such a situation, as well as some questions. While it was clear though that Mr Graham knew the subject-matter well, his responses were becoming a bit strained, his thoughts showing not to be quite as sharp. It was a common symptom of stress, and so Dr Lecter stepped in to fill the gaps with his own knowledge of the material, having studied it at length for just such a purpose.

"And what of these other reports you mentioned earlier, Dr Lecter? Do they offer any further insight?"

"Not much, I am afraid. The first was a study of the impact of sleep in trauma victims of all sub-genders, and other than concluding that depriving it below six hours a night was detrimental to physical and mental health, something that could be said for anyone, it offered little. The second was the relative study of patients' well-being and stability when being transferred from an older institute in Germany to a newer one where the location and some of the protocols were different. That one, although the patient numbers in the study were small, did offer some general observations that might guide an inquiry made into different techniques. They found a more humanitarian approach yielded
better results than ones the patient may dislike and thus resist. The third was a study on the relative effectiveness of different post-trauma techniques but was focused on alphas returning from wars, rather than omegas. Despite this, some of the recommendations may be of some use to look into more. In general though, I feel any recommendations be based on fresh approaches that can be proven to help those involved, rather than relying on these older reports for a framework. Especially after such a catastrophic failure to the patients involved, we should not rely on old and incomplete data to push forward treatment. Much like Professor Graham's report, the thoroughness of the investigation into new forms of treatments should be paramount."

There were few others who actually required any real sort of precise response. Most merely wished some point of contact, and the couple that were unconvinced of the necessity for change at least went away willing to reconsider that stance in light of the seemingly positive responses to the call for it. Chilton, he noted, had decided not to linger.

By the time Mr Graham caught the eye of his family alphas at the side of the hall, Dr Lecter considered the situation well managed to Mr Graham's hopes in the matter.

"Come, Professor Graham, let us get your coat. I believe there is no pressing need to linger now."

Moving to the cloakroom, Lecter allowed the time for the other man to gather his thoughts. He himself was in no rush, and allowed this to show in the slow, leisurely pace of his steps. By the time they got there, the foyer was mostly empty, allowing them a measure of privacy he had relied upon.

"Thank you for stepping in with Dr Chilton," Mr Graham said at last, presumably having been meditating on such a statement of gratitude up until now. "I had known he would likely dislike my recommendations, but it still threw me off more than I anticipated."

"It is of little matter. His comments were best restricted to the confines of his own body, not shared out as if it should come with a cry of 'gardyloo'."

Will was quiet for a long moment, not disputing the statement, but clearly not as pleased with how the night had gone as he should be. In the end, he sighed, a sound of frustration as he drew on the coat that Lecter had carefully avoided getting handed to him by the cloakroom attendant. Mr Graham should, after all, feel some manner of agency in his life still, without the aid of others. An illusion, to be sure, but one that Lecter was willing to gift him with for now.

"I knew he, or someone else would likely say stuff like that," Mr Graham said, clearly stressed and overwrought enough to have let his language slip into a far less formal manner, despite the setting, "but I should not need anyone to come to my rescue, not only because I know the different answers to give, but also because no matter the differences between people, communicating effectively is something omegas are noted for."

The unadulterated frustration in his tone, low as it was not to carry past them, was crystalline in the air, fragile in those shimmering chips of self-worth and pride, and just as beautiful in their potential.

"Yet not everyone is the same. By your own words, omegas and alphas are biologically dependant on each other in ways that affect their roles in society. I would not have gone to the lengths you did to research and compile that report, nor would any in that room today I would guess. Is it so wrong then that someone whose skills and passions lie in the driving force behind a project would find compliment in someone who can present and guard it for you? I am not typical in my skills as an alpha, just as you are not as an omega. Should I take your hesitance to give yourself some reprieve as a notion I would have been better challenging Dr Chilton to a duel of fists instead? No?"

Lecter smiled at the apparent embarrassment mingled with something perhaps like relief. It was more
difficult to tell with the amount of scent blocking ointment the man had used today.

"Please put it from your mind," Lecter continued as he opened the door to the Bloom's carriage for him, "You will find me quite uncompromising in my willingness to view you as you are and be pleased with that, rather than what you feel you ought to be. I wish you a good evening, Professor Graham."

It was the first time he had used the title for him, and yet the hope and intent was that he would not have to do so for long, in private at least. For now though, he had a home to get back to, and a dinner to plan. He had not missed the way that Mr Graham's eyes had lingered upon him as his carriage had pulled away. Overall, it had been a very successful trip.

Chapter End Notes

**gardyloo** - an obsolete word that was used in Scotland, in some cases up until as late as the 1930s and 1940s. It originally came from the French expression “Prenez garde à l’eau!”, which means 'beware of the water'. It was used when people on upper floors of buildings, especially tenement buildings, threw out slop buckets and the contents of chamber pots out of the window onto the street below, having no indoor toilets. It was shouted to warn passers-by.
Brothers and Rivals

Chapter Notes

Era-specific language:
'Never a feather to fly with' - to have no money
'Fustian nonsense' - rubbish

Bloom Residence to Benjamin Layton's Residence, London. Thursday 22nd October, evening

In the hallway, as Will pulled on his coat while the carriage was being brought around, he considered Humphrey. As Alana's previous head alpha, he had been in control of the household for most of Will's life before Jack Crawford came along.

Much like the quiet in the area right now as they got ready to go out, it had been a stable, understated sort of life, for all that Humphrey and Nathan had significantly elevated the Blooms to their current higher status in society.

Humphrey Layton was a man who, by way of his quiet but firm certainty, guided the household, rarely ever raising his voice, but whose demands were felt just as keenly as any other alpha of status. He did not like disruption in the house, nor would he stand for values and morals being besmirched or tainted by circumstance or choice. Standards should be upheld, and propriety and sensibility should always be adhered to. If his disapproval was felt, it was felt keenly in a gaze that told you you should have done better, and expected you to do so.

So it was that Will was left to wonder what Humphrey's brother was going to be like, for unlike Jack, Humphrey had said nothing on the matter of Will's decision to include his younger sibling in this season's courtship bids. Like any other dinner for a courtship suitor, Humphrey had merely gone about his business in ensuring that the trip was organized and done in a timely manner, leaving Will to wonder just how much, or how little, he was invested in the possibility of having Will mated to the man, for it was difficult to tell either way.

"Humphrey?"

Will called him over, his voice not raised, for there was no need to, despite the usual bustle to get everything sorted. For all that he could often see far more than others into people's motivations, it had been a spur of the moment decision to ask directly, and as the man came over with measured steps, Will found himself fiddling with the button of his coat.

He wasn't intimidated by Humphrey, not in the way that Jack could manage, but the slender man was as close as he had to a father since the accident, and there would always be a greater sense of respect there, one that had been demanded in the careful organisation of the household to those exacting standards. When the man got to him, he merely waited for Will to speak, patience there, as there always had been, for Will to say what he needed to in his own time.

"Do you think this is a good match? You know him better than I do."

Aware he was fidgeting badly, he shoved his hands deep into his coat pockets to still them, not because he thought that Humphrey would disapprove of it as such, but because he wanted, had
always wanted, to have the approval of the man. That wasn't to say he didn't have it, but he was often aware that he was not the sort of omega that Humphrey would likely have hoped for in the family. Too nervous. Too unsettled. This wasn't a new thought, nor would it change for almost any alphas, but the drive to be better for the one who had raised him was strong.

"Your choice is your own, Will. It is not for me, or anyone, to second-guess or pressure your choices in this matter. Only you can know if this will be a good match. If you like and enjoy his company, then I will support you, as I would any that found your approval, but should you not find his company enjoyable, then do not let my being related to him to sway your judgement. I wish to see you happy and mated, not enduring the company of a poor match. Come now, the carriage is ready, and we should go lest we are late."

To say he had expected anything different from the man would be wrong, but that calm certainty was reassuring if nothing else. He walked with him to the carriage, where Alana, Price and Nathan were already waiting. It helped his nerves, that reassurance that Humphrey would not openly disapprove if he didn't find the match to be good. He might be disappointed, at least a little, but he would not hold it against Will, and that eased his mind. He had found himself questioning such things far too often lately, since Jack had joined the household. They were, after all, quite different.

With everyone dressed and ready to go, they settled in the carriage, with Nathan driving, and with a slight lurch they were off. This was the second of Will's courtship meetings, another formal dinner that he would have to endure, though perhaps with it being Humphrey's brother, there might be a more familiar atmosphere than he feared.

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"Take this back to the kitchen immediately! The plate should be warmed so the food on it stays hot. I will not stand for this level of incompetence!"

Will watched as the servant apologized and took away the plate back to the kitchen, her shoulders showing the tension that had been present since entering with yet more platters of food, her eyes slightly glassy from being spoken to in front of others in such a way. Mr Benjamin Layton seemed oblivious, or at least uncaring.

"I apologize for that. It is so difficult getting decent servants these days. You would think at the price I pay for them, that they would at least be of a better standard to not make such basic errors."

They were seated around a rather large, circular table, with Will to his right, and Alana to his left. It had been surprising, initially, that it was only the host and their group that were at the table, with none of the beta servants being offered a place, but Will was no longer surprised. This was a far cry from the more friendly company that Mrs Becket supplied at Lieutenant Anderson's house, for they were forced to make their own conversation around that of their host. This, in itself, would not be a problem, except that Benjamin Layton seemed to have rather strong views that were not tempered with nearly so much forbearance as his brother had.

As this was the second course of the meal, it was Will who was subject to answering such comments, for being a formal dinner, conversations were limited to those with whom you were sitting. Alana had been their host's conversationalist during the first course, but now it was Will's turn, and he was struggling a little to monitor his words enough to be polite without encouraging such things. There would be no help from the rest of those at the table either, for it was considered the height of rudeness to interrupt another's conversation at formal dinners, and so he could not rely on anyone but himself to find the right words.

"You have set an extensive table for us. Even the most dedicated kitchen staff would struggle under
such a demanding meal most likely, and what they have achieved here is very impressive."

In this he was not exaggerating, for Mr Layton had made what could only be considered a banquet for them that could easily feed at least triple their number with ease. It was a pity, considering the sheer amount of food, that his nerves tended to make his stomach uneasy at the best of times, and the needless condemnation of the servants had not improved this. In truth, Will would much rather be giving his compliments to the staff in question who had produced such an impressive spread, but it was only Mr Layton here, whose money and demands had furnished this feast.

"I require the best at my table, to be sure. Think nothing of the scale. What is wealth if one does not enjoy it, after all? Such expenses are well invested, for much like entertainments such as the opera, to do less would be to receive less in turn. I could have gone to see something at one of those pantomime establishments, but having decided never to lower myself to such a thing, instead I viewed Arie dell'Opera di Rinaldo, and was very well pleased. There was such drama, such intensity, that I would have been a far poorer man to have missed it, rather than paying more to see it. Have you had the chance to go yet?"

Will shook his head, for in truth while he might have liked to have seen such a thing, much of a trip to the opera had nothing to do with the singing and acting, but instead on the public see-and-be-seen, and even in the more prestigious buildings it was loud, smelly and entirely too packed with people leering and gossiping. It had been many years since he had been to one, having avoided them entirely after Humphrey, Nathan and Andrew had nearly ended up in a pitched fight when another alpha had dared to slip his arm around his waist when they were on their route to the exit. The sheer overwhelming nature of the experience in the building had been bad enough, a fight had even broken out in the footman's gallery where the cheaper tickets were, but to add the press of people and then the vastly presumptuous action by the stranger had been too much. To this day, he was vastly glad for Humphrey's presence of mind to prioritise getting him home, rather than indulging in his instincts to attack someone who dared disturb his family.

"I have not had the opportunity lately to see the opera," he said, skipping around the edges of a lie merely to avoid speaking of it. Opportunity, like truth, was a multifaceted thing after all.

"A travesty to be sure! Why, there is nothing like the opera to immerse oneself in the arts, with the acting and singing showing such dedicated sincerity and poise, the upper caste of emotion and grace. Nothing like the pantomime or low-grade theatre productions, certainly, wherein they display very little above the common denominator to appeal to the unwashed masses. Why, the actors in those are little better than gypsies themselves, and it's best to stay far from those people as is generally possible!"

"I can't say I would know."

"You are better that way, I can assure you. None have a feather to fly with, and they are untrustworthy, the lot of them. Thieves to boot! Why, even the ones that don't take it from your pocket directly will do so by those fortune-telling booths that are so popular right now at fairs. A load of fustian nonsense if you ask me."

"Have you been to one yourself to gauge their effectiveness then?"

Will knew he was most likely to get another monologue, and while he knew little about gypsy travellers one way or another, he would not bring up the possibility that he had heard they tended to be very religious, and as such the fortune telling may actually be a manner of gift from that deity. One did not discuss religion at the dinner table, or indeed generally, for it was an extremely private matter in society. It was tempting though, but he was aware he seemed to be inclined towards being contrary with alphas lately, especially alphas that seemed to believe they knew everything. Jack was
"Certainly not, though I have heard from many people such varying accounts as to be highly suspect, especially since those that go tend to want to believe it works, and will talk themselves into thinking it does. It's all trickery. Why, even the more equitable public lectures on spiritualism and the occult are mainly clever guesswork. I went to one last year, as much for entertainment as anything, and found it to be far beneath the educated to consider. I hear you had your own lecture on Sunday past, and that it was very well received. I regret that I was unable to make it, but by the time I found out about it taking place, the seats had long since been booked. Were you pleased by the reception it garnered?"

The question had been posed at an inconvenient time, when he had just taken some roast duck, and so he was forced to delay answering, while Mr Layton watched him eat until it was polite to respond. He was uncomfortably aware of the regard, especially due to the fact that it was highly probable that neither of them actually had very much investment in hearing the answer. He should, during this time, have been working out the perfect wording that would be both gracious and cultivated, offering enough for interest without going into too many details that would bore the man, but all he could think of was the almost excruciating regard as he chewed, aware of each movement of his jaw, and trying to get his face to an approximation of appreciation for the mouthful when the expectant gaze merely made his stomach turn in a discomforting way.

"It was received well," he said at last, not entirely answering the question, "The majority of those that came were receptive to the cause, being physicians or those in the field of medicine and care. There were obviously some detractors, but overall it seems positive for the changes."

Will specifically didn't list the cause, not only because it was an indelicate topic to speak of at the table, but to do so would be to assume the man did not know what it was, which, even though it was likely that he did not, it would be rude to show that assumption. It was also a rather convenient way of passively getting the other man to turn the conversation away to something else, rather than making that ignorance known.

Perhaps it was with a touch of misanthropy or cynicism that he assumed Mr Layton would be much happier in his self-absorbed monologue, but as he sat listening to the trials and tribulations of the field of the law and lawyers, Will was regretful to acknowledge that his instinct was generally correct. He nodded and made enough comment to show his attentiveness, and otherwise merely attempted to calm his nerves so as to not make everyone in the room uncomfortable.

For all that he had tried to show his respect for the mountain of food on offer by trying little bits of each, if anything, the amount left over almost seemed even greater than when they had started. The richness of the meat and sauces had not helped his overall consumption, for while such things were pleasing on their own, such richness tended to oversaturate the senses, so it was better to sample only small amounts. But no matter how he tried, there was simply no way he could eat any more, and the last thing he wanted was to insult their host and his own family by revisiting the meal a second time in the privy. Setting his cutlery aside, he took a sip from his glass, trying to clear the taste from his mouth, but even the beverages on offer were on the strong side.

"Ah, is everyone finished then? Let us retire to the large sitting room while the servants clear this up."

They got themselves up; a couple of the servants were there to offer any aid as was appropriate, though they largely stayed out the way. Will was very aware of them, because for all that they were trying to disappear, likely how Mr Layton liked it, he felt bad for them. They had managed such an incredible feat in creating such a banquet and would likely get no credit for it if the earlier comments
"Yes, the food was lovely and impressive in its complexity. It is a pity our stomachs were not of a greater size to have more of it, but at least the servants will benefit from the excess."

He gathered his drink, not wishing to have yet another one pressed upon him, while the others also complimented the food, which was only good manners, but also the truth. But it was to him that Mr Layton's comments were directed in response as they moved out of the dining room.

"By no means! They made several errors tonight and I don't see why they should benefit from my entertainment when they are already being paid. No, I will likely just have the food thrown out, at least then they might learn."

Will was not the only one shocked by this, as a quick glance to Alana reassured him. Indeed, such wasteful behaviour and mean-spiritedness was not at all what they were used to. Even Humphrey, who had so far said little to his brother, in part because of the formal dining setting, seemed unwilling to let such a comment go.

As they moved through from the dining room, the sitting room they entered was indeed a large one, and the decor, much like the rest of the house was set in rich background tones that were clearly meant to highlight the furnishings and paintings within it.

"If you will not give it to the servants, then at least one of the poor houses would welcome it."

Will could pick up Humphrey's tone, which was the one that he tended to use when tempering another's thoughts as diplomatically as possible, but for all that it was meant to do so, Humphrey's vocal demeanour did tend to instil a sense of moderated disapproval whether he was trying to do so or not. While Jack tended to just ignore Humphrey's tone, knowing his own position was higher, and the other family alphas tended to mitigate the disapproval in other ways, it was clear from the sudden spark of irritation in Mr Layton's aura that he was not used to dealing with it like that.

"I shall do no such thing! Encouraging such a parasitic relationship in such people will do no good, no good at all! These sorts of so-called charitable acts only reward those who have not the care to work for themselves. Should we next offer them our carriages, open our doors so they may take what they please? No! Rewarding them in such a way only traps them further in their squalor, encouraging them to think of merely taking what others have worked for, rather than earning a better position through their own graft and effort."

Will carefully avoided looking at Humphrey, for there was clearly a history behind the two brothers for the man to react in such a way, either taking it as an affront to his own beliefs or trying to use such a topic to show his own dominance in the house. It would do no good to draw attention to the stand-off. Humphrey, being the better mannered of the pair, said nothing as his younger sibling went about losing some of the good opinion from those in the room. He had, after all, tried to temper the comment, but with poor result. Will could imagine well enough the slightly bland look on his face without needing to check.

"Perhaps while dinner settles, you would be so good as to show me your home, Mr Layton?"

It was a somewhat obvious deviation from the topic, but one that could not be ignored, considering this was one of the reasons to come here today, and he doubted Mr Layton would balk at being able to show off his house and all its contents.

"But of course! Let us leave such depressing subjects behind. If you will excuse us please?"
With the general acquiescence of those in the room, Will followed Mr Layton out, hoping at least that the man would be involved enough in giving such a tour to offer some respite from having to field questions that might put him at odds with the man. Not that he felt in any danger from him, but the sheer demand of his views was such that it made it difficult to counter without getting a strong rebuttal he would find difficult to deal with. This was something that was likely going to be increasingly trying on his nerves if he were to even attempt to refute beliefs that he did not hold, rather than let them sit and leave the man believing that he shared those views.

To hand it to him, the house was indeed lovely, if a little dark. Will was so used to living in his family's home, where many rooms were of a far lighter palette, that it was interesting to see a house with nothing of the sort. Most rooms were in darker hues, lit by lamps to highlight the various belongings therein. He could certainly see the appeal of having rooms that tended far less towards the pastel shades, but the company of the man beside him was not something he would likely trade it for.

They were in the study presently, one that was pleasing enough for what it was, though there were far more spaces clearly denoted for showing belongings. Small statues, curiosities and the like, were placed in prominent display.

"This is the study. I had the bookcases made specially. You can use this room for your writing, no doubt. There should be no need to make any changes to the decor, as it is close enough to what you are used to."

The fact that Mr Layton seemed to feel that his becoming mated to Will was a foregone conclusion only spoke poorly for his manner of observation, something he had thought the man might have been more skilled at considering his profession as a lawyer. But it was also the high-handed way he seemed already to have decided what Will could and could not change about the house that spoke just as ill of him considering that if they had become mated, then Will would have owned the entire house and its belongings, to do with as he saw fit.

He soothed his own irritation with the knowledge that Mr Layton was still young and had clearly surrounded himself with those of lesser status who did not have the dominance or will to countermand his opinions, and so he would not be used to considering things outside his own sphere of belief. This was something that had shown clearly throughout the night.

"It is indeed quite similar to the study at home," he offered, about as close as he was willing to get to answering the presumptuous comment, but Mr Layton didn't seem to mind, or even notice the omission.

Room to room they went, with his host being rightfully proud of his home, but seeming to care little about Will's own opinions on things, except if he were to agree with him. The man would likely end up with quite a submissive omega, or one who was far better than Will ever was at making their wishes and demands known and followed.

"I had these rooms renovated by the eminent architect and designer Robert Adam. I would have had him design the rest of the place, but he had been engaged finishing Lansdowne House at the time when I moved here. I think you will agree though that the work he has done here is exceptional. Such detail and thought put into even the shape of the cornicing."

Will agreed that it was indeed a lovely redesign, and not be half-hearted in that regard. The designer was someone whose work he had admired in the past, and he recounted as such while Mr Layton drank in the praise as if it were he who was owed it.

Moving back into the sitting room, he could feel the gazes of his family on him, but he didn't look up except to check which seats were vacant. The fact that a single-seat had been left unused near Price
said much about how his family knew him, and echoed his own intuition that had he been seated next to Humphrey it might have caused some unintended rivalry to resurface between the two brothers.

"And here we are, back again," Mr Layton said as Will moved into the room with him, listening to him as he made his way over to the seat. His host could find rest in one of the other ones nearby. Considering the lack of thought to his own viewpoint during the tour, Will didn't feel particularly bad about clearly choosing to sit alone rather than on one of the sofas where they might have sat together. "This was one of the first rooms I had renovated and redecorated when I bought the house. It used to be in the most awful shade of green and smelled of cats."

"Do you not like cats then, Mr Layton?"

"Heavens no! I have no use for pets of any kind. Horrible smelly creatures that track fur and other things into the house. Entirely insufferable! I would no sooner bring a pet in the house than I would a random vagrant."

Ah, there it was, the classic Humphrey sigh of slightly frustrated disappointment. Faint, to be sure, but no less clearly heard for that.

A glance to Mr Layton showed that he to had heard it, and perhaps for the first time this evening, something akin to hesitation showed on his face.

"Of course," the man amended, "I am sure we could build some manner of kennel out back if you were particularly enamoured of the creatures, though I don't see the appeal myself."

"I doubt that will be necessary, Mr Layton."

This seemed to return the man to his previous confidence, as ill-founded as that was. Will was barely listening to the continued monologue about the house and it's various renovation works that the man spoke of, instead glancing over to where Alana sat. He was done with the evening. Had been for quite some time if he was to be entirely honest, and she was probably the best for extracting them at this point.

As she took up the role of conversationalist, he let her familiar good humoured pleasantness wash over him, the largely routine politeness and social norms being an easy thing to slip himself into, following her as they moved out of the room, gathering their coats and making their farewells at the doorway before ascending to the carriage.

The entire evening had been an endurance, no matter that the food had been good and the house pleasing. He was aware of the family's gaze flitting to him on occasion as they travelled back home, but they didn't ask any questions, likely seeing far more clearly than Mr Layton ever had that he was entirely done with conversation tonight.

Home, and perhaps to read a book for a while to settle his nerves before sleep, if he could. Assuming he had not had a vast change of mind by the morning, he would ask Humphrey to relate his denial to his brother, rather than writing a letter or returning in person. A letter would be too impersonal considering the amount of effort the man had put into the dinner, and he didn't think he could endure seeing the man again so soon without speaking more frankly and causing some manner of negative gossip as a result.

He could just imagine it now, 'Why, did you hear what Mr Graham of Bloom said to the poor Mr Layton? Such a shockingly rude utterance to be sure! That family has fallen quite far if they have lost all manners in such a way!'. Best, indeed, that Humphrey go, whose skills in diplomacy were beyond
his own, and perhaps, with time, the breach, or at least distance between the siblings, might be mended somewhat.

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**Benjamin Layton's Residence, London. Friday 23rd October, morning**

"What do you mean, that I am no longer in the running in Mr Graham's courtship? Unthinkable! Have you not spoken to him, or is it that you have and poisoned his mind against me?"

Humphrey leaned back in the seat in his brother's house where he had sat the previous evening, when he had watched him so easily lose what possible appeal he might have garnered from Will with his thoughtless choice of words.

"I can assure you I have said nothing to him on the matter. Mr Graham came to me this morning and asked that I would relate his decision about you myself. Truly, Benjamin, he is not a good match for you."

"And why is that? Is my house not good enough after living most of his life in yours?"

It had been many years now since they had had anything approaching a mutually agreeable relationship, though he had not thought to find this level of hostility from the man. Certainly, there had been some rivalry in the past when Benjamin's awe of him in childhood changed when he presented as alpha, but it had clearly festered into something more in his brother's mind. He regretted that, for all that he had not been aware of the fact to a greater extent.

"Indeed not. For all that he has been raised in a large household that is fortunate enough to afford many luxuries, Mr Graham truly cares little for most of them. His head is not turned by wealth and opulence other than as a way to secure privacy and security. I tried to tell you this before, but what with our more colourful discussions in the past, along with the type of company you are used to surrounding yourself with these days, it does not surprise me that you waved it off as a ridiculous notion."

"I refuse to believe he has rejected my suit just because I have a well-appointed house."

No alpha truly took denial well, and Benjamin never had, so it wasn't a great surprise that he was reacting like this now.

"You would be correct. Your beliefs on certain subjects and rigid thinking are far more likely the cause. I know you see a great deal of the dross of society in your employment, but to make such comments at the dinner table was extremely foolhardy."

"You would have me lie to his face then?"

"I would have had you use a great deal more forethought and diplomacy than I saw yesterday evening."

"Pandering to everyone around you has become the norm it seems. You have grown weak in your old age."

"I am no longer the head of my household. It changes a person. But really Benjamin, it is common knowledge that nearly all omegas are drawn to humanitarian concerns, and Mr Graham is well known not only for his charitable donations, but also his voice of moderation in society. You are better seeking someone who shares your values far more closely than Mr Graham ever would."

"I had no idea he had fallen for such idiocy, as you clearly have. Such insipid do-gooding only
perpetuates the slovenly, work-shy attitude that weakens our society as a whole. If what you say is true, I would want nothing to do with a person so blinded by ill-conceived notions of charity. I had expected better from your household, Humphrey, but it seems my faith in your raising him well was in error."

"Why must there always be this antagonism between us? I would see you just as happily situated as I have been."

Humphrey could see the anger in his brother warring with something else that he remembered all too well from their earlier spats when Benjamin had still been young. A calculated cunning that, if he recalled correctly, tended to be entirely selfish in the origin of whatever he was about to ask. Still, it was better this than the anger, for if his brother's words reached past a certain point when speaking of his family, Humphrey would likely be unable to restrain himself from physically reminding him of his place with an unrestrained fist, and he had no wish to do that, truly.

"Very well, so he has turned down what I have to offer. It is probably for the best, as you say. Would you then write me an introduction for someone else?"

"Of course, if they are known enough by the family to make it feasible. I can only hope you put your considerable talents towards researching your quarry far better than you did with Mr Graham."

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Till Residence, London - Friday 23rd October, evening

The Till Residence was one of moderate size, but had little else to recommend it. Certainly not it's current occupant at any rate. Mr Till had taken a little time after dinner to go about his tasks, ones that typically seemed to be dealing with paperwork, then drinking a fair amount before turning to his bed. That he did not even see to the security of his house at the end of the night, leaving it instead to his servants to do so, was a shameful thing, though the man seemed to think nothing of it.

As sounds of slumber filled the room, quiet now of the man's odious consciousness, Hannibal got up from where he had seated himself in contented comfort behind the dressing screen. The wait tonight had been negligible, for the man was a creature of habit, something that had made this entire endeavour almost an act of tedium.

Shoes already having been removed to silence any minor sounds the expensive leather might have emitted, he made his way across the room, a glance given to the now snoring alpha, but it was a needless caution, for nothing short of screaming servants would likely rouse the man to any extent.

With a pristine handkerchief taken from his pocket, he lifted the decanter and carefully wiped away any lingering residue. Although it was unlikely that anyone would question either the slumber or the subsequent repercussions of the man's bid for the delightful Mr Graham, he would never leave such a thing to chance. Like a ghost, his presence might leave a sinister chill of unspecified foreboding if someone were astute enough, but nothing more.

Downstairs, he could hear the house servants moving through their various evening routines, noisy enough that they would never have lingered in employment in his own household. He could grant them that at least the crystal and glassware were clean. It would have been an insufferable waste of his time if he had had to manufacture dirt or spotting on the decanter merely to make it look the same as the rest. There was also no need for him to see to the replacement of the liqueur still in the decanter either, for even though it may have become ever so slightly tainted by the touch of the sleeping draught he had placed around the rim earlier that evening, time would erase any lingering trace of it. Nothing would be found of it in a couple of hours, time enough that even if the watch were called now, it would long be gone by the time they thought to take it to a laboratory.
Replacing the decanter, he stepped carefully over the floorboard that had a tendency to squeak, something likely brought on by the fact that it was on the side that the man used to get in and out of bed. All that excess weight was bound to have some effect on the woodwork after all. Moving to the side of the bed where Mr Till lay, he looked down at the gaping-mouthed imbecile who was utterly oblivious to the danger to his person. The man would forever remain in such a blissful state of ignorance. It was just a pity that he would never know the error his actions had instigated, even for a short time.

In truth, it was only the very real determination to give Mr Graham a worthy gift that stayed his hand from murder. The world would certainly be better off without such a man, but whether Mr Graham knew of his actions to withhold from passing final judgement on the other suitors or not, it didn’t lessen the value of it. One day he would know, and on that day, fully mated and knowledgeable of Hannibal's nature, the true impact and thoughtfulness of the gift would be made clear. Hannibal was a patient man, after all.

From the inside pocket of his coat, he withdrew a metal case and opened it to reveal the syringe within. It was one of the finest that money could buy, the craftsmanship not merely in the precision of the body that held the liquid, but also in how very thin the needle was compared to the more common counterparts. It was so thin in fact, that depending on how it was used, and where, the puncture on the skin might never even be noticed, even if it were sought. During an endeavour such as tonight, the purchase was proving that it was money very well spent.

Once assembled, he filled it from a small glass vial, the second of two he had brought with him tonight. The clear liquid was entirely innocuous looking like water, so clear it was. Above all, it was indeed mostly harmless, but it's effects would very much be felt.

Hannibal allowed himself a smile as he raised the trouser-leg on his victim, carefully feeling the fattened calf for the correct placement of the gland there, before injecting the syringe's contents into it. The man was so deeply asleep that he didn't even rouse as the full contents were pumped into him, nor when his visitor stood once more, carefully putting everything back in their places. No, such a man should never even have attempted to think himself on such a level as to bid for Mr Graham's attention. Worse still had been the man's gift of perfumer's fragrance that had quite covered up the delicate and tantalizing scent of Mr Graham himself when Hannibal had met him only five days before. That had, in fact, been the only sour note on his afternoon.

It was perfectly fitting then, he thought as he checked around the room once more and retrieved his shoes, that Mr Till be subject to an undeniably detestable smell as retribution.

The gift that Hannibal had left lingering in the alpha's scenting glands would spread from one of them to the next like a virus, although a mostly harmless one. His body would start to combat it, even as it would linger for as much as two or three weeks, darkening the glands themselves, and, much more fittingly, creating the most odious smell that could not be adequately covered up, as the microorganisms tried to multiply and fight off the body's defences. Entirely naturally occurring usually, much like a common cold, though less frequently seen, there would be no reason to consider any foul play.

Slipping past the balcony doors, closing and re-engaging the lock behind himself and putting on his shoes, it was the work of moments before he was walking along the street once more. Oh yes, Mr Till would come to regret his scent all right, for he would either have to continually subject Mr Graham to his now hideously smelling presence, or he would have to delay seeing him until it had cleared up. Two or even three weeks was a long time during courting season, and no matter the cause, would conveniently score him off Mr Graham's list.
It had been an easy night's work, but despite the lack of meat for his larder, Hannibal couldn't deny a certain pleasure from such elegant repercussions.
Regrets and Intentions

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bloom Residence, London - Sunday 25th October, afternoon

The house around him was mostly quiet, which was unusual these days. Alana and Jack had gone off visiting in the early afternoon with Andrew and Jacob, many of the betas also going to visit family elsewhere or do some shopping of their own. Nathan, Zeller, Price, Mr Harris and a couple of the other betas had taken the children out to one of the parks in the second carriage. Which, overall, had made the house rather empty, with mainly only Will and Humphrey in attendance.

Humphrey had taken up residence in the study, which had left Will to settle himself in the blue sitting room, which had enough light at this time of day to work on an old clock he had been tinkering with for a while now, until his own guest would make her appearance.

He glanced over to the large grandfather clock on the other side of the room, not for the first time. Visits always left him unsettled, especially the waiting for them, knowing that at any given moment the person might turn up, or that by the time he started to do something that they might be due to do so. Usually he managed all right with Beverly, being far more informal and undemanding in many ways than others might be, but it had been a couple of hours now since he had managed to get any work done on the clock. Ever since he had received the second of two letters. Both now sat on the desk, and would be innocuous and pleasant in the mundanity, but for their contents.

The view outside the window that his gaze fixed upon was much as it ever was, with the immaculately trimmed grass that bordered the small grove of trees, hints of the boundary wall to the right. Theirs was a large set of grounds, considering they were in the centre of the city where land was at a premium.

It said much for Humphrey's skill in asset management that he had managed to gain such a place before mating with Alana. Will had always wondered why the man had decided to come to an accord with Nathan all those many years ago, joining in their bid during the courtship process when Humphrey clearly had the dominance, as well as the financial and situational advantage. It was, perhaps, as simple as wishing to please her with the company of a far more personable alpha, one who would not be a threat to his position. For all that Alana had clearly liked Nathan by adding him to her courtship options back then, alone, he had been unlikely to have ever stood much of a chance with her. Not after she had been victim to an attack. He simply wasn't dominant enough.

Humphrey was like that though. In quiet actions, he saw to the family as best he could, and Will didn't doubt that having this accord had likely only strengthened his own bid for her, no matter what others might have said.

The sound of a carriage brought him out of his introspection, his nerves returning full-force from the brief reprieve of consideration.

At this stage in the courtship, when he was in the process of visiting the alphas in their homes, it was common for a family member to do some discreet checks on them, acting as sentinel on their behaviour outside of the controlled environment of the meetings. It was usually an alpha of the family who was close enough to the omega to understand their needs, but not close enough to be
unduly biased. Will wasn't entirely certain that Beverly fitted the last criteria, but she was his friend, and he didn't think she would do anything to harm his courtship.

That being said, Beverly had agreed to this with a somewhat worrying amount of enthusiasm.

Today she had been out to watch a series of outdoor lectures in town, one of which had been done by a Mr Cosgrove, one of Will's suitors that he had not had a chance to visit with yet. Many might say that considering a merchant as a suitor was degrading for an omega of his station, but the man had been so openly friendly and pleasingly disposed, that such societal concerns had bothered him little, especially since Mr Cosgrove had properties abroad where the critical eye of the upper classes would not find them.

It had surprised and pleased him that the man would look to public speaking as a way of improving himself, but he supposed perhaps a merchant would already have had some skills in this area already, and he could well imagine the friendly, passionate man to be decently good at it. Will had been tempted to go himself to watch, but the lectures there tended to be an extremely crowded place, and he couldn't risk becoming over-stressed or ill because of it, not with so many things that required his attendance. So Beverly had proposed to go instead and report back how it had sounded. He had expected her to like the man, for they both seemed to be fun-loving in their own ways.

Which made the fact that one of the letters that had come this afternoon all the more disappointing, because it was the man's withdrawal from his courtship.

Will honestly didn't know what to make of it. He had not even had a chance to meet with the alpha in person for his first courtship date, and yet on the very afternoon where he had been speaking, when Beverly was in attendance, he suddenly decided to withdraw. Not even a visit in person, either. It seemed too well-timed to be a coincidence, and so he was left to wonder, as he had been ever since receiving the letter, whether she'd had something to do with it. Had her playfulness gone too far?

He intended to find out, and that inevitable confrontation was now far closer at hand, considering he could hear her distinctive stride down the hallway towards the room. His hands were shaking.

Beverly came into the room like she owned it, all bold strides and effortless aplomb. Her presence made the large and otherwise quiet room seem that much smaller for her being there, like it suddenly struggled to contain those within.

"What an afternoon I have had!"

She paused, and although he wasn't looking in her direction, he could well imagine that ever so slight tilt of her head as she took in the feel of the room, and him, before her tone changed tact.

"Come sit. I bought some of those licorice sweets that you were hankering after, and Peter said he was going to bring up some tea. Did you know that the plant that licorice comes from was used to treat stomach upsets, ulsters and inflammation of the stomach? I had no idea!"

He did know, of course, as she likely understood, but he couldn't disparage her use the imparting of knowledge to try and make him feel more comfortable. As he turned and reluctantly moved over to sit, a glance to her showed her usual friendly and boisterous manner, with a mostly hidden tint of concern over his current state. No visible sign of guilt there, which was heartening.

She talked on about a subject he knew enough to barely pay attention to, as she usually tended towards doing when he was in need of space to settle. But he was unable to today, something that became clear as she didn't continue after a while.
"Will, what has you so troubled today? You didn't even hear my terrible joke about Price's underpants."

Sometime, Peter, he assumed, had come in and there was tea and some small food items on the table between them. He felt bad for not even thanking the man, not even noticing he was there. Something he would have to remedy later.

What was he to say to her though? There was no diplomatic way he could currently think of, other than to just come out and ask to know whether she had meddled with his suitor. He didn't want to hurt her, or insult her, but neither could he entirely dismiss the fact that it was well within her remit to do such a thing.

Instead, he got up, and moved over to the other side of the room where the letters sat, and picking them up, he took them over and sat once more. He fiddled with them more, before just pushing one across to her. An intelligent woman, she would understand, and he forced himself to watch her, as she picked it up and start to read. She was often good at hiding her feelings, but he was paying attention now for those minute tells that would give hint at what she might be thinking.

It seemed an age while she read, though that was likely only his perception, for the letter was not long. Finally though, she spoke, and it was with relief that he saw her slight change in stance that denoted her feeling pleased, though not necessarily self-satisfied.

"I can't say I am surprised, considering this afternoon," she said, looking up at him from the paper, her canny gaze watched him for a moment, "Ah, you thought I had maybe something to do with it? Rest your mind, for I never even spoke with the man. Have some tea, and let me tell you of my day. For all that you are probably disappointed in the letter, it is likely for the best."

"So after you asked me to act as your sentinel this year, I arranged a meetup with Dr Lecter, and agreed to go together to see the speeches. There is no time like the present, and for a man like that, I wanted to hear him more in idle conversation with only myself around.

"I met with him at the Wildflower tea room, which had an excellent vantage of Saviour Square, where the speeches were taking place, and we sat on the balcony overlooking it, and was able to hear the entirety of the speeches, though most were rather dull."

"What was the point in meeting with Dr Lecter in a pre-planned outing?" he asked, slight frustration in his tone. "The entire point of getting someone to act as sentinel is to catch the suitors unprepared, or during their usual actions."

"I wanted to see what his conversation was like, but also to gauge his reactions towards a potential rival."

"And how did he react?"

"With far more restrained amusement than I did, but I am getting ahead of myself."

She paused a moment, to gather her composure, though he was well aware that she was perhaps far too eager for someone to listen to her.

"Dr Lecter and I chatted for a while, at least until Mr Cosgrove's speech was to commence. He was well dressed when he came out onto the stage, and his manner was friendly and engaging. I would even say he was far better than those before him. He was speaking about an issue with Trade Tariffs, and how they impact badly on small businesses and households, especially those of low incomes. Disproportionate on the profit gained, due to broad standard base tariffs, or something of the sort. He
was making a good case.

"But, oh Will, never since Mrs Lily Penelope started to fling bowls of soup in a fit of exuberant anger in the middle of the Hayward's summer ball, have I seen someone so heartily destroy their own social standing, so completely, and in so short a time as Mr Cosgrove did."

Beverly couldn't quite keep the delighted glee entirely from her voice, though she did make an attempt, but it was clear that not only was she unable to withhold the expression, she was also going to amply subject Will to the entire telling of the situation that had buoyed her mood so markedly. He really wished she wouldn't, but knew that if he wanted answers about the man, he was going to have to sit with forbearance through the retelling.

"About half way through his speech, it became clear that the topic was more than just a passing fancy for him, for he seemed energized by the attention of the crowd, and eager for them to understand just how important he felt this was. His voice became more raised to reach better, and he began to gesture more with his hands, as he he told stories on the impact of the families involved.

"If he had left it to this, I dare say that he could have come off well from the experience, but he was clearly not used to public speaking on this scale, not used to the rush that having so many people heed him. The audience reacted well, and this only encouraged him more.

She sighed in sweet remembrance, before mentally shaking herself enough to continue.

"I suppose I should feel sorry for the man, but oh Will, it was glorious! He started to stride back and forth along the stage, gesturing wildly as he pleaded and harangued the audience about he fates of the poor working class families who were being devastated by the tariffs. In his fervour, he clearly mistook the crowd's enthusiasm as support for his ideas, rather than him being the best entertainment they had yet seen all afternoon, poor man."

Beverly didn't sound nearly so sympathetic as her words implied, her own mirth at the alpha's behaviour was far too evident, and Will cringed. He could well imagine the impassioned response from the man, the flush of power and almost euphoria of being listened to and responded to by the public in such numbers was a strong draw for anyone, not merely alphas, but they, more than the other sub-genders garnered far more satisfaction by being acknowledged as someone to lead the way.

"By the end of his speech, he had tears of passion running down his face. Tears, Will! We saw it all, of course, both of us having brought opera glasses. I think it was the crowd's laughter that brought him out of it in the end. It was a sight worthy of the best opera and theatres to be sure! The way his passion and fervour just crumbled in mortification when he realized what had happened. It was really something to behold. He left the area directly afterwards, and really, who could blame him."

She shifted a little in her chair, her own impassioned retelling coming to a close and likely realizing, much like Mr Cosgrove had, that the person she was with was not nearly so enamoured of the story as she was. Will's scent was likely souring the room considerably at this stage.

"So your fears, dear Will, that I was in any way responsible were unfounded, as you can see. He did it himself."

Will nodded, looking down at the letter that sat between them.

"It's sad," he said at last, while Beverly helped herself to one of the small sandwiches, "I can see why he thought to leave for his property abroad to continue his business where he would not be noted for the error, but that he did so with such speed is disappointing."
"He probably thought he was sparing you, and himself, from further tainting by the incident."

"Yes, but if my body had responded in my heat to him enough to mate, I would have gone with him, despite today's speech, and it's social ramifications. That he did not even talk to me in person over it I suppose shows that to be his error, not the misjudgement today."

Beverly made a non-committal sound as she ate, considering him, before eventually responding as she disposed of a couple of crumbs.

"I think you have stronger contenders this season. You responded very favourably towards Lieutenant Anderson, and Dr Lecter is no slouch either. I have hope that you will win me a great deal of money this year."

"You placed a bet on me getting mated?!"

"My dear Will, the bookmakers have odds on you every year, didn't you know?"

Will shook his head, shocked and vaguely mortified at this new information. It was bad enough that year on year that he never found a mate, but to then find that people were betting on such a thing was disconcerting to say the least. He should have guessed that somewhere people would do such a thing, but he hadn't expected for it to be so close to home.

Beverly, likely seeing his unease, tempered her words and tone, knowing her news today had likely not at all the sort he would have wanted to hear after all. She sometimes forgot that not everyone shared her amusements with as much enthusiasm as she did.

"Don't worry, it wasn't just you. Lots of the most eligible singletons have bets placed upon their mating potential. There's quite a large interest in Mr Hodges as well."

Fiddling with pouring himself some tea, Will was eager to be done with the topic.

"So what did you make of Dr Lecter today?"

She was thoughtful as she watched him, considering her words and what she knew.

"He is a clever man that is used to getting his own way, but is charming with it, when he wants to be. I wouldn't mistake him for being harmless though, no matter that his aura does not press on the air. I am far more inclined to believe he controls that. I'll know more when I speak to someone he works with, or perhaps a couple of former patients."

"Do you think he would be a good match for me?"

"Too soon to say, but he has some compatible traits with you that are not normally seen much in alphas, so that could be promising. I like him though. His cutting humour amuses me."

"So you have made a new friend at least."

"Ha! Perhaps. Come now, tell me of your plans for the coming week. With courting season heavy upon us, you must be amply busy."

"Actually this coming week, not so much. I was to go to dinner with a Mr Till, but he has since withdrawn due to ill-health."

He gestured to the other letter, which she lost no time in scanning.

"I can't ask the other suitors to change their days, due to the amount of preparation involved. Nor can
I visit again with Lieutenant Anderson until I have had my first visit with the rest of them. Mr Benjamin Layton, I let go from my choices. I visited on Thursday, but we just weren't compatible. So overall it leaves my days and evenings pleasingly empty of obligations. I do have work to do for the newspaper, of course, as well as responding to those from my lecture, but thankfully no visits until the community event on Samhuinn I agreed to go with Alana to."

"Oh I love those celebrations! Did you know that Samhuinn originally meant 'Sun's end'? It's fascinating how language changes over the centuries. Speaking of the celebrations in fact, I must remember before I leave to ask Mrs Platts if she could give me the recipe for the bonfire treacle pudding she made last year. I just have to get our lovely cook, Mr Parker, to make them."

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As Beverly stepped up into her carriage and started to make her way home, she considered again the conundrum of Dr Lecter.

That the man was clever and manipulative, there was no doubt, but she had cause to re-assess his actions, knowing now as she did about this second suitor having conveniently fallen ill.

That wasn't to say that the rivalry for omegas during courtship was not to be expected, because it was, far more than was ever discussed, and kept out-of-sight from the attention of omegas especially. Territorial challenges did tend to be the norm, even if it was the more common meetings related to coming to an accord with suitors of the same omega. But this was different. It showed another level of challenge, entirely, or almost entirely unseen.

It had, after all, been Dr Lecter's invitation to meet at the Wildflower tea room that day, and he who had booked that particular table with such a good view. Coincidence, some might say, that they were both there to witness the very public downfall of a lesser rival, but she wasn't convinced. How someone could have managed such a manipulation though, she wasn't sure.

Yet Dr Lecter had been just a touch too at ease, too quietly satisfied for her to entirely dismiss such a thing.

And now there was this other alpha. Mr Till, whose suit for Will had also been cut short, this time by illness, something more potentially in Dr Lecter's field of knowledge. She would have to look into it of course, but if it seemed likely that he had indeed manufactured this outcome, what did that say about the man? Potentially dangerous, of course, but then all of them were. Perhaps it was the less blatant way it was done that unsettled her, though again was that merely engineered to stop Will from finding out? She didn't know.

Either way, she had her work cut out for her in the coming weeks. She just hoped the rest of Will's suitors wouldn't prove entirely too dull to make the task a chore.

For now, she set it from her mind, and focused instead on how to willingly get Annabelle's second, Peter Radley, into the very nice pair of leather trousers she had had made for him. If they were designed to be a touch too tight around his delectable buttocks, well, he would just have to endure for both of their pleasures.

A smile touching her lips, she considered that perhaps a touch more brandy after dinner might do the trick.

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*London, Tuesday 27th October, afternoon*
As this afternoon had been the one in which Will had been due to visit Mr Till, before the man had withdrawn from the courtship, Will had thought to spend it at home. However, seeing as how it had already been organized for the carriage to be available for him to use, he let Humphrey encourage him instead to use the time to do some shopping.

Although it certainly wasn’t his way to find such a thing generally pleasurable, he couldn’t deny that once he was there, he had missed the compact and interesting interior of the small clock repair shop. Mr Brightly, the owner, was still bustling in the back to find the small package of cogs that Will had ordered some time ago, but had not had the chance to pick up until now.

He wondered if it was still the same in the back where the tiny workshop was.

He had only been twelve the first time he had seen the place, brought by the family to learn from a professional when he had shown an interest in the workings of the grandfather clock. Enough to have sat for hours watching it, until one sleepless night, watching had turned into the study floor being spread with the cogs and gears, and Will crying because he couldn't put it back together again.

Mr Brightly had never treated him with the diffidence of most of society, his gruff manner betraying how little time he had for any airs and graces when his work was around. What at first had been mistaken for dislike, had soon been recognised for the singular passion it was, and Will soaked up the information, while Mr Brightly softened a little with time at finding someone who could share his passion for all things clock, with a focus that most adults, never mind a child of twelve, would never possess.

Sitting back there had been like sitting in another world, the cramped back room filled with shelves and boxes of cogs and gears and things he had had no names for back then. It had smelled of metal and oil, wood-shavings, tea and Mr Brightly. It had felt safe back there, even when customers came and Mr Brightly became a disgruntled dragon, smiling with teeth at those who disturbed him from working with his hoard. Will had suspected, even back then that he only put up with it because inevitably they brought him more. It made Will feel privileged, always, when the man would return back through the door, interlopers chased away with a frown and polite sounding words, and his eyes would light at their latest project. Will had felt, in his youth, that he could be a little dragonling too, and he rarely begrudged the man his frowns and his lack of care for anything not related to his obsession.

"Here they are, Mr Graham, the replacement cylinder escapement and cogs you asked for. Will you be staying? I just started taking apart a German Bracket clock in the back room. It got brought in yesterday with some winding issues."

He knew he could could stay. He could go back behind the counter and clear a big enough space to sit and lose himself in the delicate task of logic and precision until those very same clocks chimed the need to close the shop and return home. It was easy to forget that longing for an escape to simpler times when he hadn't been around.

"I'd like to, but I still have a couple of errands to do this afternoon."

He could feel Humphrey's gaze and attention focusing on him more at this, having probably assumed that Will would indeed end up staying for a time in the workshop, but he said nothing.

"No matter. You know when I'm open anyhow, Mr Graham."

Will could see the disappointment hidden behind those gruff, dismissive words. The old beta had little enough chance to share his craft passion with any more, what with his wife gone over a decade past, and few people other than customers to fill his time. Not that the man was particularly sociable
by nature, if anything it was the opposite, but in his craft he had boundless focus and enthusiasm and only customers who largely didn't appreciate his work enough, to share it with.

"I'll try and find time to come by in the next couple of weeks."

Will didn't try to offer up any excuses for his tardy ability to visit, knowing the man would not be interested in hearing them. Actions, rather than words, drove the man, and Will was aware that his own actions had not exactly been all that thoughtful to his mentor lately.

It was easy to become caught up with the very many social obligations, his work, the courting necessities, the visits and the recovery from them, but Mr Brightly had never cared much to hear of such things. Will had been scared, at first, when he had presented, that the man would change, that he would start treating him as differently as everyone else did when he had shown to be an omega, but after a gruff 'huh... figures', he had merely focused on the new project that had been brought in, and the anxiety that had filled Will had seeped away in the face of the nonchalance.

Mr Brightly had never cared about all the society balls, or the lists of suitors that Will had, except when the clocks sometimes were not enough to settle Will. He would listen then, if Will felt the want for talking, his own brand of gruff advice settled him in a way that Alana's sweet platitudes rarely were as he grew older. He cared enough for Will that he would listen to things he had no interest in, and offer his opinion, and Will knew from the years together just how much the man cared for his well-being to do so.

Which only made the guilt so much more, seeing how the older man allowed his denial, and didn't question it, too accustomed to people moving on to hold it against Will, hiding the pain of that abandonment deep.

Will berated himself deeply for that hurt, for letting time, the thing they had always shared and worked with, slip away between them. He would do better. He would.

"Aye, well, be on your way then. I won't keep you. Hand in the mantle clock when you get it done. I got another couple on the shelf for you."

"I will, Mr Brightly. Thank you."

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Moving out of the small shop, they made their way back to the carriage where Jacob was waiting with Peter. The pair had an easy friendship, both being of a similar age and easy temperament. The sound of Peter's amiable laughter eased some of the weight from his shoulders, seeing members of his family happy.

"Where do you wish to go now?"

The question from Humphrey beside him, as they paused at the carriage door.

"We should go to the confectioners."

"Was there something in particular you wished to get?"

"No. But you were wanting to buy Alana some sugar flowers, weren't you?"

Humphrey looked momentarily surprised, but was more used to Will's observations than the other alpha.
"Ah, well, yes, indeed. Let us go there first then."

Will offered a brief smile to Peter at the driver's seat, who had already donned the heavier coat and hat to ward off the light drizzle in the air, before stepping up into the carriage himself.

They journey wasn't a long one, but it was enough to take them to the busier streets of the town, and no matter the work of the street sweepers, the lingering scent of horse manure was pervasive, ground into the very cobbles of the street and settling like a thick haze that most people didn't smell any more, or got used to. It always smelled different to him here, cloying and bordering on overwhelming to his more acute omegan senses, mixing, as it did, with the smell of humanity.

"Can I get you anything, Will?"

Will blinked back his thoughts, realizing that they had indeed stopped. Humphrey waited for his answer patiently. In truth, even the thought of any sort of food right now was turning his stomach, but he knew that if he declined, that Humphrey would only worry about finding something else to give him instead, not wishing for Will to feel left out, the thoughtfulness of the gesture at odds with Will's current needs, for if they ended up stopping elsewhere for such a task, he wasn't sure he would have the energy or will to see through his own. The journey was already wearing on him.

"A bar of the sweet marzipan if they have any would be nice."

With that, Humphrey stepped out, and Will tried to calm himself, block out some of the anxiety that was already creeping in, his tensing muscles dance with the slight nausea from the street.

"How did you know what he was wanting to buy?"

Will looked across to Jacob. The man was still young, indeed, younger than Will at only twenty-five, and there was an almost childlike wonder and anticipation there. It still seemed to dazzle the man, like a magician's trick, to hear of such things. It was as good a distraction as any, he supposed.

"It has been a week since Humphrey bought anything for Alana, and Mrs Platts was making sherry raisin bread this morning. The smell remind him of when he first got together with Alana, and how they would sit in grounds and he would feed her small pieces of sugar dipped in sherry. She always had flowers in her hair during the summer, and his gaze lingered on the bouquet in the hallway when we left."

No matter that Jacob had gotten the answer, he still had that slight awe about him that Will found a smile tugging his lips slightly upwards. Jacob reminded him of Nathan when he was younger, full of playfulness and eager to experience the joys of the world. It was nice, he reminisced, that his observation could be used for such small, light-hearted things, not merely to settle the mantle of killers into his own mind.

It wasn't long after that until Humphrey was stepping back into the carriage with a couple of boxes from the store, their delicate fragrance of worked sugar, light floral scents and the underlying hint of those who had made them lingered in the air. Will didn't bother to remind Humphrey to brush his scent onto the stems and petals before giving them over, for he could already see the man's fingers moving ever so slightly back and forth on the corner of the box, mostly unaware of doing so, but certainly aware of the scents that he didn't wish to be there.

"Where is it you wish to go now?"

The question was mildly asked of him, but they knew each other well enough to catch the understanding unstated. Humphrey was not going to have Will's own task sidelined a second time,
for it must be clear enough that Will was approaching the limit for this outing, no matter that it had been a short one.

"I was wondering if we could pay a call to the Hargreaves household?"

"If I had known you had wanted to go there, I would have brought another of the family with us."

"I know, but I didn't know if I was going to be able to make the trip. It's just that I have heard nothing more of them, about the pup. It's been twice now that they have not been in when I have sent a notice."

Humphrey frowned a little, though not at the request, more at the utter rudeness of not returning a call in such a time. It was this, in addition to Will's worries, that made him incline his head.

"Very well. Let us drop by and see what they have to say."

--

When the knock came to the door, George Hargreaves felt a certain amount of trepidation. It was now about a week and a half since his brother had returned home after the gambling disaster that had lost them everything. Despite Richard's assertions that he could regain most of what they had lost, so far very little had been forthcoming. Which was why, when that knock came, that it was not heard with much hopefulness of a pleasant interaction.

Thankfully most that came to the door were not those looking to collect on a debt, there had only been the tailors' boy last week, whom he had been able to delay due to the fact that his brother was not at home, but most of those that did turn up, all in fact, did have to be turned away politely and in such a way as to avoid suspicion as to their actual circumstances. The fact that over the course of the week less people were coming to call, was both a boon (for he would not have to think up more excuses) as well as a dire portend to their rapidly declining social standing.

However, no matter how passively concerned over the doorstep greeting he was, it could not have prepared him for the sight of Mr Graham and Mr Humphrey Layton of Bloom, standing on the threshold. Later, much later, he would think about how their fine clothing was impeccable, and how they held themselves with the grace of the upper classes. Of the delicate scent of aftershave and clean skin, of how their hair was cut so neatly. All of these things he would think of later, but in that moment, all he could see was that they were 'more'.

"Good afternoon, Mr Hargreaves. I came to see my pup."

For all that Mr Graham's words seemed mild and pleasant enough, there was a tone of demand there, rather than request, a fact only reinforced by the steely gaze of the alpha beside him. Someone like Mr Layton was treading far beneath his standing in society by calling on them here, and by his look, was not willing to be given any vague placations, having made the journey.

"I... that is, please come in."

He hated how he had fumbled his words, and that he was alone in the house right now. His brother would have known what to say to the gentlemen in these circumstances, he was sure, but Richard was not here, having been travelling further afield of late on the back of poor winnings, to seek fresher ground.

Alone here, it was up to him to deal with this, and seeing them both here, in their effortlessly exquisite tailoring and polite demeanour, only made the disparity between them all the more glaring.
"It is only myself in at the moment," he said, walking them through from the hallway, where much of the landlady's best furnishings had been moved to give the impression of a well-maintained household, to the front sitting room where the light from the window was best. "I must apologize for the lack of ability to offer you refreshments, but as you can no-doubt see, we are somewhat lacking at the moment. My brother always tended to try to reach too far."

He had thought the shame had been bad, when the lawyer and debt collectors had come, but as as they both stood there in a room now so utterly lacking in any manner of comfort or furnishing, this was perhaps just as bad.

Damn Richard and his bloody gambling.

Damn him for leaving him here to explain and clean up his messes without help.

He couldn't lie to these people. He had known that, not when he was so ashamed over the entire situation. Not when they had been nothing but polite to him so far, though the silence from the pair told it's own story.

"All the dogs are with another owner now. I told the lawyer present that one was yours, but I suppose they have not contacted you, since you are here to visit to see them."

"No, they have not contacted me."

George sighed, and it came out shaking, as if the tumult of his thoughts had somehow taken over his chest and racked it with spikes as he exhaled.

"I can write the lawyers name and address for you. It was on the documents we were given."

He wasn't looking at them. Couldn't. The silence lingered for long moments, unanswered.

"That would be most useful. Thank you."

George flinched at the lower timbre of the alpha's voice when it came, and not Mr Graham's. He couldn't smell any anger off the man, but he had never been good at placing scents, and he seemed too well-mannered to fill the room with his aura. That didn't mean it wasn't there though. It should be there, it likely was, and was clearly justified. That Mr Graham didn't answer himself said clearly enough that he was struggling to find polite words for him.

His hands were shaking as he got the folder out from the drawer of Mrs Wicket's table, as well as the pen and ink that he had forced Richard to get him, so they could at least respond to calling cards. He had to sit on the window seat to get enough light to write legibly.

"He assured me, the lawyer, that the new owner would take care of them well, and at least they are with their mother. I wouldn't have wanted them to leave so soon without her. They were still so young. I gave them their blankets and toys, and the kibble I had made up for them, before they left. And their brush."

He realized that he had been holding onto the address, rambling, and held it out to them.

"I am sure they will be fine, Mr Hargreaves."

The tone from the alpha was not what he was expecting, for it was soothing, rather than angry, and made him look up to check he wasn't imagining it. But no, Mr Layton stood there, every inch the gentleman, not seeming to hold the current circumstances against him as many would.
"I'm so terribly sorry."

He didn't know what exactly he was apologizing for; the dogs not being here, the barren state of the house, the disappointment, or himself being in such poor form.

"Do not trouble yourself. I will speak to the lawyers and things will be settled over the pup."

The calm voice of the alpha was what alerted him to the fact that the man was in fact using his aura, just not in anger. It lingered there in the room, a calm certainty of action that loosened his shoulders and made some of the sick anxiety and grief loosen from his chest.

"Thank you, Mr Layton. You have offered me ease I thought not to find."

"What will you do now?"

The voice of Mr Graham had him turning with a slight flush at having temporarily forgotten about the omega in the room. Was he really so addled? It would seem so.

"I, eh, will have to seek employment elsewhere."

He didn't think he needed to elaborate, not with the shell of a house around them, not even a fire or a few tea leaves in water to share. Mr Graham nodded, his eyes lingering on the folder left on the desk while he answered.

"I have heard good things about the Market End Recruitment Hall, located just off Grassmarket. A friend of mine hired his servants there and had been impressed. I believe they work with skill, not employer references."

It went without saying that he would have none. Not that his brother would not try to give one, but because soon, or even now, his brother's word would be seen as more than suspect.

"Thank you, Mr Graham. You have both been more than kind."

He barely remembered seeing them back to the door, but soon they were gone and the door closed again, darkening the hallway, the house once again silent.

--

Back in the carriage on the way home, Humphrey remained silent until Will finally looked up and over to him. He took this as a willingness to speak, knowing all too well that such times had to be taken lest Will lapse into a deeper state where it became far more difficult to re-engage with such things.

"I will write a letter to their lawyer when we get home. Being able to send the gifting letter along with it will lend it more weight in our favour."

Jacob, who had not been witness to it all, having stayed with the carriage to ensure it remained untroubled in this part of town, and was glancing back and forth between them, but neither one deemed to answer his unspoken query.

"So you think he will be okay?" Will asked, his gaze clearly concerned, and despite the scent blockers that he had put on before leaving the house earlier, some of his worry was starting to seep through. "I saw the date on that folder he had. Almost three weeks ago now. He looked like he'd had few meals since then. He was so thin."
"Will," Humphrey's voice cut through the mounting anxiety. "It is not our place to save him. He must do that for himself. It is reprehensible, the state that he has clearly endured under his brother's care, but until he decides to stop it or reach out for help to do so, there is little anyone can do for him while he is willingly under the thumb of his brother. However so long as he does take your advice and seek employment elsewhere soon, I see no reason why he would not find a way to flourish once more."

Will caught the undertone of Humphrey's words well enough, but they were both concerned for the beta, understanding all too well how close family can bind you to do things you would rather not, no matter how much good sense it made.

Jacob, unable to restrain himself any longer, at least in part because of the level of discomfort in the carriage, finally spoke.

"So what happened?"

A slight downturn touched his lips, the thinning of them in minor annoyance and mild discontent, and it was enough to make the younger alpha dip his head and move back slightly in deference, though his gaze remained steadfast enough, wanting to know the answer. He wouldn't begrudge the man this, as much because the younger alpha was bound to make the carriage journey a mess of his youthful impatience otherwise.

"The alpha, Mr Hargreaves, appears to have lost everything to a legal dispute or debt. His beta brother was left to tell us of it."

"Including the puppy? That's horrible!"

"Not nearly so horrible as the fact he has left nothing for his brother to live on."

He made sure his voice was firm in stopping any further conversation on the topic. Indulging in it more would only ignite Will's need to do something about it, and truly, to step in now would be a mistake. If Mr George Hargreaves was to find freedom from such hardship, it had to be by his own actions, otherwise whomever he ended up with would only be tainted by the same murmurings, no matter the intent beforehand. That wasn't to say that he felt nothing over the man's plight. He did. But there were carefully constructed methods for dealing with them in a beneficial way to all, ones that didn't include Will wanting to randomly hire someone that he knew near nothing about.

He wouldn't put it to the alpha of the Hargreaves family to end up orchestrating something in his desperation to attempt one last ditch to survive. Unless the brothers were separated by their own choice, the inclination to help the other would be far greater than it might otherwise have been, and whatever income might be made by the beta might merely be handed over under misguided benevolence or pressure, and then lost on more gambling or debts. He had heard of such things before, and he had not come into his own wealth and security by being impulsively inclined.

Jacob settled down, though there was little hope for him to keep his gossiping from the rest of the household once they got home. It was to be expected, of course, not only for him to tell them, but also of society at large to know. That was something that Humphrey would see to. Mr Richard Hargreaves would soon be finding that the majority of the wealthy classes would have little or nothing to do with him after this. He knew just the people to mention it to in order to get that particular ball rolling.

"I think I will take the matter to the lawyers myself and see what they have to say. It is a well-reputed company, so I cannot see there being any problem."
Will nodded, his thoughts still fixed on the visit, no doubt. The sooner Humphrey could get word about the pup and put the matter behind them the better. It might be advisable to stop in at the club on the way back and find a responsive ear or two as well. Mr Easton should be there this evening, and possibly Ms. Kearns as well, who was always eager for such snippets of gossip, but with enough morals and standards to thoroughly condemn the man for it. Yes, that is what he would do. But first, to home, where he could pick up the gifting letter to take with him. If luck and serendipity were with him, he would be back in time for dinner.

Bloom Residence, London - Thursday 29th October, afternoon.

It had been two days since Humphrey had gone to visit the lawyers to speak with them over the matter of the pup, but other than a note letting him know that the owner would contact the Blooms about the matter in person, no such contact had yet been felt.

Looking over today's correspondence, Will flicked through the different ones that had come in today, sorting them into piles. Thankfully it wasn't Monday when the bundles of mail from the Agony Uncle column came through from the newspaper's office, but there were still quite a number relating to his lecture that would need to be replied to before being passed to his colleagues to organize and deal with further, not to mention others from the courting season.

For all that he preferred writing to conversation in person, the letters for courting were a trial. Much like the gifts he had received at the ball, there was a way about them that was expected, full of flowery language and overt displays of ardour that were about as genuine as any lie. While it was true that, of all the methods of communication over courting season, it was this one that tended to give the most amusement, it was the most tedious to pick apart what the people were actually saying.

He picked one up at random out of the pile and opened it, glancing through the somewhat familiar handwriting.

--

29 Pickering Lane, London, 26th October

My Darling William,

When I was out walking today, I had thought I had seen you in the soft waves of dark hair, but upon closer acquaintance, the man held nothing of your delicate elegance, his eyes stared at me boldly and his manner was most offensive in the very fact that he was not you.

Every day the world seems bent upon depriving me of your glorious presence while taunting me with hints of what we will one day attain. I watched a young couple out walking yesterday, and it took every ounce of my willpower not to groan in dismay that you were likewise not at my side. It tore at my heart to have you so far from me, that I could not lay your head upon my chest so you might hear that my heart only beats for you and every moment apart is a pain upon my soul.

I was reminded of your fair skin in the lingering snow upon weather worn roofs, of your soft murmur in the wind that chills me as it did at the ball when you were so dreadfully ill, and although I have not heard it, I sometimes think to hear your carefree laughter amongst the elites as they wander the streets.

I can barely think even of eating for the wish that I could share it, that I might offer your soft lips a delicate curl of pastry, or some other sweetmeat that might take your fancy. ...
He stopped reading with a grimace, and set it aside without reading any further. Just his luck to have picked one that had been written by Franklyn, of all people. The man never seemed to give up, having taken the alpha trait of dogged determination to its limits and beyond, as he noted that at least one other of the letters waiting bore the same handwriting as this one.

Determined to stave off a headache, he turned away from them and instead looked at some of the others that lay waiting, ones that looked far less inclined to have anything to do with the courting at all. One in particular drew his eye, having a stamped address upon the back, rather than a handwritten one. He couldn't remember writing to a publishers, and so he opened it, interest peaking, and determined to forget, for the moment, the less welcome correspondences.

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3 Papermakers Row, York, 26th October

Mr William Graham of Bloom,

Sir:- Your letter of the 14th of October, forwarded to us on your behalf by the Hartley, Wheeler and Sons of Pembridge Street, London, that questioned the origins and other publications of the author Mr C. Eden, was received this afternoon, and I will attempt to furnish you with the answers you seek, few as those may be.

Enclosed is a list of the various published editions of 'The Marvels of European Travel' by Mr Eden, numbers published, and their current market value based on condition. I would caution that this is a general guide only, for the true value of a book may be increased or decreased significantly by small differences not immediately seen, and you would be best served by getting it valued by ourselves or another specialist for a more correct accounting.

That being said, the book described in your letter does sound very much like one of the first editions listed, of which there were only twenty made, due, of course, to the fact that the illustrations were done by hand, and not a block reproduction as seen in later volumes. This alone makes the book automatically one of the most valuable of those published, even were it in poor condition, which seems, from your description, not to be the case.

As for your request about other publications by the author, I can tell you that, as far as we are aware, there are none. Despite the publishing house having made the query several times to the author, he is showed in our records to have no interest currently in writing a follow-up book.

I can likewise give you little information as to the author himself, for it would break the rules of confidentiality inherent to our business, except to tell you that Mr Claud Eden is certainly a pen-name, as many authors use, and not the one he would regularly be known as.

I regret that my letter will offer no further satisfaction in these answers.

Perhaps, if it is not too inconvenient to you, you might bring the edition in question to our office to be evaluated some day. Such a rare copy would be a delight to our curator to peruse, and may give you more answers as to it's value at least.

Yours respectfully

Mr John Walters

Chief Publisher of Whitegate Publishing House
He had forgotten all about the letter he had sent to the local bookshop in enquiry, and was pleased that they in turn had tracked down the publishers that the book that Dr Lecter had gifted him had been made by.

Disappointing as it was that so little information could be gleaned, at least now he knew that whatever puzzle lay in the book, it was in this one alone. He had only managed to progress through its pages in the few short times when his attendance was not taken up by other matters, but still, it held his attention.

It was tempting to write to Dr Lecter about it, but he suspected that whatever insight he might glean from the man were far more likely to show in person, so he dismissed the idea, setting aside the letter and picking up another one at random.

---

29 Pickering Lane, London, 27th October

My dearest love,

I have enclosed my invitation to dine with this letter rather than waiting for your courtship acceptance, for I know must be so dreadfully busy with all the balls and business of the season. I have made it for Friday the 6th of November in the hope that you have not been forced to make other plans by your family. I hold strong in the memory of your soft yielding glances to me, knowing my love is returned with just as much fervour. I will make everything perfect for you, worry not. I yearn and dream of the time when we can be together again, my love.

Your adoring mate-to-be,

Franklyn

---

Will was sure that he was going to need far more alcohol in order to stave off the angry headache building. To have the audacity to ignore societal protocols and send such an invite when he had not received confirmation of the bid to court was bad enough, but to make such utterly wrong assumptions about Will's own feelings was just terrible on so many levels.

The man had set himself up for a dramatic fall, and there was only so much Will could do to soften it without things being left with any lingering hope of reciprocation. Will had tried before, but the man seemed to be so utterly determined that he held little hope that scandal for the man could be avoided.

It was terrible, and in all honesty it made him feel sick, for he didn't believe that Mr Froideveaux was purposefully doing it, he just didn't grasp enough of society past his own instincts and wishes to see the truth of the matter. With a sigh, he set the letter and invitation card aside with the other letter, and rubbed his brow to try and ease the tense muscles there. He would deal with it later. It would have to be done today for certain, to stem the tide of further misunderstanding, and there was little hope that the man was not going to end up heartbroken over it.

It was not a promising start to an afternoon dedicated to dealing with his mail, to be sure.

Shaking his head, he tried to dismiss it from his mind and focus on other things, flipping through some of the remaining letters until one caught his eye. His fingers paused on it, for the letter had no postmark, so it had to have been delivered by hand, and the seal on the back was not one he
It was difficult not to get his hopes up, that it might be about the puppy, for there were many well-off families who he was not that familiar with, that would send someone to deliver important mail by hand.

Carefully opening it, a quick scan to the end of the letter told well enough that it wasn’t about the pup, but that didn't stop the soft smile from touching his lips as he sat down to read it properly.

---

8 Atholl Crescent, London, 29th October

Dear Mr Graham

I am under the duress of a slight panic, as Mrs Becket asked me yestereve when I had written to you, and appeared rather distraught that I had not yet done so. I had thought you likely to be so busy with the season, and your work, that you might feel better not being pressured as much by the need to respond to more things to do with courtship. Yet in my hope to not add to it, I find myself now vastly uneasy with the thought that you might not think me interested.

I can assure you, with as much ardency as can be set upon paper, that my thoughts of you do not stray long, and it has been with keen distraction that I have gone about my daily life for want of your returned presence.

I know that it is impossible, due to etiquette, to see you once more until you have visited with the others vying for your good regard, but that does not make the time any easier. Hints of your scent still linger in my sitting room where you once sat, and I am loathe to use the room too much in case it fades before I see you once more. I find myself often wishing, of an evening, for the growing ease of conversation that we had there.

I wish, also, that I had the gift for less formal letters, as I cannot tell how much of a mess I am making of my attempt to gain your good regard, or at least your tolerance, until I may see you again.

Yours faithfully,

Lieutenant John Anderson

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Will smiled at the letter as he looked over the neat handwriting. He could imagine well enough the numerous drafts of words placed and then discarded, for it showed a certain amount of anxiety over its reception, with some words being more precise and strictly set down, while others, wistful hopes, slid from that.

Raising the letter from the desk, he drew in a soft breath, catching the whiff of fading streets, Mr Fall who had brought up the mail earlier, and beneath it, on the right hand side, Lieutenant Anderson's scent, where his wrist had lain upon the paper while writing, warm and welcoming.

It was difficult to tell how much the statement of poor letter-writing were in earnest, and how much was attempting to excuse the somewhat more risqué topic of Will's scent in his home. Frankly it was bordering on slightly scandalous if it had been anything other than a private courting letter, and even then, such comments generally were left until much further along. Still, Will found that he didn’t mind too much. That the letter was signed with both names was a clear enough indication that the
Lieutenant hoped for a less formal relationship by giving his forename in the hope it might be used.

He found his fingers absently moving over those four letters, remembering the time sitting together, with a fondness that company rarely brought him.

Taking a clean leaf of paper, and dipping his pen, Will started to make his reply.

Chapter End Notes

A slightly longer chapter this time, and on time! huzzah!
A huge thank you to my beta-reader Anthony, specifically, because he went above and beyond with his help this month.

I am also looking for some more questions for the agony uncle section, so if any of you have any questions about the worldbuilding, or want to offer up a letter for Uncle William to answer, please post them on the agony uncle page, or message me on facebook with it.
https://www.facebook.com/AO3thequietscribe
I am hoping to get enough questions together to do another post there before the next chapter is released in a month's time.
Mrs Tilly Fletcher sat in her small sitting room and stared down at the elegantly written calling card. It was of thick card stock with embossing on it, as well as some delicately printed decoration around the edges. The handwriting was neat but forceful, but otherwise gave little away as to the nature of the owner.

Ms. B. Katz of Bloom requests to call upon Mrs. T. Fletcher in matters relating to Sentinel duties.

An alpha, it would be, and a wealthy one. Even she had heard of the Blooms, although their stations in life were considerably different to her own. She had no idea why someone from that house would wish to speak to her, as she knew no one of their station that she might be able to give words about.

She looked back up from the card to her husband, Rupert, who echoed her own baffled look, and shrugged a little, not about to turn down such a visitor, even if it was an error on their part. He gave her a lopsided smile that warmed her, one that lit her own in response. It had nothing to do with the visitor and everything to do with the fact that they were only married 5 months past and both still took great delight in finding themselves so.

A few moments later she could hear Rupert in the hallway letting Ms. Katz in. She set aside the calling card, and carefully eased herself to the edge of the chair before cautiously getting to her feet, just in time to greet the woman who strode in.

"Welcome, Ms. Katz. Can I take your cloak? Mr Fletcher will be bringing through some tea shortly. Please, take a seat."

"Thank you, yes. I shall not take up too much of your time. There is always so much to do at this time of year."

As Ms. Katz removed the plain black woollen cloak, one that, despite its lack of ornamentation, was far nicer than any she had ever owned, it became so much clearer the distinct difference in their lives. Like magic, the cloak revealed the most glorious day dress, with a trimmed waist and full skirt, dark purple in colour, but with a richness to it that made her fingers ache to touch.

Her own linen shirt and dress, although clean and tended to, seemed all the more drab and poor when sitting across from the other woman. She took the cloak and held it as Rupert came in with the tea, thanking him and passing the cloak over for him to hang so it wouldn't get creased. Usually she would have had no trouble doing so herself, but she was still feeling sufficiently tender enough to feel no guilt at getting her affable husband to deal with it.

"We have not met before, Mrs Fletcher," the woman said as she sat like a queen in the modest surroundings as Tilly eased herself back down, seeing to pouring the tea, "I believe you may have met someone with whom I have an interest in knowing more about, being that he is set to courting
A pause, as Rupert came back in with a plate of sweet biscuits that he had made only that morning. Even though they were an indulgence for them, for sugar and honey were expensive, and the tea was likewise not exactly common in their house, poured in their best crockery, she was more than aware that this was nothing compared to what Ms. Katz was likely used to.

She poured for them both, as Rupert stepped back towards the door, lingering for a long moment, his reassuring gaze there before he went back to the kitchen.

"Of course I will help you if I can, but I have no contact with high society, so I cannot think whom you might mean."

Were those real diamond earrings? She had never seen any up close before, and even in the somewhat sparse daylight, they glittered, drawing the eye. They had to be real diamonds, surely, for someone of the upper classes would likely die before wearing cut glass or crystal substitutes that were more common. She couldn't wait to tell her friend Mags about it.

"It came to me that you had been the unfortunate recipient of an attack," Ms. Katz supplied, bringing her attention back to the moment. "Are you quite recovered now?"

She startled slightly at the abrupt change of topic, for while asking after someone's health was good manners, she hadn't known that her situation was general knowledge really past those that read the local tabloids. It certainly wouldn't have made it to the better newspapers, that was for certain. Surely Ms. Katz did not read the likes of Tattlecrime.

"Alas no. It will be some time until I am able to return to work I am told. I am still mostly on bed rest, but the pain wasn't so bad today."

"Ah, I am sorry to hear that. You were seen at the Founders Hospital, under the care of the chief surgeon, Dr Lecter, is that correct?"

Oh! Yes, that made perfect sense now. Someone like Ms. Katz would of course be interested in an alpha like that. She nodded her head, though the news that it was he who she was looking for information on dampened her enthusiasm for the visit somewhat, though she tried to hide it. Suppositions, she told herself, meant little, and his direct actions were what mattered.

"That is correct, though I saw little of him. He came around the wards once in a while of course, to check on his patients and to see everything was in order, but most of the time he was elsewhere, doing surgery I presume."

"Understandable, of course. Will you tell me of your interactions with him, and your impressions of how he behaved while working? As sentinel for my family, I would like to know what he is like outside of the ballroom and dining room."

It was barely a question or request, though phrased that way. Although the woman was appearing friendly, she was still an alpha, and one that was currently exuding not only her wealth and success, but also her drive to get answers by being here, right now, and seeming uncaring to move until she was furnished with them.

Tilly took a sip of her tea, reassuring herself that this was her own home, with her grandmother's crockery, and that Rupert was within hearing distance.

"I will tell you what I know, little as it may be."
The woman in question looked pleased as she sat back in the chair, but it was the pleasure of a lioness with a full stomach watching a lame deer.

"I don't remember much when I first got to the hospital. That's when I first saw him. I was in so great a pain I could barely see. There was a nurse there, she told me who he was."

She had never been in so much pain before, not even when that crate had fallen on her leg when she was eleven, breaking it. That had been bad, so bad that she had wailed in agony for hours, but as long as she hadn't moved, the pain had become bearable. This wasn't like that. This pain breathed with her, like the claws of a monster flexing every time she tried to take a breath, to live. She had to try and stop her own sobbing for, like a cycle of destruction, it made the pain so bad she feared not being able to breathe at all. Blood in her mouth after passing out from agony from her body trying to expel the taste, the pain, maybe even her own life. It certainly felt like even a moment without feeling like this would be a blessing of untold worth. Anything. Anything to make it stop.

The next time she regained some consciousness, the pain was a little less, but her head felt dizzy and uncertain.

"Please be polite. You must be polite."

She didn't understand. It felt like this intolerable agony had been the entirety of her life so far, such was its extent, that anything else outside of that was difficult to comprehend. She tried though, because the person smelled like nervousness and a little fear, and that at least was important, if there was a further threat.

"This is Dr Lecter, the surgeon who will be seeing to you today," the voice said. Surgeon? Was she in hospital then? She might live beyond this? She hadn't thought it possible, but then she had not had space to think much at all since the attack. But she remembered the worry in that person's scent. Polite? She tried, her mind was slipping towards the relief of unconsciousness again, but she tried.

"Thank you for seeing to me, Dr Lecter," or as much as her pain-slurred words could emit. She wasn't sure how much she actually got out, but was that a hint of relief in the person's scent? The nurse's scent? Maybe. Darkness slipped into her vision and pain eased away into unconsciousness.

"I think I thanked him for seeing me, but I didn't know much after that, passed out from the pain I did," she said, then wished she hadn't. It sounded so common in the face of the elegant woman in front of her, that she could have cringed. "I was in and out of sleep for a couple of days before waking properly after surgery. The nurses told me that Dr Lecter had saved my life. That another surgeon might not have been able to."

Although there were brief forays to wakefulness, she didn't rouse more fully until three days had passed.

The pain was still there, especially if she moved, but less. Manageable so long as she kept taking the powders with water that dimmed it back. She was going to live, the nurse at her bedside told her proudly. She listened as they carefully changed the dressing of the wound and the nurse preened at how there was no infection. Surely though that was just chance? Luck?

"Oh, no," the nurse had told her, something like awe, even worship in her voice. "It's his skill and how he runs things here. You would likely have died with a lesser surgeon, but not Dr Lecter. He does things his own way. New staff, they complain sometimes about the extra work, the cleaning and how demanding he is, but I've been a nurse here for over twenty years now, his wards have the lowest rate of infections I have ever seen. It works, it does. I don't mind the extra labour so long as less people die. Hadn't though it would make such a difference, but it does."
"Was Dr Lecter brought over specifically, do you know, or was he in charge of the ward you were in?"

"Oh, I think technically the nurses were in charge, but it was clear he looked on the wards as his domain, and the nurses respected that. Respected him."

"How did that show?"

She paused for a moment, considering her words. Sometimes a situation seemed so obvious that it took a while to figure out why that was, with all the little details coming together to give the overall impression.

"Well, the way they acted around him mostly. They would always defer to him. None of them wanted to be seen as incompetent or lazy. He never threatened them, as far as I could tell, but his disapproval was felt if something wasn’t done right. He had this way of looking irritated and disappointed at them that the younger nurses especially were desperate to avoid."

Ms. Katz made a thoughtful noise, her gaze holding a sheathed sort of sharpness in that contemplation.

"Did he scare them?" she asked with a sort of mild interest in her tone that did little to hide the focus that the question truly held.

"Oh, no," Mrs Fletcher said quickly, “not in that way, I think. Most were just scared of disappointing him, of being seen as not doing their job right. Many of the staff looked up to him greatly. One of the older nurses told me that for all the extra work that was being given to them, she was glad that Dr Lecter was in charge. Said that the ward ran so much smoother and calmer with him there."

"Did you find it so?"

"I mean, I guess so? I had never been in a hospital before. But it was very clean, and everything was punctual, like the tasks of the nurses, the cleaning, the meals. It seemed organized well, I think. He would come around the wards at least twice a day to ensure everything was running how he wanted it, and I know he was keeping a tally on the supplies so nothing ran out. He spoke with the chief nurses about it a couple of times."

"How was he like with the patients on the ward?"

*He wandered along the ward, checking on patients as he passed, or merely nodding to what the nurse told him about their recovery. When he got to her bed, he came alongside it to talk to her, his bearing that of a confident and in-control alpha, something that was reassuring in its competence.*

"How is the wound today, Mrs Fletcher?"

"It is much improved, thank you, Dr Lecter. Nurse Pavel was able to help me to the privy today."

*Such a normal thing, unless your body is rebelling against you. A mere walk, as short as that was, became a vast achievement under the circumstances.*

"That is excellent news," he said, "I will just check over the stitching and for any inflammation. Please lay back."

She had shifted down the bed to lie there once more, aided by the nurse, while Dr Lecter washed his hands in a basin that had been brought. It was a bit painful, but nothing like it might have been, and she wasn’t about to complain. His hands were careful and deft, and offered nothing but the clinical
examination that was expected. A couple of times the pressing of his fingers caused a small whimper of pain to escape her, but he apologized, letting her know he had to check for any internal swelling.

When it was done, he washed his hands in fresh water once more, and reassured her that everything seemed to be healing well, and that she would likely make a full recovery in time.

It had been a tremendous relief to hear that, and she had thanked him with an easy gratitude that he took without smugness as others might have done. He was too much of a gentleman to let such a thing show, if it existed.

That was what it was like for each of the patients he visited on his rounds. Clinical professionalism and confidence.

"He was always very polite when he came to the ward. He never raised his voice or flashed his aura or scent. I wouldn't say he was friendly, so much as it was his job and he was performing it efficiently and with the manners of a gentleman. He didn't have time to sit with us or see to other things, that was what the nurses were there for. But everyone in the ward respected him. He had little tolerance for ill-manners."

"Is there anything else you can think of that might be of use to define his character?"

"Oh, well, there was that time when another Doctor came into the ward. The one from the asylum. Dr Chilton, or something? I don't remember his name well. But he came in one day. I remember it because the man made me uneasy. Perhaps because of his job."

"Dr Frederick Chilton. I share your sentiment. The man is a cockroach."

"Well, he came around the wards, just... looking. Dr Lecter was there, having come to get the nurses to bring one of the patients for surgery. Dr Chilton made out that the patient, who had become panicked at the thought of surgery, might be better in his care, but Dr Lecter set him right. There was some animosity between them, but Dr Lecter didn't rise to fight as many alphas would, he just exchanged words until Dr Chilton got bored, or lost the verbal exchange and walked off. It seemed like Dr Lecter considered those in the wards, nurses and patients, as under his protection."

"Did you feel protected?"

She had first seen the man, whom she now knew was Dr Chilton, from a distance. All alphas were predators, but seeing the way the man moved in the corridors, fleeting glimpses as he wandered around, she was less reminded of the lions at the zoo, and more of a scavenger pretending to be something that he was not. Eyes always sharp for easy meat, and not much care into how he got it.

His presence there made her uneasy. She asked one of the nurses who he was, since it was not visiting hours, and the nurse’s brief assessment of the figure had, both quickly and clearly, turned to focus, dislike, and irritation.

"He shouldn't be here. Dr Lecter won't like it. As if my day ain't busy enough."

The nurse had finished folding the extra blanket, and made off down the ward to challenge the interloper. The voice of her neighbour, Miss White, brought her thoughts around.

"That's the shrink from the asylum. Dr Chilton. Harvey said he's been coming around more often since the incident last week on the other side of the hospital. Some guy went on a rampage against other patients and ended up getting sent there, and now he keeps snooping around looking for more. Best keep your head down around him. I know I wouldn't want to be someone he sets his beady gaze on."
She couldn't help but think that she agreed, and nodded a little to show she was listening. A lot of people were watching as the nurse seemed to be adamant at making him go away. Surprisingly he did, though it was only a few hours later that he was back again.

This time it was Dr Lecter that was out dealing with the man in the hallway, his voice clipped with retrained dislike and intolerance for the intrusion into his domain.

“Mrs Fletcher?”

Tilly practically had to shake the memories from her head, aware that she had perhaps drifted further than intended in the haze brought on by the pain medication.

"I’m sorry. I think so? It's hard to tell when a threat isn't physical, but I felt glad that Dr Lecter didn't let Dr Chilton into the wards properly. He kept him out in the corridors, positioned himself in front of the doorway in fact. Dr Chilton didn't return after that. I think we were all grateful."

"I don't doubt it. I only had the displeasure of meeting him once, and that was one time too many in my opinion. It is a strange assortment of people we meet in our lives, isn't it?"

Ms. Katz smiled, finishing off the last of her tea and setting it down carefully on the table.

"Well, I won't keep you any longer, Mrs Fletcher. Although your company has been a pleasure, I have to be at my tailors in half a candlemark, and it's half way across the city."

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Mrs Tilly Fletcher watched from the window as Ms. Katz's carriage drove away down the street, and wondered about the omega that had caught the attention of the surgeon. She felt a touch of worry and guilt for not telling more, but she remembered all too well how things had been that day when Dr Chilton had visited.

She had been awake and healing for a few days now, the routines of the ward now familiar. The morning had been filled with the usual things, of the bed bath, the bed linens changed and breakfast. Every day it happened like that, without fail.

She was sitting back in bed now, luxuriating in the clean sheets and, having been given her pain medication with breakfast, almost blissfully free of pain so long as she kept still. In many ways, the most she was suffering from once she was medicated was the boredom. Rupert had brought her knitting bag to help keep her occupied when he wasn't there during the visiting hours, but it still left her with little to do other than to think, and the ward was run with such regularity that it didn't give much to ruminate on.

The morning had gone much as it ever did, but by the afternoon she had noticed some of the nurses seemed a little more tense than usual. It might have bypassed her notice entirely at first if not for her boredom with knitting at the time. It wasn't just one nurse either, for she soon noticed another hurrying through, seeming on trying to get tasks done quickly.

"What's the matter?" she had asked when the nurse, Agatha, had come to give her more water. "Has something happened?" She was mindful to keep her voice down, not wanting to put additional strain on the staff by way of spreading gossip so more people inquired.

"A doctor from the asylum is poking around. Once Dr Lecter gets out of surgery, he will come around."

She hadn't thought much about it other than the fact that the nurses were having to hurry with tasks
they would usually have more time to complete before he got there.

She didn’t think too much of it until a gradual hush started to spread from the other wards to their own.

Usually the wards, so filled with people likely as bored as she was, were quite loud with the various chatter, but that only highlighted how that noise faded when Dr Lecter came around. There tended towards a more respectful level of noise when he was making checks in the area, but nothing before now had brought the utter silence that that day had had. The change from the boisterous noise to nothing except the sound of precise, clipped footsteps on the tiled corridor floor making itself known. Even the nurses had fallen silent, though their actions became more hurried, while the patients all stilled. They were like prey here, huddling down in their burrows, hoping that the predator that those steps heralded would pass them by.

They all felt it, or at least the ones that didn’t took note of those around them and followed their lead. They were all wounded here, wounded severely to have ended up in the hospital in these wards, and none were in any state to defend themselves. That was what their instincts told them.

The footsteps stopped at the entrance to their ward and there he stood, all poise and deadly efficiency, cold eyes sweeping across the room. She wasn’t the only one to hastily turn her eyes away. Not even the nurses seemed to dare look at him directly.

Many times he had come to the ward to make checks, or order a patient in for surgery, but there had never been this level of foreboding before. The thing was that he looked just the same now as he ever did, and in usual circumstances she doubted that any of them would have noticed the difference, but with all of them wounded, closer to their instincts brought on by their situations and pain, they all felt that clawing grip of terror.

"I have a free slot for Mr Tanner. Bring him now."

His voice to was much as it ever was, business-like, efficient, but with the feel of the area now, it was too much for Mr Tanner, who started to scream in terror, overcome by the fear, the pain of his wounds, and the delirium of the strong pain medication he was on. The nurses had to pin him down to give him the sedative.

Sitting in her own bed, she was shaking, the voiced terror and struggle only upsetting her more, tears burning her eyes, and she wasn’t ashamed to hide her face a bit behind her knees. She knew it wouldn't save her, nothing would, if he commanded it. That was how it felt.

"One for me?"

The smug, all-too-pleased voice of Dr Chilton from the corridor brought her eyes up and saw the man that had been loitering earlier. So unexpected it was, that a tiny whimper escaped her, though thankfully unheeded as the danger turned his head towards the interloper. Usually they would not have been able to hear voices out there with the general hubbub of the wards, but the place was so silent but for the fading struggles of the other patient, that they could hear everything.

"Wounded animals will often struggle against inevitability. There is nothing for you here."

"He certainly looks deranged to me."

"With such a wealth of free time that you can bother others during their highly demanding schedule, I am surprised you don’t put it to better use and return to your studies so you might be able to adequately tell the difference."
"The best study comes from observation. A pretty drawing within a textbook may reveal all that is needed to operate on flesh, but the mind is infinitely more complex than the body. To solve man's wounded psyche requires talent, not mere rote learning."

"Then may I suggest you return to it. You have no call to be here when you have the Institute's patients as a captive audience for your brand of intellect."

"On the contrary. It's my place to seek out any poor souls who have lost their wits, no matter where they are."

"Alas, the hospital is not in agreement. Unless to collect a particular patient at the request of myself, or a senior member of staff if I am not present, you have no authority to visit this domain. The vote was held on Monday evening by the board. I believe you had been unable to attend due to a prior engagement, but such things happen. Now if you will excuse me, I have a patient to tend to. I believe you can see yourself out."

It was without any attempt at a clever-witted reply that Dr Chilton turned and left the area, his back stiff with irritation and offence at finding himself outmanoeuvred. Turning away from the retreating figure, Dr Lecter turned his attention back towards the tasks at hand.

With the presence of Dr Chilton gone, and the nurses and unconscious patient in the corridor, the foreboding that had previously suffused the area had lifted enough that it seemed little more than general irritation in the chief surgeon. Nothing could be seen that was different about Dr Lecter now, but then nothing had before either. It was easy to start to dismiss the fear as over-reacting and vivid imagination.

"Nurse Pavel"

The voice of the chief surgeon, sharp and commanding. A question in that demand for attention, one that the nurse had clearly been hoping to avoid. She looked up and over to him, and it was easy to see, even at this distance, the bruise now blooming on the side of her face where the flailing arm of the distressed patient had hit.

"He didn't mean it!" the nurse said, her voice holding both pleading and an edge of panic. "It was an accident. He didn't mean it!"

Dr Lecter's gaze is steady on her, dispassionate at her begging.

"I believe you still have to collect the laundered bedding from the washhouse, and tend to the wound dressings in ward B this shift. See to getting those done after you have put a cold compress on that."

She had feared, and likely so did others in the room, that perhaps the patient would not survive the surgery with how the nurse had been acting. Several hours later though, the patient was wheeled back in, and once more the nurses were gushing over how talented the surgeon was.

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She looked out at the street, at the carts and horses, as well as the people walking by. She hadn't understood much back then, especially when the patient was told he would make an almost full recovery. Strangely though, one of his arms seemed to have had some damage, even a couple of weeks after surgery the man had barely the strength to lift it.

It was then that she had understood what the nurses feared, for it could not be chance that had rendered the very arm that had struck the nurse, unusable in the aftermath.
Dr Lecter was both protective and vengeful over what he considered under his sway, and she didn't think that any patients that had watched that dead arm in those days following, made the mistake of thinking it an accident.

What sort of alpha would he make to that omega, she didn't know, but she valued her own life too highly to call foul and risk his courtship chances. Both fear as well as gratitude for her life had kept her thoughts to herself. She just hoped that such vengeance never turned towards the family he sought.

Turning back from the window, she smiled at Rupert, and let him help her back up to bed for a rest. It was quite enough excitement for one day.

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**Samhuinn Festival gathering, Weavers Square Community Hall, London - Saturday 31st October, evening**

The carriage drew up to the community hall, and Dr Lecter stepped down out of it, pausing to pick up the large hamper from within before closing door and walking with it to the community hall beyond.

The night was chill, the street lights doing relatively little to remove the hostility of the night beyond. His breath misted in the air, and he paused at the entranceway, glancing out around the street with an air of a man who was unconcerned, though perhaps curious as to what might move around on a night like tonight.

Soon enough though, the impeccably tailored gentleman that he was opened the door and stepped inside, closing it behind him once more, though it did little to let people forget the chill beyond, for despite the large hearth, the place was cold no matter how many bodies were pressed into this place of commune.

He was not here to see most of them, or indeed many of them at all, but there was one that he was specifically coming to see.

"Dr Lecter, I didn't expect to see you here!"

Alana Bloom was there with two of her alphas, though thankfully not Jack Crawford. However it was the blue eyes of her son that his own gaze flickered to before graciously focusing on her as she came close.

"My dear friend, I would not miss this opportunity. These festivals are core to the turning of the seasons. It is good to do my part to remind people of them, and what better way than to start the memory young?"

He smiled politely, a hint of a genuine smile there beneath the veneer as he let his gaze travel around the room to the many children that this community hall was hosting tonight. Most were from the local orphanages, and all of them poor. The smell of bodies and clothing scrubbed in cheap soap mingling with the tallow candles and mildew from the building was not a bouquet that was particularly pleasant, but something to be endured, much like the poverty these children came from.

Mr Graham had risen from where he had been aiding in setting up and organising some different games to keep the children occupied, to come and greet him. The man, he noted, was as uncomfortable around children as he was with adults, perhaps more so as they tended not to adhere to the societal norms that might otherwise have limited contact.
Mr Graham was wearing a modest sort of attire tonight, more form-fitting than the suit he had worn at the Lecture Hall, but far less flashy than those at the ball. He doubted that it was the sort of thing he wore at rest when at home, and so perhaps this was, in a way, a sort of armour against too much familiarity with the children, whose enthusiasm for an evening spent playing games while staying up late was considerable. At least two of them, he could scent, were Alana’s, likely having been brought to help integrate different classes. If that had been the intention, it seemed largely to be failing due to the spoiled behaviour he was witness to, out of the corner of his eye.

"I didn't know you celebrated Samhuinn. Was it very different in your family home?"

A curiosity from Mr Graham in the question, but also perhaps a tell of just how much of a reprieve he viewed Hannibal as compared to the curious questions and touches from the varied youngsters all around. Even children knew mostly to leave adults alone when they were conversing. Still, he would take such contact like the pleasure it was.

"Somewhat different. The family estate is far from the nearest town, but amongst those nearby we gathered together for feasting and festivities, as well as putting in place things to ease the passing of those spirits caught at such a time."

"I wouldn't have taken you for a superstitious man, Dr Lecter."

"Where I come from it isn't considered superstitious, merely a way of life like the turning of the seasons. We would always take care to honour such liminal times."

Alana looked over as he opened one side of the large basket he had brought, turning their attention with the action. It was proven fruitful for her charmed laughter filled the air.

"And you do so by the use of sweet confections? Those look amazing!"

Hannibal smiled and started to lift out the candied apples on sticks for the children who were now eagerly gathering around at the first hint of treats.

"Thank you," he said with a small amount of pride, "We were given these sometimes when I was younger, and it has always been a favourite of my sister, Mischa, so I thought to make them for those here tonight, to offer such small delights to others."

He was careful to have made more than enough to go around, despite the veritable sea of children at a place like this. It was an unusual treat, and especially with sugar being vastly expensive, so it was doubtful that the children here would ever have seen its like before, especially because it was quite difficult to make correctly.

"Winter can be harsh," he said as he turned to the children, handing them out, one for each, "At the time when mild weather and plenty is waning, a small joy for each of you to share and remember with those who might do without."

He could see in the eyes of some of the children that they were no stranger to harsh winters and the loss of friends to it. Children like these were far closer, far more aware, of the passing seasons than those from the elite were. He didn't doubt that at least some of these sweet apples would be kept hidden away to be shared with those who were not here tonight. Coming from the poorest sections of society, some of these children, or those they knew, would likely not make it through the winter, but that was the way of things. In a reminder of the ability to share, it might make them more likely to recall this and do something about it in the months to come.

Sometimes even the smallest of actions could change the length of a life, after all.
"I have some extra waxed paper here, if any of you wish to keep them for later."

Setting the squares of paper down to be taken or not, he would turn back to William and Alana, retrieving out a smaller box of sweets to share around the adults here this evening, each one carefully wrapped so they might be easily carried home in small bundles.

"For the adults here tonight, something a little more delicate, but hopefully no less pleasantly received."

Alana laughed, taking the box to hand them out. "You know very well everyone will be delighted. You spoil us, truly."

"Then I will make no pretence to do otherwise," he said, his eyes glittering with amusement, turning to lift the other side of the basket lid, bringing out a large carved turnip.

He had, of course, carved it himself and was gratified by the delight that Alana offered at the item. Turnip wasn't particularly easy to carve, being a harsh vegetable to cut, but the time spent doing so would only heighten it's effectiveness, or that was the theory. Alana was not the only one to delight in it.

"Is that to scare away the ghosts, Mr?"

Although it was rude of the youngster to interrupt, and without his title, which had already been given, he allowed it, having banked on such interruptions to relay things he wished.

"Indeed no. Although many believe this to be the case," he said, his tone obviously one that was to start a story, letting the youngsters gather around, many already having a sticky face from the toffee apples.

He put the lantern down on the table and carefully lit the candle, setting it inside before closing the lid, his attentive audience around him with their sugar sweet apples. "All through the year, during the planting and growing, of the warm summer and the plenty of the harvest, the winter court has lain dormant, waiting. It is on this night that they rise up from their slumber, their power strong, to battle the summer court for supremacy. It is during this battle that it is said that their power draws with it the spirits from their land, and those who had died during these chill times long past."

He turned the turnip around, and the full glory of his creation came to life, with the face carved not only all the way through to the light, as was more common, but also carved to glow more softly in other places as well in a way that gave the image depth. Overall it created a variety of gasps and squeals from scared and delighted youngsters.

"They follow the winter court, whose chill grasp drew them like a cloak in their travel, but the hunt is fast, and some spirits can become confused and get lost. Have you ever become lost and confused? It is easy to become scared or angry, and it is the same for the spirits. But if the lanterns are there, carved with the faces of light, scary as the hunt can be, they know that they can rest there, in the light and warmth until the night passes into day, and they will be drawn back to where they need to be once more. Spirits, you see, they like candles and scents, it is why so many altars for the dead hold candles, scented oils or incense. Now, which one of you would like to carefully put this at one of the windows, so that any lost spirits can find it, and be happy for the rest of the evening?"

He let one of the children pick it up carefully, so carefully. He liked that they were careful, even reverent over it. As they should be, in his opinion.

Pleased by this, he turned back to his companions, only to find that Alana had slipped off, though
she gave him an almost indulgent look from where she stood, helping to give out the confections to some of the others in the place, and it was Mr Graham alone that stayed to answer his gaze.

"It seems a shame that it will only last a day or two," William said, "The amount of effort you clearly put into it is considerable."

"Ah, but that is the point, is it not? Winter is not a time where bounty can be sustained. Nights like this are a reminder that the time of plenty is at an end, and what pleasures we have are self-made and fleeting. More effort and less reward, in some ways. Yet for all that, or perhaps because of it, it is the winter months, rather than summer, that sing to me."

"You like the challenge of it."

"Just so. Though for all winter's nature, I don't believe you will find it harsh upon you this year."

Dr Lecter's smile was but a hint on his lips, a knowing and perhaps a slightly indulgent sign, for who, after all but himself would be looking after the man during those times.

Reaching into the hamper one last time, he brought out a bundle tied in kitchen cloth, and offered it to the omega.

“Something for your own windowsill, so your evening will remain peaceful and undisturbed. From the spirits at least.”

He knew his eyes sparkled at least, remembering very well just how bothered Will had been of Jack's interference in the past. He didn't doubt that such a conversation as they were having now would have been greatly shortened should he have turned up at the house, while here, in a public setting and with family alphas that were more tolerant, nothing was impeding his wish. It was gratifying as well that none of the other suitors had thought to take advantage of the event as he had, though the fact that Mr Graham was here was not at all widely known.

“Thank you, that was very thoughtful of you. It isn't a tradition I had ever done before, even as a child. I remember some of the games, and the festival foods the most, but it was usually just like a family party than anything like this.”

“I suspect that the years of our youth were quite different, but there is always time for starting new traditions between us.”

He doubted that it was lost on Mr Graham the fact that he hoped, and indeed intended, on spending the winter solstice celebrations with him, and more besides. The slight flush of colour on his cheeks in response was really quite becoming.

It was interesting that this, rather than previous charm and compliments he had made, had such an effect. He doubted that it was merely the location, for he had now met with the man in several, nor that it was perhaps particular to himself. As Ms. Katz had pointed out, Mr Graham had indeed been alone a long time, and was unlikely to be so quickly turned by easy charm. So perhaps it was the implication of something longer lasting, than merely the present time, that offered such a delightful response.

A slightly flustered Mr Graham was also, he noted, unused to taking such hopeful statements with ease, for it was a small silence before a change of topic that he answered with.

"It was clever of you to find us here tonight," William said, and Hannibal allowed the diversion of topic, aware of his omega's gaze watching as he collected the unused wrappings from the children's apples and put them back into the basket before closing it.
"Not unwelcome I trust?"

Will shook his head, and whether it was from his company alone, or as part of the temporary respite from having to deal with his current surroundings, the answer was still the same. Although Mr Graham was once more not looking at him directly, some of the same focused interest still lingered between them.

"Then I shall remain closed lipped, so as to retain at least a little mystery, that you may be able to indulge my company in future."

He smiled then, overall pleased with the meeting, and of Mr Graham. Still, there was one more aspect of his visit that he needed to accomplish before he allowed himself exit. For all that he was covetous of the omega's presence, he had other things to do tonight, and had no wish to be roped into whatever children's entertainment was in the offing.

"In truth," he said, "there was more that brought me here tonight," he said, deciding upon a more frank honesty than he might usually have considered. "I lately came to own some dogs from a man indebted to me, and was informed that one of them was said to have been owed to you by the previous owner. I wished to reassure you that once the pup is of age, I will of course give you it. Although you would see them on Monday when you come to dinner, I did not wish to leave you worrying over the pup any longer."

The news, such as it was, came as something of a shock, he noted, though he had made no effort to hide his skill in cards, quite the opposite. That it was him who had dealt with the rather presumptuous and rude Mr Hargreaves should not perhaps have been such a surprise, especially considering the man was attempting to court Mr Graham, but perhaps that sort of thing, despite the many years of courtship, was a facet of alpha behaviour that he was largely insulated from by his family.

He could see Mr Graham struggling to realign the information in his mind. Such a task was likely being hindered a bit by the overall stress of being out in public, and so Hannibal merely waited, curious to see what might be made of the information now.

"I am very grateful, Dr Lecter, but you didn't need to go to all this trouble just to bring me the news. You could have come to the house if you wanted to speak to me of it."

"Ah, but then I wouldn't have had the pleasure of your company on Samhuinn night, nor have had such a good opportunity to give you something to mark the season."

He offered this distraction and reminder, drawing the other man's thoughts away from gambling debts and more towards the benefits of his company. Picking up the basket, Hannibal would smile a little, having to be slightly more careful with such an expression, for the satisfaction of a foe defeated was more clearly satisfying when it could be gifted in some way to his omega, and the night already calling for his special brand of viciousness.

"I will wish you the blessings of the season, Mr Graham, and not outstay my welcome."

This seemed to bring the man back to the present more acutely.

"You will not stay longer? You would be most welcome I am sure."

It was a surprise, and vastly pleasing to have his presence be craved in such a way, but this was not a night to be foolhardy. He had not intended to linger, but perhaps, when his company was requested, he should.

"Are you in need of a valorous companion tonight then? I could stay a little longer to fend off the
hoards for you, if you should wish,"

He let his voice be warm and softly teasing, setting the basket back down once more as a sign of his acquiesce.

In truth he had as little liking for spending the evening in such a place, surrounded by children and those that liked them, but for the comfort and affection of Mr Graham he would endure. It would not do to be seen abandoning him to such a fate alone.

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**Bloom Residence, London - Saturday 31st October, evening**

Back home in his room late that evening, Will sat on the edge of his bed and looked at the bundle on the table beside him. He hadn't opened it while at the community hall, as much because he had not wanted to make a mess of retying it as it had wanted to do so here at home, not be rushed or watched as he took it in for the first time.

There were always so many expectations around gifts, and especially when pressurised by being out in society, he could never be sure whether he expressed himself in a way that was acceptable enough when viewing things for the first time. Those moments when you first look at something, and the person watches you, eagerly awaiting your response to the gift they have taken time over to get for you. Too long a pause and it could look like you are unhappy, and any future expression of pleasure then taken as a placation. Or give a smile too fast or too large or small might be seen as fake or lacking. All of which was likely merely because it took him longer to process, longer to decide and feel what it was he actually thought about it, and then react.

So he had held onto it, unopened, which in itself could be seen as a flux pas, because people liked being able to have that feedback. He hoped, at least, that in spending more time with the alpha, rather more than was strictly allowed by society's standards during this stage of courtship since he hadn't yet visited with all of his suitors, that Dr Lecter wouldn't be too disappointed or put out over it.

With careful fingers, he untied the ribbon and drew it away, letting the folds of cloth fall around it, revealing the large turnip inside. It was delicately carved with just as much care as the one for the orphanage had been. A small candle sitting inside it waiting to be lit now that Will got home.

When he turned it around, the face that was carved into it was a bit difficult to make out, for the fact that parts of it were not carved all the way through gave it a strange and disturbing look, though he could make out a general face as well as hints of what could be antlers. He understood now why Dr Lecter had kept the lantern turned away from the children until it was lit, for it almost seemed like glimpsing behind the stage at the opera, the beautiful palaces and walkways showing to just be painted wooden boards and pulleys. The children might have lost a little of the initial awe that they had so clearly shown, at peeking behind the curtains as it were. That Will got to see it now, unlit and be able to appreciate more than just the magic of the glow, it seemed special.

Perhaps Dr Lecter might not have expected him to open his gift before now after all.

Taking a taper, he lit it from the candles beside the bed, and carefully pressed the flame to the small one in the turnip, watching the wick sizzle a moment before it took properly before replacing the lid and extinguishing the taper.

He didn't look at it yet, not until he had blown out the candles that were still lit beside the bed, all but one on the far side. Only then did he turn it around to see the magic of the reveal, and it made his breath catch for a moment at the glowing image.
In that initial moment it was as if the face had come alive, the candle's flickering almost making it seem like tiny movement in its face rather than the intricately carved piece it was. It's face was long and gaunt, with antlers stretching around the sides, curving with deadly points. It almost seemed more bestial and skeletal than anything more humanoid, but there was certainly a smile there, sinister with its sharp teeth.

Yet for all that such an image should be terrifying, he didn't find it so, perhaps because he remembered from earlier how Dr Lecter hadn't intended the faces to be about scaring away the spirits, but by giving them somewhere familiar to rest. Such creatures of the fabled dark court might well be terrifying, and were often told to be so, but would such faces be scary to those who knew them? A face such as this, at rest, it posed no particular threat despite its visage. If anything, the more he looked at it, the more he got the feeling that such a creature as was carved here was offering protection rather than threat.

Was that what his suitor wished to convey with the gift? An alpha could be a protection or a threat depending on the circumstances. Why he had chosen this method of gift, and this image, to convey his thoughts would need to be thought of when he wasn't so exhausted.

On a whim, he took out some paper and a stick of charcoal from the desk and sketched out the shape of the face, then adding a couple of notes in pen at the side so he wouldn't forget. He would think more on it later.

For now, he wiped off his hands and set the lantern in a safe position at the window. His father had died in the summertime, so it was doubtful he would ever be lost here, but it was nice to think, even if it was fantasy, that other spirits might find comfort and rest because of it.

Laying down in bed and pulling up the covers after extinguishing the candle beside the bed, the warm glow of the lantern reflected a little off the glass of the window, the sharp, curving antlers bright in the otherwise dark room.

It would have taken Lecter hours to carve it. He could imagine him sitting with such serene patience, dedicating time and effort into making not only this, but all the other treats he had brought to the hall today.

When he fell asleep that night, it was thoughts of the slender gentleman, the protective gaze of an otherworldly horror, and the memory of sweet delicacies made for enjoyment that filled his thoughts.

Will Graham slept soundly that night, and no nightmares trouble him.

Chapter End Notes

Special thanks go to my beta-reader Anthony who was awesome for getting this done on such horrifically short notice, and to James for helping me with a piece of Chilton's dialogue.

I would also like to post a thank you to @planetstarclaw on tumblr, who recommended this fiction for 'Fresh Meat Friday' with some very kind words.
http://freshmeatfriday.tumblr.com/post/173499658549/fresh-meat-friday-round-up

Just a heads-up for readers that next chapter may end up running slightly over the deadline, as I am running around 2 weeks behind schedule. I will do my utmost to get
the next chapter up on the 18th June, but there may be a slight delay because of this, but also because it is a key scene that I really want to get right. After all, we don't want to mess up Hannibal's dinner, do we?

As always, kudos are greatly appreciated, and comments are at least part of the soul of my motivation, as are your queries. Much love to all my readers.
Fish and Lures

Chapter Notes

A bit later than usual for posting this chapter (more on that in the notes at the end), but it's ended up being about double in length! (15k omg). Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Bloom Residence, London - Monday 2nd November, evening

Will lay out on his bed, his gaze fixed upon the rich canopy above without really seeing it. The bed here was a familiar thing, the deep blue of the fabric had been a favourite in his younger years, a claim of stubborn difference to the pastelle shades his mother favoured, bold in a way he had once wanted to be.

The fabric was a bit faded now, almost two decades later, though certainly not as much as his desire to be bold. He barely remembered his father now, the instigator of his previous confidence, vague faceless snippets of memory, the feel of his arms lifting Will up. Sometimes he even recalled hints of his scent, but only in the drifting wisp-like hints, barely caught before the memory was gone again, a little vaguer than before.

None of Alana's alphas were much like his father had been. He still recalled the bark of his laughter, easily drawn, the warm chuckles and the lines beside his eyes from a history of them. Nathan perhaps came the closest, but he didn't have the strength and aplomb that Will's memories reminded him of. He was glad, in many ways for the difference, especially in Humphrey, who had taken care of them through the subsequent years.

The sheer difference was, perhaps, one of the main reasons Will had managed to adapt to a life without his father. While Alana had bonded with more alphas to fill the gaping wound of the man's absence, Will only had the bond with her, especially at first. He liked to think that he had managed to form family ties with them, but it had never been the same for him as the parental bond that had been lost.

As it should be, of course. It made sense that a child would form bonds with their biological parents, there was plenty of evidence for it. There was less evidence for what to do if that bond was severed.

He wondered what his father would have thought of him as he grew. What he would think of him now. It was odd to consider that Will himself was now older than his father had been when he was killed.

Jack, who reminded him the least of his father, did echo his strength the most, he thought. That certain type of push that the aura had, but without the warmth of regard his father had held for him. Sometimes he wondered how much alike they really were, and if the biological bond might have, over time, ended up more like Jack was with him, detached and frustrated.

He reached over beside him and picked up the newspaper laying there. No need to open it, as he held it up against the backdrop of the faded blue, to look again at the article on the front page.

Murder: Darling of society and stage, Gloria Summerville, murdered.
He had read the article, such as it was, hoping to get something more from the story of her glowing life and career that his view of the murder had not. Looking at it now gave him just as much as it had the last time, which was to say, nothing. It was infuriating, because this murder had been different, not the least because this article was not just in Tattlecrime, but in all of the broadsheets. Gloria Summerville was one of the very prominent and publicly known of the upper classes. A public speaker, actress, well loved socialite, and, to add to the public's distress, an omega.

Much was being made of it, and the public fear and outcry was considerable. It was not at all pleasant, especially considering the excessive pressure Jack and his team were now under to solve the case and bring the perpetrator to justice. Already two of Gloria's three alphas had killed themselves out of grief and the horrific amount of guilt of not having protected her. It had only muddied the waters of information further, for they could not be questioned again. Some even blamed them, not for failing to protect, but of the actual murder, no matter how vastly unlikely that was.

It was all a bit of a chaotic mess, but one that had left his own time largely untroubled. Usually Jack would have been hounding him for more answers, to seek deeper, to view this or that for more, or any, insight. But the sheer fact that there was considerably more pressure, had had the opposite effect, for the public outcry meant more, or indeed all of the investigating police were on this case now, leaving little time or opportunity for Jack to get him to look at things. It was just too great a risk to bring him, with all the scrutiny, in case of a scandal if he was seen. Jack had managed to get him a very quick look at the victim in the early hours of yesterday morning, but nothing since then.

There was a certain amount of guilt there, not for the lack of access, but at the sheer relief of not having that worry, that edge constantly digging in, like shards of glass rubbing whenever he saw or heard the man, waiting for the moment Jack's demands gripped him, driving the shards deeper.

He took one last look at the newspaper before setting it aside once more. For all the public outcry and dismay, he was far less troubled by the death. He supposed that it said a great deal about himself that he was largely unmoved by it, but he had seen worse, so much worse, over the years. That was, in a way, what got to him. It wasn't that she was a public figure or an omega, people died all the time no matter their sub-gender or class, it was the fact that she had not suffered.

Gloria Summerville's death, contrary to almost every other death by the Ripper Artist, had been swift, instantaneous even, her neck snapped. There had been no tell-tale scent of fear lingering on her skin, only the leftover scent of the party she had been attending, and the mead that had been over her lips. Usually the Ripper liked to draw out the victim's deaths, but all the presentation there had been done afterwards. Was it because she had been famous? Was the Ripper an admirer of her? There had been an omega as one of the victims last year, but nothing like this. That one had screamed for hours.

In truth, it was only the presentation itself, along with the symbolism and meticulous planning that made it a Ripper murder at all. Jack hadn't been readily convinced when the a lack of torture had been known, but he couldn't deny the level of artistry that proved it.

They had thought first that it had been a copycat killing, which was, perhaps, the only reason he had gained access to the body that first day. That and the fact that those that had found her hadn't known who she was. Jack hadn't twigged, but Zeller had recognised her, and from then it was a rush to get Will away from the scene before the rest of the police and public alike caught wind of it.

It had been the Ripper though. He could still feel that residual calm detachment when he thought of the tableaux he had witnessed.

She had been lain out on a patch of ground surrounded by trees, her limbs pinned down in the crook of branches driven into the earth. The dress over her stomach was torn and bloody, and it was clear
from a glance that her torso had been stripped of its innards.

This hadn't been about the horror though, nor fear and distress. She hadn't been alive when that had happened, and the blood on the dress, much like the tears in it, had been purposeful. It was made to look like wild animals had done it. It was about hunger. Considering that she had been killed on the turning between seasons, the night that folklore said the court of winter took power, it wasn't difficult to judge what that hunger was to satisfy. Lean months were ahead for many, animals included. Winter affected all walks of life.

Perhaps that was all it was, the reasons he had been chosen, not just any person, but an omega of prominence, to show that the bitter seasons could affect anyone.

Will didn't doubt though, that there was a large element of showing off here. Look, the choice said, none of you are safe, not even the most coveted jewels of society.

They still didn’t know what it meant, or how it fitted into the narrative of the three kills. Zeller thought something about the forest theme seemed familiar from an old folktale he had heard growing up, but they had yet to find the source. There had been much made about her name as well, considering the lore of that particular evening, of Summer being defeated by Winter. Was she chosen specifically because of her name? It might have been a deciding factor, perhaps, though nothing about Ripper kills were simple.

And yet, for all that, no matter the death and the blood, both things that he had become somewhat numbed to over the years, it had been beautiful. She had lain there like a fallen summer bloom, her large dress spread out around her, her long hair entwined with leaves and berries of the milder months. All around her lay scattered foliage, oranges, reds, and browns of autumn, as if her mere presence had kept winter at bay.

It was always about winter, the kills from the Ripper on the 31st of October, but this year there was a sense of honouring the dead, the sacrifice of this woman, and that was new. The Ripped never honoured anything but their own desires and intent, and the change was tantalising in its ambiguity.

What had changed?

He lay there for a time, but without further evidence, he just didn't know. The police were looking into the possibility that it had been someone wishing to join her family, an alpha or beta, and had perhaps been rejected, but it seemed so out of character for the Ripper to make such an emotional mistake, that Will doubted they would have much success.

With a sigh, he forced himself up and off the bed, a quick check ensuring himself that his trousers were not unduly creased, before he drew on the waistcoat that waited him, something to hide any on the back of his shirt. Fancy clothing did have some practical uses after all.

Cufflinks were already in place, and he checked his hair, combing it to tease out any flatness at the back from his languishing on the bed. His suit jacket then, a light grey blue that was one of the more traditionally omegan in hue, being far brighter than he would have chosen himself. His mother had decided on his suit tonight, so the choice didn't really surprise him.

With one last look in the mirror, he ignored his shaking hands, and turned away. He could hear her voice downstairs in the hall, so it was time to go.

It would be fine, he reminded himself. It wasn't like Dr Lecter would be a poor host. He couldn't imagine a world where that would be the case, and he was curious. He was just aware, pointedly, of the lack of scent-blockers he now wore, much as he was any time he did these visits. He was sure the
man would be fine around him, and well-mannered. There was nothing inherent to worry about.

That didn't stop the prickling of sweat touching his spine though. Formal dinners with someone effortlessly accomplished in them wasn't his idea of a calm night in though.

With a sigh, he walked across the room and headed downstairs. The sooner they got moving, the sooner he would have something other than murder to distract him.

This was, it seemed, the rather strange way that his life had taken him.

Lecter Residence, London - Monday 2nd November, evening

As the carriage drew up to the house and Will stepped out, it was the first time he had seen the building, and although it was mostly dark now, the glow from the lanterns that were set out to light their way, gave enough hint of the exterior to show a large town-house with graceful stonework and well-tended windows. Although it wasn't nearly as large as their own residence, the fact that it sat in one of the city's more affluent areas, as well as had its own large garden and carriage turning circle, said clearly enough of it's owner's status.

They were not left waiting in the cold either, as before they had even made it towards the door, it was opened, offering light and warmth as a welcome, along with their host who gladly ushered them inside. Even Jack could not bemoan the reception, despite having been in a particularly testy mood lately. He would much rather have spent the night going over the case for work, but clearly hadn't trusted that the combination of Alana's friendship and Dr Lecter's charm would not sway Will from Jack's own choice of Lieutenant Anderson, so had come along to run interference. It certainly wasn't helping Will's nerves, worrying about what he might say, but there was little he could do about things either way.

As they entered, he offered Dr Lecter a brief smile then allowed the bustle of the four of them to distract their host after they were each welcomed, Alana's happy and enthusiastic greetings filtering to the back of his mind while he tried to calm his nerves some more.

He let his eyes drop to the base of a side table as he undid the buttons on his outdoor coat, carefully drawing in the scents of the house to try and focus his mind and ground himself. Underneath that of his own family, with Price there beside him, there was the scent of the servant seeing to gathering their coats. Beeswax from polishing, not just the wooden table nearby, but the doors and wooden floor as well. It wasn't a particularly subtle scent, but it was pleasing. The mellow smell of the candles burning on the side tables, as well as from the light above. Hints of cooking deeper in the house, as well as tea closer by, and then the somewhat familiar scent of clean dogs.

At this, his gaze rose as he drew off his coat, Price taking it in hand to give to the servant. Dr Lecter's gaze flickered to Will, and there was an appreciation there in the slight crinkling at the corners of his eyes as he viewed what Will was wearing. Perhaps it was because the tie the alpha had chosen to wear himself was uncannily of the same hue as Will's suit.

Alana was oblivious to the look Will gave her in suspicion, since it had been her choice to wear this suit, for she was still chatting with their host as they all made their way through to the sitting room. Jack too, was making an effort to engage Dr Lecter, and he could see that not all of it was to do with keeping Will at a distance from his suitor, the more masculine hues and luxury in the building weaving its own spell on the alpha's good opinion.

The room that they entered was much the same in feel, for although the majority of it was done in light dusty blues and greys, these were punctuated by flashes of navy blue and maroon that kept the
room feeling not only masculine, but one owned by an alpha. No matter how comfortable the chairs, this was a room intricately designed to highlight the strength and power of the one who owned it, everything from the rich oriental rugs to the undoubtedly expensive paintings and ornaments.

Yet for all that, it was clear to Will that the man had made an effort to soften the impact of it here tonight. The placement of the candlesticks was such that it added warmth and light to the seating areas, but not too many to highlight the dominant flashes of wealth around the rest of it. The rug that lay between the seating to, he didn't think typically lived there, for although it was clearly freshly beaten of household dust, he couldn't detect the subtle scents of the visitors from it as he moved over, something that the chairs still retained. It was a richer hue, still fitting with the decor, but adding a more relaxed feel than one of another colour might have given.

What really showed the difference though was the large wolfhound lying stretched out in front of the fire.

Will didn't doubt that most guests wouldn't be greeted, or wish to be greeted by the dog, vast in size as it was, but Dr Lecter knew better in his case.

"Dinner will be served shortly," the cultured voice said, bringing him out of his thoughts briefly. "I need to tend to the last few things. Please allow Mr Hunt to serve you drinks in my absence. Mr Graham," a pause then, as their host ensured the subject of his attention was looking his way, "I believe you have already met Beatrice. There is a blanket beside your chair to save your suit from any stray dog hairs."

The smile that was given to him by the Dr was a satisfied one as he excused himself to see to the dinner. It was unusual for a host to do so, but Will didn't mind, not when it offered him more time to gather himself as well as indulge in the company of the docile hound.

It was Price that spoke with the servant to get a drink for him, being a far more friendly sort to betas than Will managed, or Jack, who was prowling the room looking at things, contrary to etiquette.

Will set aside the glass of lemon water he was given, after a sip, and sought out the blanket. It was a thoughtful gesture, but then Dr Lecter did appear to be the sort to be effortlessly organized. It did not surprise him therefore that the blanket matched the decor of the room perfectly.

Beatrice, who had been watching from her place at the fire, moved when the blanket was settled over his legs, seemingly having been waiting for it, pushing her face into his hand for petting.

"She really is quite large, isn't she?" Alana's question, though he didn't look over, too busy trying to bury his troubles in wiry fur. "Very well trained and docile though. I can see why you were so enamoured of them."

He was just about to answer when the snort came from across the room from Jack.

"As big as a small horse. It'll hardly fit in the stables with the rest. You should just let him keep the pup and get one of a smaller breed if you want another dog so much."

Will stiffened at the words, but kept his gaze on the grey fur and not the members of his family. It wasn't like Will was surprised that Jack would dislike yet another dog in the house, if for no other reason that it hadn't been a gift from Lieutenant Anderson. It was the fact that his words were thoughtlessly indicative of Will's continuing place at the family estate after his heat. For all that he knew such a thing was most likely, and he himself always made plans to take that into account, it was something else entirely to have the fact reminded to him, and for it to be done in the house of one of his suitors.
Thankfully he was saved from having to make a reply by the fortuitous return of their host.

"I apologize for having kept you waiting. Ah, Mr Crawford, I see you have noticed my statue of consul Marcus Claudius Marcellus. It used to sit in my uncle’s study when I was younger, then gifted to me when I came of age."

"I’m not familiar with the name," Jack was forced to admit, though the point was not lingered upon, but remedied by the answer.

"He was a five times elected consul of the Roman Republic," Dr Lecter said, "most noted for his military career including his defeat of the Gallic King Viridomarus in single combat, as well as his capture of the fortified city of Syracuse. More important though in this case is that he was the first person who had checked my namesake in battle, and continued to do so during his career."

Jack frowned, looking over to the other alpha, not understanding. For all that he had made his career in the police, and specifically the finding the perpetrators of crimes, some subtleties bypassed him completely.

"That seems a bit of an odd thing to have, or is it a cautionary tale?"

Dr Lecter smiled, light and unassuming. He did not focus on, or belabour the point, making it seem more akin to a pleasure to explain more, than a hardship to be endured.

"Not at all. Although he was killed in the end, I was always taught to respect worthy adversaries, much as my namesake did. After his death, he gave the man a proper funeral and returned the ashes of Marcellus to his son in a silver urn in a golden wreath. The Romans, in turn built statues to Hannibal after his death, as a worthy, if feared, adversary. I find keeping it here is a useful reminder of the benefits of challenge when someone particularly vexes me."

Jack chuckled, though Will suspected it was less about the joke, and more to do with the thought of something bothering Dr Lecter, whose courtship bid stood against his own nominee. Jack was not a subtle man in his pleasures, and Will was just glad he was left out of the conversation for now.

On the surface it might have seemed rude that Dr Lecter focused on Jack alone, but in truth the opposite was the case. Will wasn't the only one who was aware of what the man was doing, distracting and charming the other alpha, drawing him into conversation on topics that Jack knew enough about to leave him feeling knowledgeable and placated. Alana's eyes watched while she sipped her drink, warmly amused by her friend, and while Price perhaps didn't get the nuance of the situation, he was happier for having the more volatile member of their party being taken care of by someone else.

Will contented himself with stroking the dog, and as time passed, a lot of the gathered tenseness started to ease off with the lack of necessary input from his direction.

That was not to say that their host was neglecting them. Dr Lecter was using small movements when showing Jack something, or when the man looked away, to also keep track on the relative contentedness of his other guests.

Eventually though, talk was turned towards dinner, and Will was surprised to find himself quite comfortable there, so much so that the thought of moving was not necessarily one of pleased escape. As he shifted himself, as well as Beatrice in order to get up, he had to consider that perhaps the extra delay had not been about Jack after all, but about offering him some time and space away from the family alpha to calm his nerves. Embarrassing as that was, he couldn't fault the man for its effectiveness.
It was while he was folding the blanket to set it back beside the seat once more, feeling a little bit exposed after the comfort that it had offered, that he started to realize more fully just how greatly he had been preempted.

He hadn't given very much thought for what seat he had chosen to sit on, but it had been one that the blanket had been set beside, unseen until needed. That seat was one of the ones nearer the fire, after the cold of the evening air, and one nearer the dog. Needing or wanting the comfort of the animal, he had chosen the seat closest to Beatrice's head, rather than on the other side, hoping that if she wouldn’t be interested enough to get up and come to him, she might at least tolerate him leaning down to stroke her. So he had sat there, in a seat whose position was slightly less in the spotlight of lamps than the others, one that had, he now noted, a couple of extra cushions for comfort than the rest.

He understood, now that he was calm enough to take it in, that Dr Lecter had crafted a seating nest to help put him at ease, equipped with warmth, comfort and a large protector between him and the rest of the room.

A glance up to the man saw the slight smile touch the edges of those eyes, an acknowledgement at his understanding. Yes, Dr Lecter had bought his comfort with strategic furniture placement and forethought.

As they moved towards the dining room, Will excused himself briefly to wash his hands before dinner, so the scent of dog didn't follow him too obviously into the dining room.

He couldn't help the slight flush that heated his face in the solitude of the small chamber, at the knowledge and intent behind Dr Lecter's actions so far. No matter that the man had yet to speak to him more directly tonight, he had made his position very clear on the matter, to Will at least.

Jack, he knew, was largely oblivious.

Entering the dining room, another surprise awaited him when, for it was not set for a formal dinner that he had anticipated with some trepidation, but instead the table was of a more intimate and informal setting.

"It will just be us five at the table," Dr Lecter was telling them as they moved inside, "as none of my servants would be comfortable dining with guests."

Perhaps that alone was the reason, for it would be impossible to pair people off for private conversation, although proximity alone would have ensured that, as the dinner at Mr Layton's house had proven. Still, as Will made his way around the table to where his setting was announced by the small beautifully handwritten card with his name, he thought perhaps that, much like the arrangement in the sitting room, that this was more likely to cater to his comfort.

It wasn't long after they had seated themselves that the soup course was brought through by two beta servants, both men. One was a rather stoic sort of fellow whose demeanor made it likely that he was the head of the servants, while the other was a younger man with short cut brown hair and slightly wide eyes of someone who was taking in all he could of the differences in the room. Not quite as well-trained in terms of a servant, the younger one, but nothing to be particularly critical about either since his behaviour was just as precise as could be wished for.

The soup was served in expensive but understated white porcelain bowls that had a raised band of gold around the outer edge. He wondered if this simplicity, compared to the more usual decorations that tended to flow with abundance around soup bowls, was a sign of the Dr’s more practical tastes, or if he merely disliked more flowery decorations.
As Dr Lecter encouraged them to start, while the servants retreated, Will found that it was a mild fish soup with small hints of garlic, ginger and lemon that was as pleasing as it was warming. There wasn’t too much of it either, for which, despite it’s pleasant taste, he was grateful for, considering the nervous state of his stomach.

Dr Lecter proved himself to be a charming host, guiding and encouraging the conversation with a light touch that had them talking about the family, Alana extolling the virtues of various family members, Jack preening over the family’s estates, and Price recounting a mildly amusing story about a trip with the children. Will was content to let them talk, their host not pressing him to do so, while Jack was certainly not above giving his own input when it might seem like any sort of conversation might spark between him and Dr Lecter. He would have time to talk to him later, and was rather relieved that he was not being pressed to contribute much.

It was when he got to the end of his soup that he noticed that there was something painted at the bottom of the bowl. A light laugh from Alana across the table showed that she had finished her soup earlier than he, and seen it in her own. Once he had finished the last two spoonfuls, he could make out the beautifully painted fish that sat to the side of the base of the bowl. It was a playful sort of thing, and he had to once more re-evaluate what he knew of Dr Lecter, for playful had not been high on such a list of traits he had noticed.

A glance over to his host saw the open pleasure the man exhibited, and though he was answering Alana, telling her about how he had found the dishes when travelling in France, Will knew from how he had angled himself that at least part of the man’s attention was on his own reaction.

He found he was amused by the delicately painted fish, and perhaps hopeful for a more casually-minded man than had been seen this far. Hannibal Lecter had shown himself to be meticulous, thoughtful and now, perhaps, also humourous in his own way. It was more than he had thought he might learn tonight, certainly.

He had to consider though, that with all this planning and careful manipulation of events, he could merely be seeing what the man wanted him to see. Probably was, in fact. The question would be, whether he could see what his host was not actively promoting. Beverly had not found anything much of note yet in her investigations of the man, other than a dedication to organisation and standards in his work that seemed only to aid in it. It was highly possible, guessing such a probe into his work life was inevitable, that such a show of humour in the choice of dishes was a way of counteracting any concerns over his relative seriousness or rigid characteristics.

All of which might be overthinking the soup a tad much, on either or both of their parts. The soup, either way, was delicious.

When they were finished and the soup dishes were taken away, Will hadn’t been sure what to expect from the main course. Through stories from Alana, carefully extracted in the preceding days, were often that the alpha loved to impress with his meals, and often prepared a great wealth of variety to satisfy and impress those guests, that was fairly vague, especially when the table was informally set.

The soup, while delicious, had been relatively simple, and he had to think that the main course would likely be something far more extravagant to show the man’s skill in presentation, something he had seen in the beautifully carved turnip he had been given at Samhuinn.

He worried about the potential for a very rich tasting course, as his stomach wasn’t feeling particularly settled despite the relative calm of the evening so far, but as the plates were placed in front of each person, he was once more left surprised and gratified by what was on offer.

The plate that was set down held, not some vastly fancy offering, or not on the surface, but one that
was of a less ornate fare, though one that was presented beautifully. A piece of salmon on a bed of vegetables had been cut into the shape of a smaller fish, suitable for each person in size, and covered with thin, delicate slices of potato to look like scales, and baked to golden perfection. There were two miniature terrines on the side, with some dark sauce, likely offering a counterpoint to the lighter tasting fare.

As they all sat to eat, the table was dutifully quiet to take in the first bites of the meal, and it certainly didn’t disappoint. He hadn’t had fish like this for years. Something like this could be a fiddly dish to prepare, and often the family had opted more for meat roasts now that they were in town. That Dr Lecter had managed to get fresh salmon in the city, and at this time of year, was impressive. Nearly as impressive as how amazing it tasted. The potato scales were crispy around the edges from baking and the salmon was moist and perfectly cooked.

It warmed him, such homely fare compared to what else might have been offered, and indeed, had been offered at other houses. It made him wonder, as he ever did, what had prompted the man to choose this.

His gaze was thoughtful as he took in his host, and those knowing, pleased eyes turned towards him as finished the mouthful, awaiting for his response to the taste. In this at least, Dr Lecter was as predictable as others, in seeking affirmation and compliment to what he had provided, though that was not a detriment. Any thoughts he did have, however, were left to linger a while longer as Alana interjected with bright enthusiasm.

"Oh, Hannibal! What a delightful spread, and so different to what I thought you might prepare! You always seem to know how to surprise with your dinners."

"A seven course meal or huge spread would not have been fitting for an intimate dinner such as this. Part of the challenge is to find something both fitting and interesting to offer guests at the table."

Dr Lecter’s face was amused as he replied, taking up a small amount of a terrine and eating it while she smiled and shook her head.

"Your pride and skill are on show in this glorious meal, Hannibal. And when else but now is it as socially acceptable as during courting?"

Will couldn’t help but let his gaze flicker from Alana across the table to Jack, not only to see how he was reacting towards the comment about the cooking, but also the very fact that Alana’s tone was exceedingly friendly. Too friendly? Jack, it seemed, had noted it too, and was now fast returning to a more thunderous countenance at the way Alana was even now leaning towards Dr Lecter, as if it was she, and not Will, whom he was courting.

He didn’t think she was doing it on purpose, but she was too used to being around alphas in a certain way, and it had never hindered her in life.

It made him uneasy though, as uneasy as it clearly did with Jack, who could say and do little right now, silenced in many ways by the very same etiquette that had allowed him to gain her attention himself those few years ago.

Letting his gaze turn to their host, it seemed as if Dr Lecter, as far as he could tell from the polite demure over the compliments, was not actively seeking her attention, for his demeanor seemed no more warm than it did to anyone else at the table, which was a relief.

Will forced himself to speak, as much about not allowing himself to fade into the background at his own courting, as it was to promote the peace at home when the inevitable fallout of Jack’s mood
"This is really lovely," he said once he had finished the small amount he had eaten, small enough to be polite and not over-fill his mouth, something he had grown up learning under the watchful eye of Humphrey. "I hadn't had baked salmon like this for years. What made you choose it?"

Dr Lecter's smile was pleased, hints of indulgence around the edges of it as he returned his gaze back to Will.

"I cannot claim all credit, for your own Mrs Platts was kind enough to offer the suggestion."

Despite his words, it was clear he was happy enough to take as much acclaim as he could, and indeed, even that dispensation towards Mrs Platts was more a way to discount it and take the majority of the acclaim for himself, not that it wasn't justified of course.

The information though, that was a surprise. Not only that he had he approached their cook, but he had actually been successful in the attempt. It was something he would have to ask her about later, but as the full impact of the effort the man had gone to for this meal was making itself known, there was a deep sense of satisfaction there, more even than he might have credited it.

"I am surprised Mrs Platts didn't suggest a more challenging dish to impress us. She tends towards the theatrical sometimes."

"That was perhaps my own doing, for I did not ask for what dish to make to impress you, but one that would make you happy."

There was meaningful pause, brief as it was to go largely unnoticed by others, but encouraged that feeling of being indulged and pampered, like all the preparations and effort that had gone into the night were not only a hint of what he might expect with such a partnership, but also that this was his due.

"What do you think of the terrine?" Dr Lecter asked after that pause, the words mild and interested, though his gaze was more fixated on his response. It was substantial and intense as it had not been with Alana, watching as he ate a piece of the rich meat on offer.

He found that he craved the look, the knowledge of the lengths that the alpha had gone to, not only to select the cuts of meat, and choose the recipe, but to actually cook them himself, perfectly, to feed Will only the best. It was a heady feeling, and despite having been courting for a great number of years, something that he most often never felt he wanted or deserved, he was affected by it here and now. It was hard to question that look, so sure it was, and heat rose up his neck once more.

"It's surprisingly pleasant. I don't usually enjoy gamey meat, but this is lovely."

"I am glad to be able to broaden your horizons."

Dr Lecter's gaze was warm and satisfied as he took in Will's flushed state, evidently pleased with such an outcome. Will wondered, as he took another small piece and dipped it into the sauce, whether the alpha was mostly inured to the instinctual satisfaction of providing, considering how he was reputed for hosting large dinners, or whether he might be surprised, under the well cultivated exterior, how providing for an omega affected him. He had not, to Will's knowledge, courted before.

Would he have felt it when hosting a dinner with Alana? The question alone left him a little uneasy, not knowing the answer.

Jack, evidently having temporarily silenced his conflicted emotions over Alana to allow Dr Lecter to
engage Will’s attentions, interjected, having clearly decided that now was the time to put a stop to the pair’s meaningful looks.

"What is it that I am about to put in my mouth?"

"Venison and mushroom terrines, with bilberry sauce. A small taste of the forest, to accompany the fish."

"Did you hunt them yourself?"

Although the question was posed in a light, even interested manner, the true meaning of it was there just as clear as the pristine glasses sitting on the table. The condemnation that Dr Lecter had likely not procured the meat himself, and making him admit that. It was underhanded, but not outside the realms of general alpha posturing in society.

"No, I saw that acquaintances of mine supplied the fare on your plate tonight. Hunting animals with a gun is not a hobby of mine."

"And cooking is?"

It seemed as if Jack had not forgotten the knowledge that their host had cooked the meal himself. Will wasn’t exactly pleased by this round of questioning, though he couldn’t say he was surprised. He watched as the two alphas locked gazes across the table, but made no effort to lessen such a question. If Dr Lecter couldn’t deal with Jack now, in a subject that was not exactly surprising to have been brought up, then he doubted he would feel that comfortable with him later on, knowing that Jack would still hold the upper hand.

Instead, he merely watched and listened, eating a little more of the fish in silence, letting his general contentment be answer that the subject didn’t bother him significantly, though how Dr Lecter answered might well do.

It was not their host whose voice interjected though, but Alana’s once more, her tone filled with amused frustration.

"Jack, don’t be such a traditionalist. Just because you brought back a stag for my courtship meal like the delightful neanderthal you are, doesn’t mean everyone should."

Will suddenly found his mouth dry, and beside him Price shifted slightly uneasily in his chair. It wasn’t so much that she had defended Dr Lecter when there should be no need, but that she was doing it in the same way that she would any other household disagreement, and with the same familiarity, as if both alphas were hers.

"In many ways you could say that cooking is highly traditional in courtship, in it’s own way, Mr Crawford," Dr Lecter said, interjecting, "After all, there are many stories like that of Bellath, son of the deity Imu, who carved the finest cuts of meat and cooked it himself over the winter fire to feed to his mate. I would do no less for Mr Graham, had I such a fire. As it is, my kitchen stove shall have to suffice."

"It has served you well," Price replied, the first significant thing he had said to their host since arriving. "I hadn’t had baked salmon since that trip to Largs about ten years ago when we went to visit my brother, do you remember?"

That Price then turned to Will at this, as much looking for backup in this rather risky endeavour to limit Jack’s displeasure as anything, forced him to speak.
"I remember. The weather had been particularly bad, but he had still managed to land a salmon for
the table, despite being soaked through for hours."

"Your brother enjoys fishing then, Mr Price?"

It was a relief that the conversation was mutually agreed to be turned towards such things, and Will
took a small sip from his glass to try and settle his nerves again as the talk flowed onwards around
them, Dr Lecter’s clever mind easing the dissonance from the room.

Each topic was light, and took the individuals around the table’s interests in mind. There was talk of
the family betas and children, of fishing and travel, and of the various events that Alana had been to.
There was even, briefly at least, mention of Will’s own work, though the subject was not lingered
on, for which he was glad. He expected that Dr Lecter knew that, and had mentioned it only to
ensure he was included, before allowing him to slip back into comfortable silence once more.

He found, much to his own surprise, that having such subtle manipulations and focused intellect
placed upon the task of ensuring his comfort and ease was flattering.

It wasn't so much that the effort was made, for he was used to various alphas' behaviour by now, but
the depth of thought and planning that had not only gone into the evening so far, the ones that were
largely unnoticed by others, unlauded by anyone but by himself, that left him deeply gratified. This
was not an alpha seeking constant visible recompense or adoration for all his actions.

Will hadn't been aware, before now, just how much of a burden such constant strains were, until they
were suddenly gone. How had he failed to understand before now just how much of an annoyance it
was for him when alphas were so very obvious about their solicitude, one that drew attention not
only to themselves to show how very good they were being, but also to the fact that Will might
actually need help. Will hated needing help, and the fact that Hannibal Lecter was doing what he
could to remove those burdens from Will without laying claim or attention to it, it was a gift that Will
had not even known he had been seeking.

He sat back in his chair a little more, letting that gift ease some more of the tension from him now he
understood what their host was doing. It was like a carefully choreographed dance of words and
actions, and now that he wasn't having to pay quite as much attention to what conversation he might
be drawn into, for Hannibal was shielding him from that, he could start to appreciate more just how
adept the man was at this.

It was beautiful, in it's own way.

The meal continued as a leisurely affair, but eventually their plates were cleared away and the desert
was brought through.

Will had thought there might be some manner of carved fruit perhaps, or some mousse or flummery
for the table, but this was far more than that.

On each plate, nestled in candied fruit sat a clear sugar globe, like a bubble in seaweed. Inside it, a
small fish sat curled around some candied plants, small bright berries creating counterpoint, like
jewels that shone around it. As Will bent down a little to get a better look, the candlelight from the
table’s centerpiece cast light and shadows through the foliage and the rippled sugar, lightly dyed in
hues of blues and greens to make it seem almost real water in how the flames flickered through it.

Will let out an surprised and pleased laugh, unplanned and delighted. Yes, hidden under the polite
exterior, Dr Lecter did indeed have a playful side.
"I don’t even want to know how you managed something like this. It seems like magic," he said with a smile, "How should I go about eating it? If I shatter the bubble, it might damage what is inside before I have had a chance to see it properly"

"However you like, but the sugar bubble does lift off, as you can see."

He carefully lifted off the fragile bubble as shown, and set it to the side of the plate, getting a much better view of the contents within.

"There’s two!"

Dr Lecter smiled as he looked over at Will, more in his eyes than his lips, but still there hidden under the pristine surface.

"Indeed. Better for offering compliment to each other."

Will did not miss that rather blatant reference to one of their previous conversations, nor its symbolism. He had first thought that there was only one fish nestled on the plate, pale in colour, but he saw now there was, hidden amongst the candied foliage, a second one of dark hues that blended in. Nothing was ever simple with the Doctor it seemed, though that certainly didn’t detract from it’s appeal.

"It looks lovely," he said, the grace of complimentary language curtailed by the distracting puzzle in front of him. In the background of his thoughts, he could hear Price and Alana pick up the conversation, but in truth his main focus was on the desert.

This here, this was more than merely something to please him and make him smile. A man like Lecter wouldn’t have something so obvious as the previous conversation be it’s only message. It was a compliment to him that the alpha clearly expected him to understand the nuance that was in place here.

He looked at those two fish as he picked up the small desert spoon, and he wondered which of the fish he was to represent. They were both bright and eye catching as the pale one was, in their own ways. Was Will the pale one that the general public’s gaze saw first, or was he the one hidden by shadows of what was clearly meant to be his home? Was it Dr Lecter then who was the pale one, a reiteration of how he saw their partnership, with him becoming the bright host while Will was allowed the shadows?

As he took a moment to contemplate this, a thought surfaced that would not be put aside. With the edge of the spoon, he carefully took off the surface layers of the dark fish, and there, beneath it was a pale cream mousse.

His gaze flickered once more to the alpha, who was in the middle of talking about a trip where he had come upon large, multi coloured carp, used more for decoration than fishing. Will tasted the desert on his spoon, finding it a brighter citrus flavour than he had been perhaps expecting. A sharp lemon with some other things, perhaps a hint of berry, to take the edge off the bitterness. He did the same to the other fish, finding a rich dark mousse under the pale coating, one that was rich and heady with cocoa, as well as something spicy that left his tongue burning ever so slightly.

Hannibal was making little effort to hide the way his gaze now lingered on Will, as he took a little of each on his spoon, the two seemingly opposed flavours taken together. The result, when he put it in his mouth, was a surprising combination, the citrus combining with the heat of the spice, and mellowed by the richness of the cocoa into something that he had no easy words for.
This flavour, he knew, wasn’t supposed to be comforting, or sweet, as many deserts were. This was a statement, but also something interesting to ruminate on later. A flavour that interests the mind, not merely the tongue.

Would he rather have had a simple desert? That was what was put to him here. Could he honestly say he would rather have had sweet ice or fruit when he could have something so much more? It was a challenge of sorts, and Will, finding himself intrigued, took some more.

Hannibal Lecter’s eyes smiled.

It was fascinating, in its own way, to see what each person had eaten on their plate by the end. Alana had eaten most of both fish, but had treated them like separate deserts, eating one and then the other. Jack had foregone the chocolate fish mostly in favour of the citrus, and while he hadn’t eaten any, he had broken apart the delicate sugar globe with a sort of absent-minded destruction. Price on the other hand had eaten the chocolate fish completely, as well as quite a few of the bright candied peel and shards of the sugar globe. Will didn’t doubt that he was restraining himself from using the candied peel in some way to make ridiculous teeth with them. Will himself had tried a bit of everything fairly equally, though he had found himself going back to the mixed fish mouses while he watched the rest of the table.

He didn’t doubt that Dr Lecter had given such variety, not only to please his guests different tastes, but also to view this sort of interaction himself. The man seemed to delight in the facets of people’s behaviour and learning. Will wondered how much of the choice had been to see if Will also enjoyed these games, or merely for his own pleasure.

In the end, it didn’t really much matter, for the results were the same, and as the plates were cleared away, he found himself engaged and satisfied by what he had consumed, both in the food, and otherwise.

As they rose from the table to move back through to the sitting room, Will found that he was less anxious about the rest of the evening than he might usually be. Perhaps it was the fact that he had understood the wealth of consideration that had been placed, not only on making him comfortable, but also to cater to his own brand of insight, a way of communicating that sat less with words he would have to respond to. Dr Lecter had shown himself to be a clever and ingenious alpha, and the more he saw of him, the less he found himself worrying about what might be ahead because of that.

Still, it didn’t do to be seen as being too eager, if for no other reason than Jack was still not entirely happy with them being here. Although he could not outright stop him from being shown around the house with their host, he could make such a thing far more troublesome by demanding an escort for Will. It was unusual, but not unheard of, and so it was perhaps best to show as little of his eagerness as possible.

"Mr Hunt will be through shortly with some beverages. Mr Graham, if you would do me the honour of allowing me to show you around the house?"

"Thank you, that would be pleasant." He allowed himself to be ushered out, while Dr Lecter made some placations to Jack and his family, before exiting as well and drawing the door closed with an almost imperceptible snick of the latch. It was with a graceful gesture that the alpha led the way, keeping quiet until they were far enough away from the other door that their voices would not be easily overheard.

"Unless you particularly wish to see them now, I shall not bore you with a room-by-room tour. There are, however, a couple of rooms in particular that I thought might interest you."
Will inclined his head, allowing the alpha to dictate where they went this evening. Tonight was Hannibal Lecter’s performance, and this was his stage, and so, for now, he let the other show him what he wanted him to see. Will found himself interested in what that might be, considering how the evening had gone so far.

The hallway they moved down was wide, as all large houses tended to exhibit. The architect’s design was as much about being able to cater to some of the more extravagant dresses some female omegas tended to wear as it was an expression of conspicuous wealth, that such a space could be dedicated only to moving between rooms. As it was, Will liked it merely due to the extra space that stopped the darker wallpaper and large paintings from seeming claustrophobic. The decoration was masculine and a little eclectic, with expensive paintings that hung along with carved wood and antler pieces.

The room they entered was not too far from the sitting room, only one room distant. It was a fairly large room, with windows along one wall that were undoubtedly to let in early afternoon light during the day. There was no guesswork needed to understand that this was a music room, for various instruments sat on stands or in cases, shelves of music kept away from where most of the light would fall.

The most noticeable piece was, though, the harpsichord, which sat in pride of place near the windows, where the early afternoon light would brighten the room considerably, though the lamplight of the evening rendered it far more intimate a setting. Despite this, his mood dipped rapidly at seeing it.

"I don’t know if you knew this, Dr Lecter, but I have no skill with music, while you clearly have a great love for it."

It was, perhaps, the first overt thing that he had noticed as being contrary to what might work between them. Omegas played and sang, generally very well, or practiced until they could. Will had no such skills, and in such a room, he couldn’t help but feel himself somewhat lacking. A jarring reminder of all he was not.

"Mr Graham," Will looked up and over to where the alpha was standing, regarding him, waiting for his attention to focus before continuing. "The notions of society bother me little. It is I who plays these instruments, not some absent other, or wistful dream. It is enough that you would care to listen."

It was another indication of how the alpha bucked the sub-gender trends, for alphas almost never took to music, unless it was for performance purposes. It might well be that, considering the amount of instruments in the room, but they seemed to indicate a general love of music that spanned beyond the remit of merely performing for an audience.

It just left him feeling unexpectedly raw, finding yet one more thing that the man was good at, that he could not even attempt at matching. It wasn’t a competition, but all the same, it was a reminder how far he fell from the person he should have been. He could well imagine another omega, sitting here in this room playing an instrument that could accompany Dr Lecter.

It was stupid to feel jealousy over an imagined person.

"Do you have a favourite?" he asked, hoping to move his thoughts away from such things, and give the man the attention and politeness he was due.

"Each of them have their own allure, though more often than not lately I have found myself at the harpsichord."
Polite conversation had never much been his strong point, and he found himself lapsing back into silence as he drew a blank as to what else he might say. He should, he knew, be trying harder to shift the mood that had settled about him. Dr Lecter would not have brought him here just to look at the instruments, but likely to play them. Perhaps he thought it was romantic? A way to show a softer side of his personality in private perhaps. Will liked music, that was true, and he was intrigued as to the other man’s skill. Maybe the music would help lift his mood.

"Would you care to play? I would like to hear you."

Dr Lecter smiled at him, and it was a warm and unassuming smile, though one that had hints of regret touched to it to add to his words.

"Perhaps some other day, when we are more comfortable with each other. It is too much right now to expect, when we are, both of us, pressured by time and circumstance."

There was a knowledge given in that denial, that Dr Lecter wasn’t an alpha that was merely going to concede to a request merely because it was given. A reiteration of strength there, of the alpha’s own self-determination and confidence in his own beliefs. This then was something of a counterpoint to the extensive efforts the man had made throughout the evening for him, that he would make such efforts, but he would not go against what he believed to be the right course without good reason.

Will was left wondering what else there might be that could offer some balance to the exceedingly skilled gentleman.

"You are highly successful in many fields it seems. In your work, in society, in gambling, cooking and even playing music. Is there anything in which you don’t excel, Dr Lecter?"

Will tried for levity, but likely not managing as well as he would have liked, and Dr Lecter regarded him a moment, before speaking.

"Would you care for a drink?"

The unexpected question made him blink a moment, understanding that perhaps while he hadn’t exactly been opaque, that it wasn’t something the other man was about to confess to. Others might have given some amusing and obviously false statements to let the topic blow past, but Dr Lecter seemed to merely intend on changing the subject, perhaps also to ease Will’s nerves a little with his favourite tipple. It couldn’t be that pleasant to be around him right then, with his mood having declined more obviously.

"Some whiskey would be good, thank you."

He let out a breath as the alpha moved to the door, thinking that he would bring one back, but it was with evident patience that did not seem strained, that he waited at the door for Will to follow.

Caught out by his drifting thoughts, he hurried to catch up to the other man, dipping his head a little in silent apology.

"I have some whiskey in the study," Dr Lecter said, closing the door behind them, habitually tidy it seemed, before moving them deeper in the house. "I often spend time in here, when other matters do not draw my attention."

The door was held open for him, and he stepped into what was clearly a gentleman’s study, though it could also have been aptly called a library for the wealth of knowledge upon the numerous shelves.

"Please make yourself at home, Mr Graham, and I will get us that drink."
Will moved in, and it became very clear that the alpha did indeed spend a great deal of time here. The room was not only saturated by the scent of books and well worn leather, but of the alpha himself. The elusive scent of the man was more prominent in here, though by no means overpowering. It teased at the edges of his senses, a puzzle that he found himself following around the room to the places where the man had been the most.

"You wished to know my flaws."

Will startled from his thoughts and looked up sharply over to the man, moving over to receive the glass he was offering. The alpha moved back over to get his own, where he paused, tilting the glass a little from those long fingers, his gaze thoughtful as he looked back at Will, choosing his words.

"You don’t need to," Will said quickly, wishing he could down the whiskey but he had already made enough of a mess of this evening already without adding to it further by not savouring the experience liqueur. "It was rude of me to say, I apologize."

"You apologize too easily. This is why you are here tonight, is it not? To see if we are compatible. You cannot make such judgements without the information, and it seems churlish of me to make you guess after such a request. You have a right to know, and so I shall tell you, because you have asked."

The man's voice was mild, pleasant, but Will was left off-balance by this. So much of the Dr seemed to be one of hidden games, effortless control, that this sudden insight, offered freely, was in some ways shocking. Will moved over and sat himself down. Was this another game? Was this going to be a message within a message, like the other things tonight, or would it be plain, as the man had said, merely because he asked.

Was it the asking then, that was important to him? By asking, it could be given, and thus still controlled by the alpha, rather than found out. A trust, offered, but only because it was based on rules?

"I can tell you that I have no skill at general gardening," Dr Lecter said as he came to sit on the seat opposite. "I enjoy keeping small herbs and plants for cooking, but I have no tolerance for large scale outdoor gardening, and have no wish to learn it. I cannot sail a boat or ship, nor do I have any skill with a gun. Although I have some moderate strength, I have no skill nor joy in manual labour. But these are mostly superficial things. You would, I think, wish to know something a bit deeper."

Will remained silent, listening to this and not interrupting. It was unusual for an alpha, especially one courting, to offer such glimpses of themselves without Will seeking past the surface himself. Yes, Hannibal was offering these things in a controlled way, peeling back the layers to show what was beneath, and almost daring Will to find fault with them, even ‘flaws’ as they were.

"I am not often given to leaving a mess, a habit kept from my training as a doctor and surgeon. I would not ask you to keep as strict a hold on such things, but you will find the servants clearing up after you, as they are used to living with that particular habit of mine.

"You should also know that although it isn’t often outwardly seen, I am quick to anger over certain things. I abhor rudeness, slovenly behaviour as well as crassness, especially if they are imposed upon those I consider family or close acquaintances. I also tend towards being vengeful until a situation is resolved to my satisfaction, as well as somewhat controlling and possessive over those I consider under my protection."

It was a calculated risk, telling Will all this, especially the more personal flaws. There were a lot of omegas who would balk at such a list, especially if given out of context as this was. In many ways,
the alpha was trusting Will to be intelligent enough to not make such snap judgements, or at least to think more critically how it might impact on their time together.

"And how do you see this controlling behaviour emerging between us?" Will asked, curious but also cautious. Dr Lecter did not seem like Jack, but having been on the receiving end of such behaviour for years now, he was wary of it.

"I wouldn't say it would be any more apparent than you have already been witness to."

Strangely perhaps, Will found himself reassured. Either the things that Dr Lecter said of himself were not as bad as they could be, or he was good enough at manipulation that should such problem arise between them, it would be dealt with by that same skill.

It should scare him, that he was, in essence, relying on the possibility of having himself manipulated and managed enough to be comfortable, but he remembered well enough how that had felt before and during dinner. What a relief it had been. He couldn’t help but think of that same comfort in the weeks ahead when he could indulge in the lie of courtship, away from the pressures of home and those in it.

Still, this sort of thing was, like any good conversation, to be partaken of by both people. It would feel akin to lying not to offer something himself. After all, Will had far more obvious flaws than the effortlessly controlled alpha.

"I should warn you," he said, "although mother has likely already done so, and as you have borne witness to some of it, that my nerves are not easily managed. You have impressive restraint, but unless you suffer from nose blindness, everyday life, even in the home, will be difficult. All the family alphas are under constant strain from it, and it would be remiss of me not to make you more acutely aware of this, since it will affect what will happen in the house and especially any outings."

To give the alpha credit, he did not immediately disabuse or dismiss the notion, but gave it some consideration before answering.

"Your life right now is not stable, Mr Graham. Each new facet or change that comes into your life is a threat to the careful balance that you maintain. When you are in a position of calm, are you not more clear-headed and productive? It is the same with this. You retreat and defend your position, because no one else has been doing it for you."

"I’m not talking about just the last few years when Mr Crawford came to the household, but my whole life. This isn’t some passing difficulty that will suddenly disappear when under a new roof with a new person for a couple of months. If anything, it is far more likely to be that much greater."

"You do not believe that you will find a mate this year then?"

"All this," Will said, gesturing around them, though the broader gesture captured the entirety of his situation, "There is nothing permanent about it. I cannot return to trying to fool myself into believing in something that will disappear after my heat is over. You have not courted much, I think, but for me it has been thirteen years of glimpsed lives I could have, before they are shattered at the end of my heat. Do you understand? I cannot trust in it, like some folktale, that it will suddenly offer the rock for foundations that it promises. I will break, Hannibal. I do not have much left to fend off that inevitability."

Across from him, Will’s gaze was drawn to where the alpha’s hands that were on the arms of the chair, long fingers suddenly tense in his struggle for restraint. It was a small thing, one that many would not have noticed, but it made Will’s heart beat faster, his gaze rising swiftly to the alpha’s
own, that tenseness in them both waiting for what the alpha would do.

It was perhaps only a couple of seconds, a brief lapse in the otherwise flawless exterior, that the gentleman forced his fingers to relax, though his eyes were fixed upon Will.

"You will not break," the alpha said, his voice as sure as his gaze that held Will with a power he could not look away from. "Should the mating not take this season, you will find me seeking your presence each year past it. My door will always be open to you, William, no matter what time of day or night. You need only come, or send word, and I will be there."

Will let out a breath, frustrated and disturbed by the sudden fixation from the other man. He should have known better than to let his words run so freely to an alpha.

"You cannot guarantee that, nor put yourself under such an oath. I would not ask it of anyone! Do you think none have tried before now? You are not a fool, so do not let yourself become one now. You would be rendering yourself without a mate for the rest of your life."

Dr Lecter leaned back in his seat, absently plucking his cuffs back into place before he relaxed more fully into the leather.

"If that is to be so, then I shall indeed remain without a mate. Do you think me so blinded by society’s blinkers, that I would turn you down merely for a step up in prestige by some pretty face who would sooner demure to me than offer valid conversation?"

"I don’t know what to think any more! I’m so tired of all this, Hannibal. Year upon year, it is exhausting."

Hannibal paused for a moment then bowed his head in acknowledgement.

"I apologize, William. I did not mean to distress you this evening. Come, let us go and see the dogs. They will be pleased to offer you some solace where I cannot, for now."

He looked back up and over to Hannibal, trying, trying to hold himself together, to calm down. He knew that his nerves would be trying on the alpha, who would even now be fighting against his instincts to come and soothe him. That he did so without any visible effort now was both impressive as well as reassuring in its own way of the alpha's control.

"No. No, I’m sorry. This isn’t anything like I planned for. I didn’t come here to see the dogs. I shouldn’t just hide behind them. I came to see you."

He ran a hand through his hair, dislodging the carefully combed locks in his distress and turmoil.

"I don’t mean to be such a mess," he added, "Usually at these courting things I just come for dinner, look around the house, have a quick chat and head home again. I didn’t mean to ruin your evening with all this. You would have found out eventually, but," he sighed, trying to stop his apologetic ramblings, sighing in frustration.

He was startled out of his spiraling internal catastrophizing by the sudden appearance of the alpha in front of him. He had not heard or marked his approach.

"You have ruined nothing," the man said, carefully refilling the glass that Will didn’t remember drinking. "You have come to me with the truth of your very self, and I will not, ever, be disappointed in such a trust."

Will took a sip of the expensive whiskey, trying to appreciate it as he had clearly not done before, but
his attention was truly solely on the alpha, as he watched him replace the decanter on the tray before
opening a chest and drawing out a blanket., and listening to him speak.

"I do not find myself dissuaded to court you in all the ways I have stated, no matter your worries.
The evening, from my perspective, is therefore very favourable if I can now offer you some ease for
the remaining time of it. There is no call to do anything but relax. We need not do anything else."

He looked up at where the alpha was holding the blanket to him, and, setting the glass aside, he took
it, his fingers sinking into the soft fabric.

With all the Doctor’s games and the hidden dance of meanings, he had not ever thought to find
something like this. A very simple offer of space to try and unwind before he had to inevitably head
back home where all the usual pressures would be there, especially from Jack. To just have space for
an hour, where he need not speak or do anything except sit, it was an unexpected gift.

Making a decision, he leaned down and untied his shoes and took them off, before curling up on the
sofa more fully. He should never be this casual around a suitor on the first evening out, but with a
glimpse of insight, he realised that the other man wasn’t treating him like a suitor. By offering him
this casual space, where he need not sit with propriety, nor concern himself overmuch with the state
of his suit, or what exactly to say, he was already treating him as an intimate friend and partner. Will
wasn’t sure he could say the same, especially so early, but for now at least, he wasn’t going to turn
down a chance at some peace.

Perhaps guessing his thoughts, Hannibal spoke, his voice quiet and reassuring as he settled down on
the seat across from him, a book on his lap.

"I will be here, William, as your suitor and your friend, no matter what else happens."

"Is this a warning that you have become possessive over me?" Will asked with a small smile, just a
hint of playfulness attempting to show now that there wasn’t so clear a pressure over the evening’s
events.

"That it is. I am afraid, dear William, you have no escape now."

The alpha’s eyes were warm and fond as he looked at him, long fingers opening the book in his hand
at a ribbon, before leaning back in his own seat.

Will found a small smile tugging at his lips, and settled down a little more comfortably. Just as he
closed his eyes, a low sound started up in the room, very faint, but it brought his eyes open sharply
once more.

Dr Lecter sat in his seat, apparently unconcerned, reading from a book. The soft turn of the page not
entirely hiding the low rumble that hinted at the edges of his senses.

How long had it been since he had heard an alpha purr? Not for five or six years, and even then it
had been in the midst of his heat. It was so rare to hear it outside of mated couples or close family
bonds, a sound made to calm and reassure omegas.

He couldn’t think that the man was unaware of what he was doing, even if most would never be able
to produce it on purpose, but even so, he was scared to draw attention to it in case it stopped. He let
out a slightly shaken breath and closed his eyes, snuggling under the blanket a little more and letting
himself indulge in that rare sound.

It was an impressive, if manipulative, trick, but he couldn’t find it in himself to fault the alpha,
considering the state he had ended up in tonight.
He closed his eyes, letting the soft sound wash over him. What would it be like, his rebellious instincts murmured to him, not just to hear it, but to be pressed up against the alpha and feel that rumble too?

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As a light knock came to the door, Will blinked, momentarily disorientated by the fact that he seemed to have fallen asleep. Dr Lecter was already across the room, speaking in a low murmur while Will roused himself.

He had never meant to fall asleep, and the fact that he had done so was surprising in and of itself. He had only meant to rest his eyes, and not give any encouragement to conversation by looking around, having wanted to see whether the alpha could indeed keep to his offer of peace, or if temptation to communicate or offer something else would win out.

Putting his shoes back on, he stood, running a hand down over his suit, likely crumpled badly now, but he didn’t mind too much. It was time to head home, almost, and so no one would see it except for his family, and the alpha whose offer had prompted the disarray.

As he reached down to fold the blanket though, he noticed something that he had not before, pausing. A quick glance to the door showed Hannibal still engaged there, and he brought the blanket up to his nose. Yes, there. He hadn’t noticed it before, too stressed, and the whole room had hints of it, but the blanket did indeed smell like Hannibal.

Did the alpha use the blanket himself? Or had he scent-marked it in preparation for Will, to have him relax with it, a bit of comfort that would render the alpha’s scent associated? There was positive deniability there, but if it had been premeditated, then it was a clever thing to have done. Manipulative, but clever. Will didn’t doubt that with him having fallen asleep, it would only have rendered the effect more strongly.

He set the blanket down on the sofa where he had been curled up and moved over to where the alpha was turning back towards him with a smile.

"We should not leave your family waiting any longer, although if you wish your jacket pressed before you go, that could be arranged."

"That won’t be necessary, thank you, Hannibal. My family are used to my being a bit of a mess at the best of times, and we will be going directly home afterwards so my coat will aptly hide it," he said, following the man out the door. "How long have we been away?"

"A little under two hours. Perfectly acceptable for this sort of meeting. Did you rest well?"

The last words were said lightly, but Will couldn’t help but feel that it held overtones of a slightly smug notion of certainty, that he had indeed slept exceedingly well. He could be reading too much into it thought. Difficult to tell with how he was still feeling a little woozy after the nap.

"Very well thank you. It was an unexpected boon."

"My pleasure, I assure you."

Will didn’t bother to respond, the satisfaction in the alpha’s tone told well enough how true that was.

As they got to the living room and stepped in, Will was met with the unusual, but not unpleasant, vision of Price sitting on the carpet playing with a puppy. His puppy. Upon seeing them, the alpha got himself up, the pup still trying to climb on his lap and tug the toy from his hand.
"We did not keep you too long, I trust?" Hannibal asked from beside him as Will smiled at the somewhat disheveled family alpha.

"Not at all, Hannibal," Alana said from where she was seated on the sofa, a glass of what appeared to be sherry in her hand. "We were kept aptly amused."

Will was distracted from the disapproving glower that Jack sent him at the state of his suit, by the enthusiastic realisation by the pup that there were indeed more people to meet. However before the pup could leap up on him, Hannibal made a slightly sharp and disapproving noise from his side, and just like that, the pup stopped, quivering with the need to come and see them, but seeming, even at this young age, to have been trained when it was not appropriate to. It stood there, its entire back end wiggling with enthusiasm, yet still held itself back.

Hannibal looked in question to Will, who shrugged slightly. He knew his suit was going to need cleaned after this anyway, and crouched down. Even so, the puppy stayed where it was, although the noises it was making at having to stay were both pitiful and adorable.

"Very well then," Hannibal said, "Greet."

The puppy all but launched itself at Will, all legs, slobber and enthusiasm that left him sitting on the floor in a far more dishevelled state than Price had been, and caring not one jot. Alana was laughing, and over the top of the pup, he could see Price’s smile.

Moving past him, Hannibal saw to refreshing the contents of people’s glasses, before settling himself down on a seat, talking idly with those in the room, though Will was very aware of the alpha’s gaze upon him more often than not. It was not a heavy gaze, and it did not bother him so much as make him aware of the alpha in a way that even the puppy could not distract from.

In the end, it was over an hour later that they left the Lecter household, Will having extracted himself from under an exhausted, sleeping pup with some reluctance. In the carriage on the way home, Will was silent, the faint residual tingling on his hand from the farewell kiss there, a reminder of what had been talked about that evening, of the promises given. Such promises had been given before, oaths of dedication and resolute attendance, but he got the feeling that perhaps Hannibal might well be more dedicated to such a thing. Only time would tell, of course, but the notion of that promise sent a shiver through him, equal parts hope and fear for what it might mean. He sat a little deeper in the seat, and selfishly wondered what it might be like to have such a man, even unmated, at his side.

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Hannibal watched as the carriage drew away, the lamps fading into the night beyond, although the warmth and satisfaction from the visit lingered despite the chill in the air and the tails of freezing fog that drifted. The chill of winter had never bothered him, and the memory of the evening was heady and delightful.

He wouldn’t say there had been no surprises. Alana’s behaviour in particular had been highly amusing to him. Flattering, in its own naive way. Ah, but dear William. He could not have fully anticipated that conversation, raw and delightful as it had been.

It had taken him by surprise, as not much could, how strongly he had found himself reacting to that admission of need. He might have been angry about the unknowing trap those words held, had he not already been set upon the course they led. As it was, he found himself rather pleased, that his instincts were just as set upon the course of action as he was.

Closing the door and engaging the lock, he turned just as a shadowed figure emerged behind him,
having waited there while the doorway was secured before stepping into easier sight.

"Are you set on this one then? He seems a bit fragile."

The voice of the man was lilting and cultured, the tang of the old world hidden amongst the accented English he had chosen to use tonight. Hannibal paused, not displeased to find him there, though surprised, perhaps, that such a journey had been made. He considered the question as he turned and made his way back down the hallway, the well-dressed figure walking with him into the room beyond. His pause before answering was far less about deciding, than it is about the beautiful memory of William slumbering in his study earlier.

He had been exquisite there, having fallen asleep so soon after having settled. Considering William’s nervousness around people, it had shown a considerable amount of trust that he would feel comfortable enough to sleep in his presence. Of course, he had helped that along, but it didn’t detract from the outcome.

"He has survived through the harshest of winters, Uncle. He is mine."

The words, verbally given, set something inside of himself more at ease, as if they had been waiting to be given substance by their telling. Perhaps the other gentleman could feel it too, for his manner seemed to warm, some small sign of watchfulness easing back towards contentedness.

"Then I am glad for you, Hannibal. Bring him to visit when it is sealed between you both."

Hannibal nodded, and could see the other alpha smiling, pleased for him in this and what it would mean. He was dressed this evening in an exquisitely tailored outfit far more befitting of the town than of their homeland, and Hannibal was left to wondering why he had appeared in it now. Robert Lecter, much as he himself, did very little, if anything, without a reason.

Moving into the sitting room, the pup having already been taken back to settle down with the others, the room was still filled the scents of those who had so recently vacated it.

"Why are you not at home now?" he asked, curiosity getting the better of him. There was little reason to deny the impulse, not with family.

He moved over to the drinks cabinet to get something for them both. It went without saying that his uncle would not be staying. He never would, not for long at least. A few moments, here and there, perhaps an evening together if times were favourable.

"Your sister is in with a youngster alpha she is allowing to spend this season’s heat with. It won’t come of anything, but he amuses her for now."

Hannibal frowned, turning at last to look at him more directly, troubled by this. He should not be here. Robert was the only alpha in their estate, and to have left her alone without protection seemed foolhardy at best.

"You left her alone with him?"

He knows his words are clipped. Judgemental. No alpha would take it well, or, if he was almost anyone else he wouldn’t. But Robert was family, and that made the difference, in their family at least.

"Hardly," the elder alpha said mildly, "Chiyoh is there, and I shall be back soon enough. I didn’t want to miss seeing your prospective mate."
Hannibal forced himself to pour the drinks and move over to his uncle to hand one over. He had to believe that Robert knew best about the situation at the family’s estate, though it was a strain on his instincts to know that his sister was there with an unfit alpha, no matter how temporary that position was. It grated on his thoughts, like talons digging out from within.

Then the presence of his uncle there in front of him, deep as the ancient forests, a hand settling on his shoulder that helped ease the tension beginning to climb, despite his control. He let his breath ease out, the steady grip on his shoulder offering solidarity and understanding in their combined tasks. If Robert said she was safe, then she was.

That his uncle had come tonight to see if William was worth his nephew’s time, went without saying. Hannibal knew the man would have picked up all the subtle signs of his focus on the omega, and seemed to be willing to let the situation continue as it was. He didn’t doubt that should William have been seen as unsuitable, they would be having an entirely different conversation right now.

"Did you see the pups?" he asked at last, acknowledgement there of their accord, in the changing of the subject. "I thought to give you and Mischa those we don’t keep."

The hand on his shoulder lingered a moment longer before slipping away as Robert took his drink over to lean against the mantlepiece.

"Yes. They will be fine hounds. When will you bring them?"

"After the middle of next month, when I have time."

An easy chuckle from the older man that brought memories of childhood at his side, listening to the stories of ages, the triumphs and the pitfalls of humanity. He stood there, as he had back then, intriguing and timeless, dressed up now in modern clothing, drinking aged whiskey.

"So busy with all your little projects. Very well. I shouldn’t linger tonight. Just remember to get the blessings on Midwinter if you really want Mr Graham."

Hannibal smiled, reminded once more of the evening’s events, rather than his concerns over family. William would soon be part of that too.

"I will."

He could hear his determination, the certainty of those two words. There would be no mistakes, no errors, he would make sure of that. William Graham would be his.

His uncle smiled, his task this evening seemingly completed. Downing the last of the whiskey in his glass before setting it aside, he let a knowing smile linger on his lips, pleased, as he passed Hannibal, heading deeper into the house, before slipping out the back door and into the night beyond. They would see each other again soon enough.

Chapter End Notes

So wow, this chapter ended up totally massive, but I didn't want to post just half of it, because that would end up being right in the middle of dinner, and that would just be rude!

A heads-up though, that I am taking a break from posting this for a couple of months.
Quick background, I have autism and ADD, and am resistant to almost all medications for the latter. Back in February I had to come off the only one that seemed to work even a little, because of the side effects, and I have been struggling since. It takes me longer to get things done now, which is another reason why this chapter was delayed. I know you guys are used to authors who post prolifically, but even getting one chapter a month has been really difficult for me, and I need a break to get on top of things again and not burn myself out.

I have a couple of small side projects I want to play with, more planning of this plot, reorganising and answering questions for the agony uncle section, as well as try and get some stuff other than writing done in my functional time. I am going to aim to get the next chapter out on the 18th of September, to get back onto the schedule.

Anyway I hope you enjoyed this chapter, please do leave comments and kudos if you can. I really enjoy getting your thoughts and feedback.
Frampton Residence, London - Wednesday the 4th of November, evening

It had been two days since Will had spent the evening with Hannibal, and far longer since he had last seen Lieutenant Anderson, and right then, that distance was entirely too stark. Currently, there was nothing he would rather do than make as hasty an exit as he could from the current residence of Mr Frampton.

Mr Frampton was the last out of this season's list of alphas that Will had allowed to initially court him. He had been chosen, at the time, for the thoughtfulness of the gift he had offered at the first ball. That wish to please had been in evidence from the moment he had entered the front door, and contrary to expectations, Will dearly wished it gone.

"This is the day room. I had it done up recently in this particularly fetching shade of blue. I am told it is very in fashion right now, especially with omegas, but should you not like it, I shall think nothing to change it immediately to whatever you desire."

It was certainly a far cry from the tour of Mr Layton's home, and yet the solicitude, which had been constant and pressing from the first moment, was exhausting, but worse, the need for choices, and answers, was straining the tenuous hold on his nerves.

"I am sure that won't be necessary, Mr Frampton. The room is very pleasant."

It seemed churlish to be irritated at how easily the alpha was managed, watching the clear pleasure in the man at the mild compliment.

Truthfully there was little wrong with the alpha. Although slightly on the rotund size, he was friendly and approachable, with a mild manner and an open willingness to please that was rarer these days. With an omega who was less troubled by anxiety and more pleased by someone easily directed, he would make a fine partner. Just not with Will.

Room after room they wandered through, and he was struggling to keep his nerves in check. The man hovered, closer as the evening wore in, the alpha's own anxiety growing when the omega with him was showing more signs of stress, not less. Will knew he couldn't help it, few alphas could, but it was only making the feeling escalate in an unpleasant manner.

"Are you sure I can't offer you a drink, Mr Graham? Some tea, or sherry perhaps?"

Mr Frampton was hovering close, his hands clasped in a way that made it clear he was desperate to reach out to try and comfort, but had been warned against doing so, by etiquette if nothing else. That such forbearance appears to be straining, the threat that he would give into those instincts and touch, it certainly didn't help calm Will's nerves, quite the opposite.

"Thank you, no," Will was forced to say again, "I might be more at ease if we return to the sitting room however."

"I have made you uneasy. Is it the painting? I shall dispense with whatever it is that might make you easier by its absence, just say the word!"
Will was quite sure the headache he had brewing was going to be a spectacular one, but at least it would give a legitimate reason to leave early without causing more acute distress in his host. Though, as Will glanced his way, perhaps that particular concern would happen either way.

"It is not the painting, I assure you. I merely have a growing headache and find myself ill disposed as a result."

"Oh, my dear Mr Graham! Should I call for a doctor? I would not see you suffering for all the world!"

Calm breaths, Will, calm breaths.

"That won't be necessary, Mr Frampton. I may need to cut my visit short however and retire for the evening."

The alpha's disappointment was palpable, along with the desperation to see Will better. The warring scents made him feel a little nauseous.

Walking back to the sitting room, a flicker of his gaze to his mother proved enough, and she was rising, promptly taking control of the situation.

"Oh dear, have you come upon a headache, Will?" she asked, having moved over to insert herself in between them both, something that forced Mr Frampton to retreat lest he be upon the receiving end of her alphas’ displeasure. "We should get you home then. Rest will certainly do you some good."

It was rare these days that he felt protected by Alana's presence, and he allowed himself to be moved and directed by her, knowing she was far more able right now to say the right things to extract themselves quickly. Jack, he could see, was helping facilitate the exit, likely glad to be gone so he could return to thinking about work, rather than being stuck at another alpha's house potentially for hours more.

Will was barely aware of what was going on around him by the time he was guided into the carriage. He thought he had said farewell to Mr Frampton, but it all seemed a bit too muddled and dreamlike in the disassociation to be certain.

"Too nice?" Price asked after a couple of minutes of silence in the carriage.

"Not enough."


Price made a noncommittal sound and thankfully left him in peace for the rest of the journey. He would need the sleeping draught tonight, for blissful oblivion.

_Bloom Residence, London - Saturday 7th November, morning_

With all the alphas from Will's courting shortlist having now been seen individually, and enough time had passed since the last visit to steady his nerves, he was at liberty to visit them once more as he chose. The list, he had to admit, was rather short this season, with only Lieutenant Anderson and Dr Lecter remaining as hopefuls. Still, he was interested in them both more than many he had been with in the past, so he tried not to worry. Neither of them would be so ungalant as to leave him without their company during his heat if he called on them, after all.

So it was that this morning his thoughts had returned to Dr Lecter.
The evening at Dr Lecter's house had been interesting and intriguing, not only because there had been a great deal going on that was unstated, but also because of what the man had offered. Will got the feeling that, at least at first, the alpha would be careful to never tread too close to things that may trigger his nerves, doing, much as he had in the evening, a great deal to ensure the calm in the household to help him settle there.

He was sure that, in time, there would be challenges offered, much as he had seen in the subtle use of the food choices and the layers of meanings in the desert, as well as the rest, but the man seemed to be greatly adept at balancing such things. He didn't doubt that there were many things that had likely slipped by his notice, and in some ways, strangely, that was reassuring. The subtle manipulation, in easing him into new situations might very well be the best way. It was, at least, somewhat familiar from the calm press of Humphrey's expectations through his life.

Lieutenant Anderson on the other hand offered a quite different sort of life, though no less appealing. A life with the Lieutenant would be one that offered little challenge that Will himself did not instigate. He could see the man being of the sort to relentlessly support Will in whatever he did, and, assuming it didn't go against his health or safety, would do everything in his power to give him what he wanted, whether support or calm. After the increased stress at home lately, with Jack being more pushy and disagreeable, that sort of calm life was rather appealing.

Of course, all this was neither here nor there, and he couldn't make himself think otherwise. Short term was really all he could hope for, and imagining building a future life around one of the gentlemen was only setting himself up for a harsher fall afterwards.

So it was to Dr Lecter that he focused his attention, for the clever intelligence of the man would see, perhaps, what he needed, and didn't seem to begrudge it. He had a way about him that made such allowances outside of the social norms seem more like a gift to be savoured, than an imposition. The sheer possibility of not having to make a great amount of small talk, or effort right now at conversation, was more of a draw after the lingering effects of his nerves from his last visit out to Mr Frampton.

The fact that Dr Lecter had puppies at the house may also have factored into his decision.

So Will made his way down to the breakfast room, hoping to catch Alana and Jack to ask for use of the carriage while the morning was early enough not to have had anything to rouse his temper. The family had two carriages, and barring some important event, at least one of them was generally always available, especially so during courting season when access to them was vital for visits. Usually even Jack was only ever dropped off at the police station, rather than using a one of them for the entire day.

However, as he entered, he found, to his inner dismay, that Alana had already left the room, the sounds of youthful temper tantrums from deeper in the house giving reason enough for her absence. His younger siblings were not, what you might call, subdued in their manner.

He had a short moment to decide whether to make his excuses to find Alana, or continue in and have breakfast with Jack and Zeller, who were currently the only ones in the room. He would, if he was honest, rather avoid both of them, but the fact was that if he wanted to go out today, he was going to have to ask for the use of a carriage, and Jack was in charge of those.

With an inner sigh at the necessity, he moved further in and went to plate himself some food from the spread available. Not too much, he didn't want any reason to linger in here too long, and his stomach was never particularly settled first thing in the morning.

"I'm telling you," Zeller was in the middle of saying, and had not stopped upon seeing it was Will,
"It's the story of the three brothers and the forest. Heard it a couple times when I was young. I bet you the third one will be someone good in combat, probably an alpha. That's how it goes."

They were talking about the Ripper, of course. Nothing quite like discussing serial murderers at the breakfast table.

"Will, you have heard the story, surely?" Zeller asked, clearly looking for backup in his attempt to impress Jack. Will shifted a little, putting some bacon back on the serving platter, knowing he would want out of the breakfast room sooner rather than later.

"Sorry, I was never taught that one."

There was a pause as Zeller waited for him to do the polite thing and ask about the story, but he didn't, merely moving to the table to seat himself. He wanted nothing to do with murderers or crime scenes, especially not when he was eating, and wasn't about to encourage it. Zeller frowned and looked back to Jack, launching into the tale despite this.

"It was one of those old cautionary tales, like the three brothers that got the kingdom's riches split between them and fought each other, only to find that they were meant to work together to make the kingdom prosper. It was like that, but it was about surviving through the winter. First brother chopped down trees I think, to make a bigger fire. The second brother declined to be bothered by winter, and chose to attempt to drink and be merry throughout the winter months to keep it away, but died anyway. The third brother went to kill animals for food, but got killed in turn.

"It fits, you see? The first guy was made up to look like a tree, and the omega, Summerville, a cheerful performer, and there was mead on her lips. It has to be this! We could put the word out to warn people to be extra careful, or even lay a trap."

Will picked at his food, given brief reprieve from the conversation when Peter came in to add more toast to the breakfast array before leaving again. The quiet snick of the door closing felt a little too much like being trapped, though you wouldn't know it from the more jovial appearance of Jack today. He seemed, at least, in a fairly good mood.

"What do you think, Will?"

The question did not surprise him. If anything, he had been waiting for it. Dreading it. He did not want to get pulled into the murder more when it was far past the point when he could be of best use. Anything he offered now would be mediocre at best, the evidence long gone.

"As I said, I don't know the story, and couldn't say with any certainty," he said, having all but given up on his breakfast now, his stomach now far more unsettled with the conversation and its portents. It was perhaps better to just get this out the way. "I was hoping to use the carriage later on today." He could feel Jack's gaze upon him, the pressure in the room from his presence a weighty thing, but nothing particularly distressing as of yet, despite the fact that there was currently no one in the room that would actively object to it.

"Oh? Where were you thinking of visiting?"

"Dr Lecter's residence," he said, before adding "I was hoping to have another chance to see the puppies." Considering that Dr Lecter was not Jack's first choice for his heat, he figured it would be better to mitigate the visit with something that did not denote a particular preference.

"I can't spare the carriage to go so far across down. Perhaps you should visit someone a little closer instead"
Will looked up from his breakfast place in shock.

"What, both of the carriages?"

Jack sat there, looking so effortlessly pleased with himself. Smug, even.

"Yes, both. It isn't just your needs that I have to take into consideration, Will. And anyway, we can't have you going to important house calls in the small carriage. What sort of impression would that give?"

While he had known that the alpha would not particularly want him visiting Dr Lecter, he had not considered that this would be his reply. That he would try to stop Will from visiting at all!

"You aren't allowed to stop me from seeing my suitors, Jack. It goes against all that pertains to courting if you do."

How could Jack think to do this to him? It was perfectly clear that by 'someone a little closer', he was meaning Lieutenant Anderson. It was true, that Dr Lecter's residence was on the far side of town, near the outskirts where it abutted onto Waltham forest, but an extra hour of travel was hardly anything. No, this was nothing to do with the travel time, and everything to do with Jack's own preferences.

"I am not stopping you from visiting Dr Lecter. You may take the carriage later next week, or the week after perhaps, when the carriage can be spared for the longer trip."

Will looked at him, the shock at the alpha's audacity turning, like a wind blowing on coals, into something hotter and brighter in his growing anger. Zeller shifted in his seat, uneasy, but Jack, as always, was oblivious to the undertones of scent and pheromones. He sat there, seemingly just as pleased as before, if not more so, at being able to do this, to force Will's hand, knowing he had no recourse against it.

"Very well," Will said, his voice clipped, "What time can I expect the carriage to be free?"

"Oh, I expect after lunch, around 1 o'clock."

Will didn't bother making any pretence at finishing his breakfast, nor did he thank the alpha, merely giving a short nod instead, before rising and leaving his mostly untouched plate on the end of the buffet table before turning to leave. He had to leave now, or he would say something that he would be made to regret.

Visiting Lieutenant Anderson would be no great hardship, to be sure, but the fact that even in this, his freedoms and choices in life were being chipped away at, it sat in his soul, smouldering with each breath he took, and he was caught between the urge to scream out his frustrations, or being suffocated by them.

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**Anderson Residence, London - Saturday 7th November, afternoon**

Saturday morning found Lieutenant Anderson at a bit of a loss. He was not used to having two full days without work, or other tasks to be done. One could not exactly take a day off when you were aboard a ship, after all. Even when he had been at port, there had always been tasks to do, meetings to attend, shipments or negotiations to oversee. So it was that finding himself entirely free of commitments was a little unsettling.

Much of his free time since returning to land had been spent seeing to tasks about the house, making
contact with people whom he knew in town, as well as the inevitable purchases that living in town demanded. It had seemed more than a little frivolous to him to have to have so many changes of clothing, but he would not wish to be seen as lacking when in society, and so the tailors had been but one of the places he had visited.

But that morning found him without any particular task to do. David Becket was away doing more of his apprentice training, and Mrs Becket had teased him that he was incapable of relaxing when, after some attempt at merely enjoying the day without any task, he had found himself to be pacing for want of one.

He'd had some hope, perhaps, that he might have received word from Mr Graham, but he knew the man to be busy with courting, and as much as he disliked the notion, Mr Graham was much sought after, and would not be able to visit again until he had seen them all at least once. He considered writing again, but had decided against it, not wishing to appear too pushy for attention, no matter how much he longed for some more concrete evidence that he was indeed still in the omega's thoughts.

So, as much as a distraction as anything, he took himself up to the attic to bring down some of the boxes of his old purchases from abroad to sort through. By mid afternoon, and on his third trip up, Mrs Becket called up to him.

"Mr Anderson, thats Mr Graham come to visit. I've put him in the front sitting room."

He froze for a moment, shock stilling his movements. Mr Graham, here? Now? Elation warred with the knowledge of his unfit state right now, knowing only so much could be done in such a short time to remedy it.

It was a frenzy of movement that had him down the ladders and into his bedchamber to change out of the dusty shirt, dampening his hair and combing through it quickly in the mirror and pulling on a waistcoat.

He knew he was still less than adequately dressed for polite company of this standard, but he didn't want to leave the man waiting any longer, and so he hurried downstairs, trying to ease some of the rapidness of his heartrate at having been so surprised by the circumstances.

"Mr Graham, I did not expect to see you today, else I would be in better form to receive you."

He was as lovely as ever, with those dark eyelashes and pale skin. It twisted something in his chest pleasingly to see him there, in his sitting room, surrounded by the comforts of his home.

He could see those eyes flickering over his attire, and was more than aware that he probably still smelled of sweat and dust. Not exactly an appealing combination. To their credit, neither of the two alphas that came with Mr Graham showed any particular sign of amusement or outrage at his state.

"The fault is mine, for I should have sent word earlier to see if you were free for a visit, but time was not my friend today. Am I interrupting you? I could call back another day if you are busy."

"Not at all," he said quickly, not wanting to lose this opportunity to see the man he coveted. "Having had nothing planned, I took myself to the attic to take stock of what I had there. I find, perhaps, that the house is a little sparse, and it would be pleasant to have some more of my old purchases used, if they would fit. They can be set aside to do other things though, or you could see what amusement could be found by looking through them if you wish?"

Mr Graham seemed pleased by the notion, something about him relaxing ever so slightly at this offer.
Surely he had not thought to be turned away?

"I would like that, I think, Lieutenant. Thank you."

So it was that they left the two alphas, Mr Price and another to whom he was not as familiar, in the sitting room, where Mrs Becket would ply them with some food and chat, while he and Mr Graham made their way through the house to the dining room. He had spread a blanket over the large table to save the surface from the crates and boxes now placed there, and while the room had no windows to help move the scent of dust from the air, he left the door open to help circulate any breeze from elsewhere in the house. The scent of the dust didn't bother him much, but he did not want to run the risk that Mr Graham would be uncomfortable with it.

"These are all from your travels?"

He looked up from his task of lighting a few more lamps around the room to give them better light to see by, to find Mr Graham looking over the few items he had already taken out and set down at the other end of the table.

"Yes, though some are more far-flung than others" he said moving over to pick up one of the tea cups from the set. It was delicate and appeared a little small in his larger hands. "These were actually from a trader here in London a few years back. They are Meissen porcelain, which I had found amusing at the time, for I had just returned from northern Germany. I thought the detail of the painting on them was lovely, and nicer than some of the stock I had seen on a previous visit. I often find myself in markets and shops when we called into ports. I suppose the part of me that came from a merchant's family runs deeper in my blood than I thought."

He chuckled a little, setting the cup back down once more. He liked them, truly, but had never really had much cause to bring them out. It wasn't like he had been in the country long enough to have many visitors, and most of those were the sort to drink from the crystal glasses in the liquor cabinet rather than anything else. That was hopefully going to change soon, and the thought of having a mate here, using the things he had bought while entertaining friends, it warmed him.

"I dare say I am not the best judge of what goes together," he continued, "but I had hope they could be used. As you will no doubt find, the things I have gathered over the years are more eclectic than themed, but perhaps some of them could find a place. I tend towards purchasing things I like at the time, rather than thinking of how they would fit in the house, a habit picked up from my mother, I think, though my father was just as bad in his own way, always bringing home new things to sit on the mantle."

Although Mr Graham looked interested, he seemed ill inclined towards talking much today. Thankfully there didn't appear to be some great burden upon him with regards to his own company, so he merely left him to his thoughts while they unpacked the various items, commenting here and there on them as they were unveiled, to give some context or at least, in the cases of some less delicate pieces, a little justification for them.

It was, in its own way, both pleasing as well as slightly nerve-wracking for him, for truly he had no idea what he would think of the various items he had decided on impulse to buy, though as time went on, and Mr Graham's mood seemed to settle more, he let himself relax as well.

He should, perhaps, have not become so complacent, for when was just unwrapping a small walnut box he had picked up in France, a small sound of surprise from Mr Graham brought his attention over to see what had roused his interest. When his eyes settled on the partially unveiled set of perfume bottles, he didn't bother to stifle the slightly put-upon sigh of frustration at seeing them.
"A gift from my mother," he said, setting the box aside and moving over to pick up one of the bottles. They were, to be fair, beautiful. Delicate hand-blown glass surrounded by intricate nymphs and flowers in silver. While beautiful, they were not something he would ever keep himself given a choice, nor would they suit as a gift to a male omega, which was why he had opted for something different to give as a gift at the Bloom's ball. "She has taken to sending me gifts like this each year as a reminder that she wishes grandchildren. The last few I was able to give away to friends of mine, but unlike the silk shawl or even the earrings in previous years, it isn't exactly something I can give away easily. My mother is not, what you might call, subtle."

He gave an apologetic smile, and set the perfume bottle aside with the others, though at seeing the pensive look on Mr Graham's face, lingered there, feeling the unspoken words in the air.

"So you do not wish for children then?"

The question from Mr Graham wasn't really a surprise considering the explanation of the gift, though he thought a couple of swear words in his mother's direction for having tipped it that way so soon. Leaning back against the table, he looked to the other man. He didn't want to have such weighty questions between them so early. But the question deserved an answer, and so he would give it.

"Had there been a situation where there were children, or would be, I would have been content, but it has never been something that particularly drove me. I am far more given to finding a mate for myself, than the more typical family. I would not ever feel myself hard done to, in finding myself mated but without children. My mother shall just have to remain disappointed. She has my other siblings to pester on that count, at any rate."

There, he hoped he had been truthful enough to set the other man's mind at rest. He couldn't entirely deny the wish for children, but being here now, sharing his home with Mr Graham, it would be a lack he would not feel greatly.

"Truly," he said, when no comment was forthcoming, "being here with you is more than enough."

Reaching out, slowly enough that the other man could deny him the action, he took his hand gently and brought the knuckles up to his lips, before letting it down again, his thumb rubbing over them a little before releasing it.

"Come, let us pack away my mother's well intentioned, but unwelcome gift, and see what else I have forgotten in these crates. I am sure there was a particularly nice lantern in here somewhere that I thought might be suitable for the bathroom."

He let the task of replacing the items back in the crate distract them both, though there was a pensiveness about Mr Graham that he didn't like. If he had just remembered about the perfume bottles before, he could have set them aside, unopened, and this would never have happened.

In an effort to break the mood, he made himself launch into a story about the lantern that he quickly dug out from another box. He wasn't a natural storyteller by any means, but being aboard a ship, you learned to make your own entertainment with what you had. It helped him now as he described the outing that had led them through the moroccan streets accompanied by two companions from his ship, Laura Marswell and David Montbreck in search of some amazing restaurant they had never actually found. It had left them in the center of a market street and perfectly happy to be so.

"She ended up buying a new hat as well as a curved dagger in a fancy sheathe and was very well pleased either way. We found a couple of stalls selling sweet breads later on and went back to the ship with our various purchases, triumphant. I hung the lantern for a while in the cabin we all shared, but while it was nice, it wasn't exactly practical for a ship, not when the weather got roudy."
He carefully set a candle within it, and held up the lantern for the other man to see. The coloured glass, with its intricate metal surround, shed its light around the place, creating shadows and warmth that he liked.

"Perhaps not in this room," he said, looking around at the play of light in the dining room, "but somewhere without as much decoration perhaps. I thought the bathroom, to add a little warmth and interest. It isn't exactly a particularly ornate room, after all."

He held it up by the chain for a few moments longer, letting it spin slowly there, before carefully extracting the candle once more and setting it aside.

"I lost touch with her, actually. I think she ended up taking a post based in Hull, but she could have moved by now. She was ambitious and level-headed enough that she might have her own ship by now. I should probably write and find out how she is doing."

They lapsed back into silence, punctuated by Mrs Becket coming in with some tea and light snacks before retreating once more.

"What about this one?"

He looked over to where Mr Graham had unwrapped a tin mug. It was such a common item, especially in warfare when everyone had them as standard, but this one hadn't been his.

Moving over, he picked up the mug and let his fingers trace around the rim and over the slightly dented shape. It had been painted once, on the outside, but little of it remained now, just flecks of it here and there, usually in the dents where multiple handling hadn't worn it away. His fingers found those bits now, his thumb rubbing softly back and forth over them, remembering the cheerful smile and how he had always used the mug for his dice, ones that still sat at the bottom of it now. He had called it his lucky mug.

"Oh, this is a standard issue military cup. More of a sentimental piece, I suppose. It was owned by Midshipman Bannery, whom I shared a ship with for a number of years. I had forgotten I stored it in these boxes."

He could still remember those light grey eyes and the ready smile. War was filled with serious men, and Bannery was always a welcome presence of levity when things became too much. He was always with the jokes, the gambling and the personal bets that often took them through towns on some farcical trip or another. He could still remember the man's laugh, one that started like a bark but often ended up filling the room, with him doubled over with it, especially when it infected others into doing the same.

The loss of the man had hit hard. Bannery, for all his foolishness, was well-liked, but had also helped keep them all together. By the time they had been out there in the forest, with Bannery earnest and serious telling him to drink a pint for him if he came back or not, most of their original group was long gone, most having taken voluntary retirement or transferred into a role not unlike his own was now.

It had just been them there that day, stuck trying to organize the raw recruits they had been given into some semblance of a force when the situation had arisen. They both knew that if one of them didn't go, those trapped civilians were as good as dead. Bannery had gone, for they both understood that the recruits wouldn't have followed his orders as well. Too jovial, too much like a friend rather than a commanding officer.

A shot through the abdomen had killed him, but not before he had managed to get the civilians into
range of their defences. It had been relatively quick, that death, bled out from a ruptured artery, which was a blessing all things considered. He had seen men left dying for days, screaming in agony for most of it, and in that it had been some justice to the world, for no man deserved to die like that, but least of all Bannery.

"Perhaps not a piece to be put on display in the house."

The voice of Mr Graham brought him back to the present. Aware that he had just been standing there staring at the mug without saying anything for longer than was polite, his scent likely sour. He forced himself to take a step back from the past, letting a wry smile apologize for his momentary displacement into memory.

"Yes. It would be far better positioned in my office at work. It might do some good there then."

Mr Graham remained silent as he carefully wrapped the mug with its dice back up in the newsprint, and set it aside. Of all the people, Bannery would never have wanted people to mourn over him, not like this. A drink, a laugh and some celebration of his best or most daring endeavours was more his style, but it was difficult when the memory of such brightness was something that was still raw.

"A reminder," he continued, knowing he should offer more to the man who had come for a peaceful evening, rather than whatever this mood was that had taken him, "for when the youngsters I now train become tiresome with their posturing, that I should continue to persevere. Midshipman Bannery was often considered a joke on the ship for his behaviour, but he was serious when it was necessary. He was a good soldier, and he died rescuing civilians just over a year ago now."

"War isn't a great time to mourn a friend."

Lieutenant Anderson smiled a little, knowing the downturn on his mouth said well enough the truth of the matter.

"I couldn't get to him while he died. Too busy getting the civilians to safety and dealing with the enemy that had us locked down. When I managed to get there, he was long gone. He had been watching us though, so he knew the people were safe. He had that at least."

The silence and Bannery's vacant stare had been difficult to deal with at the time. He still dreamed about it sometimes. There was no way he could have done anything, not for a wound like that, but he had wished he had been able to be there in the end. Perhaps it was better though, for he knew the man would have put on a brave face, a smile and a laugh no matter that he was in agony and dying, he would have forced himself to do so, to ease the burdens of others.

He hoped that Bannery had known how greatly he valued his friendship, that he would miss him. For all his joviality and abundant friendliness, Anderson had often thought him lonely.

A hand on his arm brought him back to the present once more, and he looked to Mr Graham.

"I apologize, Mr Graham. I find myself a poor host, getting so caught up in the past. I am not usually so morose, I assure you. Someday I shall tell you of his various exploits, which are well worthy of a tale or two."

"I should like to hear them, someday."

He nodded, and set aside the wrapped memory, turning instead to the others, picking out a larger piece from a crate that he knew held nothing painful for him. It had been unfortunate that he had noted the mug at all while Mr Graham was here. What would the man think, with him turning so quickly towards melancholy? He forced himself to focus on the present, on the company and the
hope for the future. The large bowl he unwrapped and set on the table was an interesting piece he could distract himself with, long enough he hoped that the memory of Bannery could be set aside until he was once more alone.

He had only thought to share some of the curiosities he had brought back from another land, not a wounded piece of his soul.

In truth, they had worked their way through most of the crates already, and there was little left except a few more pieces tucked away in the corners. At the sight of one he was unwrapping, it was with equal parts embarrassment and relief at an item that would bring amusement rather than melancholy, that he set the newsprint aside and chuckled looking at it.

"Of course not all of my purchases were necessarily in good taste," he said by way of explanation, not wishing to appear as though he thought the vase was worthy of a place on the mantle.

"Why on earth did you buy it?"

He was gratified to hear the laughter in the voice of the other man as he came over to take a closer look at one of the most hideous vases he had ever come across in all his travels. He couldn't fault the man for that, it was, after all, one of the reasons he had brought it out. No need for the mood to remain dour after earlier findings. It was a rendition of a stylised face done in browns and hints of green far more reminiscent of the leavings of a sick dog than anything that should be shown in public.

"It made me laugh for how bad it was. Supposedly it was meant to be lucky," Anderson said, "Lucky for the seller I suppose, seeing as how I bought it from him."

Perhaps, he thought, he should send it to his mother.

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Later that evening, Will was pacing his room while Price sat nearby playing cards on one of the side-tables. Will had been restless ever since returning from Lieutenant Anderson's home, and while he had sat through dinner in relative peace, his visible agitation had only resurfaced afterwards when they were alone.

"You going to tell me what's the matter?" Price asked, glancing over to Will as he turned over another card, leaning back in his chair to better look at the omega.

At the question, the pacing had ceased, but Will had not answered, instead choosing to look out the window into the growing darkness beyond the house.

"I thought you liked Anderson," Price tried again, assuming that this was the source of the current troubles, or at least part of it.

Will sighed and his shoulders slumped a little.

"I do like him. It would be easier if I didn't."

He ran a hand through his hair, the easy waves now looking far more unruly. It wouldn't matter any, since he had no need to be further sociable tonight. Price merely made a small inquisitive sound that invited a better answer, turning over another card.

"I like him, Price. He's a good man. An honest one. An earnest one."
"So what's the problem? You like him. He likes you. Doesn't have to be more complicated than that."

Will sighed again and sat down heavily on the edge of the bed, looking over to his friend.

"I don't even know that he was aware of what he was doing, Price. I don't think he has been around many omegas. I don't think he was prepared for how much more open it was letting him be with me there. He's got wounds from his service, not physical ones, that I know of. I had forgotten just how many people he would have seen die. It's so easy to think of the uniform just as a job, not as the warfare he has faced."

Price was silent, letting Will's thoughts run through the problem that he still wasn't grasping, though was starting to get an inkling of. Eventually, when no more words came, he hazarded a guess.

"You don't want to leave him with more wounds."

The sour scent of Will's depression and anguish told the truthfulness of that thought even before he nodded.

"He's already started nesting."

Price snorted a little, "Nesting?"

"Yes. Everyone always thinks it's just an omega thing, but alphas do it to, just differently. They don't make a nest in the bedchamber, but they start trying to make the house perfect to accommodate their mate. They make new furniture purchases, move things around, see to better locks and security, consider renovation projects to make the house more suitable. It's its own sort of nesting. Usually it doesn't happen until later in courtship, but he's started already."

"I guess he is really invested in being there for you. It isn't a bad thing, Will."

Will made a frustrated and anxious sound, and was once more up and pacing.

"But it is! Don't you see? With another omega, it would be wonderful. But this won't lead anywhere for him except another wound on his soul. I don't want to be the cause of any more of those, Price. I don't."

Price sighed softly and put down his cards and regarded Will. He wanted desperately to go to the omega and physically comfort him, but knew that was out of the question. Only his words would be able to do that, and only then if he found the right ones.

"Will, it's his own choice, no matter what the outcome. He knows well enough that you have remained unmated for a long time. You shouldn't consider rejecting someone because they DO like you. He is allowed to make his own decisions on the matter. Don't treat him like a child who can't be trusted to see to their own welfare. No alpha would thank you for that."

The agitation sort of drained out of Will as he stood there, looking back over to Price, seeming smaller and more fragile. His anguish was still thick in the air, but this was not unusual, though it often took all of Price's self-control not to react to it.

"I don't want to hurt him, Price."

"I know you don't, kiddo, but that isn't your decision to make. It's his choice to court you, and fate's choice for the mating. Let things fall where they will. Now come on, I'm tired of playing cards on my own. Get over here and shuffle."
Bloom Residence, London - Monday the 9th of November, morning

Moving quietly along the corridor, Will knocked lightly on the study door before slipping inside when Humphrey called out from within. It was still early, but Will had been awake for hours after another nightmare, and had taken some light breakfast just after dawn, thus avoiding the breakfast table today.

At seeing him, Humphrey set down the morning paper and gave him his full attention, letting him speak in his own time, but the expectation was that he would speak, now that he had come to him.

"I was hoping to visit with Mr Brightly today," he said, unable to stop the slight flinch from the sound of Jack's raised voice from elsewhere in the house. "Do you think the carriage will be available?"

Although the destination of the visit was true enough, he didn't think Humphrey was under any illusions as to the real reason he wanted away from the house, nor why he was asking him, rather than Jack, who generally had the final say on such things.

Humphrey paused a moment before standing.

"Wait here, please."

Will watched him move past and out the door, careful, always, to close it behind him, preserving the sanctity of the study.

He sat himself down to wait, but soon found himself too restless in his anxiety to stay put, ending up pacing around the room, though never in direct line of sight from the door.

It had only been five days since the rather disastrous dinner at Mr Frampton's house, and between that and Jack’s increasingly foul mood over the lack of progress with the murder, his nerves were poorly settled. At least he would be doing minimal damage to the study’s air, as he had already bathed and put on the scent blockers in hope of a quick exit. The last thing he needed right now was for Jack to get so frustrated with the case as to demand his presence for something related to it. He knew himself well enough to understand he wasn't up to that, or Jack's presence right now.

Thankfully it was Humphrey, not Jack, who entered the study once more.

"You are ready to go? That is good. Take the back stairs, and meet Peter in the kitchen. Do you need anything retrieved from your rooms?"

Will shook his head. Usually he might have brought one of his own projects to work on, but there would be ample to do in the workshop.

He paused at the door, looking back to the alpha who had undoubtedly stretched the truth with Jack to allow him this. He was more grateful for that than he perhaps should have been, but this was his life now.

"Thank you."

The alpha nodded a little in acknowledgement, and Will slipped out the door, heading towards temporary freedom.

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Humphrey waited until after the door had clicked shut and he couldn't hear the soft footfalls any more before turning away. He closed his eyes and tried to push back the anger that threatened to overflow into the room.

None of this was right.

Will shouldn't have to come to him, begging for use of the carriage like a child, when in truth, had the fates been kind, he should have been the head of his own household for over a decade and a half now. But worse by far was the fact that Will, whose comfort had always been in their home, was now feeling forced from it.

Truly, if he felt he might have any joy in the endeavour, he would have gone to Jack about it, or even Alana, whose household it truly was, or should be. He might even have challenged Jack again for the head position, if he thought he would have any chance at it. But the years were taking their toll, and Jack was a younger and more physically adept man, and he knew well what the results would be, and there would be no benefit felt from such a course of action.

He clenched and unclenched his hands until the physical agitation eased back enough that he could see to gathering the things he would need for the day. Should Will not have found a mate by the end of this season, he could at least see about calling in some of his investments early and buying Will his own carriage. That, at least, he could do.

With this thought in mind, trying to ease his mood by way of a plan of action, he picked up his case and made his way down the stairs, nodding to Nathan on the way past. He could feel the lingering look from the other alpha, and knew his agitation must still be showing. If he noticed it, then Will surely would. Pausing in the hallway to try and ease some of the tension from his form, he picked up his own coat, as well as Will's before he headed to the kitchen, where Price was already waiting with Will.

"Your coat," he said, holding it for him. It said a lot about his own struggle for control that Will let him hold it for him while he put it on, despite his aversion to proximity. Will had always been very astute, and would have known that it eased something in him to aid him in this small way. "We should go now, while the rest of the family is still at breakfast."

To credit Will, while he looked surprised at the fact that he was coming along, he said nothing, merely moved out the back door where the smaller carriage was waiting, neither of them wishing to deal with the unnecessary antagonism that Jack's presence would surely produce in all of them. They would be taking the smaller carriage, not only because he knew Will preferred the relative anonymity of it, but also because Jack cared less about asking for particulars of his errands that day if he didn't take the larger carriage. Jack wanted to use that one, after all.

Getting in, Will sat himself on the far side of the carriage, where he wouldn't be easily seen from the house windows. Humphrey felt another surge of protective anger at the necessity. All the years he had spent making their home feel like a haven for the family, and Jack was ruining it all.

"You didn't need to come with me. I would have been fine with Price and Peter. I've never had any problems at the shop before."

Will's voice brought his attention to the present, letting him know that his mood was once more slipping into the public domain, and he carefully let out a breath. This wasn't about him, nor his feelings over the matter. Letting such destructive thoughts taint the area would do no-one any good.

"I had no plans for today that could not be just as adequately done in Mr Brightly's workshop. It is of no trouble to find my morning thus changed. I apologize for my mood, as the cause is not your
doing, and I shall endeavour to improve it forthwith."

No, if Will couldn't find adequate respite in the house, at least he could be there to ensure that another refuge remained as such. Price, while a stalwart friend to Will, just didn't have enough drive or presence to provide that against a strong opposition. Humphrey knew he worried though, far more than he had in their younger years. It showed in how little Price would be found anywhere but at Will's side. He was not the only one who was concerned, but until Alana did something about it, their hands were tied.

The rest of the journey was made without additional conversation, allowing Will to his own thoughts, and Humphrey to get a better grip on his ornery mood.

When they got to the shop, it was a little after 9 o'clock, and while there was plenty of traffic around this time, it was mostly business and trade related, and required little of his attention. He sent Peter off for the time being, with a request to return with lunch for them all later on, and then followed Will and Price inside.

Mr Brightly was much as he ever was; still gruff and bordering on unhelpful and rude, but they had known each other for years now, and he could easily see the man's pleasure at having Will come for the day.

"I suppose you will be wanting me to make a space for you too then," the old beta said to him, and Humphrey inclined his head, responding to the words as they were intended, as an invitation, rather than the imposition they were phrased as.

"I would appreciate that, Mr Brightly, thank you."

So it would be that he was seated in the corner of the small workshop, surrounded on all sides by boxes and clock parts, and certainly no space to stretch one's legs out. The seat was not what one might call comfortable, but it was the most comfortable one available. Price took the other and went to sit out in the tiny square of yard out the back door, the workshop barely being big enough for two people, nevermind four. The other alpha didn't mind though, preferring that to being cooped up in the tiny room, though he would have done so without quibble for Will, who was even now perched on one of the stools, peering at the inner workings of a clock, the one currently seemingly being the prioritised for fixing out of the cacophony of the rest.

Humphrey was just getting out some papers from his desk when Mr Brightly was manhandling boxes off the table in front of him before dragging out another from under it and putting it down in their stead. He had forgotten that the beta had one of these portable writing slopes, and it eased some of his own mood to have been catered to in this way.

"I don't have no fresh ink except for the shop leger, so don't think you will be finding any."

The gruff, almost unfriendly words made the urge to smile difficult to withhold, but somehow he managed. The man was incapable of being seen as helpful or pleasant, or of showing the dissatisfaction he held over not being able to provide, and tended to dissuade others of the notion as much as possible.

"That was thoughtful of you, thank you. You need not concern yourself over the ink and suchlike, as I would not put you to such trouble. I brought some with me."

There was only a grunt in response as he moved away. You would never know it from the actions really, but Humphrey could smell the pleased gratification in the air as the older man made his way back over to Will.
The morning passed in relative peace, Humphrey alternating between writing needful correspondences and reading the morning paper, as the mood took him. The workshop was mostly quiet, though the odd question or conversational splurge between the two horologists broke up the silence, that and the gruff cursing from Mr Brightly when something didn't work correctly.

Peter returned briefly to bring them lunch from home before departing once more to visit his sister. As the four of them sat around a hastily cleared table, Mrs Platts once again proved her skill beyond the norm, for Mr Brightly's tongue refrained from making any comment upon it. Proof indeed of it's excellence.

The morning had yielded few interruptions, three people having come in to drop off or collect clocks, and one having entered on the hope of directions to the nearest library. It wasn't until mid-afternoon that something came up that required his more dedicated attention.

Mr Brightly was once more in the shop front dealing with a customer. At first Humphrey had thought little of it, until the scent of Will's growing unease started to fill the small space of the workshop. Although he had noted that Will had been wearing the scent blockers that morning, those things had only a limited usefulness of a few hours before having to be reapplied, or sooner if the person was too hot or exerting themselves.

He looked up from his paper and over to Will, trying to see what it was that had caused his nerves, and seeing nothing in the particular vicinity focused his mind on the sounds from the storefront.

"And so I came back in to ask whether you could make it quieter. It is such a lovely clock, but so noisy!"

The voice was vaguely familiar, but not someone he particularly recognised from closer acquaintance. However, the tightening of Will's shoulders as he valiantly pretended nothing was wrong, said clearly enough that Will certainly did. A colleague perhaps, or a former suitor?

Either way, they were safe enough from having to deal with them back here, out of the public view. He looked back to his paper, though kept an ear on the conversation going on beyond the door, the distinctive tone of Mr Brightly filling the space.

"I guess I could look at putting something on the inside panels to dampen the sound."

"What? Oh, no, I don't want anything added to it! Can't you just jiggle the gears a bit or something, to make it quieter? I came here because you came highly recommended. I only like the best, you know."

"I might be the best in these parts, dependin' on who you speak to, Mr Froideveaux, but I ain't no magic fairy. I follow the laws of the earth like everyone else. Now do you want it quieter or not?"

"Well, I suppose so, but only if it won't show on the outside. It won't, will it? I wouldn't want anything to detract from how it looks. I never thought it would be such a large task at all! It will still be ready before midwinter? I really do need it for then. I am having people around, a great many, and I did so want it to be back in its place. I mean, the sitting room just isn't in a fit state without it!"

"The case is wood, Mr Froideveaux, it won't show. It ain't a large task."

"Oh, that's good then, but you are sure it won't show in some way?"

Humphrey listened as Mr Brightly became less amiable, clearly just wanting the man gone from the shop. The amount of restraint he was using when dealing with customers said well enough how he still remained in business. That he had not just told Mr Froideveaux to get out of his shop already
showed the clock was either an interesting one, or a needfully lucrative one.

"Look, why don't I just bring it through and show you," Mr Brightly could be heard saying, before the door to the workshop was opened and the man himself entered, going to one of the many shelves to pick up a large mantle clock, before exiting again. "There, see, the panels would sit here on the inside beside the mechanism. Nothing would be visible. So, do you want me to do it?" A pause, then, "Mr Froideveaux?"

Will shifted in his chair, enough that it drew Humphrey's gaze to him once more. Any pretence of working on the clock mechanism in front of him had been given up, and his gaze was flickering up towards the door to the shop front, his body angled so he could better see any threat from that direction.

It made Humphrey's earlier anger resurface, to see Will feeling threatened by the presence of the alpha on the other side of the door. Something that only grew at hearing the words beyond it.

"Mr Brightly, do you have an omega in your workshop? You really shouldn't, what with all the smell of oil and being so terribly cramped. Omegas don't like it you know. It's understandable that you wouldn't know, being a beta you can't small it like I can, but they are quite anxious being in there."

"Shows what you know," came the gruff reply, Mr Brightly's unusually restrained manners starting to slip.

"Really, I must insist you bring them out of there. I can't imagine how terrible it must be for them! All that ticking would surely drive anyone insane."

"Then you had best be on your way, for I've been working with clocks for over 40 years."

"No, I shall not! If you won't bring them out, then surely it is my duty to see to their care. I cannot stand to find a jewel of society trapped in such conditions!"

Humphrey had heard enough. He was just setting aside his newspaper and rising when Price came in the back door, having scented Will's growing unease. They locked eyes for a moment, before Price's stance relaxed at the understanding that Humphrey would deal with whatever this was.

He stepped out of the workroom and surveyed the scene, and it only took him a moment to understand why Will had reacted the way he did, but also that this rather rotund alpha was no match for him.

The urge to lash out was strong, to show this inferior his place for having distressed a member of his family, even unknowingly. This was something that only grew when he fully realized who this alpha was. Years it had been since Mr Froideveaux had first tried to court Will, and who had, despite social protocols, despite rejections, had refused to take that denial and continued to hound Will. The perfusion of letters lately had only been the latest in a long line of ways the man had stalked Will for his attention, and Humphrey was at the end of his patience with the man.

He could, he knew, find enough justification for taking physical recompense, to make him regret even thinking he could have someone as special as Will was, nevermind hounding him afterwards in his willful blindness.

But that would be wrong. He could justify it to a court judge, and he could justify it to his peers, but he could not justify it to himself, nor could he justify it to Will who always saw far more than anyone else.
Still, that did not mean he couldn't give the man a dressing down.

"Mr Froideveaux, is there a problem here?"

He set his question to the other alpha, not because he rated Mr Brightly's response any less. If anything the opposite was certainly true, but he also knew that the beta would far rather be rid of such an annoyance, and was offering him this to relieve him of the duty. Both of them knew that if Will was upset, as Mr Froideveaux had so rightly stated, that having the stability of Mr Brightly's company would be far more useful than lingering out here to deal with this misinformed fop. For all that the beta was about as grumpy as it was possible to be, it went unsaid but not unknown to them, that he was just as protective in his own way of his companion in clocks, as Humphrey was to his family.

At the sight of him there, Mr Froideveaux seemed to be momentarily stunned to silence. All his previous pomp and assertiveness failing him at the sight, not only of an alpha that was more powerful than him, but also one whom he was likely wanting to curry the favour of.

"Mr Layton! I did not expect to see you here," Mr Froideveaux said at last, the antagonistic tone gone in favour of one attempting to convey both pleasure and surprise. Humphrey supposed both were true, in their own ways, as Mr Froideveaux continued. "What brings you to this part of town? And in the workshop no less!"

"I am here conducting business. I shall, however, refrain from wasting Mr Brightly's time by indulging in idle chatter in his shop when he has work to do."

"Of course, of course, I would not wish to be a bother for all the world, but tell me, is it dear Mr Graham in there? I was quite worried, when I smelled the nervousness, but of course it makes far more sense now, that he would be here with you, for I had heard that he liked tinkering with such things. We share the love of such things, as you can see. I do adore the old clock. But if he is here, I should really like to speak with him. It has been an age, and I am sure he would be ever so pleased to see me. He has been so busy lately, that I have not seen him since the first ball! Of course, we write, but it isn't the same."

Humphrey could feel the irritation mounting within himself once more. This inadequate alpha just didn't understand or refused to understand the situation, even now. He himself had read the last letter that Will had sent to him, Will having wanted his opinion on it's content, and there had been really no question as to the cessation of the relationship, such as it was. And yet here Mr Froideveaux was, continuing to ignore not only the social cues, but also the very clear denials that had been offered. How dare this ignorant crud deign to continue to think himself worthy of Will's time in this way? It was beyond belief!

"No," Humphrey said, knowing that his voice was clipped, bordering on unfriendly, but it was perhaps better than laying into the man in other ways. "His time is not available to you."

This reaction seemed to make the younger alpha pause, shocked it seemed, at this unforeseen denial. Humphrey watched as the man's rather open face shifted through the different emotions, shock, denial, confusion and then settling on a roused anger.

"You cannot stop me from seeing him!" came the indignant reply, the rousing of that former presumptuous notion of entitlement. "Family are not allowed to keep omegas away from their suitors."

He should not have been surprised that it was this tact that the man thought to take. He could see clearly how greatly the denial had worked its way into the alpha's mind, how that stubborn blindness
kept him from understanding the truth. Humphrey was in little mood after this morning to be kind to those who bothered Will. He might not be able to deal with Jack, but he could deal with this upstart.

"That would indeed be the case, if you were his suitor. However, no matter how much you have convinced yourself otherwise, you are not. You were not chosen for a second meeting this year, and that would be proof enough of his decision on the matter. Had you the slightest ounce of sense, you would have bowed out gracefully and sought companionship elsewhere. But your continued hounding for his attention forced him to make the matter clearer by writing to you after your many letters, but even so, you continued to write.

"As you will not listen to Mr Graham's opinion on the matter, I shall force you to do so to mine. You are not, and will not be the suitor or mate to Mr Graham, now or ever. The very fact that you choose to ignore his words only proves this. You shall not attempt to meet with him, nor write, nor contact him in any other way. Should you happen to be in the same place by coincidence, you will merely offer whatever civil greeting is appropriate and go your own way. If you send gifts or letters, they will be returned unopened. You shall not make any attempt to follow or create meetings, or in any other way try to win his favour, time or companionship. If you do, we shall meet again and it shall be more than words of warning that I shall give you. Do we understand each other, Mr Froideveaux? Have I, at least, been clear enough for you on the matter?"

It might not have been as potentially satisfying as using his fist, but the stunned and crumbled visage on Mr Froideveaux's face had its own appeal in this particular scenario. Humphrey stood there, guardian between the unworthy alpha and the doorway that led to Mr Graham. He prided himself that although his anger and dominance might be felt in the room, his face showed nothing but detached disdain for such a man.

He waited, and it took over 45 seconds, each marked by the ticking of the clocks, for Mr Froideveaux to finally find voice.

"But we are in love!"

"No, Mr Froideveaux, there is no 'we' in this case. I suggest you leave."

Humphrey could see him struggling between the warring instincts, the clearly strong desire to see Will, either now or later, while at the same time logic as well as the ingrained instinct to bow out when faced with an alpha whose presence and power far exceeded his own were likely screaming at him to follow the order. It was an order, of course, rather than a suggestion, as they both knew. Humphrey was in no mood to be in the presence of the man any longer and had since unleashed his hold on his aura enough that it swept through the shop, making it quite inhospitable for the other alpha to remain there.

Logic, as well as the instinct for survival seemed to win over, for Mr Froideveaux backed away, not willing, as anyone would around a dangerous predator, to turn his back on him, until he fumbled for the door handle and the sudden sounds of the street filled the room. Humphrey's gaze followed the man as he all but threw himself into the waiting carriage and it sped off.

With a sedate pace, he made his way to the front of the shop, to the door that had been left open, and drew it closed, though did open one of the small windows in the shop-front to help air the room out. There was a certain amount of satisfaction in this; seeing to the orderliness of the shop, securing the boundaries and making things right again. His own scent, made in anger and contempt, had burned out any lingering scent of the other alpha, and he made himself stay there, letting his thoughts turn to more pleasant things, and letting that scent ease the shop air in turn. It had been something his own father had taught him, and after seventeen minutes, the storefront was instead filled with the hints of satisfied alpha, something that would not disrupt any further customers that day.
He moved back through to the workshop, his pace remaining sedate as he closed the door behind him and moved back to his position where the newspaper and his correspondences waited. His gaze coasted over the room, ensuring that all was well, before seating himself once more. Like his own, Will's scent had eased in the room, and Price offered him a bright smile before taking his book back out to enjoy what was left of the sunshine. There were hints of Price's scent lingering like satisfaction in the air.

For the first time that day, Humphrey truly felt his mood ease. It had been the right thing to come out here today. He had made a difference for his family, eased a situation and prevented another. It was with a slightly melancholy turn that he realized how he had missed this, the feeling of being needed by an omega. How long had it been since Alana had truly turned to him for that?

Refusing to let his thoughts sour the air, he turned instead to an article on the overseas market changes, and let the details fill his mind, while the sounds and scents of the workshop worked their own charm upon him. It was the way of things, he reminded himself, that the older found new tasks in a family when younger and more able alphas came to the fore.

It was the way of things

Chapter End Notes

Here we are, a chapter as promised. :)  

I didn't manage to get the holiday for rest and recouperation that I had hoped for, as life decided to throw a heap of things on me just after I posted the last chapter, so yeah. But this chapter is done, and I am not as behind any more, so there's that.

I am also aware that I have sort of gone off a bit on a tangent with sidestories with the family this and next chapter, so please bear with me on that. I know there hasn't been as much of Hannibal yet as I know many of you were hoping for, but that will change, I promise. Perhaps I should change the tag to 'very slow burn' lol.
Crossing the street, Lieutenant Anderson made his way past a few up-market businesses until he came to one in particular, before making his way up the steps, the brass handrails gleaming in the evening light. The door in front of him was opened by a uniformed doorman, to whom he nodded in thanks before making his way inside.

The interior of the alpha-only club was dim but welcoming after the sharp daylight he had just left. The rich, deep hues were pleasant, and, as he took off his coat and handed it to the concierge, a glance at the large clock beside the double-breasted staircase told him he was in good time. Not a man who was tardy by nature, the Lieutenant had none-the-less made sure to be slightly earlier for this particular appointment.

He was not a stranger to places like this that catered to alphas wishing for a place for meetings or relaxation, and had been here a number of times since returning to town. So it was that he moved upstairs without concern for his surroundings, nor those in it. He might not know those that frequented the establishment by name, but there was a certain etiquette involved in places like this that appealed to his sense of order and approval of established rules.

Despite his being in good time, he found that he was not the only one who had decided upon being early, for there was a gentleman already seated at the table that had been reserved for them. He had not known what to expect, having never met the man before, and the sheer difference in their looks alone was substantial.

"Dr Lecter, I presume?" he asked as he came up to the table, offering his hand in greeting.

The man was slender and impeccably dressed by the standards of the town. Unlike Anderson himself, who had dressed in his uniform, not only because it was easier but because he was coming directly from work, Dr Lecter was in a suit of dove grey, and even to his relatively untrained eye it was clearly expensive and well tailored.

Having risen at his approach, Dr Lecter's grip was firm, but not too firm. Much like the handshake that was offered, the Doctor's own was measured to be sturdy but not overbearing. There was much you could tell about a handshake, Anderson had found over the years, and this one gave little away about its owner other than good manners.

"Lieutenant Anderson, I am glad you could make it. Please join me. The waiter will be up shortly. Your day has gone well, I trust?"

The foreign accent was noticeable, but not overpowering as some could be. If anything, it added a
touch of further sophistication to the man, not that he needed it. The charisma he could see just as easily, and for all that the man was a surgeon in skill, it was clear from the outset that charm was something that Dr Lecter was also liberally gifted with.

"Quite well, thank you. The current batch of recruits have started remembering to tie their own bootlaces, so I suspect at least some of them will make it through base training in the next decade or two."

He let his tone remain light and friendly, for all that the conversation between them was likely to turn more serious soon enough. Neither of them had come here merely for an idle banter, after all.

Still, they kept it light while they ordered their drinks and then waited for them to be brought.

Lieutenant Anderson was no novice when it came to making fairly fast judgements on people's character or motives. It was necessary for the job he did, especially aboard a ship when mood could swing as fast as storms could rise. He could see the calculating gaze of the chief surgeon as they talked idly, how each word, each gesture was measured and executed with just as much precision as his work must entail. He knew he would have to be careful around this man, for although outwardly friendly, his instincts were prickling him with hints of potential danger, no matter that he could not feel any significant power from the man. He had not survived as he had by ignoring his instincts.

Finally though, both having their drinks in hand, and having taken a cursory sip to wet the mouth, casual conversation was set aside as Dr Lecter turned it towards the true reason for their meeting.

"With it being just over five weeks until midwinter, I asked you here today in order to discuss Mr Graham."

It didn't come as a surprise that Dr Lecter was adept at conversation. What little he knew of the man, and that was indeed little, was that he was unusually competent in fields of discussion. For now, he nodded, letting the man lead the topic, the carefully crafted words telling their own story.

"With the two of us being the only remaining contenders for Mr Graham's affections this season," the Doctor continued, "It seemed wise to meet and see if there might be grounds for an accord between us."

That there were only two of them left was news to him. It seemed somehow so unlikely that such a vast swathe of alphas hoping for Mr Graham's affections had been so swiftly reduced to just two, and yet he didn't disbelieve the information. No, Dr Lecter used this like the conspicuous use of currency, showing not only his superior knowledge, but also his potential benevolence in offering it. He had met people like that before, though the man opposite him wielded it with a greater sense of ease than most.

"I had not kept track, trusting Mr Graham's judgement on the matter," he said, acknowledging both his lack of prior knowledge, likely known, and his stance on dealing with rivals for Mr Graham's affections. While it was fairly common practice to fend off other alphas during courtship, it had never been his intent to partake of that particular skill-set unless he felt there was some intrinsic detriment to the omega involved.

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It might have surprised or even shocked other people that someone like Dr Lecter, so upstanding in the community, might do such a thing, but Lieutenant Anderson had lived and worked with a great number of alphas for the majority of his life now, and he could well imagine it in most people these days. The pristine gentleman across from him was no exception in this. That the man had somehow managed to reduce the number of contenders so swiftly only showed his ruthlessness on the matter, that pleasant facade hiding less than it usually would to someone less experienced in the world.
"I prefer being prepared whenever possible," Dr Lecter said, the tiniest hints of a smile there in the muscles over those sharp cheekbones. Not merely pleasant, but self-satisfied in his situation.

He had met an alpha like this before, a woman in Morocco. She had been so very splendid, and much admired. Everything she did was carefully planned and executed, with nothing left to chance. Not her attire, her speech, her gestures, not the secrets of those around her, nor even the circumstances she found herself in. Anderson remembered her smiling disdain, the casual cruelties and the utter self-absorption of her actions. If it was not done her way, she found ways to turn it and wreak revenge upon those who might have disturbed her plans.

He got the same sort of feeling from the man sitting opposite him, for although Dr Lecter's mask was by far better fitting than hers had been, being almost flawless, it was his experiences with her that not only let him guess some of the things behind that mask, but that there was even one at all. Could he really trust Mr Graham's happiness, even in courtship, to such a man if he was indeed like her?

"You do not strike me, Dr Lecter, as a man of idle fancies," he said, his words slightly slower in his caution. He remembered well how Ms. Martin had been so driven, so fixated on her goals, no matter that it might have appeared causal to the general observer, but he had seen flashes of obsession in her eyes at times. "Unlike yourself, Mr Graham is not a man easy in society. How do you see such a relationship resolving itself?"

The Doctor sat across from him looking pleasant and at ease, and probably was. It wasn't as if he was attempting to rile the man; if anything, experience had taught him that the opposite was the safest option in this case. The Doctor's smile was easy as he replied, his tone slightly indulgent.

"With my support, of course. I expect the mating will ease at least some of his anxieties, and venturing into society need not be as regular an occurrence as it is now, nor as troublesome. A small gathering of close friends is considerably different to being cast, largely unprotected, into a ball to fend for himself."

The man was persuasive, especially in this case when he too had felt discontent at Mr Graham's unease at the ball. He nodded, having seen, acutely, how even with family there it had been too much for the man. He remembered too, how it had been the head alpha of his family who had compounded that by his actions.

"It did not sit well with me, seeing him struggling," he agreed, though he did not let himself get distracted from the heart of his concern. "And what if he should wish to stay home?"

"Then, unless circumstances prevented it, we would stay home. I do not know what sort of impression you have of my life Lieutenant, but a great deal of my time when not working is spent in the house. I am not a social butterfly, to flit from one thing to the next, but rather choose my outings with care."

He remembered how each word, each action by Ms. Martin had been utterly calculated for the best effect. Nothing was left to chance.

"Yes, I expect you do."

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Later that evening, sitting in his chair in the living room, Lieutenant Anderson thought back on that meeting. While it had not been easy to guess the man's motives, some of them at least seemed fairly certain, such as why he was looking into creating an accord.
With how many years the man had put into his work, building up his skillset and then getting the position as head surgeon, it was little trouble to assume that he would not wish to give up such a role, especially as it would be one of his main incomes, though he had heard that the Lecters were a moneymaker family somewhere in Europe. But keeping that job would mean time away from the home, and with only one alpha, that would largely be impossible, or at least impractical.

To be certain, Dr Lecter would likely have quite a few servants already, and some of them could see to security, but not in the way an alpha could. Likewise, with Mr Graham being so sought-after as he was, it would only increase the danger of other alphas coming to try and claim his affections, if he was left unprotected. He himself had already spoken with his superiors before having taken this post, and would be giving it up if and when he became mated, or at least until their family grew to include others who could aid in that role.

But a job like chief surgeon would not merely hold for a few years, and skills would be lost, while other alphas might step up to take that position. Dr Lecter could not, perhaps, wait for a future year to find another alpha strong enough to protect the home, and what better a situation than to engage the agreement of a military alpha whom Mr Graham had already shown a preference.

That Dr Lecter saw himself, unquestionably, as the head alpha was a given, and not something that Anderson could really judge yet, having not felt his aura. He didn't mistake his more slender build for being weak, having seen many different types of people over the years perform feats in combat. But could he really agree, could he live with being only second in Mr Graham's life, when he might be first without the agreement? Could he agree, when it would mean a man he suspected of such selfish motivations would then rule over the house?

He sighed and leaned back in his chair, his eyes closing. All of this worry might be for nothing anyway, for there had been no clear question between them, merely testing of boundaries and beliefs. Dr Lecter may well have merely asked him there in order to gauge how strong a rival he might be, and had no intent on any accord at all. Only time would tell, he supposed, if they were to meet again to further the discussion in future.

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**Bloom Residence, London - Wednesday 11th November, morning**

Smoothing down his suit, Humphrey moved out of the study and into the house proper. It was late morning, and by now Jack and Zeller had left for work, the children would have been dressed, fed and would be in their task of learning better to read. The rest of the family would be seeing to the day-to-day tasks that helped the running of the house. In short, it was the perfect time to seek out Alana for a chat that had perhaps been long overdue.

He found her in the front sitting room with Hettie, refreshing the flower arrangements there. Despite having had a poor night's sleep due to one of the children having had a bad dream, she still looked radiant to him.

"Alana, if I might have a few minutes of your time?"

Her smile, as always, lit a warmth in his chest, as she set aside the task in response to his request.

"Of course, Humphrey. I don't believe anyone is using the sun room right now, we could talk there."

He took her hand a moment, and pressed a kiss to the knuckles in thanks, before moving to the door and holding it for her, nodding to Hettie in gratitude for her putting up with the disruption to the task, before following Alana out.
She did not fill the corridors with chatter, likely gauging well enough his slightly more sombre mood. Still, this was not at all outside of the norm, for it was often as thus, with him coming to her when a situation with the family or household needed to be remedied, working together to find a solution. That hadn't changed, even though his status in the house had.

The sun room was still a bit chilled this time in the morning when the sunlight hadn't quite burned off the cold of the previous evening. They had had it built sixteen years ago now, so that she and Mrs Harris could have extra space for enjoying the sunlight when otherwise the cold outside might be restrictive. The scent of the potted plants there was pleasant, despite most not being winter flowering, and the view over the frost touched lawn was calmly sublime. He hoped that the view would soothe her in the coming discussion.

"I wanted to talk about Will, and the family at large," he said after she had turned to him in expectation of what he would have to say. "While change and adaptation to circumstances are at the heart of any family like ours as the dynamics alter, it has become clear to me that Will is increasingly finding these changes difficult to the point where he does not feel at ease in the family."

"You mean he is finding it difficult with Jack."

Her tone was of someone who had, perhaps, hoped for a different response from her conversant. That he had to be the bearer of such disappointment weighed upon him, but not enough to avoid it any longer.

"Yes, that is what I am meaning," he admitted, having known that such a statement would not go down well, but what else could he do, other than make her more aware of the issue? "Will is uneasy around him, and as the years pass, is becoming even more so, not less."

She folded her arms across her chest, but seemed to be indulging this conversation, at least as far as her irritation held back. He could understand if he had been bringing the same topic up for months, but this was the first time he had, in fact, spoken of it to any significant degree. Was there something else bothering her that he hadn't picked up on? She had seemed pleased enough to converse before now.

"Will is generally not easy around anyone," she said, "especially at this time of year when he is forced to be more active in society."

Her dislike of the conversation was building in the air, and yet he could see nothing of particular that would be upsetting her. Had Will himself irritated her lately with something, that she disliked the topic, or was it that she merely disliked him finding fault in Jack? Either way, he could not forgo this conversation with her any longer, not with Will's nerves only getting worse these last couple of years, when until then, they had become more stable, more predictable.

"It is more than that," he urged, "The times when they are in the same room tend to be the most fraught, but even being in the house at all at times when Jack is present leaves him uneasy these days. This in particular concerns me, because we have always tried to make the house a haven for him. "You can hardly call it Jack's fault that he doesn't pick up on quite as many subtle cues as the rest of us. He can't help that he's mostly noseblind."

So it was about Jack then. That was going to make it more difficult, certainly, since he generally felt that it was in fact Jack's fault. Still, her mood had to be mitigated or she would never listen to him properly, especially not in the sort of state of mind she seemed to be building herself into.

"I certainly do not hold such a thing against him," he said cautiously, "However I do not believe he is paying as much heed to those of us who are not similarly blinkered. You have been there yourself
when he ignored the rest of our reactions in preference for trying to pressure Will into changing his actions, because it suited him to do so. It's behaviour like that, which concerns me."

"We all do what we believe to be best."

"That is true, but this isn't only about his beliefs. He is head alpha of this family, and as such he should be seeing to the care of all the family, not merely his own agenda. I am not the only one who is worried over Will these last couple of years, nor the single-mindedness of Jack's drive."

She shook her head, a gesture of her hand dismissing his concerns as inconsequential. "You know very well that alphas in the first few years of mating are more driven to prove themselves."

He was trying, really trying to keep ahold of his irritation and frustration over her attitude around this, but it was difficult. She was barely even considering what he was saying before dismissing it. Still, his rising frustration would do no good here, though it took a long breath before he could reply with the civility he wished to be always known for.

"That I do, but it should never be at the detriment of the rest of the family. Unfortunately, it falls to you to check his behaviour. The rest of us cannot."

It was best, perhaps, to bring the conversation to a close sooner rather than later. He hoped at least to show that he himself was not here to attack Jack, but to ask her to ease his more demanding behaviour towards Will. That, surely, she could do. But as he looked at her, her chin tilted up and set in a way he was all too familiar with, it was only the stubbornness he found, and one that did not bode well for his hopes.

"I fail to see any reason for checking him, as you put it. Will might well be less comfortable with the change in the family dynamics, but perhaps that's what he needs. He has been unmated for so long that perhaps he needs to feel less comfortable here in order to find a mate. Jack says..."

"Jack says?" he interrupted, unable to help himself from doing so, "The last I checked, this is not House of Crawford, it is House of Bloom."

"You might not like it, but he IS the head alpha in this family now. You should proffer things for his judgement, as I have chosen to do in this matter."

He chose to try and ignore the way those words were made in such a way to check his behaviour, a reminder of what he had lost when Jack came around. It was difficult, but her anger and irritation at him worked their own biological magic, the curl of anger and frustration in him cast back and made smaller by her own distress. He had never wished to see her distressed, and certainly not be the cause of it.

"I would if I thought that judgement was sound, and good for the family," he said, his tone more conciliatory than he thought he might manage, but he had never liked her anger, and it burned him far more than perhaps she was aware. He couldn't temper his words too much though, for all that he wished to save her from them, for this wasn't about her, at least not only her. He was here for Will, and that need had not altered merely because of her tone.

"Really Humphrey?" she said, her eyes flashing, "You wish me to believe that you would capitulate to Jack’s judgement if it was ‘for the good of the family’? Yet here you are, tiptoeing your way around a concern over Will without actually bringing it to Jack, who is the one meant to be dealing with it. Are you sure you are not just jealous of the man you lost your position to?"

The hurt of those words, barbed to cause as much pain as possible, took his words from him. Of all
the reactions he had thought he might get from her, it was not this. She had never before used her quick wit to bleed the family, and that blood must have shown in his face and scent, for the fervour in her eyes softened a bit, became slightly uncertain as he finally found words for her.

"When have you ever known me to put myself before the needs of the family, Alana?"

He could see her struggle to mitigate the damage she had wrought, to find some way to undo some of those words that sat lodged in his chest while she held the other end of the rope on which it was tied.

"Oh stop being so over-dramatic, Humphrey. Will shall be fine. You just need to stop shifting the discontent of your position onto other things."

It couldn't be her fault, oh no, not sweet Alana whom everyone loved. It couldn't be her that caused the caustic wound in his chest, filled with the venom of her anger. He had to be overreacting, of course. That she would not even properly own the wound made it hurt all the more, and it was a struggle to keep his tone even and civil, but somehow he managed. Her words had been made to hurt, but he was not here for himself. He would bleed if it meant his family was happier and feeling safer in the home.

"Will is unhappy and uncomfortable here, Alana," he said at last, "and his freedoms are being curtailed by Mr Crawford, including being stopped from visiting Dr Lecter, your own favourite for his heat. Perhaps you should ask others in the family about it, then look again at just how biased you believe I am in this case."

He gave her a short bow of farewell, and did not reach for her hand, nor offer any placations of his own. She had done away with those and could cool in the wake of his exit.

His back straight, the wounded man made his way back through the house with the poise of a gentleman, returning to the study and the work needing done there. He had done what he could for now, little as that had turned out to be.

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**Bloom Residence, London - Wednesday 11th November, evening**

In his room that evening, Humphrey's thoughts were disrupted by a knock on the door. Looking over to it after he bid whomever it was to enter, he saw, to his inner disappointment, not Alana come to make amends, but Nathan.

A quick scan of the other alpha's demeanor and casual mode of dress told him well enough that he wasn't here to bring him some problem to solve, nor was it entirely social, for although they had taken sometimes to sharing an evening of cards or other past-time together, Nathan's expression was too serious. No, there was a determination to the other alpha's frame, and a slightly stubborn edge to his smile on greeting, that said such an evening of ambivalence was not to be had.

He turned away, not quite ready to face such an evening just yet, nor the reason for the necessity of it.

When the silence had lingered between them, each standing in the space of the room, apart, finally Nathan breached the air with a question when no other conversation was given.

"So, I hear that Millie finally got the go-ahead to invite her friend to the house for a trial run for a position here."

Humphrey nodded, though didn't turn towards the other alpha as he replied, "Yes. So long as Miss
Parker is competent and fits well with the rest of the family, there should be no real issue. She will likely have to take further training with one of the guilds though, as she is not as used to working in as large a household as this. If she fits in by late spring, I shall send the letters to inquire."

A pause then, when he might have offered more, perhaps an enquiry as to Nathan's day, or things that he might wish to talk about, but he knew without turning that such an easy topic would not be the remit of this evening. He did not turn, and he did not ask, and as the seconds ticked by, so Nathan spoke once more, his voice mild but stubborn, as he had known he would be.

"And the rest of the household, do you think they will be pleased of having another beta around?"

"Yes."

Unspoken words and silence lingered in the air, heavy with the weight of their years of friendship, ones that kept each of them standing in the room together, that kept Nathan there despite the resistance from the more dominant alpha.

"Humphrey," he said at last, his voice quieter, barely louder than a murmur, but heard by him just as clearly as had he shouted, "Do you need me tonight?"

The words were cautious, and Humphrey was aware of the distance that separated them, Nathan never having moved away from the door despite there being ample places to sit. He found his fingers gripping the back of the chair he had ended up standing in front of, his gaze staring down at the dressing table, weighing that question against his pride.

Only when he nodded, a sharp, precise movement, did Nathan move.

The click of the lock on the door was as final as he had known his decision to be. He would not go back on his agreement now, nor turn on the younger alpha to try and salvage what pride he had. And so when those hands slipped over his shoulders to ease off his suit jacket, he didn't stop the action or strike out, merely let out a breath that shook ever so slightly with his restraint.

"Come, get out of this staid clothing," Nathan said, his hand running down the other alpha's back, before adding "I have missed this."

Humphrey didn't make the mistake of thinking it was only about them sharing the intimacy of the bed together that the other man was talking about, and it was perhaps that alone that had him moving to slowly take off the clothing of that day, rather than making a sharp remark to distance himself from it.

He had no real words for the other alpha, not yet, and Nathan seemed to understand that. It had indeed been a while for them, and that alone would make the evening more lengthy for want of the preparation.

Moving over to the wardrobe, he opened it and then a drawer at the bottom and took out a bottle of oil there, one that remained half-filled since the last time it had seen use. Straightening up, he took a moment to look in the mirror on the back of the door there. Silvered hair now, older than he once had been, but still virile in the ways that mattered here tonight. Moving to close it, he paused as it caught the sight of Nathan leaning back in the armchair near the bed, fingers undoing the buttons of his shirt to reveal the dusting of hair on his chest, and the skin beneath. Those eyes, when they looked up and over to him had some of their roguish charm back in them, now that they had come to an agreement for the evening. Those eyes looked at him, and they burned with carnal thoughts, as Nathan's other hand reached down to shift the swelling erection in his trousers.
Closing the wardrobe, Humphrey turned to look at him properly there, sprawled over his furniture and already looking somewhat debauched. It made a smile touch the edges of his lips. It was a compliment, that look in the younger alpha's eyes.

Not that the age difference was that significant these days when they were both older than they once were. Humphrey could appreciate that in the other man, how the years had seasoned him and tempered some of the frivolousness of youth.

Forcing himself to move, he set the bottle of oil down beside the bed, and started to get properly undressed, aware of Nathan's gaze upon him, but for the moment ignoring it as much as possible.

It was unusual, he was aware, for two alphas to do what they were going to do. He had always thought that, and could not imagine such happening in any way between any of the others in the house, not without Alana there. Perhaps it was the fact that he and Nathan had formed an accord back at the beginning. It was its own particular manner of bond in order to win her, that allowed it to then slowly grow into something more between them over time, and necessity.

He didn't want to think about the reasons for that necessity just yet. Let it be, for now, about mutual pleasure.

Putting his shirt over the back of a chair, aware of Nathan moving around the room, he glanced towards the bathing chamber. He should get some towels for the bed, but, as he looked over, found that there were some already sitting there, spread over the sheet, waiting.

Nathan smirked at him, resplendent in his nakedness and surety. A reminder that he wasn't the thoughtless youth of their past.

Taking off his trousers and undergarments before sitting down on the side of the bed, his gaze lingered on the raised bump of the pillow that had been placed under the towels. Thoughtful, but also slightly intimidating for what it signified.

"It's been a while," he said, not looking over at Nathan, though he could hear him coming over. A hand settled on his shoulder, the shadow his body cast from the lamp's candle making the closeness feel more intimate.

"We have all night," came the quiet, murmured reply.

He nodded, lingering there a moment longer, before getting up. His hip brushed against Nathan's as he turned and, with breath that felt heavy with the import of what was to come, he got up onto the bed, and lay down in the place that Nathan had made for him.

One by one, each of the lamps in the room were blown out, except for a couple beside the bed, each marking the inevitability of the time between them, before finally the mattress dipped and the warmth of the other man was there beside him, the weight of his hand moving with a firm, even stroke down over his back.

"I've missed this," Nathan said again, his voice a murmur between them, warm and earnest, as that hand settles in the small of his back. "I like that no one else gets to see you like this. Not even Alana."

It was a truth, he knew that, but it was also a query, checking if Humphrey wished to speak of it before they start. That Alana was the cause did not take much detective work on Nathan's part. No other person had ever left him in such a mood.

No words came, not yet, and he reached out to wind his fingers with Nathan's free hand, an
acknowledgement of the words, and an answer.

Usually Nathan was a talker. Ever since they had first met, and he had seen that bright youth that made Alana laugh with gaiety at his humour, the man had always used his quick wit and exuberant words to fill the air. Tonight however seemed to be a quieter and more pensive Nathan, letting his hands ease the taut muscles in his body where words were unlikely to.

The first breach of a finger was always the most startling, and only the firm press of a hand on his lower back and his own self-discipline kept him in place. It always felt odd and intrusive there, not being made for it as omegas and females were. Nathan ignored the movement except for that hand, and the stillness of the other whose digit is entrenched. He is glad for that. He always struggled the most at the start, not only of the body, but relenting to it.

He wondered what it says about him that he does.

It was slow from there. The gradual easing of muscles with patience and enough oil that it ran down over his balls with each slick motion of Nathan's hand. It was more a trial of patience than anything pleasurable at first, though the other man kept it from being painful, but as time goes on there was a warm pleasure that started to smoulder in him, his breathing coming easier as careful fingers brushed over that place inside that makes his cock start to swell with more enthusiasm.

"That's it," Nathan murmured, shifting a little so he could feel the other man's erection against his thigh. It's hot, as all alphas are, the slickness of the tip showing just how much restraint Nathan is using right now to ensure their pleasures.

They both knew that eventually it wouldn't be his fingers that were stretching him, and he was becoming cautiously more enthused about that notion as the small shocks of pleasure those fingers were bringing him. He let his eyes close, his breath deepening with the other man's attentiveness and care.

It took time though, because this wasn't about opening him up just for his member, though that would be significant enough. He had to take the knot as well, and that was the danger of their situation. So much damage could be done, but Nathan was cautious and patient, relentless in his pursuit of his goal, even if it took all night. It was one of the reasons that allowed Humphrey to relax with him like this. For all the jovial front the man put on for the family and others, here and now with him, he could trust that Nathan would never allow his actions to hurt him.

Eventually though, the warm weight of the other man was easing over his back. Still cautious, because for all that they had spent this time preparing, if his instincts are triggered into becoming defensive or aggressive in response to the other alpha, it would all be for nothing. Nathan knew him though. Over two decades of time together had built its own language and trust, and he once more let his fingers entwine with Nathan's, those digits still cool from the washbowl, a slight squeeze of reassurance there that he could continue, though the fact that it should be with caution goes without saying.

Other alphas doing this, perhaps they would enjoy the push and pull of dominance challenges between them before one took the other, but that had never been part of their accord. Nathan, even now as age has tempered them, had always been careful never to offer any challenge to his instincts in this way. It is perhaps this alone that allowed him to relax when the touch of slick heat pressed against this hole and started slowly, achingly slowly, pressing inwards.

He controlled his breathing as that measured press in and out gradually eases the way until Nathan is sitting fully entrenched inside him, and only then did the other man lean down to mold himself against his back, nuzzling in against his shoulder. It was overwhelming, feeling his body both
speared and shielded like this, and it was a fight to remain relaxed, but Nathan gave him time. He always had.

Usually it would be Humphrey that would protect Alana's body from any threat that came for them in the night, but with the pain of her words lingering, he needed the reminder that he was not in this alone, that another would help stand between him and the troubles that life throws.

Slowly Nathan started to move, the sensation chasing away the phantom conversation that had clung to him all throughout the day.

He knew that Nathan wanted to touch him, it showed in the way the other man used his torso to rub along his back with his thrusts, the way his arms crowd his own, but he cannot allow him that, not yet, for even now his instincts are pressing at him to remove the other alpha from being so close, so possessive. This wasn't the time for that, and Nathan never pressured him for more than he was willing or able to give.

With one hand, the other still entwined with Nathan's fingers, he shifted a bit, raising his hips just enough to slip the short leather sheath over his now hard member, twisting the cord around the base enough to keep it in place while it still sat loose, before his knot would eventually fill it. All alphas had them made, though this particular one had seen more use than not in the last few years while Alana had otherwise been busy at nights with Jack.

The feel of stubble rubbing over his shoulder brought him out of such thoughts, becoming aware that he was slipping once more into melancholy, instead of letting himself have something else instead.

He let out a breath, chasing away the thoughts by way of moving his hand to stroke in time to Nathan's body. It was difficult, with the press of the pillow beneath hampering the movements, but it worked enough as a distraction that his breath started to come faster, and a soft rumble of pleasure from above him showed well enough that Nathan was pleased by the change in his scent.

In these moments, he knew that Nathan thought of him as his, though he would never say it. Such declarations were never vocalised between them, but heeded nonetheless. It wasn't about dominance, not truly, which was why he was able to make his instincts comply. Nathan had always been his ally in the house, had always been there, in the ways in which he was able, to aid when required or requested, just as he was here now, filling up the hollow hurt with his own brand of reassurance.

"Humphrey."

A plea there, a soft spoken need that called to his own instincts to provide for those under his care, though this was certainly different to most. His body didn't seem to mind, and a soft rumble emitted from his own chest, a reassurance that he wanted him here, that he wanted to see him pleasured and satisfied, even if this was not exactly the normal way of things.

It lit something in him, to hear his name called like that, his instincts flaring towards carnal, his cock stiffening further in response, a pleased shiver chasing down his back as Nathan buried himself deep time and again, rubbing inside just right, making his breath come faster and his cock to start drooling in his hand.

He tried to arch a little more for a better angle, but found himself hampered by his positioning enough that he released himself and Nathan's free hand to shift the pillow under himself, Nathan never stopping despite the movement, likely unable to at this stage, his breath coming fast, small whines of need there.

Humphrey growled, finding his position, his hips raised more, demanding even that he be filled
better while each thrust rubbing him deliciously against the raised pillow beneath. Nathan's breath was fast, his cheek and jaw rubbing back and forth as much as he could against his shoulder, seemingly unable to stop the claiming there, though he wasn't so foolish as to try for his throat. Humphrey liked that, liked the restraint as much as the desperate need in the younger alpha.

It was difficult to think now, the rough slap of their bodies and the overwhelming scent of their musk filling up everything until there was only the pleasure, the raw need to complete that filled each moment. Sensation heightening, thrusting down into the soft toweling, then back up to chase the pleasure deep inside.

He was close now, each of Nathan's breaths coming in tandem with soft whines of need, his own coming in the form of low rumbles growls that rose and fell. No matter that it was his body doing the sheathing, he needed to see to Nathan's pleasure, a need that had been brought to him.

"Nathan," he rumbled, barely even coherent as words over the growl, "Now, come now."

He could feel the effect the words had on his partner, how his body body stiffened, how his mouth opened with need to bite down on something but managing, just, to not bite down on his shoulder, and how inside, that knot started to swell swiftly until Humphrey was panting with the sheer overwhelm.

"Humphrey," the gasped words, "Humphrey, please!"

So close, so close to the edge between pleasure and too much sensation as the slick thickness filled him further and further, but the plea from Nathan gave his mind, his instincts, a direction, and he snarled in against the bedsheets, his body arching, one hand reaching over behind him to grip Nathan's shoulder, his own knot swelling in the sheathe. A snarl then, ragged and brutal as seed shot with force into the towling beneath him.

They lay there panting, a thin sheen of sweat coating their bodies. Nathan was heavy atop him, but he didn't mind. The satisfied desire and the fullness locked inside him had stripped it away, and all he could feel was the pleasurable ache of being so greatly filled, along with a sense of peace that transcends his usually so well managed temperament.

It's both a trick of biology as well as of the mind, he knew that. He had let Nathan physically dominate him, and his body was reacting to that now that the knot was ensuring his compliance. There was no fight or struggle in him now, his body yielding, trusting the other alpha to protect and care for him, as he was sure far off ancestors once managed some dominance challenges.

Nathan nuzzled in against his shoulder again, leaving more of his scent there, as if that were possible after the amount he did it earlier.

"Are you… no, wait, hang on."

Nathan's words were filled with laughter in the last few, riding the euphoria of their connection, his arm tightening around Humphrey's waist a moment, before he felt that pulsing once more filling him yet fuller with Nathan's claim. Humphrey pants a little at the pressure, Nathan's soft, joyous laugh of delight at their closeness, it's own gift. It was a few moments more before his own body gives up its second surge, causing Nathan to groan in pleasure.

"I forget," Nathan said as he settled back down across Humphrey's back, "just how intense it is with you".

Humphrey made a low sound of agreement, less about a reticence to speak, and more just lazy
contentedness that lingered while they are joined. A careful hand stroked strands of his hair out of his face, and in his current state he didn't even consider anything other than enjoying the touch of care he would usually have balked at.

"Are you ready to tell me what was wrong?" Nathan asked eventually.

The question was as soft as those fingertips as they stroked through his hair, and like the pressure inside, he knew he wasn't getting away from it. After all, he had made the decision to place himself in this position. The words came easier now, as they had not before, loosened from his tongue by his body's capitulation.

"I went to her with my concerns about the impact Jack is having upon Will," he said, his gaze staring across at the wall, but not truly seeing it. It seems further away now, that hurt, with the closeness of Nathan covering him, filling him. The hand stroking through his hair settles carefully on the curve of his neck and shoulder, not quite a grip, but a reminder he is not alone in dealing with this. It was enough that he finds the words to continue. "She accused me of merely acting in self-interest."

The surge of protective outrage from behind him was gratifying in its own way, though he reached out to grasp Nathan's hand once more, weaving their fingers together as a way of tempering it somewhat. With the instincts flush through Nathan's body from their time together, it was better to be cautious with letting them overflow too greatly. He didn't want Nathan getting himself into trouble with others for a temporary burst of overconfidence.

"It's ridiculous, Humphrey!" Nathan said, though allowed himself to be drawn down to the bed a bit more by that grip, "She has seen it, just as the rest of the family has. I know she is still riding high on the side of a new mate after only a couple of years, but come on! She has known you for over twenty five!"

He sighed, not wanting to break the soft haze of contentedness with a reminder of such things, no matter that it had been them that had prompted the actions.

"It was perhaps foolish of me to go to her directly over him," Humphrey replied, "It is difficult to remember that she has a new mate now, when I speak with her of matters as I always have. As you say, we have been together so long, I am finding the change difficult."

This, more than the grip of his hand seemed to ease the call-to-action from the other alpha in favour of seeing to him, though the scent of protectiveness was still there.

"You are still her mate, Humphrey," the reply came quietly as Nathan lets himself down more to lay flush against him, his free hand coming down to rest around his waist, the movement shifting him just enough to be a reminder of the other way in which they were joined. But no matter that reassurance, it didn't change the facts.

"Not like I was, not any more," he says, his eyes closing against the weak candlelight and the knowledge he had been ignoring for too long. "It was easy to think things would settle more once time had eased in the new member of the family, but much is changed, and I am in no great place to help any more. The mating will always have her listen to Jack over the rest of us now, it is the way nature is. Something I had conveniently forgotten, having never been in this position before. I knew it wouldn't be easy, but I had at least expected her to listen."

"It is worrying for us all," came the quiet reply. It was not reassuring, that Nathan echoed his concerns, but it calmed the part of him that worried that perhaps Alana was right. Had he merely been reacting against the alpha who had usurped his position? "Humphrey," a reminder there, that his thoughts were not in solitary, "You always listened to us, no matter that you were in charge, and
you encouraged her to listen as well. You always made sure to include the family. That he does not… it should not be like this."

What could he say to that, when in truth that was what he felt to be the case. It felt petty to be complaining here, the safety of the darkened bedchamber, about a man of whom was trying his best, even if that best did not sit well with some of the family currently.

"I should just have gotten Mr and Mrs Harris, or even Peter to speak with her, instead of going myself," he said at last. "It is perhaps as much my own fault, the rest of it, as any fault of Jacks. The family still comes to me, and perhaps I have not been making enough effort to pass on those problems to him as I should. Hierarchy only works if those in it adhere to the structure, and I may have been resisting it, mostly unknowingly."

Nathan was quiet, though his distress is evident in the air. "I don't like him here, Humphrey. Zaller might be okay on his own, his temper and manners evened out, but Jack doesn't pay heed to things brought to him, not unless it fits his own agenda. You bear too much of the blame in this case. Too much."

Eventually Nathan settled down when he doesn't respond, too caught up in his own thoughts in the matter. Nathan's weight was once more heavy over his back, fingers tightening in his own. There wasn't much more either of them could say, the situation being as it was, but he found the physical reminder of Nathan's support a reassurance that he had needed.

Alana might not need him as the mate he had once been to her, but he had Nathan, and the family still needed him. For the moment, it was enough.

Slowly, Humphrey's muscles relaxed more under the other alpha, and he fell asleep.

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*Bloom Residence, London - Wednesday 11th November, late evening*

It was a couple of hours before dawn that found Will wandering through the house, not sleepwalking, thankfully, merely awake after another bad dream, giving his room time to air out, as well as himself to distance himself from it.

He liked this time of night, when the house was dark and quiet, knowing his family was resting in each of the rooms, untroubled, and not needing to worry about what might be asked of him as a result. It was times like these that the house truly felt more like his own, as if, come the night, it had changed from this too-bright dwelling into his own sort of haven, another world almost, when the rest of the family fell into slumber.

Moving along the corridor, glass of water in hand, he trailed his other over the pieces of furniture as he passed. The narrow table that held one of Alana's flower arrangements, one chair, then the other that were placed to ease the time of those waiting for others to get ready to leave somewhere, the bannister, and then the wood panelling of a door, all of them got a trail of his scent left upon them from his fingers, as he reacquainted himself with the house.

Pushing the door open, it made no noise as he stepped inside, and the darkness beyond it was deep. He knew the room though, each piece of furniture, each chair and table, and so it was with ease that he made his way to one of the huge windows, pushing back the curtains and, after setting his glass aside, unbarring one of them, folding back the shutters to look out into the garden beyond.

All was stillness. The moon shone down on frost touched grass, and the small copse of trees at the end was a haven for the shadows of the evening. If he had been at the country estate, there might
have been the cry of an owl, but tonight, here, nothing stirred.

He stood there, looking out at the garden for a while, letting that stillness calm him. His nightmares were never about such stillness, such quiet. The feel of that altered reality lingered, its own haven. Looking out at those trees, they could be anywhere. He could be anywhere.

How long he lingered there, he didn't know, but eventually he turned away from the view and made his way back through the room towards his own bed. His fingers trailed on the other side of the corridor this time, along the dado rail, the edge of one of the picture frames, and the side of a plinth that held a sculpture bought ten years ago.

His steps halted, his breath stilling as the soft turn of a lock drew his attention. It wasn't loud, but he watched it turn, the handle following before the door slowly eased open. He didn't think he had been loud enough to wake anyone. It was not Humphrey who exited that door though, but Nathan.

He must have made some sound, or perhaps his scent had caught the other man's attention, for his gaze turned, and, seeing who it was, his expression changed to one of overt, lazy satisfaction. Will took in the man's state, without even really realising he was doing so, each detail coming to him and building the picture that told the tale. The mussed up hair and the clothing lax with lazy donning. The scent of the oil and the two alpha's pleasure heavy on his skin despite the washing. It was the slight bruising on one side of Nathan's neck though, from fingers digging into his shoulder, not from behind, but having reached from below, that told it's own tale.

Perhaps he looked like he was about to say something, for Nathan merely brought his finger up to his lips in a request for silence. Now, and in future most likely.

Will stood there, watching as Nathan made his way down the corridor in quiet steps back to his own room, the silence continuing the haze of Will's home that he had not thought another could walk in and maintain. It almost felt like a gift that it had given him, this knowledge that he'd had no idea of before now. The soft scent of Humphrey's emotional hurt so very faint in the air, lingering only for a moment before it was gone again.

Almost all his life he had lived here with them, and had no idea that they sought such closeness, even rare as it likely was to have been hidden so long. A reminder that there were hidden depths to everyone. A lesson there, perhaps.

Making his way back to his own room, he let his fingers trail over Humphrey's door, unable to pass it without doing so. He supposed he was just as territorial in his own way of his family's comfort and security as the alphas were, though far less able to adequately see to it.

His room, when he got there, was chilled by the opened window, the night air having taken away the worst remnants of his ill rest. Closing it once more, he lit the candle beside the bed and sat on the edge of it, knowing there would be little he could do for Humphrey, both of them caught in the dance of societal norms, of family, and of Alana's and Jack's wishes.

It was reassuring though, that Humphrey had Nathan like that. It was almost as if he had been shown a problem as well as a reassurance over it. He could help, perhaps in his own way though. He knew the satisfaction Humphrey had got from their trip to Mr Brightly's shop. Perhaps he could stand to go another trip somewhere. Shopping perhaps? Usually he would avoid such things, but if he did go, then having Humphrey there would be a boon, one that would be noticeable to the alpha. Yes, perhaps he could do that.

There was also, if he was honest, somewhere else he would like to go. It had been on his mind for weeks now, ever since the trip to see Humphrey's brother. He had thought, perhaps, to ask Beverly
to go to a fortune teller with him, but had hesitated, knowing she would tease him over it most likely.

Was there really a power behind some of the better reputed fortune tellers? As the years passed, he was far more willing to seek anything that might help resolve his situation. He would be lucky to end up with either of his suitors this year, but he had been through too many to be left with much, or any hope.

Humphrey wouldn't mock him for trying.

With this thought in mind, he put down some clean sheets from the cupboard, having already stripped the bed earlier, before laying back down to try and get some more sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so wow, it only took me 13 chapters and about 16 months, but you finally have some manner of smut in this story haha, and even then, that section really wasn't about the sex at all. I sort of worry sometimes that the general lack of smut will put people off the story, but a friend told me to just write the story I want to write, so here you have it. Not traditional in terms of stuff on AO3, but it's a scene that is one of the ones I am actually most proud of.

In other news, massive kudos goes to my beta-reader Anthony, who once again went above and beyond the call of duty to help me fix all my errors. He had a huge job this month, because yeah, I sort of skipped from past-tense into present tense half way through without realizing, and even after trying to fix it, I hadn't. He deserves major amounts of cookies for that.

Please leave kudos and comments if you can, they are the driving force of my motivation :)
Bloom Residence, London - Thursday 12th November - morning

It had taken Will a while to get back to sleep the previous evening, but when he did, his dreams were once more quiet of horror, the night walk having stilled them, for now at least. It did mean, however, that by the time he got himself up the next day, and had had some breakfast, it was already mid-morning.

He had tried to seek out Humphrey, but unusually, the man was not to be found. Instead, he managed to track down Nathan in the hallway, the alpha's arms filled with a slightly fussy toddler, clearly on his way to the nursery to hand her off. Alexandra was Alana's most recent children, one of three, not including Will. It was a fairly low number for an omegan family, especially one established for so long, but he knew Jack was hoping to change all that.

"Have you seen Humphrey?" Will asked the man, his gaze flickering to the side of the alpha's neck and shoulder where he had seen those marks, but none could be noted today, for the more formal mode of dress, with it's high collar, aptly hid it from sight.

"He had a couple of business meetings in town today," Nathan replied, pausing to shift the squirming Alexandria into a better hold, "He should be back after lunch I think. Is it something I could help with?"

Will shook his head at the question. The knowledge from last night seemed, now in the light of day and all the noise and bustle of the house, far more hazy and unreal that he was tempted to think it a dream. This wasn't the time nor place to test such a theory however.

"No, it's nothing of any urgency. I was just thinking to do a couple of errands if he was available, but it can easily wait for another day."

"That won't be necessary."

The voice from behind him made him startle visibly, not having noticed the now looming presence of Jack, having just come around the corner towards them.

"I am having to head out for an errand of my own," Jack continued, and it was with a dawning dismay that Will noticed the note in his hand, and what that errand must mean. "We can see to yours after that. Go get your coat."

Some of his dismay must have shown, because Nathan shifted beside him, "Sure, just let me drop of Alexandria with Hettie, and I'll grab my coat as well."

It was with warring feelings that Will glanced to him. He would certainly feel better with Nathan there, but if this was a trip to a murder scene, like he suspected, then Nathan could clearly not go. If Nathan found out, then certainly Humphrey would in short order, and that would be a disaster.

He was saved from having to think up a reply by the instigator of this rather unhappy situation.

"No need. You are clearly busy with the children, and Brian is coming along. I suppose though you will be wanting Price along as well. Jimmy!"
The bellow of Price's name into the house at large made him flinch, his hands starting to tremble just from the sheer volume of the shout. In Nathan's arms, Alexandria squealed in delight at it, and Will hated her just a little bit.

"I'll be okay," he managed to say to Nathan, who, unlike Jack or Alexandria, appeared to be more astute as to his distress, and was looking far more like he might actually try and second-guess Jack. "Go deal with the children. I'll see you later."

So it was that he left Nathan standing there while he went off to get his coat. In truth he had little wish to leave the house, especially now when even before he had gotten to the scene, he was already showing signs of nerves. He wasn't sure if it was a good thing he had already bathed and put on scent blockers in the hopes of going out with Humphrey, for it meant that he was ready to go immediately, while a delay might have saved him from the trip.

It might have, but then who would help Jack find the killer? Sitting in the nondescript carriage with the three alphas, he tried to ignore them as much as possible. Both Zeller and Price were oozing dissatisfaction, likely for very different reasons, while Jack was just grim.

A candlemark and a half later, Will was staring at the bloody remains of what would once have been an alpha. The whole place reeked of blood, rage, and terror, and Will was frankly surprised he was still standing. Habit, he thought, might be the only thing keeping him so.

Why had Jack brought him to this murder? It was a rhetorical question these days, for clearly Jack wanted badly to catch the murderer, but with his head now filled with the images, thoughts, impulses of such a man, and his victim, so much so that he could barely breathe without feeling a heavier set of lungs than his own, it was more of a silent plea than a question. A plea from the part of himself still clinging onto the fact that he had not done that violence. He had not beaten that man until he couldn't move and then proceeded to tear off skin so he would not be recognised, then limbs as well when the bloodlust got too much, like a berserker rage. He had not done that. He hadn't. Nor had he had to endure the suffering of the victim, not truly. He hadn't suffered what that alpha had suffered.

But it felt like he had.

In the carriage once more, he kept his hands together, uncertain whether it was to stop himself from attacking others if his mind slipped, or to reassure himself he still had hands.

Price was unhappy. He noted, distantly, that Zeller was too. It was an unfamiliar scent of unease from him, usually so cocky. Perhaps he sensed the ghostly imprints of murder on him too.

He sat there, still, so still, a parody of murder frolicking through his memories. Not so much like bloody footprints, but of footprints visible only because the pressure pushed enough blood aside. It saturated his world, that and the rage, the anger, and of the fear, all mingled like a cocktail splashed over rocks.

Would the rocks melt, like ice in a glass, with the heat of that rage?

Price was talking, but he couldn't spare him the concentration. Another voice answered. Zeller. He didn't usually come back with them, why was he here? That question too was distant, unclear and hazy, drowned out by the slick sound of meat being ripped apart, the delicate spatter against a wall and the street.

"We can't go home with him like this."

He was glad they were thinking clearer than him. It was important, he was vaguely aware, that
people didn't see him like this. They would talk, or perhaps they would scream in wheezing gasps that barely caused a whisper as that alpha had done.

"Drink this."

Price, and the smell of laudanum and water. Okay, yes, that was probably a good idea. Price had to hold it for him to drink though. He wasn't risking moving his hands. He might lose them.

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**Bloom Residence, London - Thursday 12th November - afternoon**

When Will next woke, it was with some disorientation as well as a splitting headache that only seemed to grow the more awake he became. His thoughts still fuzzy, and his mouth tasting all sorts of hideous, he groaned and turned over, becoming aware that, not only was he dressed, but that Price was sitting in a chair across on the other side of his bedroom.

That he was in his bedroom at all said clearly enough that he had been out for a while. Enough time to travel around the city to lose any potential followers, but also enough to get him home and up to his room, and then for him to sleep long enough to feel like this.

"How you feeling, kiddo?"

The question from Price was casually said, but even as compromised as he was right then, the scent of the alpha's worry was clear enough in the air. As his memories of earlier that day started to finally filter in, he honestly couldn't say he blamed the man. He had been so close to the edge there. Too close.

"Need a drink." was all he managed, having to retry the action of getting up for a wave of dizziness that caught him.

They must have given him a lot of laudanum for him to be still affected like this. It always did make his body respond poorly after he woke.

It said much about his current state, as well as the habitual knowledge of his life, that Price didn't bother attempting to offer him water, tea, or even fruit juice, but whiskey instead. He honestly wasn't sure if the trembling in his hand was from the need for it, or from the reaction to the murder scene.

"It's just before dinner. You want me to bring you something up for later, so you don't need to sit through the meal?"

It was tempting. Gods, but it was, but he took a break and shook his head a little. It made the room spin ever so slightly.

"I told Nathan I would be fine going out this morning when Jack ambushed me. He is going to worry too much if I don't show up."

"Well you're not fine, and no one but Jack is likely to miss that."

The man had a point.

"I'll blame it on the laudanum. How much did you dose me with anyway? My head is still spinning."

"Enough."

The solitary answer made him look over to where Price was standing beside the decanter, his gaze staring down at it for long moments before turning decidedly away, even though it was likely he was craving for it something fierce. Will wasn't the only one that was not fine it seemed. It was just as
well Price had not seen the crime scene, though, perhaps Zeller mentioned it in the carriage? He had been too out-of-it to notice, especially once he was unconscious.

Will didn't answer the statement, knowing only too well the depth of warnings and worry there in the other man. He couldn't even deny that at this stage he really should be stopping, at least for a while. His reaction to that killer's work had been traumatic to say the least, and he couldn't tell whether that was because it was worse than murders before it, or he was simply not coping as well as he once had.

He had felt that edge of madness, walking that path of blood and terror that had clung to his mind afterwards like a leech. It was not such a bad analogy, he found, since he felt so drained now. The distance and the laudanum had helped, just as it always did, but he wasn't sure he would forget that terrible moment when he wasn't sure he could step away far enough from what he had seen and felt.

Price thought it was a choice, and in some ways it was, but it was stacked against him. If he stopped people would die that he might have been able to save, and not just die, but die like that. As loathe as he was to admit it, Jack just didn't seem to be able to fit the pieces together quickly enough. He was sure he would, in time, but time was something that was a noose around each of the victims necks between now and then, one that Will could relieve them of, if he dared.

"What did you tell them? If anyone asked?"

"They asked. I told them you had a shock while out getting the items on your list. That we dosed you to get you home again safely. Brian backed me up, so no one questioned it, at least outwardly."

Will watched the alpha as he paced back and forth on the other side of the room, trying to keep his agitation as far from Will as possible. It wasn't just Price's worry in the air now, but agitation and stress.

"I know your reasons," Price continued, not pausing in his movement, not seeming able to, "but you can't do this anymore Will. It's going to break you, and I can't lose another member of our family. I can't, Will!"

Jimmy had stopped and was looking over to him, the pleading of the aging alpha hanging in the air between them. His head was still feeling like someone had cracked it open, and the scent and sight of Price's distress was filling those pain-filled gaps with that history.

Gods, what was he doing, that his family was now begging him? Had he become as blind as he thought of Alana as being? Price needed him, he had always known that. A remnant of their old family when it had just been seven of them; Alana, his father, Jimmy and Timothy, and Mr and Mrs Platts. With his father dead, Timothy having moved away, Alana having a swathe of more powerful alphas now, Price had turned his focus upon Will who had always needed that extra support, as loathe as he was to admit it.

It was easy to forget the years that Price had fallen into the bottle after Will's father, Price's best friend, had been murdered in front of him. He had been a mess for years after that, and still struggled in his own ways. But these latter years had seen him become easier, as Will still remained in the house, unmated, but needing family that he could rely on. Price, had crawled back out of the bottle for that, and had stayed out. Will had become his cause. But Price was having to watch this sort of self-destruction that he wasn't in a place to do anything about but beg.

"I'll try," Will said, unable to look at the man any more for the guilt that hung heavy around his neck. They both knew if Jack commanded him to go, he would have to, or face a standoff that might endanger the entire family, not only from the scandal, but from the public outrage that ensued if it
was found out. Omegas were the jewels of society and it was central to alphas to cover and protect them. If an omega was threatened or hurt, well, alphas were not known to win over their instincts when such things happened. In a very real sense, the knowledge of what he was being asked to do might destroy the family, and those in it. If a mob came, most or all of the alphas in the family would not survive it.

Price would not.

He knew it wasn't his own life that Price was worried about though, but Will's. The trip out today hadn't only scared Will badly, it seemed, and that sat heavy upon him as well.

"For all that it was bad today," he said, "Jack should be able to find this one himself. I think I told him enough."

He hoped he had. He recalled so little clearly after he had finished looking at the scene He remembered speaking to Jack, but what he actually said, he couldn't recall.

"So what are you doing about dinner?"

The change of subject was a welcome one for them both, though it didn't sort the fact that he needed to try and alleviate the worries of any family members that had seen him earlier.

"Your excuse about the shock will be reason enough to avoid dinner. I'll go down though, to reassure them that I am all right before coming back up."

It was a compromise, though in all honesty he would much rather not go at all, but the worry over what Nathan might think, and what he might do if he became too concerned, would eat at him if he didn't sort himself out more and go downstairs, at least for a little while.

So it was that an hour later, after a wash and a change of clothing, he headed downstairs with Price there as his faithful shadow. His presence was so common these days, he couldn't actually remember the last time the man had not been around him. Was he really that distracted these days that he hadn't noticed that shift?

"Will! There you are!"

His thoughts were brought back to the present with Alana's bright greeting, which, contrary to the quiet of his rooms, was rather more troublesome to his headache than he would wish.

"I just got back from visiting Mr and Mrs Flax," she continued, linking her arm through his and leading him into the evening sitting room, "They are expecting a baby in the spring! Imagine that! Oh, but that wasn't what I wanted to tell you. I heard that there had been some issue with getting access to the carriage, so I spoke to Jack last night and he agreed to let you use it this evening to go and see Hannibal since you couldn't the other day."

Still a little befuddled from the hefty dose of laudanum, as well as the rest, it took him long moments to process what she was saying, and by the time he had, she had continued on, unabated.

"I sent a note this morning, to ensure he would be in to receive you, but of course he was. Anyway, I said we would drop by after dinner so as to avoid putting him to the trouble at such short notice. You should wear that pearl blue suit, or perhaps the dark green. Actually, perhaps the grey, but with the bright teal tie as you are looking a little washed-out today. Did you not sleep well last night?"

"Not particularly, no," he said, his words curtailed now, not only by his physical and mental state, but also by the sheer audacity of Alana's actions, not to mention Jack's. His gaze flickered across the
room to where Jack sat reading a paper, Alana having stepped away to go sit near him.

Jack had known Will was to go to see Doctor Lecter tonight. He had known and he had sent him to the crime scene anyway, knowing he was usually housebound for at least a few days afterwards. Just in time for his next visit to Lieutenant Anderson. Anger smouldered in his bones, and he had to look away before it lit through the rest of him. The crime scene was too close still, the memories, the feelings, too present.

"I thought it would be Nathan and Price coming with me, if I were to go."

A pause, then "Why would you not go? You wanted to see him, and your only major deadline is for two weeks for the newspaper, so you can surely spare one evening." The anger in him burned brighter, unable to answer her, because telling her the truth was impossible, because it wasn't only the four of them there. Humphrey sat on the other side of the room playing chess with Jacob, and neither of them knew. Jack had known this. He bet that too. This wasn't the usual room he sat in, and he had known Alana would seek Will out to tell him and then retreat in here where the family was congregating. He had banked on it most likely.

Usually Jack would not have bothered with something like that, for Alana knew he was going on these cases. Had she warned Jack from making him go, or was it simpler, and he just didn't wish to raise her ire at having stressed Will out sufficiently enough to change her plans to send will to Doctor Lecter that evening?

Will's head hurt.

His anger at Jack though, it overshadowed the headache, even as it made it worse.

"I'll go," he said, though saw the way Jack's gaze cast towards him sharply over the top of the newspaper. "I'd rather it was just alphas tonight though. It's hardly normal for a parent to come after the first visit."

"Don't be daft, dear. I've known Hannibal for years, so he won't begrudge my coming along too."

Why? Why did it always have to be so difficult?

"I would rather you didn't come," he answered, measuring every word carefully to maintain an inoffensive tone. He was not even able to meet her gaze now, not with his headache trying to split his forehead apart.

There was a momentary silence from across the room. It was bliss.

"Why ever not? Are you upset with me for arranging it for you? I thought it would save you the trouble."

His anger was as bright as his headache. It should not be like this! Why must he explain things to her that were so obvious. Why was he being forced to do this now, when all he wanted was to rest?

"Alana, you spent most of the dinner at Dr Lecter's house flirting with him. I would rather like to have some time alone with him without that."

"What? Don't be preposterous, Will. I did no such thing!"

A voice from behind him, Price, having stayed close rather than find a chair, spoke "I am sorry to say, but you did, Alana."
A noise of disbelief from Alana, as she looked to Jack to save her from such an accusation. Jack looked over to Will, just for a moment, though turned back to Alana. "You did." Clearly Jack's wish to keep Alana to himself trumped whatever it was he had against Will becoming closer to Dr Lecter.

The silence that filled the room this time was saturated with her mortification.

Finding the room just as filled as it was uncomfortable, Will made to extract himself.

"I am not particularly hungry this evening, so I'll grab something from the kitchen and start getting ready to go."

To his boundless relief, neither Alana nor Jack stopped him.

Lecter Residence, London - Thursday 12th November - evening

Having made sure to get home promptly from work that evening, Hannibal had done a sweep of the house to ensure that everything was in its proper place, before having a leisurely dinner. By the time the door was knocked upon, he had baked an extra batch of biscuits, knowing that the scent of them would help make his home smell more appealing for his visitors, as well as seeing to the finer details of the various rooms that might be used that evening.

However, when he opened the door, a quick glance at his guests as they made their way towards him had him swiftly recalculating and changing his plans for the evening, even as he smiled and welcomed them inside.

Despite the fact that the request, that Mr Graham share his company that evening, had undoubtedly been in Alana Bloom's handwriting, she was not in evidence along with her son. Those who were, however, were Mr Price, whom had visited with them the last time, their beta Mr Glen who had been driving the carriage, as well as Mr Medcalf and Mr Layton, who were also in attendance. The latter was a surprise, for not only was he Alana's former head alpha, but also because a second visit like this tended towards only being attended by a couple of the lower hierarchy alphas of a family.

He might have thought it something to do with members of the family having a reticence towards William's choice, however a glance at the omega put pay to that particular notion.

Although Mr Graham could be, at times, withdrawn when in social situations, there was nothing on the surface of his small smile of greeting that might seem out of the ordinary, however not only the fact that Mr Graham was accompanied by such a force of alphas, but also that he was wearing scent blockers this evening, when he had not before, was a warning that only backed up Hannibal's curious feeling of unease upon seeing him. The fact that Mr Price was practically hovering around Mr Graham only reinforced the notion that something was, indeed, wrong.

"Please come in. Mr Hunt will see to your coats."

He waited for them to be dealt with, before leading them through to the sitting room, a flicker of a glance given to Mr Hunt, who acknowledged the unstated command with a slight incline of his head as he went to hang the coats. There was a reason he had been a beta in his house for so long, after all.

"Please make yourselves comfortable. I shall have refreshments brought to you shortly. Please feel free to make use of the books or card table as takes your fancy in our absence. Is there anything else that I might offer for your comfort?"

"Thank you, no. We shall be more than aptly comfortable here."
That it was Mr Layton that answered was not any surprise, though the unease from Mr Price at the thought of being separated from Mr Graham was palpable in the air. He ignored it.

He led Mr Graham along the corridor, not to the study as he had initially intended, but to the sitting room near the back of the house. By comparison to the one they had just left the Bloom family's alphas in, this one was small and cosy with the fire having been lit some time ago. In addition, only a few lamps shone, and the pups were laying around, mostly still in a post-dinner slump, and sleeping, though that changed somewhat as they came into the room.

He watched as the omega, who had up until this point been entirely silent and withdrawn, seemed to perk up at the sight of them all, just as he had hoped. In such a comparatively small room, the litter of pups and their mother made it seemed veritably overflowing with them.

"May I get you a drink, William?"

It took a long moment before the man blinked and looked up to him, though not, he noticed, his eyes.

"A whiskey, please."

He smiled to the man, though he wasn’t sure that William noticed, his gaze having returned to the pups. "Of course. I shall return shortly."

It would do William good to spend time with the pups, and perhaps help loosen whatever it was that was bothering him this evening. A discrete gesture of his hand, had Beatrice move to a place beside the door, so she might keep watch on the room while still guarding the entrance to it, or indeed delay Mr Graham should he decide to wander.

Moving along the corridor, he diverted his steps to where the coats were hanging, having noticed something faint on the way in, as much because his instincts were prickling him with the oddness of the ensemble. Picking up Mr Graham's coat, he checked it over, smelling the overlay of the family alphas he had spent time in the carriage with, as well as Mr Hunt who had handled it. But there, on the right hand side sleeve, there was just a hint of something else.

He brought it up to his nose and inhaled softly, drawing in the scent. It was just a hint, left on the wool by the damp arm of another coat it had hung beside, something so faint others would likely not have noticed it. No recent scent of Mr Graham really, thanks to those scent blockers, but there was the scent of an unknown alpha there, of anger, and of blood. Had there been an incident earlier in which William had been subjected to witnessing such violence? If the coat that had had that scent had also been William's, or someone he had been with, it made the attendance of so many of his family far more understandable.

The question was, then, why was Mr Graham here at all?

He did not doubt, of course, his own appeal, nor that William would wish to visit, however he knew both from watching the man, but also from the conversations with Alana over the years, that it took time for a shock like that to wear off enough for William to deal with other trips out. More was going on here, he thought as he replaced the coat and made his way towards the kitchen, than he was yet aware.

Taking down one of the bottles from the cellar wall, he returned, though paused as he saw one of his betas, Miss Glen. He raised a slender brow in silent question, and she bobbed a little in deference to the request, and started speaking.

"Peter says Mr Graham was out earlier today, before lunch. Mr Price had told him that Mr Graham
had had a shock when he was out running an errand, and that he had to be sedated afterwards."

"The alphas with him at that time?"

"Mr Price, Mr Zeller and Mr Crawford, Sir."

Hannibal nodded, taking a couple of glasses down and setting them on a tray alongside the bottle, before returning with it to the small sitting room.

He entered quietly, seeing the object of his attention sitting on the floor surrounded by pups, though not really paying them attention, which was slightly worrying. William seemed not to notice him, deep in his own thoughts or memories. Moving over, he poured them both a drink, some of the pups getting up to pad over to him, though knowing better, even at this age, than to brush up against his suit.

"William," he said, firmly enough to make the omega blink and look up, seemingly slightly startled by his presence there. "Your drink," he offered in a more sedate tone, handing it over before moving to seat himself on one of the chairs by the fire with his own. He watched as William took a sip from the glass, having to hold off one of the pups from displacing it. The care with which William drank was telling of the restraint it was taking not to down the expensive liquor, even now trying to be polite in his home despite his own needs.

Watching him, it warmed him that the omega would try to please him in this way, and Hannibal did not offer a reassurance that he could drink as much as he liked. No, that wouldn't do any good, long term at least. A reliance on the bottle was a poor substitute for true support, and he fully intended upon guiding William to see him as that support. To have him die an early and needless death from poisoning himself with too much alcohol was not something Hannibal was going to encourage.

But how to choreograph this evening? Were William any other omega, he could have far more easily turned the evening to his advantage, and while that was still true here, it required a defter and more careful hand. It didn't disturb him that this was the case, if anything it only added to his interest in the other man that he would indeed have to use far more of his intellect and resources to make him at ease and contented. It could, after all, be so tiresome for people to be entirely won over with a gentling hand or placating words as easily as they tended to be.

In the end, it was Mr Graham himself that broke the silence between them. "The pups have grown a lot since I last saw them all together like this. Have they been much trouble?"

It was endearing, Hannibal thought as he took a sip from his glass, how William was trying so desperately hard for light conversation, despite his mind clearly being so deeply elsewhere. He would play along, for now, and see just how much dear William picked up in his current state.

"Indeed not. Despite their greater size, they have been remarkably easy to train. We once had hounds at the family estate when I was very young, and so it has been interesting to train some of my own."

To this, William looked up and over to him, though was still notably avoiding his eyes. That would come in time.

"You intend to keep one of them then? I had not thought you the sort to enjoy the company of animals."

"It very much depends on the animal," he said, a small smile touching the edges of his eyes, "I have no qualms against spending time with those that are quiet and well mannered." Thoughts of some of his colleagues as well as those at the various social functions were a decent example, though he
wasn't about to bring up such a disparaging topic tonight. "I do intend to keep two of the dogs, one of the pups and it's mother. Other than your own, the rest I shall be sending to my uncle and sister back at the family's estate, once they are of age. My sister could certainly use some dogs of a greater size to keep her suitors at a better distance. From what my uncle said, the ones so far this season have been lacking at best, though she seems to find entertainment enough with them."

He watched as William processed this, having to draw himself further out of his haze of stress to do so, just as he had intended.

"Your sister is an omega then?"

"Indeed so. Somewhat younger than myself, Mischa is utterly spoiled into getting her own way by our uncle, and almost everyone else."

A slight smile touched William's lips at this, the first sign of expression that he had yet made. "Including you?"

Hannibal allowed himself a more genuine smile then, warmed by the topic of his family, and William's indulgence in hearing of it. "At times, though she will as often call me cruel for denying her plans. I am cautiously assured of her good regard however."

She adored him, usually. He never questioned that, and he could see William picked up on it. It would be interesting when the two omegas finally met, though there was quite a bit of work to be done before then. Mischa could be slightly overbearing at times with her enthusiasm, and he would not like his mate to inadvertently be made to feel less.

"You seem quite close to her. What made you decide to travel so far from home? Surely there would be places to learn and practice surgery nearer?"

Hannibal contemplated the question, watching as William was partially distracted by a couple of the pups, having to set the glass down on a side table nearby so it wasn't spilled. Seeing him like that, his suit disregarded as he showered love upon the pups while talking to him, far from causing him annoyance or even irritation, lit within him something far closer to indulgence at seeing the man happier.

"That is true, but I know myself. When she first came into season, we decided, my uncle and I, that it would be better for me to travel further afield. My brand of protectiveness would not adequately allow her space enough to find a mate of her own, for it is likely I would find all of them severely wanting and unworthy, and take action against such a thing. So I decided to travel to this country, where the medical schools were well known for being of a high standard, and make a life for myself here, for the moment at least."

"Do you plan to return to live there one day then?"

Hannibal smiled at the thought of his home, but also that William did not seem against that idea, if his current interest was to be considered.

"Some day, yes. I have different properties both here and abroad, but my home will always be there. There is no rush, however, for I can always visit on holidays, should I choose to make the journey."

It was a holiday he would not be making until he was fully mated, but the thought of returning home once more did have a strong appeal. It had been a considerable time since he had seen Mischa, though he knew she was well, both from his meeting with his uncle, and from her letters, it was very different to seeing her. He would not risk it though.
His gaze returned to William, rather than his own thoughts, and he watched him play with the pups, now four of them having come for attention. One of the others was sitting at his own feet making small rather adorable noises, trying to get his attention without breaking the rules and actually pawing at his suit. Taking pity on the creature, he set aside his glass and reached down to pet it, letting his fingers scratch along the side of its face until it ended up almost boneless in contentment at his hand.

"Will you tell me of something you have done in the last few weeks that is not exemplary?"

The question brought his head up to look over at William, surprised by the question, though perhaps he should not have been. He gave the pup one last scratch before sitting back again in his seat to consider the request. William watched him in return, a vulnerability there in the way he looked away, although not enough that he wasn't keeping track of him. Ah, yes, especially after a day of stress, the man may well be feeling less able than others, perhaps even fragile or in some way broken, if he was reading his character right. That he would want to see flaws in others, as a reassurance, was not against the realms of possibility.

Still, what to say? He perused the various things he might talk about, picking through the different interactions until he recalled one in particular that would do very well. He let a smile touch his lips, seep into his gaze as well, because he was willing to give William this. It was a rare thing to be requested to be less than perfect, but for William, he certainly would share some things that people may consider flaws.

"Very well," he said, steepling his fingers, letting his mind run over the incident, still satisfied by the outcome immensely. "A week and a half ago I found myself at a fine art auction. There was a painting being sold there that I knew a colleague of mine was greatly covetous of. He had waited years for it to come on sale, and it was little secret that he fully intended to purchase it."

William was listening, paying far more attention now to him, than to the pups, though they tried their best to distract him.

"You bought it, didn't you?" he asked, though more of a statement than a question.

"Indeed I did," he said, allowing William the interruption, before continuing. "I let the auction go on as normal, watching as bidders dropped out, and he got the taste of victory, and only then did I offer up my own bids. He knew then, just when he had been about to gain the painting, that such a success was likely slipping away. He couldn't let it go however, and kept bidding, likely past the point where he was comfortable in his finances to do so, but in the end, it was too much, and I won the painting, much to the man's chagrin."

Would William notice? He looked back at the other man, waiting for his response. William scanned his features, but he didn't think he was giving him as much as the normally astute omega was used to getting from others. A challenge then for them both.

"Do you still have the painting here? May I see it?"

Ah, so he did understand there was more to the story, just not what.

"Alas no," he said, picking back up his glass and turning the contents in the bottom of it as he watched William in return, knowing that some of the amusement was showing in his gaze. "I had no wish for the painting and donated it to the Royal Museum."

"This was supposed to be a story of your flaws, Hannibal, yet you have mitigated it with a charitable act."
He said nothing in return, merely smiled slightly, letting the silence maintain, letting William consider it further. One of the pups was now sitting in William's lap, while another had wormed its way under his arm for petting.

"Your colleague," William said at last, his gaze seeking Hannibal's in a rare show this evening, "does he often visit the museum?"

Ah William, you do not disappoint!

"Indeed. He visits there regularly with his rather insipid wife. I hear the museum plans to display the piece rather prominently, so he shall get to see it quite often after all."

He could see William struggling with this, the knowledge that this was a story about a flaw, whilst being offered one of benevolence. The benevolence was all that anyone really saw, but he was giving William the keys to see the true reasons behind his actions, or at least this particular one. It wasn't free however, William would have to learn to see these things without his more generous nature blinding him to it. The fact that this was something the omega would never have considered doing himself might be hindering him here. That and the stress of the day. He trusted, however, that it would come to him.

"What did this colleague do, that you would take what he had so greatly wanted, and then use it to spoil his enjoyment of another favoured place of interest?"

It was a warmth that filled his chest at the question. Yes, his omega understood what he had done now, and he found himself greatly satisfied in that knowledge.

"He was odious and rude, he made my patients uneasy, as well as disparaging, in a public setting, the man whom I am courting."

"It was Dr Chilton?" William's shock was delightful.

"Indeed. I hear he is quite vexed over the matter, although has not perhaps fully understood, as of yet, the full implications. I expect he will in time."

William seemed to contemplate this, his hands still idly petting one of the pups in his lap. They, much like himself, were enjoying the company and attention.

"And so do you find yourself placated to find me so flawed?" Hannibal asked, more amused by this need in the other than bothered by the question as a whole. Indeed, that William was wanting to see these things showed both a better grounding in reality than most managed, but also a possible imagining of the future between them, to see whether such flaws might be lived with. Frankly, most people that saw his flaws were those who had earned a place on his dinner plate, but it would be a long while before he ever let William see hint of that particular aspect of his personality.

It was with contemplation that the other man watched him for a moment, seeming to weigh up more fully and seriously the question, despite the levity touched tone he had offered it in.

"You don't believe it is a flaw, what you did," he said at last, and now wasn't that interesting. "I will admit that in some respects I do, which you likely guessed, but you also knew that I would be torn enough not to be too put off by it. You knew I would think of it, the next time Dr Chilton does something to make me uncomfortable or upset, and in such a time, that I would agree with you more."

He remained quiet, waiting for what else William might add, for it was clear from the way his gaze was considering him, and the situation, that more was working through his mind.
"A dance of words around a flaw that you don't believe to be a flaw. A manipulation both to sooth, but also to create an ally without them being as much aware of the fact as you. Yes, it was a good flaw, but not the one you talked about."

He had to smile at that, something that seemed more frequent around William than any other. It was delightful to be able to dance with words and have them seen as they were here.

"Then I shall find myself utterly content that you have been made easier for having seen it, and when, inevitably, Dr Chilton raises your ire, perhaps we might take a trip to the Royal Museum, and let the soothing calm of the place ease your mood." A small smile from William then before he averted his gaze, hiding from the truth, at least a little. But it was with a certain amount of triumph that Hannibal heard the reply.

"Perhaps."

It was interesting on a number of levels that William agreed to it, and while he found himself exceedingly pleased by the agreement, although tentative as to a firm outing, that he agreed to such a thing here tonight, when, if circumstances could be believed, he had had such a shock only earlier that day as to aided into unconsciousness, it didn't seem to fit. Was a trip to somewhere such as a museum then so dissimilar to where he had been, as to be thought of as totally separate? Where, then, had he been?

"Is there anywhere else you might have a yearning to see?" he asked. It would be useful to know, as much about what William liked, as it was for planning any outings in future. That William reached once more for the glass containing the remains of his whiskey told well enough that it was a troublesome subject and one that he was not particularly comfortable around.

It was with a slightly wry smile, and an empty glass that William responded. "I am slightly tempted to offer a suggestion that would give your ample skills a challenge, but it's been stressful and exhausting these last few weeks, and I would rather not run the risk of rendering myself catatonic with my nerves when I have articles to finish writing, as well as all the things surrounding my lecture that need to be chased up and organized."

Hannibal inclined his head at that, and while he might have pressed for something on the middle ground, he did recall the conversation with the good Lieutenant Anderson. Perhaps it was wiser to keep things steadier at this early stage, rather than running risks, no matter that he felt himself to be amply able to deal with any that arose.

"Perhaps you might come and work upon them here, of an evening."

It was certainly not a lot to ask, especially considering they were courting. Spending more time in each other's company as the weeks passed and led up to William's heat was what was expected. There was, then, a slight dissatisfaction at the hesitation offered after his invitation, one that was only partially alleviated by the answer.

"I cannot imagine it would be easy to focus on work with you around. You are not the sort of person one forgets is present."

"Then, of course, you may commandeering the study in which to work," he replied, unwilling to allow the other man to deny him this. "If you come over when I return from work, we can share a light meal before you settle down to see to your writing."

Perhaps it was underhanded of him to demand more of William's time after that earlier suggestion of denial, but while he didn't think it was unseen, the reaction from him was not expected. The slight
flush on William's cheeks was delightful, as was the slightly hushed reply.

"I would like that."

The depth of satisfaction at that agreement was slightly startling to him, but he was too busy feeling the warmth of that pleasure to heed it much right then. He would cook something for him, of course. There was still some meat left over, but fresher was always better. He knew exactly who could supply him with that.

"Excellent. Would tomorrow suit?"

Another pause then, less about reticence, and more a weighing of plans, he thought.

"I think tomorrow should be okay," Although the statement was said in a slightly slower way, showing some manner of inner debate or hesitation, it was still an agreement, and one that Hannibal was not about to let slip away.

"Familiarity will make it easier for you in time," he offered, aware that at least some of the hesitation may well be from the stress of any outing. "I would have you be comfortable in my home."

He might have been tempted to say 'this home', under other circumstances, a reminder that such a place would be William's home in time, but it would have been a misstep here, especially on an evening where the man was already questioning his own stability. Better, all around, to mark the house as his own, and merely let William associate it with a refuge.

He found the idea of the other man taking over the care of the house he had bought and customized, to be a deeply satisfying one. The house itself was beautifully appointed, and he took a great deal of pride in filling it with things of excellence. His mate would be the perfect counterpart to it, sheltered and made safe in their home, and as exquisite and fascinating as anything in it.

"Things at the house are a little tense," William said in a rather rare expression of conversation. "Between Mr Crawford's work and the fact that Alana is trying for more children this year, things have been a bit less settled. It would be good to have another place to come at times."

Now, wasn't that interesting... Not that such pressures existed, but that William brought them up at all. It showed a willingness towards familiarity, that he would speak of a somewhat delicate, private matter of the household dynamics.

It was tempting to ask more about that work, and why it was impacting so much as to be mentioned in the home, but such information could be found another time. He was far more interested in securing William's place here, and such an opportunity to speed the process was not to be neglected.

"In that case, I shall let Mr Hunt know that you are to be welcomed at any time. My door shall always be open to you, William"

"That was not… I did not mean to imply…"

The sudden worry and stress in his omega, showing in the stuttered sentences and the hints of scent in the air, was telling, and he cut them off swiftly, so they had no time to grow thorns that struck inwards.

"William," he said, firmly enough to halt the struggle of iteration, "I am aware that you did not intend your comment to be seen as inviting yourself. It did not. That does not mean that it is not my own intent to see you here as often as I might garner your company. That your circumstances offered such an opportunity is merely serendipitous. There is nowhere I would rather have you be than in my
home, safe and content, nor would I ever regret that you have come here seeking respite. Indeed, quite the opposite is true."

He knew he was leaning rather heavily on the more traditional alpha traits in order to get his point across, however it was best to make things clearer sometimes, so that it could shine through the clatter and obfuscation of doubt without trouble.

William still seemed slightly troubled by what he probably considered a verbal misstep, but was offered reprieve from answering, as, out of the corner of his eye, Hannibal noted the way Beatrice suddenly perked up, a couple of moments before there was a discreet knock of Mr Hunt on the door.

Excusing himself, he went to check what would have prompted the disruption to his evening.

It was but a few moments before he was once more back in the room with William, some of the pups trailing after him.

"Mr Hunt informs me that Mr Price requests a moment of your time," He watched the confusion show on William's face as he got himself up from the floor. "Apparently he appeared ill at ease."

The confusion cleared and was replaced by understanding and guilt, and it was with some inner delight that he witnessed William seeking words, perhaps to explain or placate. Not the full truth, of course, he didn't expect that just yet, but at least more confirmation of the situation he had been in today.

"He's not trying to disrupt your evening with me," William said after only a momentary pause, showing that his primary concern was peace between the alpha's currently in his life. Although the outcome of the season was, as far as he was concerned, already set, the fact that William was already considering him in such a grouping, pleased him greatly. "I was out this morning on an errand, and became overwrought by some circumstances while with him. He is likely still affected by it. I should probably go."

It was interesting on a number of levels, but none of them blunted the feeling of dissatisfaction that settled within him, heavy and ponderous, at the intent to leave. It was more effort than he might have admitted, to keep his tone light and his scent easy. It would do no good to make William feel trapped by his possessive instincts right now.

"If that is your wish, then I shall, of course, abide by it."

William's eyes flickered towards him, and perhaps he was not quite masking himself as well as he thought, for it was a step towards him, and placating words that tumbled from William's lips.

"I don't wish to, Hannibal. I just wanted some calm tonight, but if he is like this now, then he is unlikely to settle until I am home and things seem normal again," William sighs, a hand running through his hair in exhaustion and mild frustration. "Usually I would stay home after an incident, for both of us, but we thought Mr Layton being here would steady him enough. I guess not."

Courtesy demanded that he let the other man return to his family alphas in good grace, but he could vie for extra time after he had seen Mr Price. However, upon consideration, why not try for an even greater boon?

"Allow me, at least, to offer you some reassurance, so that your own sleep might be less troubled by it."

William watched him with some ill concealed confusion as he took off his suit jacket, and it was only when he turned up the cuffs of his shirt in precise motions that understanding came to those stormy,
troubled eyes.

"It's a little early in courting to be dealing with scent marking, isn't it?"

His nerves were noticeable, however, Hannibal noted, he was not denying him.

"You may take as much or as little as you like, William," he reassured him softly, holding his inner wrists out towards the omega like a supplicant, like the offering it was. Usually the alpha marked the omega, but with William's hesitancy towards physical contact, this was better. Eventually, when they were properly mated, his scent would be permanently upon his skin, but until then he could master his instincts enough to allow William the choice.

He stayed like that, holding still and patient while William debated with himself. That he had not denied him outright, and left him to wait, that alone secured his triumph, for William would not be so un gallant as to now turn him down. It would be frightfully rude, and William had been brought up with better manners than that.

With a hesitation that reminded him in some ways of a dog approaching something it expected might bite him, William came to him. The scent blockers were starting to wear off, which was just as well for this particular endeavour, and he could catch hints of William's own scent underneath.

The hand that tentatively took his own was colder, and it was with a force of will that he maintained the relaxed state, rather than curling it over to warm his hand. William had to feel in control of this, and he knew that any motion from himself might send the man into a swift retreat.

He drank in the sight as his wrist was cautiously brought up to William's nose, knowing the scent there would be mild at first. Let the man seek it and draw it out more.

Just watching William take in his scent was a deeply satisfying experience. He watched as he sought it more, how the polite distance disappeared in favour of moving closer to find it more fully, William's scent becoming more mellow, and the tenseness in his shoulders relaxing bit by bit. It seemed not enough though, as he had hoped, and likely on instinct, William turned his wrist a little and rubbed it along his own cheekbone, releasing scent there. The sight of his omega rubbing his scent onto him had the desired effect, Hannibal's own scent unfurling, something that elicited a small needy sound from the man, one he was likely unaware of making.

His other wrist was taken, and there was no hesitation now as William brought it up to his other cheek. He could see his omega's eyes were unfocused and distant, caught up in his instincts and the scent that now surrounded him on both sides.

Hannibal himself was not unaffected. The sight of William marking him was hypnotic, the touch, the connection of skin against skin, how he knew that scent would linger there long into the next day, just as his own would upon William.

But that was nothing compared to the surge of possessive hunger in him when he felt the touch of William's tongue against his skin. It roared up through his carefully cultivated walls and barriers, the skin over his glands becoming slick with the oil from them, brought forth by his omega's need to taste him.

His taste and scent, now so much stronger for wanting to indelibly mark William as his completely, despite his control, seemed to startle the omega out of the pheromone induced state of laxity, his eyes blinking, startled as he looked up into Hannibal's eyes.

Hannibal stared back at him, and said nothing. Some of his hunger and need for possession must
have been showing, for he could scent William's inner weakening, the urge to bare his neck. It was perhaps this that brought William more fully out of his daze, for he flushed beautifully, but there was some unease there. He clearly had not expected to become so affected by it, nor react how he had.

His hand was released as if it burned him, but Hannibal was not troubled by this. He knew the taste of his oils would stay with William now, lingering in his palate for hours, the memory of the taste for far longer still. A mark of its own, in a way, for he would never now forget that taste.

He watched William become flustered by his own actions, as Hannibal once more fixed his cuffs in place, the scent of William on his wrists a gift he would savour.

"Shall we go and see your Mr Price now, and allay his concerns?" he asked mildly, as he drew back on his jacket, allowing normality to reassert itself as if what had happened between them was a usual state of affairs. If Hannibal had any say, it certainly would be. He found himself very well pleased with the outcome of the evening so far.

William nodded, seeming not to trust his words just yet. Embarrassment was certainly a better look on William than anxiety. The slight flush on his cheeks, ears, and neck gave his skin a touch more colour, and the delicate scent of it that the extra heat helped rise off his skin was enticing to say the least. Especially when that scent was mixed with his own.

Moving to the door, some of the pups scrambled up to follow, but a click of his tongue and a gesture sent them, whining, back to their bed by the fireside before he opened the door and holding it for William to follow.

"You must have spent a great deal of time training them," William commented, eager for a topic unrelated to his current embarrassment, absently brushing his hands down his suit, trying to ease some of the wrinkles and dog hair from it, mostly ineffectually.

"Not too terribly long," he offered, closing the door behind them and walking at a slow, easy pace through the house. "All dogs respond well to hierarchy, boundaries, and consistency. Once they understand what you want, it is merely upkeep. I will admit we have spent more time with them than is strictly necessary however. I did not wish to leave their training to chance. Small dogs get away with a lot, merely because their size makes mistakes almost humorous to some, but I would never risk such a thing, and certainly not with dogs like these."

He hoped it went without saying that he was further unwilling to do so due to who the dogs were destined to live with. It would be unconscionable that both William and his sister be given dogs that were ill trained and difficult.

Opening the door to the front sitting room, a quick glance as he held it open for William showed the three alphas in various states of ease, except for Mr Price who had clearly been talking with Mr Layton and all but jumped up from his seat at seeing William. The relief that filled the air was blatant. It said a lot that Mr Price had been unable to be calmed by the other alpha. The fact that he was this nervous at being separated from William at all spoke clearly, not of Mr Layton, but of Mr Crawford earlier that day. Whatever had happened, Mr Price clearly hadn't believed him to adequately see to William's safety, and it was that, rather than their current company, that had him in such a state, his instincts demanding he take charge of the omega's safety instead.

"Mr Graham, I'm sorry I just…"

The words fumbled to a stop, much like the action of crowding towards the omega did, upon catching the clear scent marking upon his skin. Mr Price, he noticed, was not the only one, for the gazes of the other two alphas were upon them both as well, and far more acutely than it had been
initially. It wasn't common for the exchange of scents to be offered this early, but from the lack of comment thus far, it seemed that such a decision was being left to William to decide upon.

"It's fine, I probably shouldn't stay out too late anyway."

This comment from William brought on further distress in the alpha, and truly, the man was a bit of a mess all around compared to how he had been at the last visit. It only reaffirmed in his mind that he should ease William from his home environment to this one, sooner rather than later. He might enjoy toying with Mr Crawford, but not until William was secured in his own influence.

"I didn't mean to interrupt your evening like this, truly," Mr Price said, anxiety clear and discordant in the air. "And certainly not shorten it. This wasn't my intention. I just wanted to make sure you were all right."

He could see William becoming more restless with the stress of the alpha, and decided that this cycle of worry and self-flagellation was best to come to an end.

"Mr Price, it is of no real matter. William will be visiting again tomorrow, and so we shall have more time then. By all accounts, it seems that the day has been trying for you all, and I would have my guests comfortable. Some rest would probably do you well."

This seemed to deflate some of the stress from the man, seeing the calm and forgiveness in his words, and that he had not inadvertently caused discord or disruption in William's courtship.

"I really am sorry, Doctor Lecter."

"I accept your apology, Mr Price. Think on the matter as concluded. Now, if you will excuse me a moment, I shall see to organizing for your carriage to be made ready." With a short bow, he exited, and left William to the questions of his family, while he ordered the household to his wishes. After directing Mr Glen to prepare his family's carriage, he had Mr Hunt gather their coats, while he himself took William's, his fingers running carefully over the arm of the coat to ruin any lingering scent of violence from it, as well as around the inside of the collar to leave some of his own to add to the scent-marking already in place on William's skin. He didn't doubt that the man would notice, despite how faint it was.

Returning to the sitting room, the group seemed to have come to some sort of settlement, for although Mr Price still had the sense of guilt about him, he was calmer, and there was no general displeasure from the other two. William, by comparison also seemed to have maintained his calm, though there was more of a slightly resigned feel to it, which pleased him. Such a feeling only showed that he had, indeed, wished to stay longer, had circumstances been different.

"Your coats, gentlemen," he said, letting Mr Hunt hand the others, while he held William's for him. He was aware of gazes upon him as he held it out, behaving as if he didn't realize the man disliked close contact. He was, in fact, exceedingly aware, but knew also that William would wish to give him this, his own sort of apology for leaving early. It was a good habit to get him used to.

As William turned and slipped his arms into the coat, and Hannibal lifted it up and settled it on his shoulders before stepping back, not crowding him, and letting him button it up himself. A compromise there as he turned his attention to the alphas in the room, checking to see that everything was in order. As it seemed to be, he waited for them to finish with their coats, not rushing them by any means, before guiding them back out to the front of the house, where their carriage awaited.

"I wish you all a safe journey home," he said, watching as they moved down to the carriage, though, to his own pleasure, William lingered. "And to you," he said in a quieter murmur, "a restful
evening."

It was a delight then, that William offered his hand, and he took it carefully in his own and brought it up to his lips. The aroma of their mingled scents there pleased him as he brushed his lips over William's knuckles. The quiet intake of breath was delicious.

"Thank you for understanding tonight," William murmured to him.

He let his thumb rub softly over William's knuckles where he had kissed as he raised himself back up to look at him.

"Your Mr Price is safe from my wrath," he teased softly, though it was as much a truth as it was a jest. There were few that were ever rendered free from his threat, but Mr Price was safe, for it was clear he was devoted to seeing to William's care, despite being essentially ill-equipped to do so. Mr Crawford on the other hand may not be quite so lucky.

The soft, tentative smile that William offered him was a fragile thing, but perhaps relieved. Those clever eyes took in more than most people, despite the fact that they rarely looked deep, and so perhaps he had tasted the truth there.

"I am glad. His company means a great deal to me," William said, as he guided him to the door of the carriage and held it while he got in.

"Until tomorrow. Good night, gentlemen."

He inclined his head to them all, closing the carriage door and stepping back to allow it to move off safely.

In the chill night air, the retreating sound of the horses on the driveway was soon overtaken by the quiet of the evening. The soft brush of the trees, the far-off sounds of humanity still awake, at the door behind him, Mr Hunt waited patiently, guarding the boundary. Above him, the night sky was clear but for the chill haze of encroaching winter. It burned at his lungs and he closed his eyes to savour it.

It would have been a wonderful night for a hunt, especially considering he was hosting William the following day. But even here, with the sharp winter air, he could smell their mingled scents on his skin, and he was loathe to wipe that away with cleaning and scent blockers. No, he relished the thought of going into work and for it to be there, lingering on his skin despite the washing for surgery, to be there still when William came that evening. It would be faint by then, likely far fainter than on William's skin, something that he hoped the man would want to remedy.

Turning away from the evening, he moved up the couple of steps to the warmth and light of his home, stepping past Mr Hunt, letting him secure the door behind him once more.

"Should Mr Graham come visiting, you are to allow him entry, no matter the time," he told the man. "I also need you to visit the market in the morning. I will leave you a list."

He moved down the hallway, nodding to the acknowledgement from the beta, and towards the study. The plans for his third kill would have to be postponed, but not too long. He didn't want Mr Crawford to get too comfortable, after all.

Chapter End Notes
Mischa is mentioned here as being 'somewhat younger' than Hannibal. In the books, she is 6 years younger than him, but in this story she is more so, to take account of why she isn't yet mated. As omegas first seek mates around 16-18 years old, I figure she is perhaps 21, since she isn't in any real hurry to bind herself to someone. This also gives Hannibal time to further train in medicine and surgery etc.
Bloom Residence, London - Friday 13th November, morning

Will made his way slowly down the stairs, lethargy still clinging to him. It was another late morning for him, though not for entirely the same reasons.

They had got back fairly early the previous evening, which had been something of a surprise for those in the house. Alana had been concerned until she had picked up the scent upon his skin, her smile carefully hidden from Jack who likewise thought the evening had gone exceedingly well since Will was home so soon, not picking up the scent as everyone else did. No one had mentioned it.

Usually Price would have sat with him in his rooms for a while after getting back from a visit, but despite the clear need to reassure himself, the scent of Hannibal on his skin seemed to counteract it to a certain extent. It had been surprising to Will, who had seen so very many alphas over the years, but there was certainly something that placed a clear marker upon him that affected Price more than usual. Either that or he was just desperate to not crowd him quite so much after having been the cause of the shortened evening.

It had taken him a long time to get to sleep after Price had left. He had gone through the various tasks he usually would to settle in for the night, but he kept picking up that scent. It was far clearer to him now that it sat upon his skin near his nose, and more, he could still taste Hannibal's gland oils on his tongue. What on earth had he been thinking, doing something so forward like that? He hadn't even been aware of the action until that swift change in the taste and scent that overwhelmed him sharply with the man's possessiveness.

It had been that thought, that memory, rather than nightmares that had kept him awake, torn between anxiety, embarrassment and a touch of longing. Even when he turned in bed, he could smell Hannibal's scent now pressed onto his pillows from his own skin. His dreams were not nightmares that night despite the murder, but they were strange and unsettling.

Which all meant of course that when he did finally get up and wander down the stairs towards a late breakfast the next morning, he was startled by the presence of Beverly coming out of the room.

"Ah, Will! I was wondering when you might surface. Forget I was coming over today, did you?"

Had that been today? He guessed it must have been.

"I'm sorry, it totally slipped my mind. Been a lot going on lately."

"So I've heard," she said, waiting for him at the bottom of the stairs as he made his way down. One good thing was, of course, that in forgetting she was visiting, it hadn't given him time to spend hours being anxious about it. "You may end up a socialite yet!"

He smiled half-heartedly, not quite up to the task of fielding her humour just yet. Not before breakfast in any case.

"Let me just get some food and we can go chat somewhere," he said, maneuvering himself down the last few steps and making to bypass her.
"Sure thing, there was still some bacon and... oh Will!" He was momentarily taken aback by her exclamation, glancing up to her, only to see the delight, a rather wicked delight, in her eyes. Ah. Yes.

"Food first," he said, trying to sound firm and confident in his assertion, and she made a small sound of amusement, but followed on after him, her glee at the rather unexpected scent on his skin quite evident. He ignored her as much as possible, something that was facilitated by his still only partially awake state. Finally though, he had a plate of food and had eaten at least half of it, and this, it seemed was Beverly's cue to speak. He was frankly surprised she managed to hold out that long.

"Okay, spill it. Is that Doctor Lecter's scent on your skin? It doesn't smell like Lieutenant Anderson, but I never got close enough to Lecter to really make it out before. Or did you find some other alpha to roll around with since we last met?"

Despite knowing that she was baiting him, he huffed in amused annoyance and was unable to help himself from rising to it.

"Yes, it's Doctor Lecter, and no, it wasn't like that," he said, skewering a slice of sausage on his plate with perhaps a little more pointed force than was necessary. "I had had a difficult day, and he knew I was likely to struggle with sleep and offered his wrists to me to help with that."

Beverly looked at him for a long, silent moment, then burst out laughing.

"Oh my dear, sweet thing. How can you still be so innocent after all these years?"

"I'm not saying that was his only reason," he added, consternation in his tone, "just that it wasn't like we were two steps away from his bedchamber or something."

"It wouldn't be bad if you were though," she said, waving a bit of toast in his direction, "Good looking, elegant, charming, intelligent beyond the norm, not to mention rich."

Will rolled his eyes a little. "I don't care about rich. I'd be just as happy with someone with less finances, so long as they made me comfortable."

"Now, now, don't be so quick to dismiss it. Wealth can buy security, and he has more than enough. I obviously did some checks on his situation, and his financial endowment is considerable. You shall have to tell me if the rest lives up to it."

He was tempted to roll his eyes again as she wiggled her eyebrows suggestively, but opted to have a drink of tea instead.

"So what else did you find out?" he asked, curious. It was, after all, one of the main reasons she was visiting him today, to update him with what she had found out as sentinel for him.

"Well, actually not too much in all honesty. Financially they are both in a good position, although Doctor Lecter is more so, in part because of his inheritance as Count. No huge scandals that I found at least, for either of them. The closest thing I found that might be of interest was that Count Lecter," she paused to wiggle her eyebrows again at the title before continuing, "lost both his parents, omega and alpha, to a hunting accident ten years ago. His only surviving close relatives are his uncle and sister, both of whom stay at the Lecter estate in Lithuania. Lieutenant Anderson's parents on the other hand are both betas, which was a bit surprising. Oh, and he was stationed in the ship that was central to the Fairdew incident three years ago."

The Fairdew incident had been a scandal that had rocked society at its foundations. An omega coerced by his family into posing as a beta through the use of suppressants, joining the navy. They had been social equality activists, wanting to prove omegas should not be so coddled by society, that
they could, and should, do things others could. It had been disastrous. The omega had spent years working as a ship's navigator until he had been wounded in the middle of a battle when the crew were trying to secure a safe landing spot. All the alphas on both sides had been triggered into their base instincts at the smell of a wounded omega. It would have been a slaughter, even amongst the crew, if they had not been kept in a pitched battle with the enemy at the time.

"Damn, that's harsh," he said, knowing the details well enough, having done some research on it for one of his lectures on gender dynamics. The information on Hannibal as well fit that comment, for although he had been an adult when his parents had died, such an event would still have been traumatic. No wonder he was so protective of his sister.

"Yes, well, not much else I could find really," she said, "You would be better at working out their true characters, and in terms of their life situation, both are more than comfortable." Beverly shrugged a little, seeming almost disappointed that there hadn't been any scandals to relate. She did love her gossip. "So anyway, tell me more about how you ended up with Doctor Lecter's scent all over you. Did he strip his shirt off for you? What are his muscles like? Details, Will, details!"

"Of course he didn't take his shirt off. He just rolled up his sleeves."

To be honest, the sight of even that had not been one he could easily forget. There had been wiry strength underneath the slender forearms and in long fingers, for all that they had remained passive throughout, and coupled with the scent and remembrance of that taste, he was uncomfortably aware that he was likely a bit flushed at the memory. He tried to hide it by taking a sip from his now cooling tea, knowing that he was likely not fooling her even slightly. He wasn't even entirely sure why he had found the sight so appealing. There was just something so poised and intimate about seeing them uncovered, layers of fabric drawn away that enticed him far more than should the man have actually taken his shirt off. It would have been too much, even if the situation had demanded it. Too overtly gratuitous.

"My, my. Look at you, getting all flustered over a little flash of skin. Why, I might even say you were yearning."

He flashed her what he hoped was a glare of annoyance, but knew it likely came off more frustratedly fond than anything else, even if she could be a pain.

"He has nice forearms, okay?" he said, aware his tone was a bit defensive. Or a lot. Whatever. He skewered another bit of his breakfast and tried to focus on that instead of the burning over his neck and ears.

"I am sure he does. Perhaps that is what has been missing all these years. A lack of sufficiently delicious forearms."

He was never going to live this down, and instead of replying, he just tossed a napkin at her face, which she caught while laughing.

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**Lecter Residence, London - Friday 13th November, early evening**

It was several hours later that William was stepping up and into the lobby of Doctor Lecter's house. It was only Humphrey, Price and himself here tonight, and as such, they had commandeered the small carriage. He had nothing to prove, for Hannibal knew his financial background was good, and was certainly not the sort of person to be unduly influenced on his character depending on what carriage he chose to step into that night. After all, the alpha had certainly had ample opportunity to view at least some of his detriments, and a fancy carriage would not tip things one way or another, and
William cared very little what the neighbours might think of seeing such a small carriage turn up at the Lecter household.

Contrary to the last time he had visited for dinner, it was him, rather than the other various members of the household, primarily Jack and Alana at the time, that was greeted, Hannibal taking his coat himself before handing it to Mr Hunt who was there to facilitate the process of entry. In truth, it all felt ever so slightly surreal as Humphrey and Price were shown through to the sitting room before he was guided by Hannibal to the dining room alone.

"We are not dining with anyone?" he asked, not having expected this. Even if Hannibal's beta servants had not felt comfortable sitting with them, he had expected his alphas to be present for the meal. He allowed himself to be seated, keenly aware of the presence of the alpha behind him as he helped settle him in his chair, and could imagine, without looking, how the other man drew in a breath to scent him. He could still smell hints of Hannibal upon his skin at times, and knew the other could likely pick it up to. He didn't doubt it would please the man greatly.

"I thought we might have a quiet meal to ourselves tonight," Hannibal said, moving around to his own seat as Mr Hunt came in with their soup, "I was planning on serving them once you had become settled down to work."

It made sense, of course it did, that the alpha would want to spend time with him without the family present, but it still surprised him. In truth he had sort of expected to have those clever words turn things around until the evening was spent in his company either way. That Hannibal clearly still intended on allowing him space to work was reassuring.

"So tell me how things are progressing after your lecture," Hannibal said after they had given enough time to initially savour the soup, "Have you had a favourable response?"

Will was glad to have a topic that wasn't merely small talk, but something he actually knew and cared about. After a slow start, he found himself talking more animatedly about the ups and downs over it in the last few weeks, of the endless letters and inquiries, the updates from his colleagues and the frustrations they were subjected to in his absence. "The Printers had to do another run of the report last week, the demand from medical professionals especially was so high, even from abroad, so we can't really complain since it has become of such interest. It really needs to be of interest, otherwise nothing will change." Hannibal made a soft hum to show he was listening, and there was no dishonesty or exaggeration in the act. He was interested, and that fact alone was refreshing. Will actually had few people he could talk to about things like this and not feel like they were merely being polite. Doctor Lecter, he was finding, was rather frighteningly easy to talk to.

"Have you considered writing an article about your report in one of the medical journals?" Hannibal asked, leaning back in his chair to allow Mr Hunt more space to replace the empty soup bowls with the main course, "A follow up like that would reach far more people."

"I was thinking about it. I had letters from the Empire Medical Journal and Journal of the Hogart Society of Medicine, as well as a couple of newsletters asking about it, but I wasn't sure if it was the right thing to do, not the least of which because it might bring me more notoriety than I want. I don't want this whole thing to end up being about making a name for myself as is often the case with journal articles. It's about the report."

"The balance being that notoriety, if it happened, would serve your cause. Being known for writing a report of such depth need not be a bad thing. I would recommend the Empire Medical Journal, as it tends towards being the most factually representative out of those."

William nodded, thoughtful, as he ate some of the creamed potato with little bits of bacon mixed into
it, distracted momentarily by how good the food tasted. He glanced up, intending on complimenting it, only to find those eyes watching him with a focused intensity that brought a flush to his skin. He didn't need to ask if Hannibal had made the food himself. It was obvious by how he was so thoroughly pleased by watching him eat it.

"It's really good," he said quietly, somewhat mortified by just how flushed he had become under that gaze. It was a gaze that was addictive by how singular it was, as if nothing in the world could match the fascination and interest the alpha had for him. Interest from alphas was, of course, not a foreign concept to him by any means, but from Hannibal it felt more personal, as if he truly saw more of him than merely the façade that society made him wear, and was happy to do so.

"Thank you, William. It is gratifying to see you pleased by my efforts."

"So," he said, clearing his throat a little, trying to shift the self-conscious embarrassment from his throat, "how is your own work progressing?"

He had asked as a sort of throw-away subject, a common topic of small talk that he honestly hadn't been expecting much of an answer to. However a feeling came over him, perhaps a change in the other man's scent or pheromones, so subtle that he didn't properly pick up on but was nonetheless felt, that made him look up and over to the alpha.

"Much as it usually is in the hospital, although there are a greater number of alphas in due to the seasonal in-fighting that takes place, but nothing the hospital isn't used to handling. I have also been finding my time filled more, as the board has implemented new research and trials on finding ways to make patients, especially omegas, feel more secure while within the hospital."

This news stunned William, who had not thought that such a thing would have been even considered, or at least, certainly not yet. That Hannibal, whom he knew was on the board, likely had something to do with it, possibly as a way of showing his own support for William's own report, was exceedingly likely.

"Doing that must make it more time-consuming for staff," he offered, perhaps a little cautiously, not wanting to seem so enthusiastic as to disregard the extra efforts involved. "What sort of research and trials are being done?"

This was more than merely something off-handed, a gift of a brooch or, he remembered with consternation, a pearl headdress, no, this was a gift that meant so much more to him, as Hannibal had likely understood well.

"Initial stages of the research are based around looking at ways to make the rooms more calming for patients, primarily through the colours used on the walls, and the number of people in the rooms, as well as the shape and placements of the beds within. Preliminary results showed, contrary to general opinion, that omegas felt far more secure in smaller, darker rooms, rather than the lighter coloured, more spacious ones that they had been offered before. Only when they were more recovered did their choices in colours and shape of the room change. Seeing these results, the research was rolled out to all patients coming into the hospital, not merely omegas, and while it has only been a couple of weeks since then, the findings are rather interesting. Alphas, for example, who were moved to pre-coloured rooms of the hue they had chosen, seem to remain calmer and more restful, which in turn has made the job of the staff easier."

Will listened to this, not having to fake his interest, and indeed, had ended up leaning forward to pay closer attention, his food all but forgotten in light of this new subject.

"It makes sense," Will replied, his mind flitting from one thing to another, people he had met,
especially for the report, "Smaller, darker nests feel more secure, and more easily defensible. Have you thought about scent? When a person wakes up, disoriented, they will pick up scent first."

"Actually no, that hadn't been put in, mainly because it was expected that family alphas would scent-mark the area generally. What are your thoughts?"

William frowned a little, remembering all the various times he had woken up from nightmares, disoriented and scared.

"I think that making sure the bedding at least smells more familiar might help. As far as I recall, the bedding in hospitals tends to be done with a standard type of soap, and it is fairly distinctive. Having something more soothing, or one that smells more like the one they are used to would help stop initial surges of fear when they wake, because it won't smell so very different. An alpha's scent marking will only cover so much. You might find that betas also respond better to having familiar scents around them, even though their sense of smell isn't as acute, because so much of their own comfort comes from the home. If the hospital finds out the more common brands of laundry soap and makes up a few samples, you could have patients pick out the one that they like the best, or have the person they are brought in by point out the one that smells more like the one they use at home."

Doctor Lecter made a soft hum to show he was contemplating this, eating some of his dinner while he thought over this with just as much care and consideration as he did other things.

"You are likely correct," he replied, "If there were only, say, four different ones that were more commonly preferred, it wouldn't be a great burden to have such a change."

The glow of pleasure that came from having his idea vindicated was a bit of a surprise. Perhaps it was that he knew Hannibal to be a man of exacting standards, and having him genuinely agree with his idea made it feel more like a triumph.

"So how did you manage to convince the hospital board to go through with all this? I can't imagine it being someone else's plan."

Hannibal smiled slightly, just a tease of a shift on his lips that showed enough pleasure to be seen but not enough to appear smug.

"Actually it wasn't too great a feat as all that. Those on the board are mostly alphas, and as such the idea of leading the way in standards of care held enough associated prestige for them to jump upon the idea. The fact that they can do this in response to something like your report gives them an opportunity to be seen to act fast and be at the forefront of change, so they can then look down upon the others who are trailing behind," Hannibal took a sip from his tea before adding, his eyes crinkling ever so slightly in his amusement, "Playing to sub-gender stereotypes does have its uses, especially when guiding a room full of latter middle-aged alphas wanting to leave a legacy."

This surprised a laugh out of William, "And what of you? Do you want to leave a legacy?"

"Of a sort," Hannibal replied, "however I am far more interested in relishing in the now, of the pleasures and experiences that life has to offer, rather than some arbitrary footnote in history. You, I think, also live in the now, but in the mantle of improving it for others. A far less self-serving position, but perhaps I can corrupt you, just a little."

"Can I not get pleasure from helping others?"

"The world shall not end if you find yourself able to take enjoyment in things around you. Life without ease and delight is just suffering and despondency, and I would never be content to see you
"You may be setting yourself up for disappointment."

"Perhaps," Hannibal said, an ever so slight smile touching the edges of those lips, confidence in his own abilities inherent, "I suppose we shall just have to wait and see what time brings us. The steps of your life have led you down a path that is different to my own, and yet, your steps can be moved, if you let them."

Will frowned at this, his gaze looking down at the remnants of the meal that they were eating. "I didn't walk upon this path by choice, Hannibal." He knew his words were harsher than he had intended, but his frustration and anger bled through anyway. It was too close to other times, when well-meaning people had said similar things but far more obviously in the vein of the fact that he was doing this to himself, that his life would be better only if he tried harder, if he just wasn't so 'picky', as if he were willfully holding himself back from what might help his life be more normal and contented.

"I was not under the impression you did," Hannibal said calmly, his placid tone so far from the bite of William's that it only made that harshness seem all the more out of place. Will shifted a little uneasily in his seat, aware he was being rudely defensive. "Your path is narrow and filled with thorns, with no visible divergence. You have known this path for so long, that you cannot see any way from it, but I can. In time, I hope you will put your trust in me to help you find your way from it. The forest is a vast place, and I would show you more of it."

"Alana is right, you do dance with words," he said, trying to lighten the tone and shift the focus away from the topic.

"And you see the steps and can hear the music, just as I can, but yours is a private dance, set for those closest to you. You dance for them, and the steps you make carve gouges into your soul from the thorns, because they don't always remember the path you are forced to walk upon, or how restrictive it is. I see you bleeding, William, and I do not forget."

Will could only stare at the other man, taken off guard by the serious and intense comment. Couched in metaphor, he couldn't even deny what was intimated, especially recently, but what could he even say in response to such a comment? He was saved from such a dilemma, brief as it was, by Hannibal speaking once more, his tone once more light as if the serious turn of the conversation had never taken place.

"I heard that Ms. Katz is quite fond of dancing, in the more typical sense. She appears to have charmed the majority at the latest ball at the Hopwood household over the weekend with her enthusiasm for it."

"Yes," he said absently, not quite sure where this was going. "She tends to rate people only so high as their skill in it. I believe she intends to challenge your own at some point."

Was he trying to merely make small talk with him? It seemed unlikely. If there was something that he had come to understand about the alpha over their acquaintance, it was that he never seemed to only have one goal in mind for any action. Will made himself eat a few more bites of food, not wanting to waste what was otherwise a lovely meal.

"Then I shall attempt to live up to her lofty standards, although I would certainly rather be dancing for your pleasure than her own. She is acting as your Sentinel this year, is she not?"

Will made an affirmative noise, finishing his food before answering, "Yes. She hasn't caused any
disruption I hope?" He had hoped she would be a bit more discreet. He honestly didn't know who she had been speaking to, other than from her general recommendations that there seemed nothing untoward about either of them.

"Not at all. I merely had a couple of my financial contacts letting me know she had been inquiring," he said, though made no mention of William's satisfaction with what had been found, as that would be in poor taste. However, neither did he inquire in some way as to anything else she might have uncovered, even should he be interested. Perhaps he judged William's presence in his home tonight as evidence that no matter who Beverly had spoken to, she had not found anything sufficiently damning to keep his interest in pursuing such a connection at bay. Rightly so. It showed a level of self restraint and confidence that Will was becoming more used to expecting from the man. "One of our family's most trusted betas is acting as my sister's Sentinel this year," Hannibal continued, "Her family has been linked with my own for many generations, much as Mr Hunt's has."

A knowledge there, offered to him about the type of family Hannibal was part of. Loyal to those that showed skill and expertise, those that fitted within the framework of their lives, and a willingness to extend that to future generations who were likewise taught such things. But more than that, it was also an admission that their family was small enough, despite their title, that they perhaps did not have sufficient numbers of alphas at hand to do such a task.

"Is your family quite widely spread then? Or are the customs surrounding Sentinels different in Lithuania?"

"A little of both. Where I come from it isn't as common to have so many alphas linked to a family, the number of betas being significantly higher in percentage than it is here, where the societal structure encourages alphas together far more. At the same time, however, the gift of acting as Sentinel is given to the person best suited for that task. Chiyoh has always had a knack for such things. No secrets are safe from her for long, especially if she is seeking them."

So he was right, and the family was quite small, tied quite close and used to being so. Will was aware of the image that Hannibal was painting for him in casual comments, of the closely-knit family that took care of their own, loyal and protective over generations. It was a stronger incentive than he had given it credence for, mainly because this would be a family that, if he ended up mated to Hannibal, he would be in a position of importance in, compared somewhat to his current situation.

He had to mentally shake this from his thoughts, the lure that the alpha was letting rest in the waters of their conversation. It was dangerous.

"I'm glad your family has someone so well skilled for the task," he said, trying for a conversationally neutral tone, but putting that topic aside with the delicate click of cutlery being set down on the plate. "Why is it you think that there are more alphas here, than in your homeland? Is it genetics, or social?"

Will picked up his glass and took a sip from it, sitting back in his seat to distance himself a little conversation a touch more, if only in his own mind. Hannibal Lecter was a clever hunter, and he knew how to maneuver his quarry well, and that made him nervous, not because he thought the man meant him harm, but because that was what would happen if he let himself fall into those words like he so desperately wanted.

"Mostly social I believe. The population density is higher here, and the way that society pressures alphas to tie themselves to omegas as soon as possible is far more prominent. It is not unusual, where I come from, for an alpha to remain unmated for the majority or even the entirety of their life, focusing upon the other facets of their achievements. While it is true that the goal would be to find a mate, there is a far higher expectation of personal achievement before the alpha would ever consider
applying himself to such a hunt."

"So a lot of alphas aren't part of a family?"

"Quite the contrary. Most will stay linked to their biological family, or forge out and form connections and alliances with close friends, just not through mating. You see this sort of thing with alphas here, who do not have the strength or dominance to retain an omega partner for whatever reason. Often they will focus on the rest of the family and other tasks, rather than the omega. The same is true there, but instead of trying to find a place in the family via an omega, they do so merely through choice. Many end up marrying betas or, in rarer cases, another alpha."

Will couldn't help but think of Price, who honestly had had no real chance of a relationship with Alana in anything but mutual respect and care after the attack, but who was tied to a relationship with her despite this. He had always been a part of the family, and his position had once been far more favourable, as the second alpha to Will's father, her sweet natured generosity having made a place for him to. But that had long since past, and Will was forced to wonder if in another society, whether Price might have been happier. As he was bonded to Alana, he was bound to her, making any romantic relationship elsewhere near impossible, especially considering his lack of dominance. The bond assured a level of commitment and focus that would make anything else seem pale by comparison, even as lacklustre as his current position must be. What of the others too, of Andrew, Jacob, even Nathan? What would their lives have been like in another society?

"Would they not regret not attempting to gain an omega? Biologically its predisposed."

Perhaps it was his own hesitance to see the truth of the unfeasible nature of their family that made Will ask it. He had never had much cause to question how well the family structure worked, not until more recently, and even that seemed far more tied to his own presence within it than the others.

Hannibal made a small thoughtful sound, considering his answer as he set his own cutlery aside. "I should think so, but is that worse than being bound and left neglected as is common here? People bond so young that they barely know themselves or what they want in life."

"And what of heats? A lot of the early bonding is merely the result of them."

"As you know yourself, if the mind and instincts are not ready to bond, then it does not happen. Omegas here are raised to crave setting up their own household as soon as possible, and the life that offers them. Back home, it is different. There is a far greater amount of import put on finding the right mate, rather than here where the focus is merely on one who has the most money, trusting that if things don't work out very well that they can add another alpha to their household."

Will was aware of the low laying undertone of what was being said here; an opinion of the alpha, perhaps even an expectation, that the omega he was with would not want or need several alphas to feel contented. Out of all that had been spoken of between them so far, it was this that sent a warning through him, for even with several of his family traveling with him, it usually wasn't enough to make him feel safe. He had always assumed that should he end up mated, his family would inevitably grow like Alana's had done.

"Do omegas generally have fewer alphas there then?"

"Indeed. It is rather uncommon to have several, though not unheard of. Omegas still have a number of alphas around them, but they are merely linked by family, not through mating. It is likely that my sister will remain with our family even when mated, the alpha moving to live with her, rather than the other way around."
Will shifted a little in his seat, uneasy with the notion of staying with Alana and Jack, especially in recent times.

"She wouldn't feel the need to set up a house of her own?"

"Its possible, but unlikely. Many of the restrictions in society here do not apply, and she has always been so wilful that she has the house already how she wants it. It is already her household, and even had my parents still been there, this would still be true. She would have had just as much autonomy in the household as she does now."

It went unsaid, but not unheard, that Will's situation would have been quite different. He tried to imagine living in the household without feeling so restricted and commanded in their home. That he could have things how he wanted them and not have those things countered by Jack, or anyone else.

"I can see how that would change things," he offered more quietly, a pang of melancholy there for a version of himself that had never existed. Or rather, one that had never been as much of an issue until the last few years when the dissonance within the house had grown.

Hannibal hummed a little, sitting back as Mr Hunt came in to take away the dishes.

"I have always been interested in the different ways that people live. I will admit it was something of a challenge when I first came here. There was much in this country that made little sense to me," Hannibal smiled softly across the table at Will, before getting up, smoothing down his suit as Will did the same. "For now, however, I have kept you from your work long enough. Come, let me accompany you to the study and see you settled there."

Will allowed himself to be led out of the room, much of their conversation roaming in his head like geese being chased by overenthusiastic sheepdogs.

The study was much as it had been the last time he had visited, with its many filled bookcases, the expansive fireplace and the desk and chairs. Masculine but cosy, and in its own way, a haven. Beatrice was laying in front of the fire, lifting her head when they came in, only to resume her nap when it was clear that her attention was not immediately required.

It surprised Will when Hannibal graciously excused himself, having expected him to linger, as most alphas would do, to spend more time with the omega in their house. Perhaps he should not have been surprised, for he got the feeling the man liked to deviate from expectations. It was with conflicting feelings that he found himself otherwise alone there, because while this had been agreed on and planned for, there had been a part of Will that had expected, even perhaps wanted Hannibal to linger. It created a slight feeling of discontent in him that he was alone, while at the same time knowing he was being ridiculous. He would never get any work done if the alpha was in the room. Frankly, even without him being here, the man was consuming both his thoughts and his attention.

It was even more ridiculous when he considered that if he wanted Hannibal's attention, all he had to do was step out of the study and go and find him.

Resolutely, he picked up his briefcase, which had been left beside the desk by Mr Hunt, and started to sift through the different pieces of correspondence he should be working on. He hadn't really known what to bring, so there was a decent amount here, not only of variety, but of quantity. That seemed vastly ambitious now, considering he couldn't get his mind to focus on it enough to even start.

Twenty minutes later, he had managed to write a very short note to shop he wanted something from, had wandered around the room restlessly, taking a moment to pet Beatrice, and staring at the various
books that lined the walls. He had also stared at the various other items in his bag without actually choosing any of them.

Sighing with frustration at himself, he sat back against the edge of the desk, his fingers rubbing his forehead a little to try and ease the tension there. He just couldn't seem to settle.

The conversation from the dinner table still worked its way through his thoughts, words, tone, meaning upon meaning that lingered just as heavily as the scent of the alpha in the room. For all that he had been contrary about the fact Hannibal had done as he had promised and left him to it, both wanting him here and not, there was also a larger part of him that was just waiting for the alpha to make an appearance again, and that sensation kept him worrying about it, waiting for him to arrive, but not knowing when. Expectation mingled with anxiety, making him feel restless and agitated.

It was around the time that he was contemplating either just ignoring the work and curling up on the sofa as he had before, or just going to find the alpha in question, that he heard the music.

It drifted in, delicately at first, barely a hint in the air, so discreetly in fact, that Will almost thought he was imagining it. But as he drew his head up, it continued, strengthened a little until he could make out the notes lilting in the air.

Will huffed out a silent laugh as the harpsichord filled the house with proof of Hannibal's skill, as well as the music itself. Ego there, and a very alphan need to be noticed. The music was nice, but he didn't doubt that after a song, perhaps two, the alpha would come through and see his response. Will shook his head and looked over to Beatrice, who was seemingly uninspired by the music and slept on.

However one song merged into the next, and as the third piece started to play, Will turned his gaze towards the door, a small frown deepening his brow.

No, he had been wrong. Hannibal was not going to come into the study seeking affirmation. This wasn't about that. The alpha was... he was reassuring him. He must have understood that Will might feel like this. 'Listen', the music said, 'I am here where you can find me when you are ready. You do not need to fear me ambushing you.' Will knew then that Hannibal would play, and continue to play throughout the evening while he worked, filling the house, not with smug self importance, but with practiced skill and reassurance. Will could stay here, deep into the night, and he knew the alpha would not relent, would take it as a chance to prove himself.

It was that knowledge that finally let him settle back down into the desk chair and start to look over his various correspondences, the soft music from the other room easing tension from his shoulders and he soon lost himself in his tasks.

It was perhaps three hours later that he roused himself from his work. Mr Hunt had come in half way through, bringing fresh tea and a couple of biscuits that Hannibal had likely made. It hadn't felt like an intrusion, nor shattered his focus except for a few minutes where he partook of the tea that had been left. But now he packed up his letters and took his case and left the sanctuary of the study, leaving the door open enough that Beatrice could get out if she wanted.

He found Hannibal in the music room, remembered from his initial tour of the house. He lingered there in the doorway, watching Hannibal play, his eyes closed, no music sheets in evidence. He had played all this time from memory?

Not wishing to disturb the man, he closed the door as quietly as possible and moved over to one of the sofas nearby, setting his case beside him and watching Hannibal for a while, the delicate dance of his fingers on the keys hidden by the angle, but the music flowed, bright and beautiful. One song
flowed into the next, and he realised that he had, at some point, closed his eyes to better listen. He found Hannibal's eyes on him, and while the man offered a small smile and a gentle nod of his head in greeting, he didn't otherwise stop or speak as Will had thought he might, upon noticing him.

Will found himself smiling at the gesture, and after a moment's hesitation, got up and moved over to the side of the harpsichord to watch those delicate fingers move over the keys.

"You play wonderfully," he murmured quietly to Hannibal, not wanting to unduly disrupt him, while at the same time knowing it was his right to do so should he chose. Hannibal was playing for him. He could feel the alpha's gaze upon him, but his own watched those fingers. Multitalented those fingers were it seemed, able to save lives, bake biscuits and even play the harpsichord for hours at whim.

"Thank you, William. I often play of an evening, to practice. I find it relaxing. It is delightful to have an appreciative audience however."

The warmth of those last words nuzzled into him, making him flush slightly, despite how obvious the compliment was. The alpha didn't need to use complex words with him after having played for him for over three hours without stop.

"If I had worked all night," Will says, on a whim, "would you have continued to play?"

He got no immediate answer, and he forced himself to glance up from those deft fingers and the hints of wrists, only to find Hannibal watching him, evidently waiting for the eye contact before replying.

"That would hardly be very responsible of me, would it? We both would need our rest at some point." Hannibal said with a smile that was a slow thing, the hint of teeth that reminded Will of a cat sunning itself, lazy and at ease. Will did not point out that the alpha had not actually answered the question, nor did he ask whether the man would have played all night if he had asked him to. He knew the answer from the way those eyes drank him in. That was not to say that he believed Hannibal's response would always be the same. His favour and acquiescence would not be universal, but for now, tonight, he would have played, and it was a heady feeling.

"You could play at the opera or as part of an orchestra."

"I could."

"You could," Will agreed, though more slowly for how his mind was picking over the idea, "You could but you won't. It would require too much of your time for rehearsals with others. You would find that tedious and unsatisfactory."

"What a keen mind you have. What else do you see?"

Will considered this question, turning over things in his mind. He could mention how much Hannibal seemed to relish spending those hours to bring him peace of mind, but that would only bring compliments that Will wasn't that easy on hearing more of. They would feel forced for how he could see them. He could even change topic entirely, but that would be too obvious for the sharp minded alpha. Will found that he actually wanted to give something to the man, not a reward; he wasn't a dog to be bought with a few kind words and affection, but to actually be able to impress in turn, to match in his odd way, show skill that the Hannibal in turn might appreciate.

"Music means a great deal to you, far more than is common. You play primarily because you enjoy doing so, being able to recreate and master music that fills your house. It isn't a typical alphan skill, and while there is much you would do to better yourself, this is more personal. The level of
satisfaction and pleasure you get from it tells me that there was once a time it didn't exist in your life, making the fact you have it now, whenever you want, to be that much more special. You either lost music at some point to have it removed from your life for a time, or it came into your life young enough to seem special and magical. Perhaps both."

Hannibal's muted delight and approval were warm in the air around them, the scent so faint, as all his scents seemed to be, but it seeped into him anyway, relaxing some of the lingering tension of the day.

"You are quite correct," Hannibal replied, still playing while they spoke, seemingly just as easily, although he knew others would have faltered, "I never knew music much while growing, as my parents were not interested in it. There had been people locally that played in taverns, but nothing that seemed worthwhile learning. That changed when my aunt came to visit. She took us all to a city that was further distant than we usually travelled, and there we saw a troop of Ordus devotees playing. Although that was not my calling, it stirred me in a way that stayed. When we returned, I must have been sufficiently roused to be noticed, for it was not long before she bought a harpsichord for the estate, and started to teach me the basics, and would take me, and later my sister as well, to worthy musical performances."

Hannibal paused then, his own music coming to its natural end, and Will wasn't unaware that this was echoing the story, likely by design.

"Such things halted when she died," Hannibal continued, his fingers resting on the keys before drawing them back and carefully closing the lid. "It was too painful for the family to hear such reminders for a time. Only when Chiyoh came to stay with us did it finally return, refusing to have my aunt's joys relegated to pain."

"And you practiced relentlessly to bring honour to that memory."

The alpha inclined his head, turning on the stool to better face William. "Indeed so. The creation of something beautiful from that which is ugly is a worthwhile achievement. It leaves the world a little lighter as a result."

Will could only nod, his thoughts turning in on themselves as he was reminded of some of the extremely ugly things he had seen lately, wondering how such horror and brutality could ever be beautiful. He was shamed when his thoughts turned to the Ripper. Murder had no place here, with the delicate instruments, the soft candlelight, and the warm look that the alpha was giving him. What was wrong with him, that he couldn't just be pleased for the music, but had to go to those places with it?

"I wish more people had that view. The world can be an ugly place," he said at last, knowing that his scent had likely turned a bit sour with his changed thoughts, and had to give reason for it that the alpha would accept.

Hannibal rose from his seat and stood, ending up closer than was entirely appropriate, and it made Will nervous, too used to others encroaching, unwanted.

"Are your dreams filled with such ugliness, William? Is that what keeps you awake?"

The words were soft, intimate, and Hannibal made no effort to closing the gap between them when Will nodded in agreement rather than answering. To take that last step forward, Will realized, was for him to do, if he wanted. The invitation was there, the lean muscled form of the alpha offering its own kind of haven, but it was one that Will had rarely ever been comfortable taking from others. Will found in that moment that he craved it just as strongly as he felt trapped by it.
Seeming to understand that, for now at least, such closeness wasn't on the cards, Hannibal stepped 
back to allow him more space. It was a relief, one that sat hollow and alone in Will's chest.

"Will you take my scent with you tonight? It would bring me comfort to know you had a reminder to 
chase your dreams down a different path."

It wasn't a lie, Will could tell that. It wasn't just an excuse to have his scent, his claim on Will's skin. 
That scent still lingered around him from last night, pressed into his skin, his pores steeped in it 
enough to linger, so there was little reason to refresh it yet, other than want.

Will found that he did want. Even the strange dreams that having an alpha's scent on him were better 
than the nightmares that would surely plague him otherwise. It was selfish, and in a way self serving, 
that he craved that relief no matter how he came by it, driven by the demands and pressures in his 
life. He knew that Hannibal was likewise offering for selfish reasons, not merely to help, and it was 
this mutual profiteering that had him nodding ever so slightly, enough for the alpha to read.

He was allowed this, he reminded himself as the alpha took off his jacket and started to roll up his 
sleeves as he had done before. Society expected courting couples to offer such gestures, although he 
had rarely done it without it being so close to his heat, when his instincts demanded he warn off other 
omegas.

He could pick out hints of Hannibal's slightly possessive scent in the air, just hints of it. The man was 
so controlled with what he allowed to show, that Will got the feeling that it was purposeful, a 
declaration or reminder, though of what precisely, he didn't know. Perhaps it was just a reminder of 
that selfish need, for the man was clever at seeming to understand why he hesitated, what he was 
thinking.

Either way, it was Will that took a step forward this time to bridge the gap between them. Still 
nervous, but reassured by the steadfast declaration of the music earlier, and what that had meant, he 
reached out and took that wrist, bringing it up to smell delicately, a token effort before he gave in to 
craving and rubbed his cheek against it. There was a slight dampness there as oils came more readily 
to the surface, heady in that warm fragrance of Hannibal, potent and eager.

Drawing the wrist away, he moved with a certain laxness that he knew was the result of the scent on 
his skin, some of the edge of perpetual anxiety and nerves easing with the primal reassurance of a 
strong alpha tending to him. The other wrist was taken and brought up, and he was barely aware of 
how he nuzzled in against the warm skin, trying to get closer to the scent that promised safety.

How long he stayed like that, he didn't know, but when the soft haze lifted, he was once more sitting 
on the sofa, Hannibal standing close by, but not touching. It helped the slow return of his senses from 
where they had been languishing, stopped it turning to panic, either from too much distance when the 
scent was still so fresh, or too close where his instincts might panic, as they often did.

"Was I out long?" he asked, feeling slightly discomfited by the lost time, but knowing it was natural, 
even if it was not something he associated with comfort. It was normal, he knew, for omegas to react 
like that sometimes, falling into the scent of an alpha, trusting that they would be taken care of while 
they were allowed to let go and just be. It just wasn't something that had ever much happened to him, 
and certainly not for many years.

"Not terribly long," came the murmur from beside him, and he looked up, though gave up on the 
attempt when his gaze found the alpha's waist and would have to crane his neck to see higher. He 
was allowed this. He could already smell the satisfaction coming from Hannibal at having thus 
rendered him into such a state. Will closed his eyes and let himself drift a little longer, his mind 
wonderfully quiet.
It was just so nice, to not have to talk, or think, to not have anything but Hannibal's quiet, pleased presence beside him. He listened to the house around them, the extremely muted sounds of a door opening and closing, the soft murmur of voices in tones that Will recognised as Humphrey and Price, the tick of the clock in the hallway beyond the door.

Eventually though, the peace of it started to feel too selfishly indulgent, aware that he was not only keeping Hannibal standing there beside him, but also his own family alphas from their home. He had no idea how long they had been waiting now, but it had to be late evening by now.

So it was that he drew himself away from the gentle retreat of his mind, and forced himself slowly back to the present.

"I should probably be going," he said, stretching his legs a little, as much to remind himself of physicality after drifting so long as it was to ease the muscles.

"Your presence here is always welcome, William."

The sound of Hannibal's voice, so warm, so pleased at his presence, did very dangerous things to him.

Lecter Residence, London - Saturday 14th November, afternoon

Hannibal drew on his gloves, the leather creaking in a muted but satisfying way as he tugged them delicately into place.

"If there are any callers, I shall be gone most of the afternoon, likely into the evening," he said to Mr Hunt, who was holding the various dog leads while Hannibal sorted himself out to his satisfaction. "I doubt Mr Graham will visit, but should he do so, please see that he has every comfort made available."

A man of few words, Mr Hunt merely inclined his head in acknowledgement, deferential in his manner without the need of unnecessary verbal placations or superfluous language. Gathering the leads from the man, he waited while the door was opened before moving out into the dull afternoon light.

Instead of heading out onto the road to take them to the park, he headed around the house and towards the back of the gardens where they abutted onto the Waltham Forest. It was one of the reasons he had bought the house in the first place, as he found it convenient having it at such close proximity to the forest, even if it set his abode further from the center of town than he might have liked, and it was now proving most useful for dog-walking. Beatrice padded alongside him without need of a leash, but the woods were dangerous, and he had no wish to lose one of the pups to their inquisitiveness.

The walk was a boisterous affair at first, the pups all excited to being out and they all enjoyed the wealth and variety that the forest had to offer. It was not an unusual occurrence for him, as both he and Mr Hunt had both been walking and training them, and he merely waited them out, allowing them their enthusiasm, knowing that after the initial splurge and tumble of energy evened out, they would focus more.

So they walked, the pups fanning around him, playing and exploring as much as the leads allowed. Their breath misted in the cold air, puffs of white that were a warning of the cold weather that was on the cusp of descending. Hannibal paused, breathing in the burn of it, and revelled in it, before continuing onwards.
Gradually the forest relinquished the hold of humanity, with its more slender, managed trees, the cleared paths with the odd remnants of those that had walked before; a crumpled bit of newsprint, a piece of ribbon from a hat gone astray, footprints of secret lovers scuffed into the earth with their delight in each other. The sounds of the city faded as well, until all that was left was the breathing ache of the forest, spidery limbs of branches long since past holding their coverings mixed with the evergreens that populated the air with an abundance of scent despite the cold. Leaves crunched underfoot, curled and edged in frost, delicate still in its portent of winter, easy to warm or brush away if one were of a mind to, not like the ice and snows that deep winter that such beauty foretold, for now.

The further they walked, the more the forest changed around them, thick with the sounds and silences, the gloom of tightly packed trees, and the weight of the ancient ways.

They moved with more purpose now, and the pups picked up on his firmer aim, the jostling of fur and paws smoothed out into an attentiveness that had them padding in an easy gait around him. They were hunting dogs, and in their bones they knew the tells, even if this hunt wasn't for meat. He strode onwards, still calm and relaxed in his own way, no longer lingering, but seeking the way ahead.

The forest was darker now, no matter that it was still the middle of the day and most of the leaves had already fallen from them, letting his gaze reach for the sky, should he wish. Great pines and evergreens sheltered them in gloom, the trunks becoming closer together, and pups had to scramble over tangled shrubs to keep up. A couple of times Beatrice seemed to sense something, a rabbit perhaps, but he kept her close rather than allowing her to go off.

How long he walked, he didn't know. The unseen path they tread was never the same length, twisting as it did at the whims of the forest, but when he saw the first subtle markers he recognized, only then did his steps slow and finally come to a stop. There was no sign, nor bench on which to sit, but all the same, this was the place.

After checking the area around him for anything of significance, he merely leaned back against a tree, allowing himself to slip into the state of merely waiting, his mind taking in all the details around him while letting time drift past. The pups were at his feet, their leads hooked over branch. Most were taking the chance for a nap, still young enough to need it. It was only, perhaps an hour later, when he felt the figure approaching that he drew himself back more acutely to the present.

"I apologise for keeping you waiting so long," the figure said as it moved further into the light, "There were visitors at the estate, and I had to see them off first."

Robert Lecter walked past the last of the trees that separated them and came to a stop in front of Hannibal, his eyes warm with welcome at seeing his nephew. He was dressed this time in the clothing of their homeland, simpler in many ways, less formal than what he had been wearing when visiting his home.

"It is no trouble. I am not in any particular rush today."

It was only when the favourable greeting was returned that Robert moved forwards, stepping past pups that moved out his way, to embrace Hannibal as he had not done before. They stood like that for long moments, taking in each other's scent, reminders of family that were etched beneath clothing and skin, reassurance of that family, of belonging.

Finally, by an unseen signal, both stepped back, content with having reaffirmed the familiarity.

Reaching into his coat pocket, Robert took out a couple of letters, handing them over to him, the delicate handwriting telling clearly enough that they were from his sister. It was an effort not to lift
them to his nose to seek scent. Instead he opened his coat and took out his own bundle and handed
them over. Most were for Mischa from himself, written over time, but there were two from Mr Hunt
to his family as well.

"She is well?" Hannibal asked, though he didn't expect anything but an affirmative. Their greeting
would have been much more fraught if something was indeed unsettled at home. Likewise, he
refrained from asking about the guests, despite his curiosity about who would be visiting them,
mainly because the answer was likely to be someone to do with Mischa's own courting endeavours,
and the least he knew about that the better.

"She is well."

That Robert didn't deem to go into any more detail, said easily enough that his thoughts on the matter
were of a similar sort. It was a dangerous subject, especially with him being so close right now.
Hannibal lapsed into silence, refusing to ask further for the same reasons he set the letters in his
pocket while refusing to touch them more. Conversation between them was not usually so stilted, but
then it was rare that they met out here.

Only when Robert had reassured himself of Hannibal's restraint, did he turn his attention to the dogs,
crouching down to stroke over furry heads and squirming bodies.

"How many are you keeping?"

"Just these two, and the mother," Hannibal replied, though was pensive a minute, looking down at
the sea of them, forcing his mind from the dangerous paths his instincts might take him, and towards
the reason for his visit. "Although if you would rather take Beatrice, I would not begrudge it. The
pups could likely use a calming influence at times, and she knows how to deal with them."

Robert hummed, a soft sound of inner thoughtfulness that they both shared.

"I think so, yes," he said after that moment of contemplation, "It's always easier to train pups with an
adult already there to lead by example, and there are many here that might need that example."

Hannibal, still pensive, merely nodded his agreement to this. Training two pups, one of which was to
be William's, would be far less trouble than the rest, and it would be better for his sister to have that
easy stability. As if sensing such thoughts, or merely guessing, Robert stood and looked back to his
nephew.

"And how is your prospective mate doing? His scent upon you is strong. I trust all is going well?"

It was perhaps as much to distract Hannibal away from thoughts of the family estate and those in it,
as it was to inquire about William, but it worked. The thought of the omega, as well as the
acknowledgement that the scent had been noticed made Hannibal's spine straighten just a little, the
tilt of his jaw showing just a hint of pride that no one but family might have noticed. Yet there was a
slight hesitation that lingered enough to pause his answer by just a fraction, just enough to be noted
by the other alpha when he answered.

"Things between us are progressing well, but there are additional pressures around him. Not all of
them I have managed to work out yet. As some of them seem to be from his home, there is little I can
do to assuage them, or even know exactly what they are. I made inquiries, of course, but I have not
yet found the exact source, although there are general pressures abound."

This was troubling news, and one that brought a slight frown to Robert's brows. He was, unlike
Hannibal, a man of darker hair, and his brows drawing down made him seem that much more severe
as a result. "Do you wish me to send Chiyoh? Perhaps two will better find the source than one."

Despite the frustration that must clearly be eating at Hannibal, he merely shook his head ever so slightly in denial. "It is not so severe as all that yet, and hopefully it should prove a moot point, once he comes to stay more often. I have moved my plans forward accordingly, and I get word from their household on a regular basis, but I shall send word if this changes."

Robert nodded, placated by this, knowing Hannibal's varied skills, and yet it still sat visibly poor with him that such a situation were taking place.

"Are you at least feeding him properly? This winter will be harsh I think."

"He was around yesterday evening for dinner."

At this statement, Robert's eyes sharpened, taking in the younger alpha's face and eyes. Hannibal's control over himself was admirable, but he had helped rear the man, and in conjunction with the answer that was not the clear response he had been expecting to hear, he let those words linger in the air.

"Ah. So you think him merely a game after all then? That is disappointing," Robert said, his voice bland. Judgement standing in the space between them.

Hannibal's eyes flashed in sudden irritation, forgetting for a moment just who it was he was challenging, and got a searing reminder to his senses when Robert let his presence go, just for a moment. In truth, Hannibal might have been able to take him in a challenge, for Robert wasn't as young as he had once been, but habit and respect were their own reminders, and the younger alpha backed down a touch.

"Far be it from one of our family to disrespect an omega they are courting by offering anything except the best they can make available," Robert continued. He could read the anger that hid the sudden shame in the younger man. Hannibal knew better than this; had been brought up better, and from the lack of response, he knew it. "The day is still young enough. Perhaps you wish to consider a change of your plans."

It wasn't so much a suggestion as it was a demand. Hannibal might be the Count of the Lecter line, but Robert was still his superior in the family. It was only then that he finally offered a verbal response, one that was clipped with restrained emotion.

"I believe so. I may have erred."

Robert inclined his head to this, not only glad that Hannibal was going to alter his behaviour in accordance with his upbringing, but that he was still humble enough to admit the mistake.

"In that case, I don't doubt you will have things to do, and shan't keep you any longer. Travel well."

To this, Hannibal nodded, returning the farewell and turning on his heels after picking out the two dog leads he required, and leaving the rest with his uncle. His steps were slightly stiff with his anger, with his frustration and regret, but soon the forest swallowed him on the path home, and Robert was left there alone with the rest of the hounds.

He stood there for a long time after his nephew had left, thoughtful over the encounter as the sky slowly darkened. At his feet, most of the pups were content to rest, exhausted after their long journey. At his side, the mother was placid with the change of ownership, easy as only dogs could be when the structure of the pack was properly renegotiated.
The only creature that was not restful was one of the pups. Despite its tiredness, it was restless, and had been ever since Hannibal had gone.

Eventually he crouched down, running a hand over the pup, seeing if he could calm it, but while it was clear the pup wasn't challenging his position as leader, neither was it contented.

Holding it in place with one hand, Robert undid the collar and let it, and the lead, drop away.

"Go then, little brother," Robert murmured to the pup, "Whether it is the forest, or something else, go find what you seek."

As he released it, the pup scrambled up, and, after an initial hesitation of finding itself untethered, ran off into the woods, all paws and gangly legs. As he watched, Robert sighed, not knowing whether the forests would be kind to it. He hoped they would, though it was not kind to many.

Turning away, he picked up the spare lead, and headed back towards home. Dinner would be ready soon, but he thought that perhaps it might end up delayed for the furry chaos he was bringing back with him. The thought brought a fond smile to his otherwise somewhat severe features.

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**London - Saturday 14th November, evening**

By the time evening came, neither the walk home nor distance from the conversation had settled Hannibal's anger. If anything, it only seethed within him more, far stronger for the fact that his anger was directed within. The bitter taste of his failure to provide was a weighty thing, shameful, and his uncle had been right to remind him of this.

It didn't matter that dear William was entirely unaware of what he was eating, nor that he would likely be horrified if he did know, all that was beside the point. It was Hannibal's duty to provide the best for his mate, something he had failed to do the last dinner they had shared. He had justified it to himself that William would have wanted to scent the mark he had left the night before, when they met again, but in truth it was that he himself had not wished to erase it from his skin, and prioritized that over providing for him. It had been a selfish decision, and one that was needless, for they would be properly mated soon enough, and their scents would mingle together from that point onwards.

So it was that when he had returned home, he took little time in dropping the two pups off, and changing into something more inconspicuous, while deadening his scent more fully with blockers, before he made his way out once more to rectify his error in judgement as best he could.

He had now been following the alpha for a while, unseen, chosen weeks ago for the audacity of thinking himself worthy beyond his station.

Early evening had turned into night, the faint scent of beer and the mingled scents of patrons drifting through the air as the man left the bar and started to make his way home. Hannibal watched from the shadows, unnoticed, watching that lone figure make his way towards where he was waiting deeper in the park as the man passed by, only to have the alpha pause when he noticed something.

The scarf sat there, caught on a shrub in the park, bright in the moonlight and teasing a scent through the air, one that drew the man off the street and over the grass towards it. Hannibal watched as the material was carefully extracted and brought to the alpha's nose, smelling, not only of a light, floral perfume that Ms. Summerville used to wear, but also hints of the dead omega's scent, a nostalgic hint of what had been lost.

Hannibal smiled, slow and cruel behind the raised collar of his coat, and shifted where he was
standing, the action purposefully bringing the gaze of the alpha up sharply. The man was quite the sight, all straight backed in his navy uniform, the flash of anger, of outrage not only having had this moment be imposed upon by a watcher, but also the growing possibility that the shadowy figure might have been the cause of both loses, was delicious. To add insult to injury, Hannibal let a soft chuckle pass from his lips, letting his amusement tint the air, not only to incense the alpha further, but also knowing that the sharp scent of that anger had now destroyed the subtle hints of true scent upon the scarf.

It was foolish for the man to come after him, alone and on ground not of his choosing, but people were fools for what they wanted, as Hannibal knew only too well. Certainly the alcohol the man had imbibed, as well as the outraged instincts, helped encourage that foolishness.

As the alpha strode towards him, Hannibal drew the man deeper into the trees, letting himself fade back a few steps as if wary, enough for their fight to be hidden from being disturbed, letting the man attempt to strike him, think he had an advantage. But the night was thick, and Hannibal’s own anger demanded an outlet. They feinted and moved around each other like dancers, and soon the man had drawn the knife he carried on his belt, a small thing that many sailors kept habitually, thinking it gave him the advantage.

Nothing would give this man the advantage, and nothing did.

Triumphant, Hannibal stared down at the meat on the ground. He stared at the mouth. It wheezed desperately, coughing as blood filled the lung, making it difficult to bring too much attention when Hannibal wanted far more leisure with his victim. His gaze turned to the small knife that now rested in his own hand, the leather glove black in the moonlight while the blade gleamed with silver and his victim's life. It was not his preferred type of blade, but it would service enough for his purposes. This creature would be a feast for his mate, and its blood would feed the forest.

He smiled down at it, sharp and vicious, before leaning down and holding it still with one hand, while the other plunged the blade deep into it's chest, parting flesh with a steady motion that drew out lovely music from its mouth, feeding the night air as well with such a song.

Chapter End Notes

Hello my lovely readers. Well, it is December again, and we all know what that means, don’t we? It means chaos and stress! As such, I have absolutely no idea whether I will manage to get chapter 16 out on time (Jan 18th), but I am certainly going to try.

If things look like they are going to be going well on that front, I have been working on a couple of small stories in down-time, that I had hoped I might be able to offer as a festive bonus for you all. One is pretty much just smut, and not based on the world here, the other is a reworking of the Fairdew Incident spoken of in this chapter that I actually wrote before LL&P was ever conceived. My primary focus is on getting the chapter done, but I have been dipping into both when I needed a break. Fingers crossed I can get at least one done on time, but man, I need to really stop adding plot to things that don’t need it lol.

I hope you all have as stress-free a festive season as is possible.
London - Saturday 14th November, evening

Hannibal looked down at the remains of the alpha. His anger had cooled alongside the corpse, though still smouldered, ugly and bitter within his own chest. He hadn't let it affect him enough to be seen in the cuts and placement of the body, following his own plans for the tableau without deviation, so he knew his emotion would not be seen, and no mistakes had been made. Yet he found himself dissatisfied, likely the result of his mood.

It was better, now that he was done, to focus on how to remedy his error, not in the procurement, for that was completed, but in the providence he could offer. This, rather than the kill itself, was likely going to be the more difficult of the two, for while William had been visiting with him more frequently, Hannibal would have to manufacture something to bring them closer together enough to offer up what he had gathered. The forest at least had already been fed, the rich blood seeping wide and deep into the soil, keeping the frost away and sinking in.

Picking up the bag at his side, one that held carefully wrapped packages of waxed paper and twine, he turned to make his exit, only to hear a slight rustle in the distance of leaves crunching, and chilled shrubs brushed past at speed. It was not a human sound, and so he lingered, listening and waiting, as the disturbance came closer.

Four paws and grey fur burst through a gap in the trees and it was with startlement that Hannibal beheld the exhausted but euphoric pup that wiggled in front of him.

He crouched down, setting his bag aside for the moment as he reached out to stroke long fingers through the fur, and immediately found himself the recipient of such innocent joy that his anger over his own failings was momentarily forgotten. He gathered the pup to him, drawing it in close and under his coat to try and warm it up, glancing back up past the trees in the direction it had come from, but nothing else stirred, and the pup's collar was gone. How long it had spent running was anyone's guess, but somehow, with help or not, it had found its way back to him, not even on the path he had taken back home, but to here?

He murmured something, his voice sounding words of gratitude that only the pup, the corpse, and the trees might have heard, and then focused his mind back on the pup whose presence he had been gifted with once more.

The pup smelled less of dog and damp fur, and more of the deep forests; of mosses, ancient trees and life steeped in the old world. Hannibal drew that scent in, a reminder as well as a gift as the pup cuddled up against him.

Although he was not trained in animal care to the level of a veterinarian, the pup did seem to be in good condition, despite the cold and the long journey. It wiggled at first as he held it, before finally settling as the heat and knowledge of it's successful search made themselves understood in its youthful canine brain, tucked in close against Hannibal's side, and warmed by his body heat and coat.

Lifting it as he stood, he moved back over to the corpse, contemplating it for a moment before letting the scalpel drop into his hand from the pocket in his sleeve once more, then reaching forward and
carefully slicing away a thin sliver of meat from the remains.

The pup ate it from his fingers with care, remembering it's training despite whatever hunger it felt. He procured another two slices for it in re reward before standing straight once more and making his way back to the bag, picking it up and heading back through the trees and onwards towards home.

It was a curious thing, he found, to have a companion with him at the end of a successful hunt. Satisfying to be able to provide from the hunt as well. The pup was a distraction and balm upon his mood, a reminder of loyalty despite the odds, and he found he liked that reminder exceedingly well.

London - Sunday 15 November, morning

The morning was fresh and bitterly cold this early, before the sun had had a chance to burn off the worst of it and mellow it into something easier to bear. Will didn't mind too much, for that chill and the early time meant that the streets were largely bare of people, which was certainly a plus.

Humphrey and Andrew sat opposite him in the carriage, already a couple of small packages from their trip tucked to the side. Still, although he had said the trip was for shopping, there was something else that he had in mind for the journey. With Andrew sitting there, he had kept his tongue silent so far, hesitant to air his request in front of the alpha whose temperament he was sure would be disparaging of the goal, but already there were more people venturing outside the warmth of their homes, and if he was to get this done, he would rather do so without the possibility of meeting people he knew while out.

"I should like to stop by the pier, if that's okay?" he ventured, not looking over at the other two. Humphrey, he knew, would be amicable enough with wherever he chose to go, and the fact that he was the alpha in charge of their little trip was the reason he managed to make the request at all. He shifted in his seat a little, uneasy with his request, but not saying any more quite yet.

"Of course," came the measured and polite reply from the alpha, before the man turned and opened the small sliding window to the front of the carriage, relating to Price where he should turn the carriage towards, before settling back in the seat once more. "Is there something specific you wanted to see?"

That was the question, of course, and while he was hesitant to voice it, he wasn't about to leave something as a surprise, knowing that the uncertainty would only put the alphas on edge more, and he didn't want to have them prickly for the rest of the trip.

"There is a well-reputed fortune teller there," he ventured, a slight flush of embarrassment tinting the scents in the carriage at this admission, "I thought it might be interesting to see how much of it is just the clever use of intellect, or if there is some real power there."

There was a slight snort from Andrew, but not an unkind one, merely one that showed his disbelief in such dubious powers. The alpha was, to his knowledge, not affiliated with any of the gods, and tended towards being highly sceptical in nature of their powers. While Will had likewise never found himself particularly drawn one way or another, he was more open-minded to the possibility.

"I know it's likely that most of them are frauds," Will admitted, easy enough in their current company's response not to withhold his words, "but I am curious, okay?"

He didn't mention the other possibility, the other hope he had around the trip; that the power might in fact be true, and could offer some guidance that would help him. So many years without finding a mate, he was getting desperate for any hint that his life might hold any hope of something other than
His answer settled the alpha, who gave him a warm, indulgent smile and shake of his head to show his bafflement of the whole thing, but clearly willing enough to go along with it. "Seems like a waste of money, to me," Andrew said, "but if that's what you want to do, I am sure it will prove amusing at least."

The pier, when they got there, was all but empty at this time in the morning. There were some of the stalls open, and various workers here and there, but for the most part few had ventured to such a location. Getting out the carriage, he paused to tug his scarf tighter around himself and make sure the cuffs of his gloves were tucked into the sleeves of his coat, less for his own wants, and more so that Humphrey wouldn't feel the urge to remind him.

With Andrew swapping places at the front of the carriage, it was Humphrey and Price that wandered along the pier with him, pausing at a couple of the stalls that were open, and looking at their wares. It was mostly food stalls open, hoping to cater to any workers this early, but there were a couple of ones selling small ornaments and trinkets that they browsed over as well. Price picked up a carved bone pipe for his brother, and Humphrey and Will shared a small portion of fried potato sticks to help supplement their rather rushed breakfast.

Finally though, they allowed their steps to head towards one of the various fortune teller stalls that were in evidence. These, unlike the more permanent stalls that took up the majority of space along the pier, were actually comprised of caravans that served both as a place of work, but also living quarters. Will had seen them many times in the past, but had never been in one. He remembered listening to various accounts of them from others describing their visits, but they deviated so widely, perhaps in reflection of the personalities of the fortune tellers themselves, or even just the observations of those telling of such a trip. Brightly painted, and with their wheels secured down with wood and bolts to the pier floor as protection against high winds, the caravans stood a little festive against the backdrop of the harsher weather, cheerful in their stand against the elements. They were abbutted onto what might otherwise have been stalls, to keep waiting patrons or family members safer from the weather.

It was into one of these that they went, Will having picked out the caravan whose name he was looking for, Ms Tutley's Tarot, painted in beautiful cursive on the side. Although he had not heard too much in terms of details, this was the one that had been mentioned in his presence that seemed to have the most potential for actually being what they claimed.

So it was that their small group huddled a little in the shelter while Humphrey knocked upon the door.

"Welcome, dear. Please sit and I will get things set up, hmm? Quite the bitter chill out today. They say the heavy snows are due soon."

He nodded to this, pleased that he seemed to be required to make little in the way of response, and seated himself in the chair indicated, while Price stayed back by the door, out the way. The place
was tiny inside, not too much bigger than their own large carriage in fact, but it was meticulously tidy, and was filled with such clever little space-saving items that he couldn't help but be impressed by it. In a different world, and in a different life, he could imagine himself being quite content living in such a place, perhaps near to a river for fishing.

"Your home is lovely," he said, as he watched her bustle around getting the table set up and various things taken out, seemingly having caught her before she had started her business day, as it were. She glanced over to him, and he could tell her gaze didn't miss the fact that he was not, in fact, lying, and perhaps surprised by this.

"It is thought an odd way to live," she said, sitting down opposite the table that was now placed between them, "but it has been many years since I lived in a home with stone walls, that I would think it too strange to return to it. There's a freedom to being able to pick up and go wherever you like, taking your life with you."

She was shuffling the large pack of cards in her hand, already several items down on the table. A couple of bowls, a delicately embroidered cloth to place the cards down on, and a pot of what was likely to be incense. There were two small lamps on the shelves either side, and they cast a warm light on the small space that made it feel comfortable and intimate.

"Is this your first time having your fortune read? What should I call you, dear?"

Will nodded, giving his name, momentarily distracted by a small figurine tucked away, mostly out of sight on one of the shelves. It might be nothing of note, but he rather thought it looked similar to the stylized depictions of Osara, the God of Fate and Prophecy.

Forcing himself back to the present, turning to look towards her, "You came highly recommended by a couple of those I know. I was hoping to find out what my chances are for becoming mated this season."

He knew he posed more of a challenge to a fraud than most, or potentially they might see an easy mark. The rate of matings was so stupendously high that it was very rare that omegas did not become mated. Despite this, he knew that she was not a fool, either to think him easily placated by empty promises, nor the good odds of likelihood tipping in his favour. For at his age, to be unmated, was nearly unheard of, although there was the possibility that she would think he merely meant another mate, rather than his first, but he caught her flicker of a glance to his cheekbones, likely picking up the lack of highlights there indicative of mating marks on the glands there, despite the low light. He fully expected to get some manner of generalized neutral reading that didn't give any more answers than he might have hedged himself. But either way, he hoped it might be interesting. Even seeing the inside of the caravan was of enough interest to make him pleased for having come.

"The standard price for a reading is six shillings. If you would put it in that bowl there," she said, gesturing to one of the two bowls to the side, "and then shuffle the cards while I get the rest organized, we shall see what answers I can get you."

It wasn't a particularly large amount, modest even. It made him think better of her that her price didn't change on perceived income. She was astute enough to have picked up on their wealth by now, if for no other cause than the more expensive tailoring than the average person might have. He set the money in the bowl and did as he was bid, a little excited despite himself, at what might be shown one way or another.

The deck was thick in his hands; one of the more complete decks with seasons, emotions, and more specifics than the sparser decks tended to have. They were slightly unwieldy in his hands, due to the sheer number, but he managed okay, watching as she settled down more comfortably in the chair
opposite, before lighting some incense in the pot and then setting the lid back on it to keep it contained.

"I'm just going to cast my runes for guidance on this reading, then we can begin."

She smiled to him, and it was an open and friendly smile, and he found himself relaxing a little under the warmth of it. He might not know her, but he could tell she was pleased enough by his presence, and happy to do her appointed task.

He watched her inhale some of the smoke from the covered pot, small wisps of it trailing up and over her face before she politely put the lid back on, so he wouldn't be inundated by the smell. He was glad for it, for while many liked incense, he had always found it gave him headaches, which was another reason he had wanted to come in the morning, before a day filled with readings such as this would have rendered the caravan thick with the stuff.

"Not everyone that does readings asks for guidance," she said amiably, taking a bag from a shelf, one, he noted, that was near that small figurine, "but I make a habit of it. The cards can often be ambiguous if they are feeling fickle." She rummaged about in it, before casting a small handful of small bone runes into the second bowl on the table. It was only when they fell there, some of them face down and offering nothing, others face up and stark with their carved runes, that the first hint of anything other than amiability showed on her face. If anything, Will saw, with a growing sense of unease, her face had lost some of its colour.

"Is something the matter, Madam?" he asked, knowing already that, as far as she was concerned, there was indeed. Whether an act or not, and it was a good one if it was, she appeared rather unsettled.

"Ah, well, of a sort. I can do your reading for you, but I cannot take your coin, for there is only so much I can offer you in this case, and not enough to justify the price. If you would pocket your coins, I will tell you what I can."

Will set the cards down for a moment, and did as he was asked. Whatever she had seen in the runes, he didn't think she was lying about the warning she had seen in it, whatever it was. It was that, more than anything else so far, made him wary. Was the guidance from a God, truly then? What might one of the Gods see about his life that would render their follower wary to offer up a fuller truth?

"Thank you," she said as he took the coins once more, her voice having a slightly more forced cheer in it, "If you would shuffle the cards again, and focus on the question you want clarity on, then place them down here. Then turn the first card over and place it down."

Will shifted a little on his seat, wary now of what he might find. It was rare to see the power of the Gods at work in everyday life in ways that were clearer, but he got the feeling that perhaps, just perhaps, this might be one of them. It was unsettling, not only considering this, but that there was something about his life that made them hesitate to give the guidance.

"The first card is your past experiences of those who have tried to court you," she said as Will turned the first card over. Looking at it, he found a huff of amusement leaving him as he looked down at the card. It was 'The Fool', a card depicting a man chasing butterflies off the edge of a cliff. Seeing it, a bit of the woman's hesitation melted into something more at ease, amused as he was.

"Not had much luck with them, have you?" she said, and Will shakes his head. If it was luck that chose that card, it was pretty apt. "Alphas chasing a dream, rather than paying attention to reality, and that was their downfall. They had neither the wings to follow where you led, nor the wit to catch
you, to their detriment. Blinded by their own dreams and wants, I would guess. Here, turn over the next one. This will show your current hopefuls for this season."

Will reached out to the deck and drew the next card, stalling a moment when he accidentally pulled two and put the second one back.

"No," she stopped him, drawing his gaze up for a moment, "Place them both down, but turn over the top one first. When that happens, it tends to mean the cards are linked."

Interested, but not caring either way, he set them down as requested, and turned over the first card. It sat there, beautifully rendered and enticing.

"Oh my," the fortune teller said, her eyebrows raising to an elevation as yet unseen. Will hadn't thought eyebrows could go up that far. "Well, you certainly have managed to find someone impressive, I will give you that. That's the magician card. A man of skill beyond the average, possibly beyond the norm; someone who can guide you to success in your endeavours. He has the tools to help you unlock your potential, and since he is seen here in relation to your mating, I would say that while it has been fools in the past, this man, this alpha, he has the knowledge and the power to see you mated this year. Being guided by the magician in any task isn't the easy route, but then the easy route has not been something that has worked for you in the past, since you are here."

She would ponder the card a moment more, and while she was distracted, he watched her gaze flicker to the second card beside it. The magician seemed like a good card, and really, who out of the two could it denote except Hannibal, with his clever words and actions, his alternate views of the world. Still, that second card, if he was buying into this reading, was, from the ever so slight frown he saw touch her brow, not one of further joy, but a cautionary one. If anything, it made him feel a little more trusting that this wasn't a scam, though he hadn't noted any particular untruth from her so far.

"Turn over the second card, if you would please. It is linked to the magician, and will be something you should be aware of, or cautioned by, although it is not the end result. That is for the last card."

He did as he was bid, turning over that second card, and they both stared at it for long moments, and behind him, he could hear Price shifting slightly at the scent of his distress at the image.

The devil sat there staring up at him, horned and furred, a human chained at his feet.

"This is the challenge you will face," the fortune teller said, although he was barely managing to listen when the dismay was filling him so acutely. He was surprised at how much the sight of that card sent distress through him, believing the telling more than he had ever thought he might. Perhaps it was because it wasn't all good, but that didn't detract from the message it was conveying. This was no equal working relationship, this was one subjugated by another, and he had more than enough of that with Jack, without binding himself to someone of a like-mind.

"Mr Graham," she said, drawing his gaze away from the card, and to her after a moment, letting it skitter over the kindly features that were drawn in concern. "This is a warning, but not the end result," she reiterated, "Getting what you wish in terms of a mating this year, when dealing with the magician, it comes with a cost, as any serious undertaking does. This card tells me he is possessive and covetous. He usually draws people in with power and wealth, and like any devil, is good at what he does. While getting the magician in a reading will usually mean a goal attained, this card tells me that your paths will not part at the end of it, for making a deal with a creature like that is binding. This should not be a surprise to you, since it is to do with mating, which in itself deals with the same thing. The challenge here is that you will have bound yourself to someone, but that person does not hold to the conventions of others. The magician has his own rules, that is why he succeeds where the
majority will not. The devil card is a reminder that some of those things will be strange and uncomfortable for you, and you should consider carefully what it means to be with someone like that."

He nodded to show he was listening, but already his thoughts were being drawn to the various ways that Hannibal had shown his cruelty, trained him to see it, even. His possessiveness, that was something that the alpha had, himself, reminded Will of with regards to his sister, but at the same time, their family, despite the distance, seemed close-knit, loyal to each other in a way that was not necessarily the norm. It had been something he had coveted; being part of a family but without being pressured by others in the same way he was now. Did he really think that an alpha like Hannibal would merely let him get his way in everything? No, but those chains were stark to him, and in truth, the vision of them sitting on that card disturbed him more than he would like.

"If you would turn over the last card, this will show your future when with this alpha. As I said, the third card was a warning. This card will show what choosing the magician would grant you."

Will was hesitant now. He could understand the praise of her skill that the woman had gotten from those who had spoken of her. There were, to his knowledge, no tricks here, and she didn't sugar coat things, or play to what he wanted to hear. That made it rawer, especially when the information that was being imparted was not good.

He selected the last card and set it down, pausing a moment before turning it over. It was almost with a sense of thankful disbelief that he looked at it, for this was not at all what he had been expecting. He was almost giddy with relief, although he didn't truly know what it meant. The card that sat there was not something depicting a couple, or some struggle, quite the opposite. What sat there on the table was the card that depicted winter.

He looked up at the fortune teller, confused. The cards up until then had seemed like part of the story, the narrative of what he had come to find out, but this stood stark and odd at the end.

"Are you sure that the devil wasn't the outcome?" he asked, but the woman was already shaking her head. Whether she had noticed something, or was now using her more mundane skills to put a client at ease after a mistake, he didn't know, but she seemed firm on it either way.

"The card of winter is an unusual card, but the magician is an unusual card to get as a mate. Think of it less of a person, or a physical destination, and more of it as a feeling. When you look at the card, what are you reminded of? What does it mean to you?"

Will frowns, looking back at the card, willing to play along for now. In truth it made him think of several things, now that he was paying attention. It reminded him of the feeling when he had stood by the window at night, looking out at the small copse of trees in the family's garden. It had almost been an disassociated feeling of tranquility and otherness, but one that felt familiar with hints of possibility that the noise of the world generally stopped him from feeling. It was a similar feeling in some ways as he had felt the last time he had been at Hannibal's house, when he had taken in the alpha's scent and let himself drift in that scent, feeling safe enough to let go in that way, at least for a time. And of course, it reminded him of the comment back at Samhain, when Hannibal had commented, knowingly, that he didn't think William would find winter harsh this year.

The woman let him sit there and consider these things, not interrupting as many would, letting him work his way through the feeling until he looked back towards her.

"Those feelings, whatever they are to you, that is what such a mating would offer longer term. The cards show there will be struggles with his inner nature, but only you can decide whether that feeling
and what it offers, is worth it to you. The magician and the devil in one man is a challenging combination, and yet, they do say that the daemons and devils protect their own. That might offer its own security, if that is what you seek."

Was that what he sought? It was undoubtedly a part of it at least. He thought of Alana, filling her house with more alphas just to feel safer and more secure, and had never really questioned too much if he might have been the same, if he ever got mated. And yet, the talk with Hannibal had offered its own consideration; that Hannibal was not likely to be pleased to share William with those who were not family, and quite possibly not as a mate. He hadn't really considered that the man thought himself powerful enough to hold off any necessity to add to their family through mating. He had not, after all, ever really felt the man's dominance, nor tasted his aura in the air. While it would likely be something Will would inevitably have to discuss with him, did he really want to tie himself to someone like that, who would be so possessive as to cut off the possibility of enlarging their family?

He could easily see those hints of the cruelty underneath the excellently cultivated veneer. Many of the things he did that may have seemed like generosity had very different origins and goals. Hannibal had let him see those glimpses, only hints in their talks, of someone possessive and far more protective than was helpful at times. That he knew that was at least something, but Will didn't get the feeling that the man would be as lenient in offering such allowances to his mate. After all, it wasn't like there was anyone else to look after Will, should they become mated and these suppositions proved true, and that lack of viable security would only make such protectiveness swell.

"I have two suitors this year," he said to the woman after a moment, his gaze returning to her. "What can you tell me of the other one?"

She paused a moment, and he caught the flicker of her gaze as it looked to the runes still sitting in the bowl as she gathered up the cards once more, folding them back into a beautifully embroidered silk cloth and setting them away.

"No, Mr Graham. There is only one."

**Bloom Residence, London - Sunday 15th November, afternoon**

By the time they returned to the house it was almost lunch. Both Humphrey and Price had left him largely alone with his thoughts while coming back in the carriage after their trip to the Pier, for which he was grateful. He had a lot to think about, or rather, a lot that he was worrying about. Not that that was unusual really.

The whole thing could have been a setup, a farce, as Andrew had told him, but Will wasn't one to be taken in easily, especially not when he was paying attention. Too much about what had been said, and left unsaid, in that caravan had him believing it was true, or at least as true as such generalised suppositions could be.

Despite the fortune teller's comment to do with the money, he wasn't exactly sure what it was that made her turn down the cash. The reading, as far as he could tell, was around the same sort of depth as those that had recommended her had received, and had would have thought nothing of paying for such a reading. And yet she had still turned it down, and he didn't know why. Was there really much more she could have said, or was the reason for not taking the money different?

On a different note, he also wasn't exactly sure how the reading itself could have been faked. There had been no way for her to know that he would turn up, nor who he was really. It wasn't as if he was frequent in visiting even the more general shops nevermind the stalls at the Pier. It was possible that she might have recognised him from a description, but even knowing who he was, and therefore
who he might be courting, it didn't account for the cards that had been chosen, for it had been Will that had shuffled and drawn them.

It was a strange twist of fate that had Will wishing he could disbelieve what the cards had shown. He was sure that the Gods, if any were watching, would be chortling with that irony.

Back at the house, he stepped down out of the carriage and wandered into the stables to say hello to the dogs. He hadn't been spending as much time with them lately, and he could use the uncomplicated companionship while he worked his way through the thoughts of the trip.

Keeping out of the way as Peter and Millie took care of the carriage horses, he sat on a bench and petted the dogs. He had learned early on that he had no skill with horses, and indeed preferred to be at least a stall away from them whenever possible. He couldn't really remember a time when he was at ease with them in close proximity, and had long since admitted to himself that this too was likely a lingering leftover from the incident 25 years ago.

"Will Jack be out for long?" he asked Peter, who was brushing down one of the horses nearby. The other carriage was gone, and he had seen enough of the betas around the to gauge that it was not a family outing that had taken place.

"Yeah, that's right. Off to work he is, him and Brian. Said he wasn't to be expected back until the evening dinner."

That was an unexpected relief, and it must have shown somehow, because Peter chuckled at him.

"I wouldn't try bringing the dogs inside though, no matter that he is gone for the day, because Mrs Harris has her hands full right now with the kids' mess. They caused quite a ruckus earlier. Just as well there are so many of us here. Can you imagine a family of four trying to deal with them?"

Will found his lips turning up a bit at this. He could imagine it all too well, and it was, by varying degrees, amusing and distressing.

"That's what comes with two of them likely to present as alphas. It's only going to get worse as they get older," he said, standing and brushing himself down a bit. "I suppose I should head inside and see if there's anything I can do to help. Will you be wanting to spend more time going over the expense books later?"

Peter was still young enough not to look on the challenge of young alphas as as daunting as many would, but he groaned dramatically anyway, though perked up at the offer.

"Yeah, that would be great! You make it seem so logical and straightforward when you explain it. Mr Platts tried to help me on Thursday, but it ended up feeling like the numbers were tying themselves in knots around my brain."

Will shook his head a little in amusement. "You will get there. Come find me after the evening meal and we can go over them."

With Peter's words of gratitude in the air, he headed back towards the house, some of the tension having eased out of him, not only because Jack wasn't likely to be around for a number of hours, but also because of the sensation of calm and satisfaction that came with feeling useful. Peter hadn't been able to do more than basic addition when he first joined the household a few years ago, but had been determined in his drive to better himself for the family. Will suspected that he hoped, eventually, to end up as head butler when Mr Fall retired, even though that was many years in the future.

His coat having been hung up, he made his way deeper into the house, avoiding the room where he
could hear the children, instead following directions from a harried looking Hettie.

He found Mrs Harris in the upstairs sitting room in the midst of what would once have been a cacophony of the children's delight, but was, in fact going to be a bit of a nightmare to clean up. There was paint everywhere. The room with it's large windows to the garden made it decent, even in winter, for painting, and it seemed as if Alana had left her supplies unattended.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" he asked, lingering at the doorway so as not to rouse the clearly bristling Mrs Harris should she decide that his presence was not required. Betas, although not territorial in the same ways alphas could be, nonetheless tended to get testy when faced with things that hampered their ability to sort things in a house to their satisfaction.

"Oh, Will. Actually, could you put away the painting supplies back in the cupboard in the atrium? This mess is going to take an age to clear up, and I won't have time to put them away before lunch. I've cleaned them of the paint, you just need to put them in the cupboard. Here's the key."

It went without saying that leaving them unattended further was not a good plan, and he was happy enough to do it, letting her get on with scrubbing oil paints off the floor and attempting to salvage some of the seat fabrics that appeared to have gotten absent minded handprints on them in a mess of rainbow hues. He was not about to attempt to help with that, knowing only too well how she was best left alone to get on with such things, her own pride in the work being at stake.

Gathering the various tubes into the boxes, many of which were less than amply full now, as well as the brushes and other things, he carried them carefully around the mess, and then headed downstairs. The atrium wasn't a room that he was ever in much, being far too bright for his general ease, but he was familiar with it enough to put things away at least. It sat at the side of the house and was quiet for the moment, the errant tantrums of the children held at bay by the several stone internal walls within the house that sat between them.

It was uncharitable, or at least self-indulgent to be grateful that he had never been the sort of child to behave like that, not that he remembered at least. Certainly not since they moved in with Humphrey.

Sitting down on one of the seats, he started working through the box, taking each of the abused tubes of paint and carefully easing the crinkles made by youthful exuberance, making them neat and ready to use once more. He should be more forgiving, honestly, because while he might not have had the same characteristics as they were showing, he didn't doubt that he was, in his own way, just as difficult to live with. If anything, he had noted that while there were grumbles about clearing up the results, the family did tend to take joy from the youthful delight. Will mostly only remembered the caution and the worried scents and somewhat forced smiles in the family from his youth when they had looked at him.

It was stupid to feel jealousy over his family's reactions to the children, or a sort of grief that he had never been the sort of person to elicit those casual joys in others. Not at least in those that knew him better.

He turned his head away, letting his gaze focus on something else in the room to try and dispel the melancholy frame of mind he had ended up in. Was it really any wonder that the family reacted that way if he was like this? Like attracted like, and the children were far freer with their joys.

Getting up, he started to put the supplies away in the cupboard, firmly turning his mind away from such a topic, though perhaps still a little morose as he focused instead on the trip to the fortune teller's instead. There was much there still that he had to think about, but while the reading about Hannibal had been deeply worrying in some ways, he tried to think past the knee-jerk reaction against that one card.
It wasn't even like he didn't understand that Hannibal was possessive, nor that he could be cruel and demanding, he had worked that out, alongside the carefully measured honesty the man had offered him. It hadn't been a full honesty, of that he was sure, for Hannibal wasn't a man to be open in that way, but it was the sheer depth of that possessiveness and restrictiveness that the card hinted at that concerned him. Hannibal had told him that such traits were not likely to be shown in any other ways than had already been seen, but could he really believe that?

Another question that turned over and over in his mind, was what Will would be willing to put up with in a mate to be able to have a family and home of his own?

He frowned as he set the paint brushes back in the pot waiting for them, not able to deny the understanding that he might have to put up with a great deal to do so. He couldn't forget the way Price had ended up begging him not to go to more crime scenes, and he had been unable to give a promise because of Jack. Becoming mated, if that were even possible, would likely be the only way he could extract himself from such a situation. While there was guilt there, for in doing so it would likely mean that other people's lives would be cut short without his aid, he couldn't honestly deny that in continuing as he was right now, would likely result with his family ending up hurt instead, one way or another.

Not that this trail of thought had any bearing on reality. He had remained unmated for so many years now that he really shouldn't be spending his thoughts on such impossibilities. He would just have to find some other way to attempt to extract himself from the situation with Jack.

As if conjured up by his thoughts, he could hear Price moving into the next room, talking with Zeller. Was Jack back then? If so, that was an unhappy circumstance for his quiet evening.

"No, we only got back about half an hour ago," Price was saying, their voices traveling easily through the open double doors to the atrium. "Glad we were already gone when the message came."

"Where is Will now?"

"Upstairs I think. In his rooms or the study probably. You aren't thinking of getting him to go are you?"

Price's voice had an edge of worry to it, all too clear despite the divide. Will quickly finished putting the last of the supplies away and locked the cupboard, intending on going through to help calm the man if necessary, but Zeller, usually so snide and dismissive was already trying to calm him, in his own way.

"I'm not that much of an asshole," Zeller said with just enough of a bite to the words to stop what had likely been about to become pleading from Price, "What the Ripper left of that Lieutenant had two of the other police officers losing their breakfast."

Will, on his way across the atrium towards them, faltered to a stop.

"Someone has to tell Will before Jack gets home," Price was saying, oblivious to the horrified listener, the scent blockers from earlier still seeming to have some effect.

"Well you can count me out. I was only really sent back to tell Alana not to expect Jack home for dinner tonight, and unofficially check to see if Will was here. I need to get back to the scene before I see him, so I have plausible deniability not to bring him with me. You owe me for that."

Will stood there, frozen. No! No, not Lieutenant Anderson!

"I reckon so. Stop by my room when you get home. I still have some decent whiskey that needs
drinking."
The sound of a door opening, and new footsteps making their way in towards the atrium. It could be any Lieutenant, he tried to tell himself. London was a huge port city. It was. And yet that parting comment from the fortune teller, along with the two alpha's comments in the other room told him otherwise.

"Ah, Will, there you are."
He looked up, his eyes probably too wide, or perhaps not, for Peter stood there seemingly only pleased at having found him rather than concerned. From the other room, however, Will could make out the sudden sharp scent of alarmed alphas.

"Mrs Harris said you would probably be here," Peter continued, "Lieutenant Anderson is here to see you. I put him in the front sitting room."
The words, although clear, seemed to make no sense, conflicting as they were with his prior understanding.

"Lieutenant Anderson. He's here?"
"Yes. Said he was just dropping by on the off-chance you were free. Do you not want to see him?"
The question seemed to prompt his state of inaction away as an autumn wind cast leaves. He moved past Peter before he had even conceived of the motion, long strides taking him past Price and Zeller as well, through the door, along the corridors. The horror having morphed into a clawing panic, the need to see for himself that the man was still alive, that he was here, that it wasn't just a dream, a nightmare.

His entrance to the front sitting room was abrupt. He could hear the hurried footsteps of Price following, and closed the door swiftly behind him, his gaze only holding space for one alpha.

Lieutenant Anderson turned around at his entry, the warmth of his regard turning to something more concerned as he took in Will's state.

"Mr Graham, is something the matter?"
What could Will say to that, when all was not right, and yet perfectly, wonderfully right as well?

"You are real, aren't you? You are here?"
Dark brows furrowed further in concern, and the Lieutenant moves over towards him. "Yes, I am here. Come, sit, and you can tell me what has you so worried."

It wasn't so much a suggestion as it was a command, but while the scent of his own distress might be adequately hidden, enough not to be less of a danger, Will wasn't unaware of the calming aura and pheromones that the alpha was filling the room with in response to seeing an omega in distress.

Will found himself moving over and taking a seat, glad to sink down into it so long as the other man was still near. The Lieutenant settled in a seat nearby, within arm's reach, certainly, if one were to lean forward, but not close enough to be considered improper.

"There was a murder," Will said after long moments in which each breath came slightly easier as his fright receded with the reassurance of the man's state of life. "It was found this morning. I heard one of the family mention it a few minutes ago. They said it was a Lieutenant."
Worry gave way to understanding beneath those severe brows, and a warmth of something close to pleasure melded in with the Lieutenant's scent.

"I am quite well, I assure you," the alpha said, his tone soft and reassuring, "I am very glad, doubly now, that I stopped by. Can I pour you a drink, to help settle your nerves?"

Will nodded, asking for some whiskey, the knowledge that it should be him doing the offering was balanced by the fact that alphas felt a far greater need to provide, especially in circumstances like this.

"You don't have to be away soon?" Will asked after he had taken a couple of fortifying sips from his glass, forcing his gaze to look at the Lieutenant. "Can you stay, John?"

The other man smiled; a soft, warm thing.

"Yes, William. I can stay."

Chapter End Notes

So yay! I got it done on time! This chapter is a little shorter than I have been posting more recently, being only around 8k words partially due to the holidays, partially because of a nasty cold I caught at a New Year party, but I didn't want to leave posting it longer and end it up being late.

Let me know what you guys think of it, your impressions, critiques, comments, and discussions. I love getting comments and questions, as it helps keep my mind on track with the story.

Oh, also, check out what I got in the post the other day ^.^
Hopes and Buttonholes

Chapter Notes

Special thanks this month go to my long-suffering beta-reader, Anthony, who, despite having to get up each day to shovel snow to get his car out, then do 12 hour shifts as well as overtime, still managed to work through my chapter for me. Other thanks also go to my friend Steve, who very kindly came over to discuss the various conversational norms that people engage in during the initial stages of relationships (it's been a long time for me XD).

Minor trigger warning - scene with a PTSD flashback in this chapter. Nothing graphic, but it's there.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Anderson Residence, London - Monday 16th November, evening

After Will's fright at the house, Lieutenant Anderson had stayed the rest of the afternoon with him. They had alternated between sitting talking in the sitting room and taking a turn around the gardens with the dogs, despite the chilled air.

The scare had bothered Will greatly, and it had taken several hours to feel more adequately secure in the knowledge that John Anderson was, in fact, alive. He cursed himself for letting the words of a fortune teller get to him so much that it tainted how he saw the world, and was determined to think nothing more on that visit. If anything, he reassured himself, the alpha was actually more safe from someone like the Ripper, for out of all the kills he had seen or heard of from them, they never chose the same sort of victim twice.

However, for all his internal reassurances, he had still been left with that lingering uncertainty long after the alpha had left for the evening. Which was another reason he had agreed to come out to Anderson's house today, for although avoiding Jack was a large reason, he couldn't forget the abject feeling of devastating loss that the thought of John Anderson's presence in his life had elicited.

Stepping up to the doorway and inside, that feeling of relief at seeing the alpha there maintained, and the steady presence that the man exuded only helped reassure him further. Lieutenant Anderson was not a slightly built man, and standing there in the hallway, the size made him feel smaller, almost delicate by comparison. It was not a feeling he was used to, not at least with someone other than Jack, and so it was with relief that he found it didn't intimidate him, but instead, that enduring strength felt like a shelter.

"I brought these, for the house," Will said, almost stumbling over his words, the bouquet of flowers held in his hand a moment longer before he all but thrust them at Mrs Becket, who was taking coats. "I don't have any skill with arranging them, but mother thought they would go well in the house.”

His stupid hands were shaking, and he forced himself to shut up, before he made even more of a mess of the gift. Mrs Becket was making admiring sounds, words, probably, but his brain wasn't picking them out right.

He still had a flower bud in his hand, carefully tied with some leaves, a couple of smaller flowers and ribbon into a buttonhole arrangement. Gods, he was such a mess. Forcing himself those last two
steps closer to John, it took several fumbling attempts to get it to sit in the alpha's buttonhole, his hands trembling far too much to make it easy, especially with the gloves on, despite how thin they were. However it was finally fixed, and while it could likely be tweaked to sit better, probably, he had done it.

He rested his hands on the front of the other man's lapel, smoothing it down to sit right. The solidity of the alpha's muscle was easy to make out, even through the clothing, and that thought brought a somewhat inconvenient flush to his face. He forced himself to take a step back to survey the token that now sat as a statement on the alpha's clothing.

It looked fine, he thought, but more, he knew that the alpha would be able to scent him on it, and know he had made it for him. The gloves at least had ensured that the worst of his current anxiety would not have transferred onto it.

"It's lovely, Will, thank you."

He let himself be guided through the house, only vaguely aware of Nathan and Price being shown into the front sitting room on their way past, his stress over the gift having brought his mind to a standstill of nerves that reduced his ability to think, to an absurdity low level. It was only when he had found a seat in the now familiar smelling sitting room, with the sounds of Mrs Becket bringing in tea and snacks, then leaving again, that enough of the haze lifted for him to actually take in more of his surroundings.

The room was much as it had been before, although he noted that there were a couple of new items, ones he recognised from the boxes from the attic that they had been looking through the last time he had been here. It was a reminder of the alpha's nesting, and it brought a slightly uncomfortable but pleasant feeling to his chest at seeing proof of John Anderson's wishes for a nicer home to show to others. The fact that some of them were here, in this particular sitting room proved this was more of a private sort of statement, unconscious or not, that he hoped it was Will who liked them, rather than general visitors.

"The vase looks good there. Did you put the lantern up in the bathroom like you wanted?"

It wasn't a particularly subtle start to their time together, but then Will didn't think that the alpha minded too much that he would be a little slow to settle. If nothing else, the other man was more used to it by now, he thought. His gaze flickered over towards him, lingering on the flowers in his buttonhole, a bright statement in the otherwise more modest and dimly lit room.

Perhaps he should have chosen something that would be more suited to the man's more restrained attire. The white flowers were probably fine for the front sitting room, but then that wasn't exactly the personality of the alpha across from him. Alana was used to seeing places through her own eyes, her own tastes, but the more he looked at those flowers sitting starkly against the charcoal jacket, the more he looked at the arrangement he had made, the more he wished he had thought to question the flower choice, rather than merely being driven by the goal of making something small but meaningful for the man today.

"Yes, I installed it yesterday, along with the tall jug with the large print. I quite like them there," John said, turning to pour them both some tea, "I admit that I have been finding it somewhat unsettling not to have tasks to do while in town. There was certainly a lot to sort out when I first moved back, but now those have been taken care of, I am finding even the short times when I am not working to be troublesome. I am not used to being idle, so bettering the house has been my focus. Mrs Becket finds it quite humorous to see me so artificially busy."

Will nodded a little to show he was listening, his mind turning that over, adding it to what he knew
of the other man. "Have you considered investing in a business? Many alphas who are not given to hunting or at the card table tend towards side projects, ones that don't require constant attention, but enough to keep busy. Partial ownership of shops or businesses, buying and renting property, that sort of thing."

John Anderson nodded, thoughtful as he sipped his own tea, sitting back in the seat opposite.

"I had toyed with the idea, as much because I grew up with it as anything, but I wouldn't want to invest too much, either in time or in funds before my home life is settled. For all that I am more cautious with my money than many, so the risk is lower, I had rather hoped to be guided by the preferences of a mate. On my own I would merely be filling time and profiting from others to a larger extent, and I would much rather invest in something that would please my family. You, I think, invest in charitable organizations, do you not? Perhaps you would be so good as to help me decide."

Will flushed. The man was not subtle, but then with Will sat snuggled into the chair that smelled so strongly of the alpha, in the private room of the house, he didn't need to be. It was the fact that John Anderson was clearly earnest about his intentions that warmed him the most though. There was no ambiguity to his hopes for the future, nor was there false flattery, merely the stark truth, and that, Will found, was a powerful thing.

"I could try. So far most of those I have invested in have been chosen on a whim. Researched before, of course, but I haven't focused on one type of charitable type as many do. Over the years I have invested money in homes for the worthy elderly, homeless soup kitchens, even a dock workers' union hall. There's an annual printed paper that lists all the charitable organizations and groups petitioning for help in the city that we could go through to see what might appeal to you and go from there."

Although the small smile from John was genuine and interested, the warm scent of deeply contented alpha was heady in the air, showing far clearer the pleasure at his response.

"I would like that, thank you. I shall endeavour to pick up a copy for the next time we meet."

As far as Will could tell, this pleasure in investing his money into charity was not merely something to win his favour, as many would have used it to be. John seemed entirely genuine in his enthusiasm for doing so, which was a little more unusual for an unmated alpha than was common, although that could be in response to Will, who had made no effort to conceal the fact that he didn't rate hoarding money as a priority.

"Actually," Will said, forcing himself to ask this, while the subject was concurrent, "I was wondering if you might be available in the morning on Friday. I agreed to go and revisit the soup kitchen I put money into two years ago, as they have just renovated part of their building. Usually Mr Layton would go with me, but he had a long-standing appointment that couldn't be changed, and I didn't want to ask Mr Crawford, for he has no interest in such things. I know it's short notice, but I only realized yesterday evening that I had forgotten to organize with the family about it."

It was with a slightly startled pleasure that John took this news, one that mellowed quickly into something deeply pleased. It was not unusual to ask courting alphas for their attendance in such trips, if for no other reason than to see how they fared while taking on the responsibilities that the omega's family would usually see to, but it was more than that, much like the buttonhole arrangement was. Tentative as Will was around courting at times due to the transient nature of it, he didn't need to be subtle either.

"It is no trouble at all, I would be more than happy to attend. I have an arrangement with a couple of midshipmen to cover training during the courting season, so I can be available whenever you might
have need of me."

Away from the season, it was easy to forget the play of emotions that the courting process tended to elicit. Sitting here and now, with John's easy acceptance and forethought clear between them, he found some of the ever-present tension easing with the soft thrum of pheromones making him feel mellow, safe and pleased. It would be no hardship spending his heat here with John, he thought as he curled into the seat a little more in contentment, his cheek rubbing against the leather.

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London, England - Tuesday 17th November
Mr T. Price, Largs, Scotland

Dear Tim,

Your letter found me in good health, although it appears to have been a little delayed by the weather, which I am told has taken a turn for the worse around the borders right now. I hope that my own will find you in good time.

I was pleased to hear about Maggie's latest achievements with her music lessons, and have to face up to the fact that I still have just as much, or indeed as little, a skill in such things as I did as a child. I am sure Mr Platts still has nightmares about having to sit through that one rendition I did for the family all those many years ago. It is better for all involved if such attempts remain firmly in history, I think.

Work, much like your own, appears to be taking turns of being overwhelming in its scope, before thankfully dwindling down to something more manageable. The season, at least, offers some leeway for a bit more laxity, but that has been somewhat mitigated by the other things that the courting season inevitably brings, good and bad. I will not mention much on the bad, only to say that it has been, in turns, very bad. Jimmy hasn't been happy with it either, as I am sure he has told you in his own letters. In many ways I feel trapped by obligation, guilt and demand, and it is somewhat difficult to extract myself away from it. I have been attempting to go out to visit with those I am courting with more, as a way to avoid it as best I can, though that has its own pressures.

Speaking of courting, it has been going quite well this year, though there are only two alphas now; Lieutenant Anderson, the naval officer, and Dr Lecter, the chief surgeon. They are so different! I have not yet decided on which I will spend my heat with, both are good choices in their own way.

Dr Lecter is a clever man, and wonderfully skilled in many subjects. He hails from Lithuania, and so some of his beliefs and mannerisms are a bit more liberal than is typically seen here. He cooks extremely well, plays many instruments, is effortlessly skilled in social situations and his intellect is notable. When we have been together, it feels like there are layers to whatever he says, and its pleasingly challenging, while at the same time he has rendered me calm and passive with his scent twice now, which isn't an easy feat, as you know.

Despite this, I am leaning towards Lieutenant Anderson this year. He is a good man, of that I am certain, and in some ways quite simple in his tastes and attitudes. When I am with him, he does what he can to help make me comfortable, and while the same could be said for Dr Lecter, there isn't that pressure of wondering whether I have missed something critical he has hinted at. Having a partner that can challenge my mind would be great, but especially lately I have been feeling overwhelmed with what all is going on, and I know the Lieutenant would do what he could to give me more space and calm.

My one worry is that I know myself. I respect and esteem Lieutenant Anderson greatly, and when spring comes, having spent my heat with him, and all that entails, it will make the inevitable parting
that much more painful. I can imagine someone like Dr Lecter, who always seems so in control of everything, including his emotions, moving on with his life without great trouble, and while it would be disappointing to witness, there is a sort of freedom in that knowledge, a lack of pressure. I think, however, that Lieutenant Anderson would be rather devastated, as would I, when it all ends. I have often thought, lately, that it is better to halt such things early, so the wounds are less, but Jimmy disagrees. He thinks I should give him a chance.

I don't know what to do really. Lieutenant Anderson is going with me on Friday to visit that food kitchen I helped fund, as well as their newly refurbished storehouse. It isn't a big trip, but it will be good to see how secure I feel with him away from our homes. Dr Lecter had been there at my lecture, so I already got a bit of a feel for how he would be like out.

The lecture went fine by the way, thanks for asking. The seating was fully booked, and for the most part the audience was receptive. Dr Lecter actually helped quell Dr Chilton during it, which was good of him. It still annoys me that I wasn't able to do it myself, but I was too stressed at the time. I have had several letters from hospitals and institutes that deal with omegas asking for further copies of the report, or for advice on changes in treatment plans, not to mention the newsletters and journals asking for articles on it. I have no idea how I am going to fit it all in, but I will have to somehow, though I rarely get as much peace in the house lately. It's not even like I can offer them advice on treatment plans, not until proper studies are done to find treatments that actually work.

Speaking of that actually, I got a request from the Foundling Hospital, where Dr Lecter works, to come and discuss some of the findings they have on possible changes to make patients feel calmer. Dr Lecter is coming over tomorrow to drop off my puppy now that it is of age, and take me there. I didn't tell you about the puppy did I? It was the same one that was supposed to be gifted to me by another alpha, but he bet them, and pretty much everything else he owned, and lost while gambling. Dr Lecter is, apparently, as good at cards as he is with other things. Multi-talented, but perhaps morally dubious at times. I think you would probably like Lieutenant Anderson more.

I can imagine you both with your feet up at a fire with some port, you grumbling about things, as you do, and the Lieutenant mostly listening, but offering his own comments here and there. It's an appealing image, warm. His household is down to earth in a way I think you would approve of, both the sturdy nature of it, and the people. Mrs Becket, his housekeeper, is a very friendly woman, and enthusiastic in her approval. She lives there with her son and husband, though the latter is bedridden. I thought it showed an agreeable amount of good nature in the Lieutenant, that he provides for the three, despite only two being able to work.

Anyway, before I forget, you will find two copies of that recipe you asked for from Mrs Platts. It took her a while to find it, otherwise I would have written a bit sooner. Seems like it was stuffed into the back of an old book she hadn't used for a while. The first is the recipe as she used to make it, but she decided to try it again and make improvements, which is the second. Both were nice in their own ways, but a bit too sweet for me. Jimmy liked them a lot though, so I suspect we will see it on the table again with more frequency. I think he and Jacob have some sort of unspoken bet going on who can stomach the most at any given sitting. It's really just as well that alphas have higher metabolisms, or your brother would end up the size of a house.

Alana has been doing all right, although things in the house have been a bit more unsettled recently. I would like it to be otherwise, but I am too self aware not to understand that it's primarily my nerves that have been the catalyst for that. I am trying my best to mitigate it where I can, but it's been more troublesome lately to manage, and I worry about the escalation. I'll be glad to take up your invitation in spring to come and visit, at least for a time. I expect I will be more than happy for an escape from the city by then as it is, and perhaps the time away will let the household settle again. Ms Katz mentioned the intention for her part of the family to visit Ayr, so we could travel with her. She said to
tell you not to wear those waders next time though, as she has not sufficiently recovered from the horror to subject herself to it again so soon.

I shall close the letter with the reminder of my affection, for although our family has diverged paths, I still very much consider you a part of it.

Yours affectionately,

Will Graham of Bloom

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**London - Wednesday, 18th November, morning**

Will stood in the hallway and tried to stop fiddling with the cuffs of his coat. Beyond the sounds of Humphrey, Andrew and Price getting ready, he could hear Dr Lecter's carriage drawing up outside.

He had been awake for hours now, despite the early time of the morning, having been woken from more nightmares and unable to return to sleep after that, for his thoughts too often strayed towards the trip out today. While any trip from the home was generally difficult, this one was proving more worrying than most, mainly because the dynamic of the trip was not as clear. It was for his work that he had been requested to attend, to give some advice on the recent research and changes that the hospital was intending to implement, but on the other hand, he was travelling, not in the family's carriage, but with Dr Lecter.

It had been a relief, of course, that he'd not had to go to Jack about begging the use of the carriage, but on the other hand, Dr Lecter was a suitor this year, and yet the place they were going was also the alpha's place of work. It should have been pleasing to him, that the man was trying to bring their two worlds together, but that morning he merely felt unsettled, not knowing how Dr Lecter would behave, nor how others would respond to either of them when in attendance. If Beverly's account had been correct, then the alpha was very well respected there, and he had never doubted this fact, but when on most days Will had trouble maintaining the mask of professionalism in the face of his anxiety, he worried as to whether, especially in a hospital where the chances of his nerves were greater with the number of people around, whether he would end up fading into the background as merely a bauble beside the alpha. When his own professional credibility was at stake, the fact that he couldn't easily guess how things would go, was unsettling.

If he was honest with himself, and despite his best intentions, his mind also kept returning to those cards from the fortune teller. The reading itself might have been tainted by some sort of bias, but no matter if the cards had been a true foretelling or not, he couldn't deny, as they made their way outside to greet the man, that he could easily imagine the alpha as both of those cards, though he had not thought them as so stark before, and it was a worrying thought.

Outside, Dr Lecter stepped down from the carriage with his usual grace. He seemed almost to flow out of it rather than step, with none of the awkwardness that Will generally associated with such things. Not even the act of getting out of a carriage with ease was an exception to Dr Lecter's bounty of talents it seemed, and Will found a pang of envious discontent at that, too used to catching his jacket on the door handle, or fumbling his step getting down.

Will was, he thought, in a rather contrary state of mind that morning.

Greetings and pleasantries were exchanged, although what was actually said, Will could not have recounted afterwards. What did break through his preoccupation was the fact that there were no telltale sounds from the carriage, nor scent of fur on Dr Lecter's clothing. The man must have seen the way his gaze sought what was not there, and spoke.
"Mr Hunt will collect your pup from the house while we are at the hospital. That way it will give you both time to get used to each other when work has concluded, rather than forcing a separation so soon."

Will nodded a bit, disappointed not to have his pup there, but seeing the logic to it. It had been one of the things about today’s visit that had not been worrying for him, and suddenly finding himself having to wait some more was, despite the forethought, frustrating and disappointing. He knew though, that it would have only distressed him to have to leave so soon after, however. Knew also that he would not have wanted to go at all. The alpha had likely understood that all too well.

He could almost feel the flicker of those clever eyes taking him in, and Will largely ignored it as much as possible. It wasn’t as easy to do, when they were in the carriage, with Dr Lecter sitting opposite him, in a prime viewing spot to take in every unconscious twitch of Will's fingers towards the soft lining of the coat's sleeves, every hint of thought showing on his face.

The carriage was an opulent thing, more so even than their own. For all that it was slightly smaller, although perfectly adequate for the four of them inside, it was far richer appointed with soft fabrics and cushioning, and, as they moved off, the usual jarring motions of a carriage seemed less pronounced. In many ways that was a hidden luxury, not done for the viewing of others, for they would never see the interior of the carriage, nor the ease of it's gait, but something more personal to the alpha, who would spend such an exorbitant amount on being more comfortable in his surroundings.

It smelled mildly like beeswax polish and the alpha himself, and the unfamiliarity did little to help Will get into the confident mindset for work that he had to force himself into.

In the background, he could make out the voices of the alphas talking, Dr Lecter's voice interspersing with Humphrey and Price, but Will didn't pay attention. He knew he was being less than attentive to his suitor, but this was for work, not anything else, and he honestly wasn't up to making light conversation with him just yet. The alpha was astute enough to understand that, he trusted, and not take it as a needless rudeness.

He let himself watch the passing streets, trying to block everything out enough that he could try and get his mind adequately focused for when they got there, but it was difficult with the lack of sleep and the burgeoning headache from the sharp early morning light and the effort of seeming put together.

By the time they got to the hospital Will couldn't honestly say that he was ready for this, but he was, at least, no worse than before. Upon exiting the carriage and moving into the foyer of the hospital, he paused, turning towards Humphrey as he took off his gloves, trying to take in his scent and presence from close by, enough to settle him from the sudden influx of noise and people in the immediate vicinity. He didn't touch, and outwardly it was well practiced enough to look as though he was only pausing to deal with his gloves, but such things were honed over the years to seem so, rather than the clawing need for reassurance that it truly was. Humphrey's scent and presence increased gradually, not enough to appear as a strong reaction to draw other's attention, but enough that it helped settle him. He wasn't the only one that was used to having to deal with this, after all.

It was that same knowledge and understanding between them, as well as the reassurance itself, that let Will straighten up, pocketing his gloves and allowing Dr Lecter to lead them further into the hospital to where they were to meet with one of the directors.

"Ah, Dr Lecter, there you are. And this must then be Professor Graham. It is a delight to meet you at last, a true delight. Why, we are all exceedingly impressed by your reports and journal articles. Exceedingly! Come now, can I offer you a drink before we take a tour to the hospital? Some tea
perhaps? The hospital can be a bit overwhelming with all the bustle, but then that is another reason you are just the perfect person to help us, for we are all quite used to it. Come in now and have a seat and I shall send for some."

The director was an aging alpha of rotund proportions and a propensity for the pipe, if the smell about him was any indication, and seemed a pleasantly disposed individual, if a little presumptuous in his overly solicitousness that included fussing with the guest chairs. While it was slightly condescending in it's own way towards thinking of Will as such a delicate little flower in a brash world, he couldn't help but be, in some ways, rather grateful for it today, even though it grated on his nerves. It wasn't even like he could honestly say it wasn't the truth.

"Some tea would be lovely, thank you Director Thompson. This is Mr Layton, Mr Pickering and Mr Price, from my family."

His family shook hands with the director, who seemed to be genuinely pleased to meet them, or at least as much as he felt that their presence was a boon currently. Tea was soon brought, so soon in fact, that Will couldn't help but be impressed by whomever the director had as an assistant. They were certainly good at their job, having had it already brewed ahead of time.

"Although Dr Lecter has given me some information on the research you have been undertaking," Will said, when they had all settled with their cups, "perhaps you would be so good as to explain it more fully for all of us."

As intended, the director was only too happy to do so, much as Dr Lecter had said, the man was eager to show off his accomplishments to those who would appreciate them. Much as any alpha, he supposed. He didn't doubt Dr Lecter had been priming the man for just such a thing, making the effort of gaining the director's good will almost a complete certainty.

Dr Lecter himself sat to the side, surprisingly not having made any effort to interject his own opinions or guidance, merely allowed Will, as well as Humphrey when he had a question, to interpose the director's monologue with questions.

Will had to admit that he hadn't expected that, although he probably should have. Dr Lecter had, after all, not imposed his own comments at the lecture until it proved advantageous or needful that he do so. He had, Will considered, been rather careful not to overshadow Will's own dialogue with his own agenda. Having spent the best part of the previous evening as well as this morning worrying about this meeting, it was Dr Lecter's silence that actually allowed him to ease off some of that accumulated tension.

"And so based on your recommendations to Dr Lecter, we started making inquiries about the different washing products and made up five samples. We started testing a separate ward with those just yesterday, so it is too soon for any concrete data just yet, but it is all just too fascinating! To imagine that something as simple as the colour of walls in a room could have such an effect! I have been quite beside myself when the results started to be recorded. The future of better care in hospitals starts here, with the Foundling hospital leading the way in such groundbreaking research!"

Will could almost see the shadows of Dr Lecter's words in the director's speech, carefully cultivated tugs at alpha pride and accomplishment that stayed in the thoughts of the man before him, eager, so very eager to put his mark on the world and do some good and be remembered for it. Dr Lecter didn't need to speak here and now, for he had already woven his words and intentions deeply in this man, turning someone who might have been hesitant towards change if only for cost-saving measures, towards a far more humanitarian goal. Hannibal might as well have tied a huge ribbon on the director, so obvious a gift he was to Will's hopes for the future of care.
"The work you are doing here is very impressive, Director Thompson," Will said, not oblivious to the manipulation of his own words, though they were also true. It wasn't like he had to work very hard at encouraging the man, after all. "Being able to offer a place where those who are hurt can not only find healing, but also a place of safety and refuge after such trauma is so vastly important."

He could see the effect his words had on the man; the slight puffing of his chest as his shoulders were drawn back, the straightening of his back and the change in his scent. Even as stressed as he generally was in company, it really was too easy to stoke the fires of such a man. It might have been different if the logs and kindling had not already been placed, but as it was, the fire had already been started and was burning happily even before he had arrived.

"Indeed! I have always thought so. Here at the Foundling hospital, we strive for improvement. We are considering adding a new wing to the hospital next year, and with this research, we can tailor it into the cutting edge of hospitals of the future!"

Will's gaze flickered to Hannibal, who sat there entirely composed and seemingly unaffected by all that was going on. Nothing showed, only polite, professional poise, but then Will knew that more was certainly going on beneath. If Will found the director to be easy to manipulate, then surely someone such as Hannibal would find it as easy as breathing.

"A worthy goal, Will said, "I expect, with the growing population, expanding the hospital will prove beneficial in the years ahead."

Will set down his cup and saucer, the tea not finished, but he was finished with it. Beside him, Humphrey did the same. The director didn't miss the action for what it was. After all, the alpha would not have come into his position without skill.

"Ah, are we all finished here? Then allow me to guide us to a couple of the wards so you can see for yourself the research and some of the rooms."

Moving out of the man's office and through to the main area of the hospital, Will tried to pay attention to him as he talked about the various aspects of the hospital, it's history, and the general workings on it. He knew that both Humphrey and Hannibal would remember it far better than he would, if he ever needed the details, and merely hoped that he wasn't asked some specific question about it while they were in the noise and bustle, where his mind had once more attempted to retreat to safety from the influx.

Despite his preoccupation with the change in scenery, as well as trying his best to follow the conversation with the director, it had not slipped his notice that Hannibal had positioned himself on his right, with Humphrey flanking the director and himself on his other side. He wasn't sure how he had managed to so seamlessly do that, considering the other two family alphas with him who should have gotten precedence for such a position, but then much of the way Hannibal moved in society was so artful as to make it seem like magic.

"And here we are. The new patients are brought to the central area here, and we record their answers if they are aware enough. Not all are, of course. We keep the records of those ones separately, and they are offered them later when they recover enough to respond better. Then, they are moved to one of the rooms that match the colour they selected, assuming there is room. They have a second choice if not, and that is recorded as well. Nurse, I need a few copies of the questionnaire as well as the colour samples. Ah, good, thank you. Professor Graham, if you would just follow me through here, this is one of the single rooms we have done up."

As the door closed behind them, blocking at least some of the noise of the hospital, Will felt a little bit of the tightly strung anxiety unwinding. Looking around, the room was nice enough, he
supposed, for a hospital room. It stank strongly of disinfectant and the new paint as well as the clean sheets on the bed. It was not a particularly reassuring set of scents, but then this wasn't the ward that they were doing the scent testing with.

"Here is the questionnaire" the director told them, handing out the pieces of paper to the group, "and these are the colour samples."

Will moved over to one of the two seats that were already in the room and sat down, a nurse bringing in more folding chairs for the rest. The samples were varied enough in shade to be useful, but the samples themselves were too small.

"I would make colour samples larger, Director Thompson. Many people struggle to imagine how something will look fully, especially if they are distracted, and so having a larger sample that can be held up will offer a closer approximation to someone."

The director made an interested noise, though whether it was an agreement, interest, or ambivalence, he couldn't tell right now, his gaze looking back down at the questions on the paper. There were quite a few here, which he was glad to see. It was Humphrey who spoke next, picking up the conversation while Will was otherwise engaged with reading and needing a break from conversation.

"Director Thompson, am I correct in thinking that you do not get many omegas in the hospital?"

"That is indeed correct, Mr Layton. Thankfully few become hurt to any extent that would need hospital care. I believe the last to come in was a couple of months ago. Thankfully she made a full recovery and was home in a week."

"It can be quite difficult to gauge reactions when around an omega in distress," Humphrey continued, "and by your words you have had none here to offer such insight. You are not only having to cater to the presence of an omega, but also to their family, who will be reacting differently than they might ordinarily. If this was one of my family here, I would not wish this room set up as it currently is. It is neither defensible nor is the bed placed in a way that would calm omegas that I know."

"Why would it need to be defensible. The hospital is quite secure, I assure you."

"When our instincts are triggered by a bonded family member or mate, it doesn't matter whether objectively the place is deemed safe or not. Our instincts tell us otherwise."

Will, seeing the moderately uncomprehending look from the director, as well as scenting the slightly rising annoyance at being challenged by another alpha in his territory, decided that it was time to step in. There was no true threat here, but it was better for all involved that the director remain firmly supporting their cause.

"I would suggest an example, as that is why we are here," he said, taking out his pocket handkerchief and carefully wiping off the worst of the scent blockers from his wrists as he talked. It wasn't something he had wanted to have to do, but he had come prepared for it either way. "You will soon become aware of the scent of an omega that is nervous or worried. I would ask that you all pay attention to what that tells your instincts."

He glanced around those present, before moving to the bed. "I should probably sit on the bed," he offered, then doing so. Hannibal, he noted, had seated himself the far side of the room where he was closer to the door so as not to be seen as crowding, but also likely because he wanted to ensure the room was secure.
"What now?" the director asked, not yet feeling the effects, nor having noticed any.

"Now we wait," Humphrey replied, "I should think that perhaps half an hour should offer us all some better insight on what might be suggested for an omegan room."

Honestly, it didn't take long. Not five minutes later the director was more obviously uneasy, despite having been warned about the effect. Hannibal, as well as his own family were still relatively still, though Price was fiddling with his hat.

"Can I not get you a drink or something to ease you?" It had only been eight minutes and the director was all but pacing, only keeping his distance by the stoic visage of Humphrey nearby.

"Thank you, no. If you would seat yourself, Director Thompson, and try to focus on what else your instincts are trying to tell you. The patients that your hospital will treat here will be under just as much strain, if not more, than you are responding to now. What are your senses telling you might be an issue, other than my need for refreshment? This is research, remember. Use it as such. If not me, then imagine it is your mate sitting here. What garners your attention?"

Will kept his voice level, much as he had before. In truth, the only thing stressing him out more than usual was the possible threat that the director might try and crowd him or something. The room was fairly pleasant otherwise, for a standard hospital room.

The director was frowning, not dismissing his questions, but trying to master his own unease, to try and see what it was Will was attempting to show him. It seemed difficult for the alpha, although this was perhaps a little unkind of Will, who had grown used to those around him understanding his needs better. He should, instead, find it nice that the man had clearly not had to deal with someone in distress, despite his profession. He wasn't, after all, generally in the thick of the hospital workings no matter his position.

"I suppose I am noticing the noise in the hallway and the rest of the ward more. My thoughts stray, not only to things that might help relieve the anxiety I am sensing, but also frustration at not being able to do anything to help."

Will nodded, "Yes, if you were to build a new wing to the hospital, having better soundproofing into the walls would be a boon certainly, not only to help keep the rooms restful, but also to limit how much frustration any alphas staying with a patient will feel at hearing them. Minor frustrations like this will, in time, turn more acute, especially as it is likely any alphas that stay will become more sleep deprived, needing to guard their family member."

The director nodded, taking that into consideration as he tried to think of anything further, although was clearly not accustomed to such thoughts. An alpha like that, it was a foreign concept for him to struggle with things, but he was at least being open with the fact that he was attempting to do so. However, seemingly finding nothing else that quite triggered his ideas, he turned to his colleague for backup.

"Tell me you notice more, Dr Lecter, for I am struggling, I admit. You are around patients more often, what is your insight to all this?"

Will flickered his gaze over to the alpha who remained sitting, poised and seemingly at ease, though, to be fair, so were most of his family, being far more used to it as well.

"The noise is certainly something, not because of it inherently, but due to the possible threat it brings. An omega in distress will draw alphas to them unconsciously, for our biology is uniquely adapted to want to protect, however as someone already placed in a position of doing so, any outsiders that
attempted to come in would not be taken as such, because it would be someone attempting to usurp
the position I, and his family hold here, and as such they are a threat. I am extremely aware of the
noise and scent of each person that comes close enough to the room to be noticed. Likewise, I am far
more aware of the different things that could be making Professor Graham's situation more stressful,
such as the strong scents in the room, the bright light and the lack of cover. The bed is poorly
positioned I think, to offer any feeling of safety."

"What's wrong with where the bed is positioned? It has plenty of room around it, and the views of
the hospital grounds are nicely seen from where it sits."

"Indeed, and that is what is wrong. Omegas, when they feel threatened, will wish to hide. Even
when they are at ease, they prefer nests with cushions around them. In my homeland, it is far more
usual to have beds that include low bands of wood around the edge, to offer further feelings of
safety, while here it is more common to have the four poster beds with curtains. None of that is here,
and as such an omega will likely feel far more vulnerable. Likewise the position of the bed is too
open. As Professor Graham mentioned to me before, a darker, smaller room would be better when in
distress. If I were to rearrange the room, I would place the bed over in that corner, and move the
privacy screens around the other two sides. This would also allow his family more space to sit
between him and possible threats, and those threats include ones that might potentially come through
the windows."

"We are on the second floor here, why on earth would someone come through the windows?"

"It doesn't matter how unlikely such a thing might be, Director, it is not a logic-centric part of the
mind that considers this a danger, but an instinct-driven one. Alphas become far more acutely aware
of any threats, probable or not, when dealing with a distressed omega."

The director frowned a bit, glancing at the windows, then to where Will was sitting, then back to the
others in the room.

"And you, Mr Layton, do you concur with this assessment?"

Humphrey would consider this for a moment, before inclining his head. "Indeed. While it is common
for omegas to like large open rooms when in good spirits, if they are feeling particularly threatened,
then they need to feel safe. Aesthetics will matter very little until they do. I suggest moving the bed
and screens, and seeing if that helps."

Will got himself up and off the bed, stepping away from it, letting Andrew and Price move the bed as
they saw fit. Hannibal stayed where he was sitting, and Humphrey stood and moved his chair out the
way, staying between Will and the majority of the room, though whether out of habit or instinct was
uncertain.

When the bed was in position, as well as the screens, Will moved back over to it and settled down on
the edge once more, glancing around and letting himself feel the difference. The screens blocked out
the sight of the windows, and the brightness they offered, leaving the small area around the bed in
shade, and having two walls there made it feel safer. Humphrey brought his chair around to beside
the bed, just enough space for it to fit, and sat down, and he could see the edge of Andrew's jacket as
well as Dr Lecter from the gap between the two corners of the screens.

"It feels better now. Even without changing rooms, it feels more secure."

He couldn't smell if his anxiety had dropped, but the director did seem a little more relieved, a little of
the tension leaving those shoulders.
"Quite astounding! I would never have thought of this, and such a simple change. Why, I dare say we could incorporate folding screens into many of the rooms. The versatility would be quite significant, and would certainly not cost so very much as to be troublesome. What an amazing thing! To think, folding screens having such an impact!"

"The smaller space will also help eliminate some of the harsher smells of the hospital, as those with the patient will better be able to overmark them, although if the hospital implements the different choice of laundry soap, that will certainly also help."

Will didn't waste any more time before re-applying the scent blocker ointment onto his skin, the purpose of the task having been completed enough to be sufficient. Getting up from the bed, he straightened his clothing and dealt with the once more enthusiastic director, already seeing the drive in the man that was urging him towards this new goal. They left him in the foyer of the hospital and returned to the carriage.

He had quite forgotten about the pup until they saw Mr Hunt holding the lead, and so it was with a far brighter outlook that he stepped up into Hannibal's carriage, and took the lead when the pup was lifted up into it behind him.

Honestly, the relief of the trip having been completed, as well as the presence of the overexcited pup rendered the trip home more than pleasant, aware that it wasn't only him that took pleasure in it, for the warm scent of contented alphas was rich and mellow in the interior. Hannibal's gaze never left him, and even though there was no discussion in the return trip, the journey was easy and unstrained.

Finally though they drew up to the house, and Humphrey helped the pup down onto the front step, before handing over the lead once more.

"It was good seeing you once more, Dr Lecter," Humphrey said, "I wish the rest of your day to be a pleasant one."

It was with returned farewell from Hannibal, as well as farewells from Andrew and Price, that they were once more left more or less alone, only Mr Hunt sitting with the carriage nearby.

"The visit went well, I thought," Will said, not quite willing to relinquish the alpha's presence quite yet, despite his earlier reservations. It was far easier to let his more cynical mind run unchecked when he wasn't actually in the man's presence, even if his actual aura wasn't felt. It was all too easy, he found, to thinking Hannibal had every detail thought out in advance, and let that worry slip away, at least a little. He drew his eyes away from the pup, who was sniffing around the area at their feet at the end of the lead, looking up to Hannibal instead.

"You will find, I think, that the Foundling hospital will be very supportive to your cause."

"Thanks to you, no doubt."

"In part, but your work does you credit, and it was that which largely prompted the research, I only nudged them to do so sooner."

Will smiled a little, amused Downplaying his own role to appear more humble was a skill that was well-practiced, clearly, but only amused Will, who could read the pride behind it.

"Perhaps we should call it even, and take equal credit," he said, letting his gaze flicker to those maroon eyes, seeing the instant pleasure there, both, he thought, at the challenge to his statement, as well as the understanding that Will had seen more than most did.

"As you say," Hannibal returned, a warmth in his voice that made the words seem all the more
intimate. "Unfortunately I cannot linger here today, as I am due back at the hospital for the afternoon shift. However, knowing you are likely to become distracted by the pup and forget to eat, I have taken it upon myself to pack you a picnic to take with you."

Moving to the back of the carriage, Hannibal unstrapped a hamper from the luggage box there, and came back over, offering it to Will, who took it, feeling slightly overwhelmed at the thoughtfulness of the action.

"You didn't need to," he said softly, though made no motion to offer it back. He didn't want to, he found. The thought that Hannibal had spent time himself this morning making up the hamper, for him, cooking whatever food was within it, it made a warmth fill his chest, one that seemed to rise a flush up the back of his neck as well.

"I did not need to," Hannibal said to him, his clever eyes taking in the pleasure that his action had brought, "but I wished to. It brings me a great deal of satisfaction knowing that I have seen to your care."

Will tried to resist letting such words get to him, but even an hour later, settled in the stables with the dogs and nibbling on the sweet biscuits that was all that was left of the generous hamper Hannibal had made for him, he was still affected by it. He didn't know what it was about knowing that Hannibal had cooked for him that morning, and thought to bring the hamper along for him to sit with the dogs that afternoon, but it filled him with a warmth at the rememberance that was difficult for him to shift, even when he purposely tried to.

He finished off the biscuit and packed away the cloth that had lain over his lap, likely having some dog hairs on it as well as crumbs, but he could get it cleaned before returning the hamper, certainly.

"Well, I suppose I should head back in," he said to the dogs, "Newspaper columns aren't going to write themselves."

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**Bloom Residence, London - Thursday 19th November, late morning**

Lieutenant Anderson had arrived at the Bloom's family home earlier than his appointment with Will, in order to meet with the other alphas that were coming along on the trip. Although he had met most of the men before, this was the first trip in which he would be accompanying them out. It was always better, he found, to settle their relative dominances beforehand, as well as discuss the trip itself and what it might involve. Not that he had actually been courting like this before, but it bore a great deal of similarity towards other situations he had been in, seeing as how most of his life had been spent in an alpha-dominated field.

It was a strange sort of situation really, for he was coming in as a newcomer, an unknown to them for the most part, and, considering his dominance was such that he was undoubtedly in charge of their outing, it was they who held the familiarity, family connection and knowledge that they would need on the trip. Which was, of course, why he was here now, discussing it.

He had been surprised, somewhat, by the relative ease in which the question of dominance had been seen to. He was far more used to being around alphas who challenged or tested him, but this meeting of auras had been a far more polite affair, and perhaps that too he would do well to cultivate when dealing with people in town. It was far different from being on a ship where the force of ones aura was used with speed and efficiency to stop any potential troubles. Not that he had battered them with it, he had been careful to not cause such an offence, but overall, the way that they had merely yielded
to him without even so much as a growl of irritation had impressed him. Then again, he doubted he would get such a response from some of the more dominant Bloom alphas, although perhaps only Mr Crawford, for Mr Layton had seemed typically restrained in his manner.

As it was, they were in a different sitting room this time. Only Mr Price was sitting, far more at ease now that a clear hierarchy had been silently organised, the two other alphas taking up their own silently demarcated spaces.

"I had a look at the locations yesterday," he said to those in the room, "Both the soup kitchen and the storage building are within easy walking distance, hardly worth taking the carriage unless it has become particularly busy on the street."

It was Mr Nathan Ferris that answered, easy enough in his manner, but seemingly pleased that Anderson had the foresight to check the location. He was currently reclining against the edge of the table that had light refreshments on it. "Yeah, I remember from last year, although they didn't have the storage house back then. It's a new addition that they want to show off, hoping, no doubt, for more donations." The man shrugged, seeming unbothered by the fact, he had an easiness to him that helped mellow the group.

"Very well, is there anything else not discussed that we haven't touched upon? You haven't mentioned about Mr Graham's nerves, for instance. What would you typically do, should he become too stressed on an outing?"

"It really depends on how bad it is," Mr Ferris said, though it was Mr Price that took over, eager, it seemed, to impart the knowledge.

"Yeah, I mean most of the time he will be a bit nervy, because any trip, no matter how mundane and peaceful tends to have that effect. Giving him more time to do things, not rushing him, that helps. Finding a quiet location away from street noise and bustle and people he would have to interact with helps too. The carriage works, but if he uses that, he probably won't go back out again, so we tend to let him decide what he wants to do, because it means that the reason he went out in the first place would be jeopardised. I mean, he's not very talkative if he is nervous, but he can usually accept or decline a course of action. If it gets really bad, then he needs to get away from the area as efficiently as possible. We keep some laudanum in the carriage for emergencies, but we try to use it sparingly."

All useful information to know. That, in conjunction with what he knew of Will from the family ball, and their time together, was building a rather troubling picture of the scope of the problem that his nerves caused in his life. It reminded him of the conversation he had had with Lord Montbrek a year past, about his mate Mr Fairdew, who likewise suffered greatly from nerves. Considering how much Will got done in his life, he hadn't thought him to be affected as much, but was having to reevaluate that supposition right now. It didn't put him off, but he would need to be more cautious in what he suggested for them to undertake together in future perhaps. If Will managed to be this active in society, as well as in his work, then he clearly pushed himself far more than Mr Fairdew did to get such things done. More, perhaps, than was wise.

"You know, of course, not to crowd him, even when suffering from nerves?"

The question came from Mr Andrew Pickering, currently pouring himself a small snifter of brandy. In all honesty, he hadn't been aware of that. It hadn't come up in conversation, and he had been careful only to initiate small intimacies where Will had shown himself receptive to it. It was the genteel and polite thing to do, after all. He respected the man too much to have thought himself in a
position where stealing intimacies was the right course of action.

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Well," Mr Price said, standing, "If all that's taken care of, I guess I'll go see if he's ready to go."

It pleased him that, despite living here, despite having every right to come and go as he chose, Mr Price paused long enough to ensure he was okay with that, before exiting the room. Even on the various ships he had been on, he had never had the opportunity to witness a group of alphas so devoid of the usual posturing and dominance tests, and yet, he didn't doubt that if something threatened their family, they would turn as one to take it out.

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The knock came on the door, and Will called out for Price to come in. He was dressed and ready to go, although he had lingered in his room, knowing that Lieutenant Anderson was already downstairs talking to the others. Not all alphas took the time to check in with his family before an outing, and it spoke well of John that he did so.

A glance over to the aging alpha showed him to actually appear to be fairly relaxed, which was a surprise.

"Everything go okay then?" he asked, curious, but also eager for a distraction from the upcoming trip.

"Oh, sure. He seems good. Organized and competent. I guess he would need to be, working on a ship, but he isn't overbearing with it. He listened to us just fine."

The silent 'unlike Jack' was left unstated, but Will could see it hanging in the air nevertheless. The family's head alpha had been pretty overbearing lately, what with the recent slew of murders, not only from the Ripper Artist, but also from another serial killer, and a swath of random alphas getting into fatal dominance battles due to the time of the year. Add to that, that Jack was hoping to get Alana pregnant this coming season, and he was all but pissing over the house and those in it in order to try and make sure the other family alphas knew their place. It had all made living here far more troublesome than it usually was. Only that morning Jack had ended up shouting at Nathan and Zeller for not getting tasks done quickly enough, and the noise and inherent violence attributed to the behaviour had left him shaking and unwilling to leave his room even an hour after the man had left for work.

"Well I guess we should probably go," he said, although the war between wanting to see John Anderson, and the daunting prospect of an entire afternoon spent having to be sociable with people from the charity, had left him toying with lingering here a little longer. Right, come on Will, legs moving.

He tried to block out the trip itself, and merely focus on the fact that he wanted to see the alpha who was waiting for him downstairs, but his nerves had left him feeling more skittish than usual after that morning, and it took far more effort to get himself going than he might have wished.

The reward though, when he and Price finally made it downstairs, was lovely. John, though typically restrained in his visible emotions while in company, was visibly happy to see him, the smile on his face welcomed him into the room, and the soft brush of his aura, one that had filled the room prior, was a warm and pleasing thing, like stroking fingers through puppy fur. More, he was glad to notice that there was no lingering scents of discontent in the room, even those resolved, which meant that Price hadn't been liberal with the truth of the discussion between the alphas. It reassured him that the
men going with him today would not be harbouring niggling annoyances.

"I guess we should probably go," he said, moving further into the room, honestly not really wanting to go, especially when the ease and comfort that the alpha offered in the home was going to be swiftly disturbed by doing so. Still, the appointment couldn't wait, having to take place between times when the charity was actually feeding the poor at set times of the day, so he allowed the alphas to escort him out to the family's carriage and they were soon on their way.

Will shared a look with Price at the somewhat overbearing pheromones left lingering in the carriage by Jack that morning, as if even when absent, the man had wanted to remind everyone who ruled every aspect of the family. If this was the sorts of thing they could expect more of as the season leading up to the spring heat would involve, Will was grateful that he would soon be able to stay elsewhere for the duration, no matter how unsettling that could be.

Despite that, the trip itself was a sedate and understated affair, and Will was once more pleased by the evidence that all the alphas seemed content in their positions. It hadn't always been the case in previous years, some alphas having either been too yielding towards his family, or attempting to take over purely on the fact that they were courting Will at the time, only irritating his family in the process.

By the time they got near to the location of the soup kitchen, Will had managed to largely regulate his nerves. It wasn't like this trip was an entire unknown, for he had visited several times in the last couple of years, by invitation to see the progress they were making, and he liked those running it.

"A lot of charities like to invite omegas to visit during this time of year," he said to the Lieutenant as they got closer to the location, "It's an entirely manipulative practice, although I don't begrudge them for it. They leave it until around now, so that only the more serious contenders for an omegas affections will be left to accompany them, and in being so, far more likely to want to impress the omegas by investing in said charities. Winter is always harsh to the poor, so I try to go regardless, as upper class families showing favour to such places helps bring notice to others who might donate their time or money."

"The city's gossip working as a force of good for a change," the alpha replied with a more muted smile, but they were not in the house now.

"Yeah. I don't like the notoriety, but sometimes it has its uses."

Which reminded him that he really needed to finish writing that article for the medical journal that Hannibal had suggested. The thought brought a brief flash of guilt over not having managed to get around to that yet, but he was soon distracted by the carriage coming to a stop outside their destination.

John and Nathan got out of the carriage first, checking along the street for any signs that might cause trouble, before the Lieutenant turned back to him and offered his hand.

In truth, Will had become so used to the ways of his family, that he hadn't expected it, although perhaps he should have. Offering an omega a hand out of a carriage was both polite and expected, especially between those mated or courting. It took him an extra moment to force himself to move, taking the hand and letting himself be drawn carefully out of the carriage, trying to pay closer attention so he didn't fumble and embarrass himself, but the strong but easy grip through his gloved hand was distracting, and left him slightly flushed when he made it safely onto the pavement.

"We shouldn't be too long," Nathan was saying to Andrew as Price closed the carriage door behind them, to which Andrew only shrugged a little and settled down a little more on the driver's seat. They
were all well used to this sort of thing. It wasn't as if they were about to leave the carriage and horses unattended.

They were met at the door by a thin looking beta of latter middle age, white hair mingling in with the auburn. Mrs Tannerson was a familiar face, and Will forced himself to smile and let himself be drawn inside by her warm, exuberant greeting.

"It is so good that you were able to make it today, Mr Graham!" she was saying as they made their way off the street and into the relative warmth of the building. "I know you must be frightfully busy with the courting season deeply upon us."

It wasn't just empty words, for her gratitude was as clear to him as the freshly laundered apron she was wearing over her dress.

"You do important work here, Mrs Tannerson, and I am happy to see it flourishing." He turned towards John, "The Juniper Soup Kitchen is one of the few beta-only run charities in the city. Mrs Tannerson," he said, turning back towards her to proffer the introduction, "This is Lieutenant Anderson, who has recently returned to the city after many years at sea. You remember, Mr Ferris and Mr Price, of my family, of course."

"Of course I do! You are all very welcome. Come through this way. We finally got those new counters and tables built for the main room. A lot more sturdy than the previous ones, though that wouldn't be difficult," she chuckled, "Mrs Dawson is just finishing up the prep for the evening meal. It's pork pasties today, which always goes down well. Filling. This time of year, we try to offer the fattier sorts of foods to help tide them over better during winter. Summer is long gone now."

They followed her through the building, making appropriately congratulatory comments about the improvements that had been made since the previous year. Although it was never mentioned, Will knew that a place like this would never usually be so empty of people, especially while there was work to be done. It was one of the reasons he tried to come and visit when requested, because Mrs Tannerson and Mrs Dawson always made extra effort to try and put him at ease. It helped that they were both betas and didn't stand on too many formalities. All in all, once they got talking more, he tended towards finding himself more comfortable in their presence. Nathan and Price helped, of course, both having a soft spot for the two betas, and he was pleased to note that while John was mostly quiet, it was a supportive sort of quiet, a few rumbled words of question or praise conveying his support just as well as Price's cheerful enthusiasm.

It was good seeing Price being happier for a change.

When Will deemed the visit to have gone on long enough that they were likely holding back the pair from work, he would, somewhat regretfully, make his farewells.

"I'm not in charge of our family's finances, as you know," he said to Mrs Tannerson as they made their way back to the exit, "but I'll see if I can divert some funds your way, or at least try to get some supplies from somewhere to you this year."

"That would be wonderful, Mr Graham! Even a little can help reach more people. In truth, even you coming here today is a boon, because it lets me gossip and tell people 'Why, we were visited by Mr Graham of House Bloom' and they are all very impressed. I managed to garner several donations last year from just such a boast!" She laughed heartily, and Will smiled, charmed at her openness, just as he always is.

She saw them out, waving farewell at the door until they turned the corner and disappeared out of sight, and Will felt a slight loss at the comfort of the visit in exchange for the growing noise and
bustle of the street.

"The storehouse isn't far from here," John said, drawing him out of his slight fugue, "It is only a few minutes walk."

Will nodded, allowing himself to be guided out towards the main road where they ambled along the pavement towards their destination. The Lieutenant seemed in no rush despite the chilled air, which was pleasant, and he forced a smile towards him, glad for his company and patience. "Mr Dawson looks after the storehouse, or so I am told. I never saw him last year as he had caught the flu. Thankfully he recovered. It will be good to see him once more."

His breath was misting in the air, and despite the noise of the many carts and horses on the road, it was good to be out in the wintery breeze, he found. John at his side, Nathan at the other, with Price walking a little behind them. He could see their carriage further along the street, already waiting for when they would finish with the trip.

A sudden, loud crack, the squeal of a terrified horse. A lurch as he is grabbed and moved, pressed close against the unrelenting force of an alpha and a wall, terror of his own clawing at his throat as he is transported back 25 years to a very different location. The vast swell of dominant alpha, clawing fear coating the back of his throat. Cries of family, distant. Will is frozen, mind blank of nothing but tainted memories brought to life. His throat constricts further as the alpha grips the back of his neck, holding him captive. He has no voice this time, even as it constricts his chest trying to escape.

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The afternoon had been surprisingly pleasant for Lieutenant Anderson, not because he had been in any way displeased with the company prior to the trip, but more because he hadn't been expecting to so genuinely enjoy the visit itself.

He had thought, perhaps, to find those running the charity to be those sorts of smug do-gooders that he had seen hints of in the upper class events he had attended lately, but was delighted instead to find the two women were far closer to Mrs Becket's temperament; familiar and down-to-earth in a way that welcomed and encouraged rather than preened at their own actions.

Even dealing with the Bloom family alphas had been a nice surprise, easy going in their manner that, despite him being in charge, they didn't set off his more territorial instincts. It let him envisage, as he had not before, what it might be like having a larger household; not like the constant tensions on a ship, but a more relaxed sort of camaraderie that left him feeling a sort of warm protectiveness for them all.

All that ease and hope was splintered quicker than he was able to comprehend what happened. The sound too close to gunfire for him not to react.

Instincts that had been tempered by warfare and honed by experience had him moving with a speed that had saved lives in the past. He had the omega pressed up against a wall, the smaller man's body sheltered by his own as much as he was able. His aura had spiked out, loosed at the perceived threat to chase away or make the enemy hesitate. A horse was screaming in fright, and Anderson was already seeking out the threat with his senses so he could eliminate it.

He didn't find one.

What he found was an elderly male beta struggling with a panicked horse and a clearly dilapidated cart that had just given up the ghost by going over a pothole in the road and broken. The sound that had made him think of a gunshot nothing more than the already weakened wood giving way.
It was all so very mundane and lacking in threat that a soft self-deprecating chuckle escaped him as he drew back in his aura so he wasn't disrupting the area, and stopped crowding Will quite as much.

"It seems as though I am trying to protect you from the foibles of old age and wagon neglect," he said, looking down, expecting to see the slightly wry humour he had come to expect of Will, but that wasn't what his eyes laid on when he took in the omega. It was with rapidly speeding concern that he didn't see any humour in the man at all, but a sort of shell-shocked terror that had no place on the otherwise peaceable street, kept too well hidden from his other senses by the scent blockers he was wearing.

"Mr Graham?"

The visceral response to seeing that fear was that he must have missed some threat, and he turned, checking the area again, but only found Mr Ferris and Mr Price hurrying over, seemingly having been unable to do so prior due to his more dominant aura response. Neither man looked at ease now.

He forced himself to take another step back, having to restrain himself from doing the opposite, despite what his instincts were demanding of him. He had been warned about not crowding Will if he got upset, and it was with understanding brought quickly by the adrenaline, that he had, in fact, done far worse than that, no matter that it had been unconscious reaction and well intentioned.

"We need to get him to the carriage," he said as the pair got to them, the priorities of the day having significantly altered in the space of under a minute. He didn't bother to explain himself; now was not the time, and he was sure it was more than evident what had transpired. Neither alpha was lacking in intelligence.

To their credit, they didn't question him, and giving his instincts a direction other than physically comforting the omega certainly helped. They fell into step around Will, and John used his aura to ensure they had a clear path to the carriage. Will, although he had said nothing, allowed himself to be guided there, his head down, in part, John thought, to hide that fear from outsiders. He should be grateful for that, for it minimised the threat that other alphas would interfere, but at the same time, the necessity of it grated on him. He would have been glad to deal with any real threat to see Will safe, but he couldn't fight phantoms, and so he pushed his irritation at feeling powerless aside, and merely focused on getting the omega to a place better suited to safety than a public street.

As they got to the carriage, he made sure the rest were safely inside before turning to Mr Pickering, "The Bloom Residence, with as much haste as is safely permissible."

Getting into the carriage, it started out immediately, the slight lurch doing little to quell his worry as he looked at Will sitting there, silent and blank, the tension in his body and the terror he couldn't smell, but could see lingering in the depths of eyes that didn't see any of them. If only he could have changed what had happened, perhaps noted the cart before it had hit the pothole, all this might have been avoided. It was a supremely uncomfortable thought that it had, in part, been his own actions that had triggered this unhappy state.

He kept his silence, as did the others. They were all equally powerless in this, and he could only hope the trip would be a short one, so Will could start feeling safe once more.

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Back on the street, the elderly cart owner had managed to calm his horse, succeeding in untying it from the bit of cart that had been uncomfortably straining on it after the break. He patted the horse, trying to soothe it more with shaking hands.
His gaze turned though, looking across the street to an upper story window, the action hidden, for the most part, by the horse. A slender gentleman stood there, drinking tea from a delicate looking cup, the smile hidden behind the bone china for a moment, before inclining his head towards the old beta and disappearing from view.

Seeing this, the old man's shoulders slumped in relief, turning his head in towards the horse, seeking comfort rather than giving it.

"It'll be all right Musty," the old man said to the horse, his voice hoarse and cracking with relief, his shaking, gnarled hand tightening in the mane, "We're gonna be fine now."

Chapter End Notes

First of all, a note of interest. While doing some additional research on what it's like to have a PTSD flashback, I came across this article, which discussed how children under 5 years of age often don't have specific visual memories linked to traumatic events like older children, teenagers or adults do, but instead fix upon the emotion they were feeling at the time, even when they cannot remember the event itself. This was super interesting to me, so I figured I would share it, if for no other reason than the fact that it applies here, since Will was 3 years old when the attack that killed his father happened.

I also have to say that I will be taking a month off from writing this, so the next post won't be until April 18th, unfortunately. Right now I am constantly chasing the deadline, and the writing is suffering for the pressure that causes, so I am taking a month off to give myself some breathing space. I don't have a lot of capacity for tasks right now, and currently LL&P is taking ALL of it.

I will, however be delighted if people leave comments here, or want to chat on the facebook page in the intervening time. Getting and replying to comments is one of my favourite things on the internet ^.^
Earnestness and Thunder

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning:
This chapter contains mentions of grief, PTSD and alcoholism, as well as a fair amount of drama.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bloom Residence, London - Thursday 19th November, evening

The alcohol burned down his throat; a fragile attempt to anchor and numb the emotions and memories that cascaded in pitiless, toxic waves through him.

It was dark now, the remainder of the day having passed in agonizingly slow increments. The laudenum sat beside his bed, waiting, but he had been avoiding it. He couldn't risk using it, not tonight, not after what had happened that day. Letting his instincts run unchecked in sleep would not do him any favours in this instance. The only hope he had was to fend off his thoughts, and somehow fight through the situation without resorting to the oblivion it offered.

Jimmy Price still sat outside his room, and Will could smell the unhappiness that emanated from the alpha. They had been through this so many times, and as the hours had gone by, the scent that seeped under the door had only increased when Will had not emerged. After all, both of them knew what the situation was likely to mean, and as the day had progressed into evening, Will knew it was a losing battle.

If he was honest with himself, nine hours now after he had returned home, the battle was already lost. But he didn't want to be honest with himself. Not about this.

He poured himself more whiskey, and tried to choke back the sob that threatened to erupt from his chest, the body emulating the anguish that was attempting to drown him in the hateful normality of his reactions. If he let one go, others would follow, and if that happened, he didn't doubt that he would have most of the alphas in the family up and pacing outside his door or in his room. He couldn't deal with that. Not today. Certainly not after today.

It had been the sound of his name back then, alongside the acrid smell of the salts that Price carried, that had brought him out of it enough to understand that he had had an episode on that street. He had still been feeling slow and dazed, but had seen the signs around him that let him piece together that he had been reliving the past.

He had smelled John's anguish and worry, his internally targeted anger and frustration, but mostly worry for Will, as they moved along the street. He couldn't fault the alpha, no one could. He had reacted with a swiftness that was a credit to him. It was Will who was broken, and whose reactions...
were not as they should be.

He had tried to keep his thoughts far from that, feeling those cracks in his psyche spreading and widening until eventually he would shatter from it if he wasn't careful.

They had gotten to the carriage, and moved inside, his limbs seeming lethargic and not as responsive as he would have liked, but too dazed to care. Usually the carriage felt safe, like a haven after visiting somewhere, but the interior had still reeked of Jack, and in the state he had been in, it had not brought comfort. Quite the opposite.

He'd tried to take small breaths through his mouth, but the scent of the family's head alpha seeped in regardless, his distress having further heightened his awareness of smells around him, unlike his other senses. It was a large overwhelming scent, much like the man, and could not be avoided or ignored. It reminded him too closely of other stressful situations with the alpha, and that had not been helpful when each breath edged him towards a lucidity he feared facing.

John, Price and Nathan had been talking in quiet, intense voices as the carriage rumbled its way across town. He had some small hope that they were going to John's residence, where he could sit in the back room, with the fire and the friendly Mrs Becket bringing in tea once in a while as he and John sat and calmed down. But through the haze of nerves, he'd understood that they were not going there, for he had seen the streets out the corner of his eye being far too familiar as they passed.

He had wanted to tell them, ask them, to turn away. He couldn't deal with Jack right now, nor deal with the questions and worries of the family back home where they were more able to talk freely away from the gaze of society, but he had found he couldn't speak, even when he worked out the words he wanted to say, even said them in his mind, but his lips would not move. He couldn't seem to look away from the chip of paint that was missing on the edge of the carriage's window frame, and each moment passed taking them towards where he didn't want to be. They couldn't scent his distress, that had been the point of the blockers of course, to hide him from the public, but it stopped them from noticing his further anxiety over their direction, frozen as he was on the carriage seat.

It had only been when the carriage stopped outside the front door, and John and Nathan got out, that he managed to force himself to move. More of an escape from the scent of the carriage, now that the other alphas were gone, than a conscious movement. He was barely aware of anything as Nathan and Price, and then Peter at the door, all helped funnel him through the house and up to his bedchamber.

He had heard Jack downstairs, as he stripped off his town clothes and into something more comfortable, the soft haze of shock giving way into the fine trembling, and then core-deep shuddering of nerves that finally hit as he curled up on his bed, his breathing far too fast.

That had been many hours ago now. John had left. Price sat outside his door, unrelenting.

Neither of them would be getting any sleep tonight.

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*Anderson Residence, London - Friday 20th November, early morning*

The morning light was bright as it filtered in through the windows and onto the table, where a half finished breakfast was sitting. John Anderson had slept poorly, and was currently staring down a piece of toast on his plate, aware he should probably eat more, but his mind was too distracted by other things. Such as how early he might be allowed to call upon Will, to check on his state.

It had been the first time he had been witness to Will's nerves in a more acute fashion, and he wasn't ashamed to say that it had left him somewhat shaken. Any alpha of worth would have been shaken at witnessing such distress and fear in an omega, especially knowing that, in some way, it was his own
actions that had led to it.

He sat back in his chair, running a hand through his hair, frustrated, again, that he hadn't noticed the cart before he had, his main attention having been on the people walking on the street. The road had just been background noise that he hadn't expected to be any issue, as they had not been ready to make use of the carriage. Running through the events in his mind again, and again, he knew that it was inevitable to miss certain details, as any given situation was filled with many things that needed to be filtered out in order to make the best judgements. Especially when there had been little in the way of warning that the day was going to be troublesome, he had not judged the road to be of sufficient threat to their movement to focus on it much, no matter how much he wished he had done so now.

Will had been in good form that day after their visit to the soup kitchen, and Anderson had watched that tension unwind as the time went on with the betas, and felt positive for the remainder of their trip. It had been a nice meeting, and he had enjoyed being there with the man, seeing the pleasure and difference he made in the city. If Will had been more wary or nervous beforehand, he might have, in turn, been far more alert for potential dangers on the visit, or even have asked that the carriage be brought for the short distance they had to travel. But Will had seemed fine, even at ease walking with him afterwards.

Logically, he knew that he couldn't be held accountable for random occurrences, but it was difficult to hold onto that when he had seen the blind terror in Will's eyes. It had been that, rather than anything else, that had kept him awake most of the night.

Etiquette dictated that callers could visit any time after eleven in the morning until around four o'clock in the evening, but this wasn't a regular call, and he was loathe to wait, idle, for so many more hours, for it was only just before nine o'clock. He could, he thought, justify going now, even if he were to wait for them, especially since he hadn't been able to see Will before he had left.

That, of course, had been because of the circumstances. With Will back in his family's estate, and John only being one of two suitors, he didn't have the justification for staying that a single suitor would. He had hoped that he could linger there until Will was feeling a bit more settled, and then speak to him, but he had never come back down, nor had Mr Crawford been of the mind that he would that evening, telling him to visit the next day instead. With the head alpha of the household telling him that, he'd had no other option but to leave, despite his wishes to the contrary.

He abandoned the toast. He would go now, he decided, even if he had to wait for several hours, or even merely get an update from another member of the family. He needed to know that Will was feeling better.

It was difficult to ease his restless mood over it, despite the fact that these sorts of incidents were fairly common for the man, or so he'd been led to believe. From what Mr Price had said, usually by the day or two after Will recovered fine. But still, he had to know. It had been his duty to look after Will, and lingering here at home when he might be, at least, closer to the man, was fast becoming unconscionable. He wasn't due in for work today, having sent a message to the midshipman who was helping cover shifts for him, so there was nothing hindering him.

Moving with purpose through the house, he was just telling David to get his horse ready, when he heard voices at the front door, a few moments before Mrs Becket met him in the hall.

"That's Mr Graham here to see you. I put them in the front sitting room."

Surprise, then profound relief at this news, some of the tension and agitation in his form releasing. If Will was here now, then he must have recovered sufficiently, much as he had been told. He honestly
wouldn't have thought the man would have left the house so soon after such a shock, but he was profoundly glad to have him here.

"Thank you, Mrs Becket. David, I won't be needing the horse just yet after all."

He made his way swiftly down the corridor towards the sitting room, already picking out the scents of the Bloom alphas as he opened the door and stepped in.

"Will, it is profoundly good to see you!" he said, knowing the relief tinted his words heavily, although honestly upon seeing him, Will did not look well at all. Concern swiftly overtook his relief as he looked to the others in the room when he only got a wan smile from Will in response. Mr Layton, Mr Pickering and Mr Price. A hefty amount of alphas for a private visit at this stage in courting, although that could be expected if Will wasn't feeling greatly well after yesterday. No one else said anything yet, but that wasn't what was edging around his consciousness with a growing sense of unease.

Will looked as if he hadn't slept all night, and although he was as well turned-out as ever in his suit, the scents that were coming to him did not fill John with ease as they usually did.

His initial thought, that it was merely the lack of sleep and stress lingering from yesterday, was rolling aside with a ponderous shift; huge and devastating. Underneath the nerves and the disquiet he could sense from the man, there was none of the beautiful mellow scent of omega that always lingered underneath. It wasn't even as if the scent had gone, but something worse, altered in a way that his instincts understood only too well.

"No...!" He knew his voice came out anguished, unbecoming of an alpha in polite society because of its apparent weakness, but once he had identified what he could sense, he could not stop the reaction. It was the scent of rejection.

"I'm so sorry." Will's voice was small and distressed, and it hurt to hear it, not only because Will was upset, but because it was confirmation he never wanted to be true. "It's not your fault, and I didn't want this to happen, but it has."

It was difficult corralling his reactions, as his many hopes for a future with Will started shattering, one by one, at the understanding that they would never now be his, while at the same time being faced by the omega who was just as distressed as he was over the circumstances.

He turned away, forced himself to move a little further from the temptation of trying to physically console Will, knowing that it would not be welcomed, and certainly not now. It was difficult, attempting to master his feelings, and he knew that his own distress was likely making the room inhospitable. Sitting himself down so he would not be able to pace the room, or worse, loom too close to the other man, he stared at one of the shelves across from him, something, anything to draw his attention enough to help master his reactions. He was not an animal to be growling and pacing, no matter how much the situation hurt him, and the scent of Will's distress helped whip his instincts into a more well-mannered form, needing to ease it somehow.

The shelf held a couple of the vases that Will had picked out from those of John's travels. The omega had smiled when he had looked it over, those slender fingers tracing over the pattern in the enamel, and that soft smile had lit his face at the playful melding of the colours. Anderson thought of that smile every time he saw the vase.

He forced his gaze away.
"This has come as a bit of a shock," he said, attempting to give himself some time to get a better grasp on his instincts, howling as they were in devastation. Every breath he took brought to him the reaffirmation of rejection, of how he had failed spectacularly enough that Will's body had vetoed him utterly. Each inhale gathered tight in his chest until he might drown with the knowledge of his errors, his failures. He had caused this. He was the architect of these shattered dreams. As a man who had prided himself on his control, on his organization, his own ways of making the world a better place, piece by piece; that he had failed so spectacularly, it gutted him.

He knew, in some part of his mind that it was nature's way of protecting against bad matches, designed that way to stop persistent alphas from pushing their attention when it wasn't wanted. No one else would be able to notice the change, only the alpha and omega it pertained to, as the omega sent out unconscious signals to his own brand of pheromones, targeted specifically and to almost overwhelming effect.

Across the room, Will sat as well, though it was on the edge of the seat, as if any moment he might leap up and escape, and it pained him to have been the cause of that. The Bloom alphas stayed on the periphery, close enough to intervene physically if necessary, but otherwise allowing them this time without pressure.

Gods, it hurt. It was like a physical thing to him, not merely that he knew now that he would never have Will Graham as his omega, but that as an alpha, he had not been enough.

"It was the flashback," Will said, bringing the Lieutenant's gaze up to him. "The attack that killed my sire when I was three years old caused this. The shock and noise of the horse yesterday, coupled with being physically restrained was too close to what had happened back then I think. My body thought you were the attacker from the past."

It was an attempt at consoling him, and the kindness of that act only made the grief and anguish twist deeper in his chest, for it was a sign, once more, of Will putting others before himself, no matter that it was clear enough that he was suffering as well.

He nodded and knew he should say something, do something that would try to ease that burden from Will, but his mind seemed only to cycle from the rejection to the cause of it, over and over, leaving little space for anything else. He had enough wherewithal to know that Will was hurting too, that he should, as an alpha, be able to console him somehow, to take what was wrong and fix it. Even in this, he failed.

The silence lasted, because he didn't fill it. The room around him seemed to suck the life from all of them, until finally Will spoke once more.

"I hope once the season is over, that we can remain friends, Lieutenant. There are not many whom I would gladly share company, but I would regret losing yours."

Anderson drank in the sight of him, the man whom he had hoped to spend the rest of his life with, and Will stood and had to turn away, hiding tears as he took some solace in Mr Layton's presence. His own presence would never serve that purpose now.

"We will see ourselves out."

John's body seemed unable to move, even to guide them to the door as was proper, instead staying where he was sitting, listening to the footsteps move from the room, down the hall and the soft click of the door falling closed. He listened to the carriage move off.

Only when Mrs Becket came into the room some moments later, getting no response from him
initially, and moving to open the windows, airing the place of the tangible memories, and replacing it with street noise and scents of people making their way about town, did he finally manage to break himself out of the stasis.

"I am going to retire to my room for a while. Please see to the house in my absence as usual."

She said little in reply, seeing well enough, in all likelihood, that he was in no state to chat. It was only when he had closed the door to his bedchamber and went about removing his more formal attire, that he noticed the trails of tears that marked his face, unheeded, until now.

There was, he thought, very little else to say.

_Bloom Residence, London - Monday 23rd November, afternoon_

Will sat in the stable, surrounded by the dogs. The sharper winter light filtered in, softened by the glow of the lantern that hung on the wall behind him, illuminating the book in his hand. To the side, a couple of the dogs were half-heartedly playing, lazy, and for the most part contented after a long run around in the house's grounds earlier. Lizzie, his newest pup was trying to goad a couple of the others into play, but was so far defeated in her quest by the lax good nature of the rest.

All was quiet out here, but for the sounds of the animals, insulated from the house as they were by the walls and distance. The sound as he turned the page in the book seemed loud by comparison, the slight shifting of one of the horses towards the door, secure, locked in their stalls, the small sounds of the dogs around him, and further off the sound of hooves on gravel towards the front of the house; probably Price coming back from a quick trip into town where he was to pick up something for Mrs Platts.

He needed this quiet time after the last couple of days, a soft escape from the devastation of loss, the distraction of worlds within pages and the uncomplicated joy of the dogs. He didn't dare let himself indulge in his sorrow, not out here where the very air would betray him. It would do no good letting his family smell his acute distress, knowing they could do nothing about it. He had hurt others too much lately, and much like with Lieutenant Anderson, there would be nothing to alleviate the situation, other than time.

That trip to see the Lieutenant had been one of the worst he'd ever had to undertake, knowing, as he had, about the man's deep partiality towards him, made all the worse by the fact that none of it had been the alpha's fault. Despite this, and despite Will trying to reassure him, he had looked at the alpha and had seen the wound he had caused carve deep, sapping the confidence and joy from the man, watched it trail down his face in unheeded tears that Will had been too weak to bear watching, and had left.

Trying to focus on his book, he knew he should be used to it by now. It wasn't as if turning down or losing alphas was anything particularly unusual considering his many years of courting, although the full rejection, rather than the lack of mating during his heat was abnormal. It had only happened a couple of times in the past. It was with bitterness that he wondered why it couldn't have happened with someone like Mr Froideveaux, rather than Lieutenant Anderson.

Another pointless thought. It changed nothing.

For the moment his tears had run dry, and he felt more hollowed out. It would change, of course, it always did, coming in waves of grief and loneliness, moments of acute sorrow that crushed his chest until tears ran, ugly, down his face, choked his throat and threatened to consume his mind. But for now his thoughts ran towards the comforting presence of the dogs, and the ins and outs of class.
dynamics in Scandinavia from the book on his lap, even tentative and fragile as those thoughts were. He should really be doing work, but he doubted he would be getting anything done right now anyway. It had been a hard lesson to learn over the years, but he knew it was best sometimes to take time away from that pressure in the long run when things got too much.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of footsteps coming out of the kitchen door and towards the stable. Tucked in one of the last stable's stalls, one of the ones used by the dogs, Will was out of sight of the to and fro of those needing the horses, and he dearly hoped for that to remain the case, especially since those particular footsteps sounded like Jack's.

He had not seen the man since before his visit to the Lieutenant, avoidance rather than natural situation, for he didn't doubt Jack would be angry that his plans for Will's heat had gone awry. It wouldn't matter that it wasn't intentional, nor that Will was grieving over it as well. He was familiar enough with how Jack's mind work to understand such technicalities held little sway when it came to the alpha's thoughts. In many ways the alpha's lack of the ability to smell scents and pheromones was not his most damning trait.

Footsteps strode closer, and down at the other end of the stable the door was drawn wide, letting in a blast of cold air before it was shut once more.

Will sat, still and silent, while the dogs had become more attentive around him. He found himself tense with unease, not sure what Jack's mood was like, as well as dreading one of the only reasons that he ever intentionally sought him out. But maybe Jack just needed his horse for something; a short trip that wouldn't need a full carriage, something speedy.

As those footsteps continued, firm and loud, moving along the stable from the door, that hope faded, and was replaced by something far more like trepidation. He had to remind himself that he wasn't doing anything wrong out here. Those steps though, as well as the pungent and angry scent of Jack as he strode towards where Will was sitting, hidden away, made his instincts want to cower. He tried to remind himself that the man was family, and that he wasn't a threat, but his body didn't seem to agree. What had been, for several hours, a haven, started to feel far more like a cage without an escape other than the one door that Jack's large form was striding towards him from.

His mind helpfully supplied him with the information that there was nowhere useful to hide here. It was not a calming thought, nor was it a good indication of his rapport with the head alpha, that his mind automatically sought refuge from him.

"Will!"

The demand for attention seemed unnaturally loud in the stillness of the stable, making him jump at it. Jack's voice was almost always louder than necessary, but here and now, with him already stressed, it seemed vastly blaring. Would it have killed the man to wait a few more steps, ones he made even now, to see if he was there rather than hollering for him?

"Gather your stuff, we're going out."

The man glowered down at him on the other side of the stable door from Will was sitting, the omega studiously attempting not to cringe as his only exit was blocked by the man in more than merely imagination now. Around him, the dogs were unsettled by his distress, shifting and whining, and it did little to help settle him. He didn't want to do this today, not if it was anything like the last murder he had visited. But more, he knew he shouldn't be going. He had promised Price that he would try not to, and that forthcoming battle of wills only made him more nervous.

Getting himself up, as much to stop him feeling the significant height difference as the alpha glared
down at him as if he was personally responsible for whatever crime had brought him here as anything, he tried to steel himself against the press of Jack's scent and presence. It was difficult. The calming scent and peace he had built himself in this corner was fast being overtaken by Jack's scent, and he knew that even if the man left now, it would take him a long time to settle once more.

"I don't think I can do this today, Jack," he said, brushing himself down of stray bits of straw and dog hairs, trying not to show how unsettled the man made him, "It's not a good day for me, and Jimmy isn't back yet."

Denial of any kind to the alphas plans was never met pleasantly, and he didn't even need to look at the man to sense the building anger at the perceived challenge to his order. Jack never had gained a grasp of the fact that Will shouldn't be treated like alphas and betas when not in company, inconveniently discarding critical information because it wouldn't suit him. Because he needed Will.

"I don't care where Jimmy is, and people don't stop dying just because you have an off-day. Or were you thinking of just lazing about here while someone else gets murdered?"

The bludgeon of guilt used to make him comply was not a surprise, being the tool that Jack had always found the most useful for getting him to do what he wanted, that and the unrestrained aura that was currently crushing him with Jack's demand.

He was shaking now, fine trembling as he sought to fight against what he never should have had to, having to delve deep within himself to find enough self determination to stand against it, made all the worse because his instincts wanted, desperately, to neutralize the threat, not antagonize it further. But he remembered Price, pacing and begging him that day back in his room after the last murder he had been to. A man on the edge of shattering if Will didn't protect him from it. He had to do this, he had to fight against Jack's wishes if he was to protect, not only Jimmy, but the rest of the family from what might occur.

"I can't keep doing this," he said, astounded that his voice was level, if quiet, "I'm not coping with it as well, and it's putting the family at risk, if anyone finds out."

"That isn't for you to worry about," Jack said, opening up the stall door between them. It was clear that he was making some attempt to control the need to shout, but it was a losing battle as the volume rose as he continued to speak. "You aren't head of this household, and since you decided to throw away yet another prestigious mating, you can just make yourself useful to the family in other ways. Now go get changed into something suitable and get down to the carriage. Don't make me come find you again. Move!"

Will flinched, hard, at that shouted demand, one that was backed up by the stall door banging against the wall. Jack stepped back, and all his instincts were now screaming at him to escape, and escape he did, rushing past Jack towards the other end of the stable where the door outside was.

Fast, gasping breaths escaped him, not able to be controlled when he was already struggling to hold back the growing series of frightened whimpers that would turn into a distressed wailing if he didn't manage to swallow them, his instincts desperate to feel safe by calling for support. It would bring nothing but trouble if he did. He didn't dare go through the kitchen, and it was only with a force of will that he restrained himself from running as he made his way around the side of the house towards the front, pausing a moment to try and get ahold of himself. Great gulps of chilled winter air filled him, burning down his throat and making him lightheaded alongside the resentment and frustration that grew to replace the fright with each breath taken outside of the alpha's company.

He should not have to do this!
He stayed there as long as he dared, trying to stabilize his nerves and get the worst of the distress from his scent, before making his way to the front door and slipping inside, managing to avoid people as he headed up to his room to change. Usually the guilt worked the best on him in the face of such trips, but it was guilt towards his failure to hold up to his word to Jimmy that ate at him as he got himself ready. The hope was that he could be back before the man ever knew. But it was a small and worthless hope. Jimmy would know, because Will's ability to hide it when distressed had never been great enough to fool the alpha that had helped raise him all his life.

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Jimmy Price dismounted from his horse, having to steady himself for a moment as a brisk wind tried to tangle the saddle bags with the hem of his coat. The trip to town had been busy, but he had enjoyed taking the time to go to the various shops himself for once.

He didn't begrudge his time for the family, of course, but to be able to linger and chat as he liked, catching up with the local gossip with Mr Dewport the fishmonger, and being able to take more time than usual to decide on what small treats to bring back with him, it had been pleasant and relaxing in a way that sometimes other trips were not. Usually he was out with Will, or other family members and Alana, and he never felt entirely comfortable lingering too long and holding them up, especially since he knew Will would much rather be elsewhere than in a shop, or waiting in the carriage for as long as it took for him to decide what to buy.

But today Will had been feeling a bit better, and had been comfortably ensconced with the dogs in the stable, Alana with the children, Jack safely away at work, and so he hadn't hesitated too much about going to do the errands for Mrs Platts, as well as his own, and getting out of the house for a while.

Looping the reigns over the post, he unlatched the door, making sure none of the dogs had gotten out first, before opening the stable properly to put away the horse. Grey Gentry Farthinghoof was her official name, but they all just called her Farthing. He petted her neck, intending on taking her inside when something caught his attention, pausing his hand, and chasing the easy contentment of the afternoon away.

He could smell Jack's scent in the stable.

It hadn't been obvious from the outside, the brisk winter wind having taken any other traces of it away, but as he stepped inside the stable, it was there, lingering in shades of frustration and anger, and worse, the scent of Will's distress.

"Will?" he called softly, already hurrying along the stable corridor towards the back, hoping against hope that his charge was there, and already knowing it was a fool's hope.

By the time he got to the end, looking over the stall door to where the dogs mingled together, attentive to his presence, but alone, the panic was starting to crawl up his throat. A discarded book, left unattended and vulnerable to puppy teeth, the smeared scent of Jack on the top of the stall door, and the scent of Will's sharp distress, a trace of fear left hanging in the air like the cloying first sight of carnage.

He shouldn't have left! Out here alone, Will wouldn't have been able to stand up to Jack. He could imagine it all too clearly, with Jack trapping Will there, hand on the stall door blocking the exit like a vast monolith until he said yes, the taint of the anger hot and forbidding, hidden from the rest of the family, shadows of violence that Will should never have been subjected to.

He had to find him! Maybe they hadn't left yet.
He was running back through the stable, banging into the kitchen, startling Mrs Platts and Millie there. He had nothing in him to apologise, nothing mattered more than finding him.

"Where's Will?"

He could see Millie back away a bit, and he was sorry for the agitation in his presence, but unable to control it right now.

"Where is he?" he tried again, aware of Mrs Platts' disapproval of his behaviour, even tinted as it was with pity he didn't want to think too much about.

"I think he's still out with Jack. They left a couple of hours ago," she said, then likely seeing his panic, because surely the entire house could likely sense it by now, the entire town maybe, she added, "Jack will take care of him, Jimmy, don't you worry."

Jack would take care of him? Like heck he would! "He won't," he found himself saying, dumping the bags on the counter, uncaring for their contents now. Mrs Platts could find the items she wanted out of them. "He won't. Not enough. Not enough."

He was already moving through the house, his senses sharpening in his distress. He had to find Will. Find out where Jack had taken him. Had to. "Jimmy?" Maybe he could catch up, if he could find out where they had gone. Yes, he could do that. He couldn't take Farthing, not fast enough, "Jimmy," but he could take Nathan's horse maybe. It was steady and fast, sturdy too. Sturdy enough to push past most threats. "Jimmy, Will is upstairs". Will, he had to get to Will. "Upstairs Jimmy, in his rooms." Will was … upstairs?

Already moving, taking the stairs two at a time, leaving Peter at the bottom. He should never have left. Never. Gods, what if Will was catatonic. What if he had been hurt?!

A perfunctory knock, before he had the door open, unable to offer anything more before he was moving inside. He knew he was a mess, but he had to see him. Had to. Will had to be here. He had to be okay. Nothing else mattered if he wasn't okay.

"Jimmy, I'm okay. It wasn't that bad. I'm okay."

Will standing, having risen from a seat by the fire. Will was here. No sign of injury, no sign of hurt. No smell of it either. Get a grip, Price, don't stress him out more. Don't make this be about you. He was there though, not away, not hurt somewhere and trapped elsewhere. Here, in his room. Safe.

Will was moving towards him, and he could have sobbed when the omega's hand pressed in against his heaving chest, like a weight to remind him of reality. He knew it was costing Will to offer him this, to bring him down from the fear of almost losing him, again. He tried not to nuzzle in against those thick dark waves of hair, but it was too late, spreading his scent there, needing to. Needing to.

"I'm okay, Jimmy. I'm home now."

Under his cheek, Will's hair was damp with the faint smell of the soap he used. Clean and unsullied by the taint of traffic and death. Clean of normal scent too though, hidden under the suspicious scent of herbs that meant he had reapplied scent blockers when he returned. He clenched his eyes shut, trying to take in the comfort that Will was attempting to offer him. There was no way Will would be this calm and unstressed after even a trip to the shops that had gone perfectly. There was always a tint of it that lingered. The calm was an illusion, but they both needed it, Will so he could calm him, and Price because if he smelled any more distress on Will in his current state, he would have to try and comfort and scent mark him in a way that Will would not be able to handle.
"He shouldn't have taken you." His own voice was rough as he struggled not to reach out and hold the omega to him, to wrap him in his arms tightly to reassure Will, and himself, that everything was going to be okay. His nails digging into his palms, shaking with the need to hold and shelter, while knowing it wasn't the right way. Not for Will, especially not when they had been reminded so acutely only days before.

"I did try to tell him no, Jimmy, but you know what he gets like when he's determined."

He did know, only too well.

A polite knock on the door and his whole body tensed, until the scent of Humphrey caught up to him as the other alpha came in. He didn't look up. He couldn't yet, not when he was struggling against himself so much. He could feel the movement when Will looked over, the turn of his head that shifted his hair against Price's cheek. It was shame that filled him deeper when it was clear that whatever passed silently between the two, it was likely some manner of request for aid. Aid with him, for the sound of footsteps approaching, and then the firm hand of the other alpha settled on his shoulder.

"Jimmy," the low, calm voice said from behind him, "Come with me. We can talk in the sitting room."

He was caught between the need to be here, right here, where he could see Will and reassure himself that he was okay, with the knowledge that he should not be encroaching on the omega's space like that, that he should not be rubbing his cheek, even now, against those strands of hair, leaving scent that Will would only feel further distressed by, given that it is proof of Price's instability and fear.

Slowly the placid reassurance of the alpha behind him eased some of the tension in his muscles, and Humphrey waited for him. Not forced. Never forced unless there was no other option, and eventually he managed to turn his nose away from Will's curls and straighten up a little.

When Will's hand lifted from his chest, it tore a small growl from him, unable to stifle the response to the omega drawing away when he needed him here, right here, where he can feel him, and know he's safe. Humphrey's hand tightened, ever so slightly on his shoulder, and the sound cuts off. Gods, but he was a mess, and felt it keenly. He let himself be drawn back and turned towards the door, and he didn't doubt that Humphrey could feel the tension in his muscles as he strained not to pull away, not to launch himself back across the room and grab Will, to hold him, to feel he is safe. He knew his distress had been stinking Will's room; another failure.

It's shame that got him out of that door, shame and Humphrey's steady presence at his back.

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Four hours later he is slumped in a chair, bottle in hand, already more than halfway finished when Brian Zeller walked in without knocking, which is fair enough because it's his room.

"You said we'd share the bottle," Price told him, reminding Brian of that, so he doesn't get all angry or something. He couldn't deal with angry right now with his own self-loathing having had hours to tenderize him. He was only here now, because Humphrey had agreed to stand guard outside Will's room, to make sure Jack or anyone else didn't take him away. Humphrey had promised, and he was always reliable like that. The man would sit out there reading a book by the light of a lamp, and even if Jack did come and did overrule him, Humphrey would come and get him before they left. Price believed that. He could even scent the faint tint of Humphrey's scent, fresh in the hallway, reassuring him as Brian closed the door.
"I said we could share it, not that you could drink it all yourself," came the reply, but it was more frustrated than angry, and he would take what he could get. The bottle was plucked from his hand as the other alpha takes a swig from it, reconsecrating it as his possession, before handing it back. He smelled of the city, of people and that hint of death that always lingered far longer, slightly sweet and rancid from the decay and the fouling of the glands. It's a smell he had become too well used to, every time Jack took Will out in the carriage.

Price knew he was a mess right now, but he was so very grateful that Brian made no mention of it. Mostly, he thinks, it's the fact that the younger alpha honestly didn't know what to do with other people's emotions. Black or white, simple anger, frustration, crude amusement, Brian can handle, but a family alpha in a state of… whatever it is he was in, Brian likely didn't know, but also didn't want to make it worse by trying and failing right now. That alone felt like more than he was due, and was stupidly grateful for the silence on the matter.

Of course, the silence, when he had sort of expected a harsh put-down and didn't receive it, only started his mind into a defensive outpouring that he couldn't seem to stop. Blasted drink, betraying him.

"He said it wasn't bad. Was it bad?" he asked, his head tilting back on the chair to watch as Brian shucks off the outer layers of his clothing to wash before dinner. He didn't even want to think about dinner right now. "I got home from town to find him gone. Jack ambushed him in the stable alone. I could smell it when I got in; Will's distress, his fear. Jack made him fear, Brian. He shouldn't be doing that. He shouldn't be making him go out when he doesn't want to, doing things that hurt him. But he did. He trapped him in the stable. I smelled his fear, and he was gone. He was gone, Brian. Gone!"

Brain was staring at him, and he had no idea what the other alpha was thinking right now. It was all he could do to stall his mouth some more with the bottle, let the alcohol sear his throat and burn it away to try and stop it.

He sputtered a bit when the bottle was taken from him, some of it spilling down his chin in the process. A waste. But it was probably wasted on him anyway. He had some cheaper stuff in his room, but he hadn't wanted to sit there, isolated.

"It wasn't too bad. Just a robbery gone wrong."

Brian keeps the bottle, and if he was honest with himself, that's probably a good plan. He's had more than he should have. Way more, considering he was meant to have quit.

"I can't lose him, Brian. He's all I've got."

He buried his face in his hands, moving them up and over through his hair a few times until the shadow of the other alpha falls across him and a hand rests on his shoulder, and the other takes up the soothing motion he had started in his hair. It's too much, that touch of comfort, and he ended up a sobbing mess with his face buried against the side of the younger alpha's hip.

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_Bloom Residence, London - Monday 23rd November, evening_

Will rubbed the towel over his damp hair in a half hearted attempt to dry it after washing, before giving up and just slumping down on the seat by the fireplace in his room. It had taken two passes with the shampoo before the majority of the scent-marking by Price had been removed, needing it gone to escape the escalating worry and anxiety of having an alpha's panicked and fearful scent suffocating him no matter where he moved to.
He shivered, his shoulders hunching closer to the fire, trying to stave off the bitter wind that now flowed through the open windows; a helpful breeze that cleared out the worst of the scents that lingered in the room, but one that extracted payment with the touch that chilled through the shirt he was wearing. He didn't dare put anything else on just yet, too aware of the nerves that lay trembling alongside the shivers of winter, waiting to make a mess of whatever he had on with nervous sweats that would only worsen the situation when he went to dinner.

And he had to go to dinner tonight, no matter that he would much rather stay in his rooms. Alana sometimes took to sitting in the parlour with him after dinner, instead of going directly to one of her alphas, if he asked. If he was to speak with her about intervening on his behalf with Jack, he would need to speak to her soon, and alone, and that meant suffering through dinner, because 'it wasn't that bad' was very much based on your range of reference, and his had been distinctly skewed of late.

It was the sheer pointlessness of the death that bothered him the most. He had seen so much death, re-lived so much brutality and torture, but the death today had been needless. A random beta trying to steal from someone's home, and had been found during the process. Instead of running, he panicked and attacked, then tried to stage it like one of the more recent killers reported in the newspapers to throw off the police. Bloody slabs of meat, carved skin and muscle, just filled with panic, frustration and fear of capture, and nothing else.

He ran a shaking hand through his hair, and glanced up, surprised when Millie came into the room.

"Oh, I thought you would be at dinner, Will. I just came to clear the bathroom and change the bed. I'll go do Jacob's room first and come back."

He looked at the clock on his mantle. Fuck. Sabotaged by his own mental faculties, not that that was any major news at this stage.

"Thanks, Millie, I guess I lost track of time."

He had, and badly. The evening meal was always served at 6.30pm, and it was already over quarter of an hour after that. There was no time now to choose something specific to wear, or get his hair into a better state than the mess it had ended up drying into. All he could do was put some more scent blockers on to help cover his discomfort and get down there as soon as possible.

It wouldn't have mattered a few years ago. He would never have considered using blockers while in the house; far too expensive to waste on such a thing, nor even during some minor trips outside. Those days has long since past however, and tonight he was too worried over Price's state of mind to risk going down where his nerves might only agitate the man further. The last thing he wanted was for him to become more distressed over Will, and mention something of the trips that Jack made him go to while at the table where everyone would hear. Or even to have him seem to question Jack. Questioning Jack would certainly not pan out for anyone, and he doubted he could take much more of the alpha's blunt force trauma style of leading today.

By the time he got down to the dining room, it was only seven minutes later, but he was exceedingly aware of how all gazes turned towards him as he entered. Humphrey politely went back to his food immediately, making as little focus on the disruption as possible, but others were not so discreet. Jack's glare at him burned with his discontent as he found his way to an empty place at the table and sat, Andrew pausing his own meal to make up a plate for him.

"Nice of you to finally join us."

Did Jack think such hostility was meant to encourage him to come and sit with them in better time? Didn't he understand that if he had made Will feel welcome, rather than profoundly deficient, that he
might not have spaced out in the first place, or did he think that Will did this on purpose?

"Sorry. I lost track of time."

He didn't bother to look up and view firsthand the look of disapproval and annoyance on Jack's face. He could imagine it well enough from the scent and pheromones that the head alpha was putting out.

What he could also scent, was that Price had been drinking.

It was a particular kind of scent that he would never truly forget, for it had been the scent that Will always associated with Jimmy all throughout his childhood. It sat, a mix of alcohol, soured sweat, exhausted despair and something almost sweet, like Rumtopf fruits when it mixed in with the alpha's glands in that quantity, saturated into the very pores of his skin, into every breath he exhaled. It had been so long since he had smelled it on the other man, he had almost forgotten. He wished it had stayed in the past.

Around the table, the family were restless. He had thought at first that it was merely the disruption of him coming in late, but as the flow of scent rose and fell, mingling and carousing with each fractious thought, it was clear more was pulling at the threads. He could almost feel the arguments brewing and retreating with each clink of cutlery, each murmured request to pass a plate, the restless shifting on a seat, and the sometimes too tight grip on cutlery.

Jack wasn't oblivious, for while he might not be able to scent or sense the pheromones, he could certainly take in the agitation around him, the way that there was an almost challenge to the weight in the air. Jack didn't like challenges to his authority and seemed intent on crushing it by the sheer force of his will. His aura pressed on the room like a physical force, and the alphas shifted and almost squirmed at the harsh rudeness of the action. Will glanced to Alana, wondering why she was letting this go on as long as it was. A point had already been made, why wasn't she reeling Jack back in? Letting this continue was only going to breed annoyance, even resentment. No one at the table was speaking, and Alana seemed intent on ignoring the tension.

Well if Alana wasn't going to do something, he was going to have to try. Even if it only refocused Jack's attention on him, at least it would release most others, hopefully.

He looked up and over to Jimmy, whose gaze he had felt on him since the beginning, on and off, flickering up and over when that need to reassure himself grew greater than the guilt and despair that the alpha was exuding in distressed waves. Bloodshot eyes looked back at him, the contours of a man hollowed and cracking. The others saw it too, and the feelings at the table made more sense, even if they were still difficult to bear, battering him, as they did, with their silent conversations. Jimmy might be an alpha, but the family were meant to look out for each other, and he knew they felt their own failings in that, even if some were more acutely aware of that than others. Even Jack saw it, he though, though much like any other uncomfortable notion, the man seemed determined to block it by focusing on other matters, and Will knew that that dismissal would feel more to Jimmy like the condemnation that he felt himself due.

Will tried his best to look out for Jimmy, the weight of the knowledge that a lot of his troubles could be placed at Will's door was a heavy one, but it wasn't like it was his support that was needed the most. Alphas that were lower in a family's hierarchy needed the reassurance and security given by those above them, and with Jack seemingly unwilling to reach out and provide that, the rest of them were having to edge around that decision the best they could to help him.

"Jimmy, will you pass me the gravy please," Will asked, forcing himself to speak in the pressurized silence of the table. Jimmy needed someone to need him. He needed to be reminded that the silence was not condemnation from them all, to have Will be able to thank him for it, and to know that it was
about more than merely passing a dish. And Will, he needed something to focus on to help withstand the crushing weight of Jack's smothering presence, even if that was just a temporary distraction.

Unfortunately he misjudged his own reactions, too focused on Price. As he was handed the gravy boat, he didn't even know what happened, other than his muscles gave way, heavy china falling from his hand and thumping to the table, gravy splashing and then spreading rapidly from the dropped vessel over the pristine white tablecloth.

Fuck. He made a grab for his napkin to try and stem the tide while he reached for the fallen white ceramic nearby to right it.

"Leave it! Sit down!"

The thunderous demand from Jack had him flinching away from the spill, too distracted and jangled to withstand the automatic reaction as he sat back on his seat, hunching a little at the volatile command.

"Andrew, go and get help to clean up their mess."

Their mess. The gravy continued, unabated, to drain onto the table; a widening mess of sludgy brown, a tangible example of his failings that crept across the linen, seeping into fibres, splatters of it tainting dishes nearby. A mess that had no place at the table, that should have been contained by the well established parts of the household. He knew Jack, especially at times like this, felt that way about him. It was impossible to ignore, and he felt himself curl inwards, trying to protect himself from the battering of that angry disappointment and disgust the alpha exuded.

Gods, he just wanted to go back to his room. He couldn't deal with this right now. There was no way he would be able to stomach eating anything further, especially not with the rising discontent in the alphas around him. They might not be able to scent his distress, but they knew him. They could see how he had reacted to Jack's shouted command to understand what he was feeling, even if Jack didn't see enough.

"Will," Not Jack this time, but Alana finally speaking, "Why don't you go and change. Some of the gravy caught on your shirt."

It was an act of daring, almost, considering the atmosphere, but perhaps she was finally realizing that getting him out of the room, where his presence was only causing more unrest, was better than the potential of being seen to counteract Jack's command and igniting more knee-jerk attempts to instill discipline. Either way, he wasn't questioning it.

Andrew and Peter passed him on the way, but he didn't look at them as he slid out the door and closed it quietly behind him. He knew it wasn't his fault, logically, but it was difficult to get his instincts to hold onto that in the face of Jack's reactions, the sheer range of the alpha's ways of showing discontent with him were battering, and he had to pause for a moment on the other side of the door to steady himself, not wanting to trip from his shaking on the way up the stairs.

"You are pushing him too much, Jack."

He was startled to hear Alana's muffled voice through the door, not having expected her to do more to try and quell the alpha, not after her silence through the rest of the meal before then. He stood there, a sudden gratitude that she would speak for him keeping him pinned, wanting to hear more, desperate to feel less alone, even for a moment.

"How is this pushing him too much? The dinner is at the same time every day, and yet he comes
down, barely dressed decently, and certainly not if we had guests visiting. His hair wasn't even combed, and then he tosses an entire jug of gravy over the table! Even Alexandria has better table manners than that! How is he meant to find a prestigious mate if he acts like this?"

"He tries hard for you, Jack, but his control isn't endless. The more you push him each day, the more likely it will be he will have an episode in full view by the constant pressure."

"If he's that unstable, maybe he should be getting help from the mental institute after all."

That broke through the numbness. Terror, jagged shards, pitiless and drowning swallowed him in the wake of those words. Not just words, but belief behind them; that Will should be sent there, to a place like he had researched, to undergo 'treatment' that had so broken others. Jack wanted him there. He must want Will broken, a pliant husk of a man, no fighting back, just empty, trapped in his own mind deep down, but able to be used like the tool Jack wanted him as.

"How could you even think that?" Alana's voice was shocked. A terrified whine broke from his lips, and there was a stillness a moment before she spoke again from beyond the door, "Will?"

There was cursing and the swell of alpha pheromones, and then the rise of anger, swift and overpowering, the thump of flesh meeting flesh, and Jack's roar of outrage, but Will wasn't waiting, already halfway up the stairs. The sound of voices, of pursuit, the roll of the storm taking them along with it. There was no escape, he knew that. Jack controlled the house. He would be sent there, to that place. He slammed his door behind him anyway, turning the key until it stopped, even as he heard people coming up on the other side. They could break it down so easily.

The screech of heavy wood as he dragged the solid chest-of-drawers over against the door, the banging behind it making him whimper. Shouted voices, a large thump made him jump.

He had to hide. Somehow. Even though they would smell him by now, sweat rolling over his skin, washing away some of the blockers.

Thoughts scrambling, fingers, shaking so badly that the jar smashed on the floor. His most favoured clothes struggled out of, torn and discarded in his terror before he smeared the ointment all over his skin in panicked uncoordinated motions. The blanket from the bed. It was clean. Freshly laundered and placed while he was away. It didn't yet smell like him, and that was good. He dragged it around himself and dashed to the large walk-in closet, the only place he could go that was further away from people. There was a bolt-hole in there. A place that had been built in the original structure of the manor to hide people. Humphrey had shown it to him when he was little. He could still fit. He would have to.

Blanket around himself, he found the lever under a shelf in the corner and clambered in. It smelled of dust and neglect. But that meant it was safe. No one had been here. He pulled the hatch closed again, and the darkness was absolute. He could still hear them out there, but he was safe here. No one had been here. It was safe.

Darkness of a different sort pressed in, and his body gave up it's terror for unconsciousness.

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Soft candlelight in a lantern, the smell of freshly washed skin. Family.

"Hey kiddo."

Price's voice was soft, barely a whisper, slightly rough around the edges with suppressed emotion. Will looked out from the safety of his sanctuary to the crouched form of the man, his gaze flickering
over the swelling and discolouration on his face, to the split knuckles that still smelled of fresh blood.

"You're hurt."

His own voice came out a murmur, barely there, as if anything louder might start the chaos again.

"I may have punched Jack,"

A small sound of worry from Will in response.

"I know. I never was the smartest, but he needed it."

Will said nothing, his body still recovering from the trauma, his mind still groggy from it as well, that and waking up. There was no sound in the other room, nothing and no one else, at least not recently. The dressing room was dark except for the lamp, not even a crack of light under the door. Had he slept through the rest of the evening then? They sat like that for a while, Will watching Price from the bolt-hole, eyes too wide, cold despite the blanket, and Price staying there with the single candle lamp beside him in the dark of the walk-in closet as if it was the most normal thing to do in the world. He didn't crowd him, nor did he try to bundle him into his arms, or even growl in frustration. Price, who had punched Jack for him.

Even when he made up his mind, it still took a long time to actually get his body to respond. Finally though, the intent to move became actual motion, though tentative and halting.

It helped that Price kept absolutely still.

Slowly he eased himself out of the bolt-hole and onto the floor beside the other man. Price didn't reach out to him, and so the fragile trust, that it was Will's actions alone that would dictate the circumstance, allowed him to shift a little closer, the line of the shoulder and arm touching. He could smell him better here, feel the fine trembling of the man's restraint not to act. Price smelled of soap, of damaged flesh, whiskey and family.

Will slowly curled himself in against him, breathing in the scent from the skin at the crook of his neck, reminding himself of comfort offered, before tucking himself in against the man's chest, feeling careful arms wrap the blanket around him better, covering his feet from getting chilled, before those arms settled lightly around the bundled omega.

"I'm proud of you, kiddo," Price murmured into his hair. "The world gave you a raw deal, but you're always trying to do the right thing for people. I may be a washed-out old drunkard, and I don't always get it right, but you've got me regardless."

Will curled his fingers in tighter to the man's shirt. He didn't quite sob, but it was hovering there, a disjointed array of different emotions in his chest, making him aware of it's swell, too complex to easily determine.

All alphas ran hot, and it brought out the scent better, and Will allowed himself to pretend, when breathing it in, that everything would be okay. He had never thought that determination could have a scent, but the tinge that his brain categorized as smelling like freshly cut rhubarb, one that added to the intricate mix that was purely Price, could be nothing else. Determination to do better, be better. Will could relate.

They stayed like that for a while, Will taking in the comfort his biology demanded from family, until inevitably the creeping sense of claustrophobia started to tighten his muscles. They pretended that this didn't hurt them both, Price gently loosening his arms more, shifting a little as if discomforted by the way he was sitting, allowing Will the opportunity to shift away under the pretence of giving him
space to stretch. It was a soft lie, but a well-practiced one.

"Think you are good to sit in bed for a while?"

Will nodded a little. He didn't want to go out there, where it still felt more dangerous, despite logic. But to perpetuate the lie that sat softly between them, he used this excuse to move. He hated having to do this, unable to tolerate the contact that other omegas thrived on, that his own biology and needs craved, but was unable to deal with for long. He hated that it hurt the alphas in the family to constantly fight their natures, to deny themselves the craved touch to calm and comfort an omega. Knowing the reasons behind it did little to assuage the need, and the resulting pain and feelings of helplessness that inevitably brought.

They both got up, Price once more keeping a distance from him, knowing the limit for touch had been reached, and any more would only distress them both. Will hung back a bit as the other went first into the room, darkened by closed shutters, closed curtains, Price's lamp lighting the way to the bed. Across the room, the dresser was still sitting against the door, though the floor was clean of the shattered ointment jar. It was confusion for a moment as to how the alpha had gotten in, but of course, the service entry from the bathroom was there, one he hadn't considered in his panic.

"Try and have a nap. I'll bring up some food later for you, all right?"

Will looked over to the man hovering there, concerned but hiding it as best he could. Hovering but not close enough to make him feel trapped.

"Thanks Jimmy."

He made himself look to the alpha as he said this, trying to do now what he had so catastrophically failed at doing back in the dining room, in conveying his gratitude for his presence in his life.

As he climbed up onto the bed, he didn't immediately draw the curtains closed around it when he saw the alpha was still there, that scent of determination about him lingering. He waited, much as Jimmy had done for him, would wait for whatever he had to say, even if it took hours, like the man had spent waiting on him to come around from the catatonic episode of nerves. There were many pieces of news that might be deemed necessary for him to know, especially since this particular episode had undoubtedly only given more weight to Jack's idea. Such a thought was terrifying.

"No, it isn't about that," the words spilled in a rush from the alpha, not because he was able to read minds, but because it was likely evident from Will's posture or expression the type of thoughts he was thinking. "Or it is, but isn't."

The alpha ran a hand through his hair, wincing a bit at what was likely to be a bruise from his altercation with Jack earlier. "What I just wanted to say was that, if after your heat you haven't found someone to settle with, you wouldn't need to still stay here, if you didn't want. I don't have much money any more. We both know I pissed it away years ago. But I've been saving. I've got some. Enough to get a small place you could stay, with me. If you wanted. I know it wouldn't be ideal, but it's an option if you wanted to take it. Jack would have no right to demand from you there. It wouldn't be a family house, not really, and people would have little reason to gossip. Anyway, I just wanted to mention it now, so you wouldn't be worrying for no reason about him. About it all really."

Price didn't wait for a response, slipping out of the room and closing the service stair door behind him, leaving Will to sit in shock that Price would do that for him. For an alpha to leave the home they had made with an omega was near unheard of, and while Price wasn't near Jack's level of intimacy with Alana, he did still need her. He loved her, deeply, but it seemed like he would set aside his own wants, for stepping up to support his dead friend's son.
Will sat back on the bed after absently drawing the curtains closed. He wasn't fool enough to think that Price wouldn't get anything out of it. He would be the sole caregiver and protector of a family omega, and that would please the alpha in him deeply. But that very same responsibility was just as likely to break the man. He wasn't a strong alpha, and trying to deal with it all, even fend off other alphas, was far more likely to end in him getting seriously hurt. Will liked him greatly, and trusted him too, but he was always aware that such trust could only go as far as strength allowed in circumstances. Price would try, Will had smelled that determination upon him, but long term, it wouldn't be practical.

He sighed, drawing up his knees and resting his head back on the headboard. It might be a plan worth considering in the short term so long as he got used to the new place, short enough visits there to let them both calm down, and then for them to return home and allow Jimmy time to see Alana. He just couldn't imagine himself suddenly leaving home fully, not without a mating bond to reassure his instincts. This house had been the core of his stability and safety for so long that he couldn't imagine ever just walking away from it completely.

But to have a place elsewhere that he could retreat to when things with Jack got fraught, it would be useful. If anything, this latest episode had taught him that this situation between them was tearing the family apart, and he would sooner leave these walls than make them suffer it.

He supposed Jack would, in some respects, get his own way if he was to do that, as donating to an animal charity would have to be set aside. With the addition of the gifts from the ball, it would take some of the pressure off Price to fund it, and while the man would undoubtedly dislike taking from him, it would also ensure that they found a place that was more suited to their needs. Somewhere nicer, and in a better location. The last thing he wanted to do was to compromise and end up feeling intimidated in the new place due to where it was situated.

But he didn't want to think about it any more for now. Just the thought of having to move from the house he had almost always lived in was enough to make him feel sick.

Laying down, he could still scent the smell of Price, of family, from the blanket around his shoulders. That and the nest-like darkness helped ease him, until, eventually, he fell asleep.

Chapter End Notes

I was a bit nervous about this chapter, mainly because there was just so much drama all packed into one place, but the events were all sort of leading up to this breaking point, and it made Will's response at the dinner table feel more justified. I'm sorry Price!!! Don't worry though, from here on out, things should calm down a fair amount. That's what holidays in the country are for, right? Right.

As always, please drop me a comment, and let me know what you liked or didn't like about the chapter (or the story as a whole if you have been binge reading). I like to know what stuck out to you, what pissed you off, or made you feel good lol You know, the usual things. Feedback, good and bad, is of great use to me, so long as it's polite.
Another restless night found Will sitting in bed the next morning, unwilling to venture forth from it just yet. It was no surprise that he'd been pulled in and out of consciousness by dreams filled with blood and being hauled away into a deeper nightmare scenario, one after another. It certainly didn't lend itself to feeling at ease with going beyond the illusionary safety of his bed curtains, even when he had heard Jack leaving for work.

By the time a light knock on the door heralded Alana's presence, he was sitting up with a book, and had deigned to risk a little more exposure by opening the curtains at one side of his bed part way, to let in enough light to read by. It still felt dangerous.

He watched as she made her way over, drawing those curtains open further before sitting on the side of the bed. He could see she had taken more time to polish her appearance today, hiding the slightly darker marks beneath her eyes that denoted a less than ample sleep. Her hands sat neatly in her lap, precise in a way that was familiar enough to Will to know that it was a feinted poise, a veneer hiding her own troubles. It seemed a little late to become aware of the problems in her household, but better late than never.

"I think it's best if Price and myself go to the country estate for a while," he said before she could ask him how he was doing, in her particular manner of trying not to show her pity for his poor mental state. He hated it, saccharine sweet as it was, coating him like poisoned honey, seeping into his senses in a way he cannot be rid of. "Neither of us are easy here right now."

Her pity has always angered him. It was a sort of self-congratulatory indulgence, a pat on the back for her efforts, being so generous and willing to help, when in reality it offering nothing to anyone but herself. It also allowed her to ignore the inconvenient truth, that some of his struggles should be laid directly at her door. Understanding or aid would have been better, even polite indifference would have been kinder in some ways than pity. He hated pity.

"That was actually why I was coming to speak with you," she said, seeming to refocus on more practical matters, perhaps allowing herself to feel a little more in control of her own household by helping to organize things. "Humphrey had the same thought. He said he would accompany you both, assuming you agreed. Do you know when you might be ready to travel?"

The desire to stay safely ensconced in the bed warred with the knowledge that he was not safe there, despite what his instincts tried to tell him, but also that he would much rather have a bit more distance between himself and Alana for this conversation. Setting the book aside properly, he swung his legs around and left the languid warmth of the covers to find some actual clothing to put on, rather than merely staying in his nightshirt and sleep trousers. If nothing else, if he had his wish, he would not remain in the house for long today.

"Before Jack gets home," he said, knowing well enough that she wouldn't like the way he phrased it, as true and as clear as he needed to be with it. He could have told her 'before dinner', but the time of the departure, as well as the reason for the choice was important. The conversation he had not had with her the previous evening after dinner still sat heavy on his mind. Heavier now, considering how everything had gone.

"Now Will, I know what he said wasn't exactly tactful, but surely there's no need for you to rush off so soon."
Will's hand paused on the arm of a shirt a moment at her words, before taking it down and turning to look at her.

"Not tactful? He said I should be sent to the mental institute. The very same sort of place that my investigative report found to be lethally damaging to omegas!"

Moving behind the privacy screen, he pulled off his nightshirt and started to button up the shirt in its place, the motions sharp in his irritation and rising nerves at the volatile topic, still feeling too open and vulnerable in the space of the room.

"I know, I know," she said, her voice attempting to placate him, "He is a man of passions, and he sometimes lets that get in the way of civility if he is roused. I'm sure he didn't mean it."

Will said nothing for long moments, deciding on taking the time to pull on the rest of the clothes alongside shoring up the currently dubious control over his anger and frustration. His mood was likely telling it's own story in the room without him voicing it, after all. By the time he was fully dressed, some of his calm had returned, though the anger and fear lingered, growling, restless, under his skin.

"The fact is that I can't trust him, Alana," he said, moving to put on his shoes while she sat there, and wondered just how much of Jack she was actually seeing. "He pushes where he ought not to, and he doesn't listen."

"You know he doesn't pick up on everything because of his injury. You shouldn't hold that against him. He can't scent when you are distressed."

A sound of frustration escaped him.

"Last night no one could scent my distress! I had blockers on at the dinner table, but he was the only alpha there that either wasn't aware of it, or just decided to ignore it. He treats our family's struggling either as an annoyance, or a personal challenge to his plans." He stood straight once more and looked over to her, running a hand through his hair, more of a self-soothing action than an attempt to ease his rumpled state. "I don't know how much of his behaviour with the rest of the family you are actually seeing, Alana. He bullies when he doesn't get his way immediately. He only tempers himself when you are around."

She frowned at this, and he was thankful to see that it was a troubled frown, rather than an annoyed or dismissive one. He decided to press on in that moment while she was quiet, hoping that this pause of clarity while Jack wasn't influencing her as much might be enough for her to recall afterwards when she would once more be sucked back into the daily life of the family with him.

"He cornered me in the stable yesterday afternoon. He was angry and frustrated, and making no effort to hide it. Despite me telling him that it wasn't a good day for me, and that Jimmy wasn't around to come with me, as well as my concerns over the safety of the family around it, he forced me to go out with him. He shouted at me while he had me trapped in the stable, Alana. He shouted and he forced me to go when I'd had no intention of doing so."

He started pacing the room, feeling that vulnerability again, the feeling that at any moment he might be attacked; the agitation was too much for him to keep still. "I can't continue to go out with him to his... trips. I'm not coping well with it any more, and neither is Jimmy, but Jack won't let me alone when he decides he needs me for it. I don't feel safe around him, Alana. He's either forcing me to do things I am struggling too much with, or condemning me for not coping with those things. So yes, I want to leave before he gets home. I don't want to be in this house with someone who seems to have decided to use me like a tool as much as possible until I break, then send me off to a place that I
consider to be a personal nightmare when I am of no practical use to him any more."

"I didn't know he had taken you out yesterday."

He could hear in her voice that she was troubled, but he was more so, for the fact she had decided to focus on this, rather than what was truly important.

"Yes, and you didn't know he had taken me out on a day I was visiting Hannibal in the evening either. He was hoping, no doubt, that I wouldn't be well enough to go, when he wanted me with Lieutenant Anderson." He held up his hand when she seemed ready to refute this, "I know you are predisposed to taking his side because of the mating, but he told me yesterday that I could just make myself useful to the family in other ways, when I had rejected Anderson. As if it had been my choice to do so. He wants me to help with the scenes because it will get him that promotion he wants, but he's sacrificing Jimmy and me in the process, not to mention potentially the entire family if anyone ever finds out. I don't want to do it anymore, Alana, but he won't listen to me, and he certainly isn't listening to Jimmy. Hopefully you will have better luck."

He turned away to pick up his suit jacket and draw it on. No time for comfortable clothing today, not if they were going to be travelling, and therefore in public. He would pack some to take with him. As much as it pained him to admit it, Humphrey would have everything ready, no matter if his own plans had differed, should Will need to go early. Now that he had made the decision to go today, he didn't want to wait.

"I'll talk to him about it," she said, and he paused his perusal of the wardrobe's contents to look over at her.

"You should watch how he interacts with the rest of the family too. Although things have been more fractured because of the situation with me, there are other troubles there. My being here has only highlighted them more."

She nodded, absently, and he let himself feel a touch of hope at the feeling that she was actually listening to him this time, properly. They used to talk like this, in the past. He tended towards being more astute towards the needs of the family than she was, more acutely aware, and she used to listen to him because of that. He hoped she did now too.

"I suppose I should go and tell Humphrey the news then," she said, rising. "It will be nice for you to be back at the estate. More room for your dogs too."

This thought seemed to perk her up, and just a touch of his hopefulness started to fade as he could almost sense how she was letting herself be distracted with the positivity of his going there, rather than on the problems she would remain with. Without Jimmy and him there, things would seem better on the surface. Or perhaps, he thought with a slight downturn of his own mood, it would be.

She left him there, with his troubled thoughts and the packing of his trunk, and, half a day later, Humphrey, Price and himself arrived at the country estate, far from the noise and agitation of the city, and he could pretend, just for a while, that Jack didn't exist.

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_Bloom Estate, Hertfordshire - Friday, 27th November - afternoon_

Dr Hannibal Lecter sat poised but relaxed in his carriage, his gaze taking in the changing scenery outside the window. The pups were sleeping together on a blanket on the carriage floor, having had a long morning walk before they set off. The journey from his London home to the Bloom family's country estate was a long but sedate affair. At his insistence, Mr Hunt took the quieter yet slightly
longer route in order to avoid the worst swell of other travellers. And so, as the morning turned into early afternoon, they found themselves nearing their destination.

The abrupt change in Will's location had been a surprising one, though it only aided his own plans, being further away from Mr Crawford's limiting influence, as well as offering a far better circumstance for him to further his understanding of the familial strains that dear William was under, and use them to his advantage. If anything, this was better than he might have hoped for, no matter if some of his plans had been sped slightly by the change in location.

He had agreed to travelling out to stay at the Bloom's country estate when asked, of course. It had been a pleasure to host dear Alana and her sour mate that evening, if only to revel in the poorly hidden annoyance in the other alpha, while knowing his own circumstances were assured. The visit from Alana had been two days ago, the delay in making the journey allowing time both for William to settle in the new location, but also for himself to organize for the pre-arranged cover at the hospital. He had been taking extra shifts in the preceding months in order that it would cause no issue with gaining time off during the courting season without fuss. With work now aptly taken care of, he could relax in the pleasing nature of the change in venue, knowing he could continue to court William with a far greater leniency of intimacy and contact, being the last and only suitor the man had left.

His gaze turned towards the expansive building that came into view as the carriage turned the corner and made its way up the curving driveway. It was a beautiful building, with smooth grey stonework and trailing ivy that, so far, had survived the chilled winter weather. A tiered front lawn sat immaculate in its tending, and he could make out a small forest copse to the rear. He rather liked it, and in other circumstances he might have liked to own such a place himself.

As the carriage drew to a halt, he stepped down, absently ensuring his clothing was still sitting correctly. Nothing too colourful or flashy today, for travelling in brighter colours was in poor taste, but he was self-aware enough to know he looked good. It would not do to make a poor impression, after all.

Mr Layton came out to greet him, with one of the house betas lingering by the doorway, waiting in all likelihood to be of use in getting his belongings from the carriage. It was a Miss Gilmore, if he wasn't mistaken; not someone whom he'd had much to do with in the past. Mr Layton welcomed him with a handshake and a civil sort of warmth that was typical of the upper classes of alpha, restrained in a way that omegas and betas almost never were, coming, as it did from a rigorous control of their more volatile emotions. Still, Hannibal could pick up the more genuine pleasure in the greeting, and was pleased by it, for he had shared drinks and conversation with the man in the past and found him to be decent company.

He had expected William to meet him at the door, not only because he was his suitor, but because with Alana back at town, William was the one in charge of this estate. Their last meeting had gone according to plan, and so he didn't think that there was any reason for the omega to avoid him, not unless he had somehow found out his part in some of the other suitors' retirement from courting this year, but that was unlikely. He had, after all, been exceedingly careful. It had, then, to be some other reason.

Mr Layton, always the stickler for such social formalities, was likewise of a mind to be considering it, for he spoke as they made their way inside, letting Mr Hunt and Miss Gilmore deal with his luggage, and the pups.

"You will have to forgive Mr Graham for not coming down to greet you himself. He is currently resting in his room after a troubled night, but he informed me that he intends to come down in the late
Nightmares then? As he followed alongside Mr Layton through the halls and up the stairs, he could indeed pick out the faint trace of William's scent despite the cleaning and time since he had been in the hallway. It sat, ever so slightly sour with distress, a beautiful starting point for Hannibal to turn it around during his stay. He had every intention of making himself an integral part of dear William’s life, and despite the slight dissatisfaction at having not been greeted by the man, he would make the best of it.

"That is quite all right, Mr Layton, I fully understand. This season can be exhausting at the best of times. I am not so unaffected after the influx of work myself, and will aptly content myself with settling in, unless of course you have something you wish of me?"

After they got to the top of the stairs, Mr Layton moved onwards, paused at various doors to open them and state the nature of the room beyond, or, in the case of family bedchambers, merely point them out, in order that he knew where things were. They finally stopped at the door of one and Mr Layton opened it for him, showing a bedchamber beyond.

"These are your rooms while you stay here. After you have settled things to your satisfaction, if I might have some of your time in the library downstairs. It is the door to the right of the stairs as you come down, at the end of the narrow hall."

"Certainly, Mr Layton. I shall join you shortly."

The other alpha bowed a little in polite gratitude, before leaving him to surveying the small suite granted to him.

Moving further in, he didn't bother to close the door behind himself, for he could already hear the steps of Mr Hunt and his cohort coming up the stairs with his luggage. It was a rather hefty trunk, for he had no way to know how long he might be convalescing here, and it was better to be prepared for at least a couple of weeks so as not to put a further strain on the Bloom family betas that were in attendance.

The room itself was a large one, outfitted with two fireplaces, a seating and study area, as well as a generously sized bed that was waiting to get made; a thoughtful gesture that allowed him to choose the thickness of the mattresses provided. There were a couple of chests of drawers, and a wardrobe, as well as large windows that looked out onto the estate grounds to a small lake, as well as a doorway that led, he found, into a privy and bathing chamber, already furnished with salts and soaps should he wish. Overall, he remained impressed by the obvious effort that had been made on his behalf.

Returning through to the main chamber, he found Mr Hunt already making use of the wardrobe to unpack his clothing, Miss Gilmore waiting nearby.

"How do you like your bed made up, Dr Lecter?"

Moving over, he felt the different mattresses that had been left available, most less than a handspan thick, some firmer than others, though all of them had been kept fresh, for the scents of cleaning soaps as well as the slightly less pleasing, but preferable note of the dusting to keep away bugs, was also in attendance.

"I think these three, if you would be so kind."

If she was surprised that he had not opted for a harder, firmer mattress, she was too polite to say.
Most alphas, he knew, preferred harder mattresses, ones that did not offer as much comfort, so they could remain more alert during the night. He had no trouble sleeping or waking on any surface, and had chosen for other reasons.

Stepping away, he did not offer to help in either tasks the two were undertaking, both because Mr Hunt was eminently capable, and being paid to be so, but also because, as a guest, it would be impolite for him to offer assistance to the family's betas in tasks that they had chosen to perform. It might have made the job quicker to be completed, but only at the cost of insinuating that Miss Gilmore was incapable of doing so herself to the standard he expected. As he had no wish to offer unsubstantiated insult, he allowed them to continue as they saw fit, taking himself to the window once more to admire the view, only turning away when Mr Hunt came to him.

"That's everything placed, Dr Lecter. Will you be needing me for anything else?"

Usually the man would not have bothered to offer such questions, knowing, as he did, that if Hannibal wanted something of him, he would let him know. The man had always been of the more monosyllabic temperament, which suited Hannibal fine, but it didn't mean that Mr Hunt was without intelligence. If anything, the fact that such a question was asked at all was proof of it, for it was not for him that the question was likely asked, but as an instruction to Miss Gilmore and therefore the others in the household, of the sort of interaction that Hannibal preferred while staying. Many alphas liked a more congenial and familiar relationship with betas, but that had never been his way.

"Only to walk the pups," he said, rewarding Mr Hunt for his thoughtfulness, "Just ensure you are back home before dark."

It was generous of him allowing the other man extra time off to do as he pleased, especially considering that Mr Hunt was a paid servant, but the man had been with him for years now, and he and his family before him had been exceptional in their service. He could afford to be generous when he knew the man would not take advantage of his good opinion and attempt to skimp on his work when he returned to town, or fleece him. The Hunt family had always been hardworking, loyal and trustworthy, something he valued greatly.

With a nod to them both, he made his way out of the rooms and down the stairs towards the library, taking his time to allow the drifting air to bring him information about the household. It seemed like there were perhaps only seven in the house right now, excluding himself and Mr Hunt. He might be missing another beta if they only used other portions of the house or grounds, but he could only pick out the recent scents of William, Mr Layton, Mr Price, and four betas. For an estate this size, it was a rather small number, but then he supposed that it was bound to be such with the family split between the two properties. While it was convenient for him, he couldn't help but wonder at that split, for usually a family would travel together, or not at all. Mr Price would be a likely source of information, even if Mr Layton refrained. He might, if push came to shove, endear himself further towards the betas as well.

Still, there was no real need for such methods just yet, as he was confident that he could at least get some information from Mr Layton. It was intriguing that he was being asked to a discussion so soon after arriving, but he could only think that it must be to do with William, for otherwise a chat after dinner would have done just as well.

As he found the door without issue, he knocked politely and was immediately called to enter. No false bravado or posturing by making him wait, which he appreciated, but he honestly would not have anticipated it from a man like Mr Layton, who had always seemed like a polite and level-headed alpha. It was one of the reasons he had no qualms about spending time in his company.

The room he entered was spacious, and impressive in it's floor to ceiling bookcases filled with
knowledge, something else he could appreciate, having a similar inclining towards the printed word. The scale of it here, compared to the smaller study the family had in town reminded him that for many years this was the primary residence, long before Mr Crawford came to attendance. He could see how an alpha like this, who valued learned knowledge and patience, had helped shape his William over the years to share those values. There was no recent scent of William in here now however, and he wondered if there was another library or study elsewhere in the estate where his omega chose to spend his time instead.

"Come in, Dr Lecter. Please have a seat. May I offer you a drink?"

It was all very congenial, and he sat in one of the seats as Mr Layton got him the drink he had requested. He was pleased to note that the seats were placed in such a way as to be on equal footing, rather than at the desk, which appeared to be where the man usually spent his time, a polite gesture that not many alphas in home territory would have bothered with. As the other alpha sat himself, there was only a minor pause, one in which they both took a moment to enjoy the drink, before Mr Layton got to the heart of what he wished to say, no obfuscation or stepping around it, which he appreciated currently. Although straight-talking didn't lend itself greatly to his own style of extracting information, it could be just as forthcoming if the right questions were asked. It's own sort of challenge, in a way.

"Although we have sometimes been on opposing sides in friendly debate," Mr Layton started, "I have never been in doubt of your intelligence, skill, nor the esteem you hold your friendship with my mate, something I was glad to see emulated when you began courting Will. I will not insult you by giving you the same lecture of duty that I usually do to Will's suitors at this stage. Instead I would speak to you in confidence, if I may, on matters pertaining to him."

Hannibal inclined his head in agreement, opting to remaining quiet for the moment. It was best, in order to allow the other man to more fully express himself, and it interested him to see where this conversation would go. He took another sip from his glass, relishing for a moment in the heady burn of the alcohol, before setting it down on the side table in order to offer his full attention to the conversation ahead. That Mr Layton was bringing it up at all was surprising, showing not only a trust there that was pleasing, but also that the situation itself was slightly amis in order to take this tactic. He had no qualms about offering his confidence in this, for whatever it was would only hold him in secrecy until someone else, likely William himself, spoke to him of it, releasing him from the agreement, and that would be easy enough to arrange given time.

He watched, ensuring that he was sitting in such a way as to offer an almost professional sense of patience and trustworthiness that he thought the other alpha would respond to the most. Mr Layton was a man of morals and order, and would react best to someone else who appeared the same. It was not a long pause, but long enough that he watched as the other man look at the amber in his own glass, swirling it slightly as a visual distraction while he gathered his thoughts more before speaking.

"I am not sure if you are aware of the recent resignation of Lieutenant Anderson from Will's courtship?" Mr Layton said at last, his gaze moving from the glass and up to Hannibal, leaning back in his chair.

"I knew of it."

Mr Layton nodded, seemingly satisfied perhaps that Hannibal had been attentive to such things. Knowing one's adversaries was important, after all, and he hadn't allowed such key events to slip by him unnoticed, especially considering he had been the one orchestrating them. Mr Layton, of course, need never know that.

"What is less well-known is why it happened," the other alpha continued, "The Lieutenant reacted
with an entirely logical, correct and justifiable response to a perceived threat to Will on the street, shielding him from it. On any other omega, his actions would have had the expected effect, calming and reassuring them. Unfortunately Will's responses to such things are not normal, and he panicked. This in turn then changed what had, up until then, been a very positive match, to one where his body rejected the Lieutenant."

Mr Layton, whose gaze had turned away slightly in a memory, once more focused on Hannibal, his tone firming a little, a more determined set to his shoulders as he continued.

"I wish to see Will happy and mated, Dr Lecter. And so I feel it is my responsibility to tell you some details of Will's past, so that such a thing doesn't happen again. It is not my intention to attempt to dictate your actions, only you can decide those, but instead to arm you with information enough that accidental missteps are not made."

That was even better than Hannibal had hoped, to not even have to work to find out more information about dear William's situation, but to be granted them on a platter, as it were. Serendipitous in the extreme. He settled himself into a calm but slightly concerned visage, and waited patiently, hiding his hunger for what Mr Layton would tell him, although a little nudge in the right direction would certainly not go amiss.

"I am grateful, of course, that you would come to me with this," he said, for it didn't hurt to reinforce the man's trust and reassurance in him. Mr Layton would be a strong ally in his bid for William's presence in his life.

There was a sense of seriousness about the man, and yet for all that, Hannibal could detect an ever so slight hint of something else from him, an undertone that hinted at something almost relieved. He didn't think that Mr Layton would have been getting much support from the family's head alpha, and so perhaps this was the reason. It said nothing good about Mr Crawford's behaviour in the role, that so simple an offer of reassurance had an observable effect on a usually extremely reserved man. Hannibal had no difficulty in fulfilling that role here and now, easing the burden on an unsupported alpha, seeing as how it would offer its own rewards in information that he himself coveted. For now, it would be best to let the man talk, drawing him out more to see what else might be uncovered.

"I would also not have you under a misapprehension of the ease of forming a bond with Will. Eleven years, twenty seasons of courting, and yet each time I see blinded optimism over the likelihood of the mating being successful due to Will's appreciation and sentiment over those he courts. But sentiment has usually never been the issue. Time and experience has shown clearly that it will not be enough."

Ah, he could see where Mr Layton was going with this, and it was useful that he had indeed already discussed this very thing with dear William in the past. He remembered those eyes, bright in the lamplight with fear and desperation to survive, beautiful in their fragility and need.

"As I said to William, I have no intention of allowing my suit to lapse should the mating not take this year," he said, laying the further groundwork of stability between them, "This year, or any year beyond, only his direct sayso will render my place at his side vacant. It is my belief that he requires a greater certainty of security and affection than he has been thus far granted. How, after all, is he to trust in any alpha if they are so dissuaded by only one season, when they are meant to dedicate their lives to him?"

He could see some of the strain ease from the other man, nothing so very noticeable to the average person, but then he was paying far closer attention than most. Good, it was best that Mr Layton had thought on these things. Too many in this country were focused on fleeting pleasures and instant gratification, and it was pleasing that the more steady alpha had considered beyond that. There was a general sense about the man that he had been having a great deal more time to think on such
concerns lately, if their conversation currently was any indication. He watched Mr Layton take the information in, and his tone, when the man spoke, was thoughtful with those underlying hints of worry that seemed the norm for him these past years when Hannibal had seen him.

"It has been a concern of mine, for although there have been some that have returned after a season, it has not lasted more than two. Will is used to having the stability of a large family around him, and starting his own household away from that, and without as much security of our presence, it will be a drastic shift, and he doesn't deal as well with changes to his life."

"The habit, here, of omegas forming new households upon mating, is one that only suits a certain sort who thrive on new beginnings. Although society has trained expectations to mitigate some of it, it is a practice that will be troubling to less outgoing omegas, such as William."

He watched the other man nod, pleased for the seed planted that would further destabilize the alpha's good opinion of Mr Crawford, who seemed more determined to thrust all the family into society's greater focus. Hannibal was, after all, very well aware of Mr Layton's way of running the Bloom household in the past, having known Alana since he had travelled here initially, and how restrained it had been by comparison. It also helped bring the conversation back around to the topic that he wished to know more of.

"Stability is exceedingly important to Will," Mr Layton continued, and his voice was slightly easier now, though still held the underlying seriousness that the topic deserved. The alpha would never be flippant or dismissive about such matters, something that spoke of his character highly. Having Mr Layton as extended family would be no burden, he considered, though didn't allow his thoughts to detract from his attention of the man as Mr Layton continued, "It has needed to be, in order to ground him after the death of his sire."

Mr Layton paused there, but Hannibal didn't interrupt the silence this time, letting it sit until the man was ready to continue.

"Will was three years old at the time. The family as it was then, had been out with a picnic when they were attacked by an alpha. No one knew why. Will's sire defended the family, but was overwhelmed and killed in front of them. We believe the alpha intended to try and claim Alana, but she wouldn't let go of Will, and the alpha attempted to wrestle him from her. It was Will's omegan cry that then allowed Mr Price to deal with the threat that saved them from that."

Hannibal had known this of course, having heard enough from Alana to build the picture of that afternoon. And yet he hadn't known about it being Will's cry that had stopped the attack, nor that it had been Mr Price that had concluded the episode. It made his overprotective behaviour that much more understandable, if he had been left to deal with the threat on his own in such a way. But for Will to have offered a cry so young, that was also fairly unprecedented. That meant that in the force of the chaos and threat, his body had adapted just enough to give them safety. A few moments would all it have taken, not only to make the attack stop, but to ensure that their remaining family alpha did what was necessary to make it stop for good. It was no wonder Hannibal found himself drawn to William, if he had adapted from such a young age to survive.

"While they were safe, none of them were untouched by the incident, as you can imagine," Mr Layton continued, "For Will though, it left far greater impact, being so young."

"I can see how it would affect his receptiveness to traditional methods of gentling and physical reassurance by alphas, if it had been tied to such trauma."

Relief there in the scents in the air, and the slight slumping of Mr Layton's shoulders. Had he really been so worried that something so obvious would be disregarded? It was easy to conjecture that this
was a learned response, and as this was a very private matter, he could only think it was a particular alpha in the family who might dismiss such things on a regular basis. The thought was not a pleasing one, and his consideration of Mr Crawford became slightly darker with the knowledge.

"Yes, that is exactly so. Even in privacy, Dr Lecter, with the family in our own home, even when he needs the comfort and reassurance offered by us, it tends to be almost impossible to give it to him in most ways. We, as a family, have adapted, but I will not lie to you and tell you that it is easy on any of us, nor will it be on you. All of us have to fight against our instinctive responses, and Will tries to minimise the impact of his nerves on us as best he can, not only to make it easier on us, but because of the threat of what might happen if one of us should slip. It is a balancing act that you yourself will have to walk when dealing with him, and while it may not be obvious in everyday interactions, you should always be aware that it exists under the surface. Will needs the same things that other omegas do from their family and their mates, but he is hampered by his past, for his instincts are more often wont to see things as threats. That is what happened with Lieutenant Anderson. The situation cast him back into the mindset of the past, and his body reacted accordingly."

"And yet not all of Will's suitors could have done something to trigger those defensive instincts," Hannibal offered, far more interested in learning something new now, than rehashing knowledge he already had. "What is it you believe has hampered his ability to form a bond with them?"

Mr Layton was silent. Not refusing to answer, but giving the topic his full consideration. Hannibal didn't doubt that the man had thought on this often, but if answers were so easy to gain, Will would have been mated long ago.

"I believe," the other man said at last, "that it probably comes down to issues of security and trust. Will witnessed his sire, the head alpha of his family, being slaughtered in front of him. He was in enough of a situation of threat that it was his action that galvanised their safety, no matter that Mr Price saw to the deed afterwards. That is a burden. Will may like the alphas he is with, and yet it is his instincts that have to be convinced that any alpha he mates with can do what his family did not. This will be no easy feat, for while any person will be threatened by such an attack, for one so young, so small, that attack must have seemed of far vaster proportions, and so alphas attempting to mate with him now also need to convince his instincts that they are also that much greater, while at the same time not offering any signs of threat to trigger his fear of them. That is no small task considering how carefully balanced Will's grasp of his nerves are, and how very perceptive he is. And so here we are today."

It was certainly a lot to think on, and Hannibal inclined his head to show he was considering the words. In truth, he had not thought to get such an insightful observation from Mr Layton, and yet it certainly made sense. He would adapt, of course, to take it into consideration, and he relished the challenge it posed, even as precarious as it seemed to be. He did not doubt Mr Layton had considered the matter thoroughly before bringing it to him, and so exaggeration was unlikely to be the case, and certainly not misdirection.

"I apologize for burdening you so soon after arriving, Doctor Lecter, but I did feel it best to speak now, before other matters brought distraction."

Hannibal looked back over to the other man, offering a reassuring smile to placate him.

"By no means is it a burden, Mr Layton. You have done me a great service by offering the information as candidly as you have, and I appreciate that. It will require some thought, to digest the matter more fully."

"Of course. Take what time you need, for our home is yours during your stay. Dinner will be served at 7 o'clock in the dining room. It is not a formal affair, currently, so no particular mode of dress is
required."

After thanking the man, Hannibal made his way out of the library and returned to his rooms, taking along with him a better appreciation for Mr Layton's careful handling of his family, and his grasp of the nuances of the situation. He had no trouble imagining just what a difference Mr Crawford's presence had made on the family by comparison, and so perhaps the sudden change of scene to the country estate was not a particularly surprising one after all.

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*Bloom Estate, Hertfordshire - Sunday 29th November, night*

Will jerked awake, the retreating nightmare clinging to his skin, slick with sweat as he pushed himself up and reached for a towel that now stayed beside his bed each night as standard. Gone were the times when he was angry or frustrated at the disruption to his sleep, far too used to it now that only exhausted resignation remained. It was routine now, a habit well formed, as he wiped his face and neck before he pulled off the night shirt to find a replacement. A quick wash first, the water cold in the bowl, left him shivering for more mundane reasons, the remaining embers of the fire barely giving enough light to see by, nevermind any significant heat, but at least he knew the place well enough in the dark to navigate himself without bumping into things.

Ten minutes later, he had washed the worst of the scent off his skin, stripped the bed and pulled on the clean shirt, and left the window open to the safety locks so that a breeze would help freshen the room. Ever since getting here it had been the same, at least once a night, but it was merely a transference of habits long since created in town. A drink of water usually helped, as did the calming walk through the house in the darkness and calm.

He moved from his room, his feet clad in soft sheepskin slippers, and took a moment to reorientate himself. The scents in the hallway were familiar, or becoming so, the one from Hannibal lingering, just at the edges of his awareness, a wisp of a hint that teased his senses in an almost coy manner. Hannibal had been here for two days now, having arrived on the Friday afternoon. It had been a particularly bad night for Will in the evenings preceding it, so much so that he hadn't actually seen the man until just before dinner that evening. Then, and in the days thereafter, the alpha had been a calm and restrained presence in the house, making an effort, no doubt, to help put Will at ease with him being there. He hadn't even seemed to mind that the dinners in the evening were completely informal, with all the betas coming to sit with them, and not even any formal evening wear had been in evidence. Hannibal had chatted amiably with those around him, and Will could detect no dissatisfaction. In truth, Will had not talked much with the man since he had come here, but he could see both the patience in Hannibal to wait for him to settle, as well as the warmth of his regard when he happened upon him.

In some ways, Will had hoped that the scent of the man about the house would have helped alleviate the nightmares as it had when he had scent-marked them both two weeks ago, but either the passive scent around the house wasn't enough, or recent circumstances had rendered everything more difficult.

One way or another, the nightmares were still in evidence, as his current wakeful state told of all too clearly.

Still, despite this and the nightmares that prompted him to rouse at such an hour, this time of the night was his favourite. Nothing moved, and nothing stirred. The house had the utter quiet that felt less like a facet waiting to be broken by a careless footfall, and more like an embrace, with the shadowed hallways sheltering him. There was no one awake now, nor the harsh light of day to spear into his sensitive eyes and make his head ache. There was no chatter or bustling from family, no threats of
communication needing tended to and considered, no pressures to appear a certain way or do certain things. The house just sat and embraced him, and he breathed easier for it, his steps relaxed and confident in this nighttime domain he owned.

As he wandered along past some of the family's bedrooms, he drew his fingertips over wood and mantle, marking it as he went, now that he could be sure that his hands at least would not transfer any scent of his earlier distress, washed away with soap and calmed by the evening. It brought a sort of visceral satisfaction that he had never found in other instinctive tasks, even if it meant very little in the light of day; a claim of his own.

At the top of the stairs though, his steps paused, his gaze drawn further along the corridor in the other direction to something that set a slight frown touching his brow. There was a light there. Not bright, nothing so much to make it be more than one lamp or lantern, but enough that he could see the spill of it from the gap left in a partially opened doorway of his study, like an invitation.

The frown deepened and he turned his steps towards the room. None of the family generally went into there, tending to use the library downstairs, or the drawing room if they wanted some quiet. If there was a room in the house, other than his bedchamber, that was his more than other people's, it was that room, and at this time of night, with his scent having been placed along from his room and the house feeling intrinsically like his territory, the intrusion was not a welcome one.

His steps were silent on the thick carpeting, and he found a spill of almost feral aggression touching the edges of his emotions, the still otherness of the house at night only lending itself to his altered mood. There was no anxiety or worry in his thoughts, not when it felt like the house was huge and steady around him, a shield that no threat could break through.

He opened the door further and stepped inside, his eyes sharp as he took in the figure sitting there, sitting in the seat Will usually relaxed in. He took in the way the alpha with those prominent cheekbones looked towards him, how he assessed what he was seeing, and then got up, the book set aside as he moved to where Will stood. The alpha was calm in front of him, compared to the tense irritation in Will at finding his domain infringed upon.

"This is my room."

The words that left Will's mouth were an almost snarled, no matter that they were quiet. He watched, having none of the usual hesitance about keeping eye contact right now. The alpha stilled in front of him, and then dropped his gaze to the side, turning his head, just a touch, just enough to placate the anger in Will with that unusual deference.

"I apologise," came the soft reply, no playing with words right now. The alpha was clever enough to understand he had misstepped. Will could pick out the change in his scent, his attention heightening the gathered information around him so he could pick up the slight awe that emanated from the man. It tingled pleasantly over his senses and placated his mood, knowing the alpha respected his anger.

He stood there, and although he didn't let more words spill from his lips, this alpha was astute enough to sense the lessening of his irritation at receiving the apology, verbal and otherwise. Lessened, but not yet forgiven. They stood there like that for long moments, before the alpha spoke again, understanding more was needed from him to settle things between the two of them.

"You did not eat much at dinner. Allow me to make you something small to tide you over until breakfast."

He had not been intending on eating anything, his nightly wanderings tending towards only getting a drink, but it was more about realigning the peace between them, allowing the alpha to supplement his
apology, to show he could provide, both as a reaffirmation that he could, but also that he would be
allowed to do so, that he had not misstepped so far as to be denied.

Conveniently, such a task would also get him out of the study.

He judged the alpha's sincerity for a long moment, making sure the weight of that judgement was felt
and understood. He would not be swayed by pretty words if this was merely a placation without true
foundation, but he found nothing to be particularly troubled by. The alpha seemed sincere, and so he
stepped to the side, allowing the man to move past him, forced to leave first, picking up the lantern as
he went.

Will closed the door behind them, quietly, but firmly, and followed the alpha down the corridor
towards the stairs, the soft spill of light not encroaching too much on the evening air. Neither of them
spoke, both silent as cats as they made their way to the kitchen.

All the way down and through the corridors, Will watched him. The alpha moved with such easy
grace, but that wasn't what concerned him right now, as he watched to make sure he was doing only
what he had said he would. It was a distrusting gaze, as they made their way into the kitchen, Will
standing back and, getting out one of the stools and sitting, he surveyed the family's kitchen, and the
actions of the alpha within it. They were both very keenly aware of that watchfulness. He could see
it in the way the alpha never entirely turned his back on Will in case he missed some minor gesture,
in the way that he was careful with how he moved, so that no action might be seen as too swift that it
might offer a threat, or too slow, to be considered wanting.

The fire strikers were found, and with that and some old newsprint, the alpha got the stove in the
huge hearth re-lit, before lowering the sturdy metal candelabra that sat above the wooden preparation
table. It was this, the gradual increase in the brightness of the room as the candles were lit, that eased
some of the almost feral attention from Will's eyes. The room was still not entirely bright, not enough
to make him ill-at-ease, but enough that he didn't feel as much of an edge to his teeth at watching the
alpha move around. Hannibal must have felt it too, for he spoke once more, though his voice remains
a quiet murmur.

"I thought I might make some brioche buns with beef filling, if you don't mind the wait?"

Will shrugged a little, not minding what the man deigned to make, nor particularly bothered by the
wait. It wasn't like he would have got much sleep now anyway.

Hannibal nodded, not seeming to mind the lack of verbal response. Will watched as he moved about
the kitchen, getting his bearings with the layout and food stores, finding a couple of bowls and
ingredients and laying them out on the table before he rolled up his sleeves and made his way to the
sink to wash his hands.

"The brioche, like many of the best recipes, finds its origin in France," the alpha was saying as he
started to weigh and measure the different ingredients once his hands were dried. "It has a higher
butter and egg content, similar to pastry, that gives a bread that is richer and more tender
consistency."

There was a smoothness to the alpha's movements as he worked, and Will slowly started to relax a
little more, understanding, much as he had when Hannibal had played the harpsichord for him, that
the talk here was more about offering a backdrop for him to settle himself, rather than something he
needed to respond to.

"The first recorded use of Brioche was in 1404," he was continuing, while Will let the words wash
over him, watched the way those muscles in the alpha's forearms flexed with each movement. He
had never seen the man cook before, and there was something disarming and appealing about it, how very in control the alpha seemed, even doing something so homely. The last time he had seen the man's forearms was when Will had scent marked them both, something that his brain was only too happy to bring up right now, no matter that he wasn't entirely pleased with the man still.

Will had often sat and watched both the betas that were in charge of the kitchen, cook. He was more used to the noise and clatter here, the thump of dough and smells that filled the place when food was in the offing. There was none of that here tonight in the whisper quiet of the evening, only the soft murmur of Hannibal, and the sounds that could not be entirely hidden; the beating of eggs, the sizzle of meat in a pan, though even that never tended to raise above the sound of the alpha's voice somehow.

Eventually Will got up to fetch the glass of water he had intended to retrieve when he had left his room earlier. He didn't know how much time has passed, but the buns were now shaped, and Hannibal was talking about different Germanic meat-filled breads and their historical functions.

Sitting there sipping the water and listening to the man, it was a far cry from how he woke up. The kitchen had warmed around them with the heat of the oven and stove, the lighting mellow, as was Hannibal's voice in the rise and fall of the cadence of his words. Will thought, vaguely, that aside from the initial displeasure of finding the man in his study, it wasn't an unpleasant way of spending an evening.

"I think Humphrey has some family in Germany," he said as Hannibal was slipping the tray of rolls into the oven, "I know he has some in southern France. An aunt, I think."

He could see the pleasure in the other man, that he had deigned to interact more actively at last. There was a warmth and satisfaction in his eyes, as he started to clear up the dishes, pleased that he has mellowed Will until he was seeking conversation, rather than merely listening to it.

"Germany is a beautiful country, and although I spent some years in France in my youth, the warmer climate there didn't suit me quite as well."

It made Will smile, hearing that, not because the sentence itself was particularly amusing, but because the alpha was handing out personal information like a prize to encourage Will. The man wasn't exactly being terribly subtle, but perhaps that was also a gift, in a way, that he felt less need to obfuscate here and now.

"I have never been. We decided not to travel when I was younger, and in the more recent years, I suppose I am more set in my ways. We have family and friends throughout the country that we visit regularly enough. I never felt much need to travel further, although the book you gave me had me questioning that decision."

Definite pleasure there. It might only be the slight crinkling of Hannibal's eyes, and an ever so slight tease of scent, but considering how restrained the man usually is, it was as good as shouting.

"I am glad to have been able to broaden your horizons."

"Don't get too cocky. I never said I would be willing to make such a trip."

"The mind is a far more important landscape. Through it we experience all the world has to offer; memories, thoughts, conversations, ideas and concepts. Is a book any less important than a trip, if it offers the richness of interest?"

That was not what he had thought might be a response to his comment. It was a subtle twist on the
topic, moving from talking about a gift, to the value of one experience over another, and that change was just clear enough that it had his mind stalling, trying to work out, not only an answer, but also how the alpha had managed to alter the topic so seamlessly. It was still, technically, about a book, but Hannibal was speaking of much more than that alone.

Will watched as Hannibal wiped down the surfaces of the kitchen then dried off the bowls and pan he had used after washing them. He seemed content to let the subject linger until Will had an answer for him. This wasn't small-talk, and the weight of the topic allowed him to give it the proper thought and consideration it was due.

"On a trip, you would be sharing those experiences with someone else," he offered, less of a statement than it was the testing of boundaries and suppositions, but the alpha wasn't going to let him off that easily, and Will found that he didn't want him to.

"Are you not already doing so? The words on a page were written by someone who is sharing those experiences with you. A view of the world that is not your own. Is it less valid if they do not stand before you in person?"

The question brought with it memories of almost three decades of social interactions and demands, of outings, conversations, balls, people coming to the house to call. It brought thoughts of his lectures, of charity outings, of people talking in the street or at an eatery, of picnics in the park, of opera, of all the ways that society interacted with each other in ways that were the norm.

Will had never been the norm. But while he had always venerated the written word, and more often than not, using it as his preferred way of communicating, he had never truly considered that it might be of just as great an importance as talking in person. Society didn't think that way. Will, for all his difference, had never thought that way, for while he preferred it, he had always understood the norms with which he struggled, and how he was lacking in that regard. He might find it better, easier, to lose himself in a book, or his writing, but that was not what society expected and demanded. He knew that, and truly, Hannibal must know that too. He wasn't entirely sure where the alpha was going with this, other than to buttress his gift with well-meaning conjecture.

"Most would think so," he offered at last. "Society functions on personal communication."

"Do you think that, William? Your own words have brought experience, consolation and levity through the newspaper, it has brought information, warning, and a view of the world almost no one has ever noticed before to hundreds of academic readers that might, in turn, save lives and reduce suffering. In the privacy of their own home or office, those words that are printed can be properly contemplated without the distraction of humanity, the pressure of their peers, only their own mind and understanding between them and the words that are printed. That is a powerful thing. Words on a page whisper and shout where they might otherwise be ignored or passed over. They sit and they stay, as a conversation might not, re-read, enjoyed, contemplated. Is it less valid, William, or is it merely a different way of experiencing the world?"

Will frowned a little at this, not in anger, but in consideration. What the alpha was proposing was good in theory, but in practice?

"People don't live in isolation, tucked away and sheltered from the world and those in it, Hannibal. Even if I am more given to reading than travelling, that doesn't stop the consensus of society, or biology, from impacting. Humans are meant to interact, to share. It's healthy."

Hannibal hummed slightly, a sort of sound to convey thoughtfulness as he considers this, or merely delays his answer while he checks on the rolls. The smell of freshly baked bread was delicious, and despite having been content with what he had eaten earlier, his stomach growled. The look that the
alpha gave him was both amused and pleased.

The tray was drawn out of the oven, deemed ready it seems, and with quick, precise movements, the rolls were placed on a rack to cool. It was a matter of personal challenge that Will stayed seated where he was, rather than go over and try to take one before they were cooled enough to eat.

"Your biology, your needs, are different from the majority," Hannibal said, drawing his attention back to him, and their conversation. "If the general populous were faced with those needs, rather than their own, society in general would be rather different. Your needs and wishes are no less valid, William, than anyone else's."

Perhaps it was the time of night, or the way the alpha seemed so entirely sure of himself and his beliefs, but the words, simple in their expression but far-reaching if he grasped them, sat more solid than he had felt before.

All through his life, as far back as he could easily remember, his life was one of an omega in a society that venerated them, held them up as the leaders, the conversationalists, the heads of households, the activists, the orators. Will had never, truly, been any of those things, not in the way that society expected. No matter that he had grown up loving books and the written word, it had never, he realised, felt as valid in the face of those expectations. Especially living in Alana's home, rather than one of his own, he realised that he had never really thought much of his own needs, other than to see how he could fit in with others.

Hannibal, he understood, was not thinking in those terms.

As Will looked over towards him, he realized that the alpha was looking at Will as a power in his own right, no matter whether that was merely isolated or in a wider context. This wasn't about a gift of a book that the man had given him, it was about nudging his thoughts onto a different path. What might it be like if Will could live any way he truly wanted, without question or pressure from society and others? What would his life be like? That was what Hannibal was asking him.

He contemplated this as he hopped down off the stool to take the roll that Hannibal had put on a small plate for him to eat, now they had cooled enough. He leaned against the wooden table and nibbled at the edges, making sure he didn't sear his mouth, and closed his eyes at the soft, buttery taste that was complimented a moment later by the filling.

It was so good.

He felt he should really say something, either to the question, or to compliment the food he was eating, but he didn't need to look up at Hannibal to know the man was watching him with an indulgent satisfaction. And really, wasn't this what the man was trying to convey anyway, that forced words to placate society were not needed? Hannibal knew he liked and appreciated the food, and perhaps that was enough, knowing that further comment would be forced through discomfort to give.

Either way, his response was distracted from, as he heard the sudden hurried footsteps coming down the stairs. He let his gaze flicker to Hannibal, but the alpha seemed unconcerned, and so he took another bite from his roll, the food offering its own warmth and contentment, before Price all but ran into the room.

At seeing them both there, Jimmy seemed momentarily baffled; relieved, yes, but seemingly taken out of sorts at seeing so easy a situation in the kitchen.

"Upstairs, I smelled your anger, then you weren't in your room."

Jimmy's voice sort of trailed off in worries that were too close to the man's personal nightmares, and recent events, to make him easy. The alpha positively reeked of fear and anxiety, quite contrary to...
Will right then, who had seemed to shuck it off with the evening air and the time with Hannibal in the kitchen.

Both of them sort of startled slightly when Hannibal moved, coming around the large table with smooth, easy strides, and placing a carefully wrapped brioche roll in a linen napkin into Price's uncomprehending hands.

"Go back to bed, Mr Price."

Jimmy looked down at what was in his hands, then to Will, then Hannibal, then back to the napkin in his hands. The baffled sort of surprise seemed to stall the downward spiral, at not only finding Will perfectly contented and safe, but also not being shouted at or reprimanded by another alpha.

"Okay."

Will watched as the tension eased out of Jimmy's shoulders, how they slumped in a sort of survivor's relief at having found everything as it should be. Better, perhaps, than expected. The man sent a small smile his way, before merely turning and leaving them to the kitchen, the sound of his feet padding quietly back up the stairs, the soft click of a door in the distance, and then silence once more.

It was such a difference, stark really, on how Jimmy had behaved. Will looked to Hannibal, his gaze thoughtful as he took another bite out of his own roll. Usually Jimmy would never leave him so quickly, or so easily after a scare, nor did he usually take other alpha's commands so well, but was that only because Will was easy right now, or was it because the other alphas were under Jack's command, and therefore didn't make the man feel as safe? Hannibal wasn't attached to Jack, and couldn't be commanded by him in the same way. Was it that, then, that made Jimmy trust in Hannibal's dominance, no matter that it had not been felt in the air?

Or had it? Will hadn't been around Hannibal much during those first couple of days, and it was possible that Hannibal had settled any issues of dominance with him then.

Either way, it was a relief, to have Jimmy so settled, so easily. It only highlighted what a mess their family had become lately, that something so simple as Jimmy going back to bed after becoming concerned for his safety, should be such a relief. It had encroached so slowly at first, he couldn't remember when, exactly, Jimmy had become so prone to being overprotective. It hadn't been when Jack first joined the household, but sometime since then, certainly. It eased something in him, to see proof that Hannibal could handle those Will cared about.

"I should probably head for bed as well," he said after he had finished eating and set the plate down on the table, understanding that Hannibal would want to clear up himself, so he didn't offer. "I will think on what you said."

Hannibal's smile was warm, contented with this, no matter that Will was leaving his company for the moment.

"Then I shall wish you a restful sleep."

Will turned to go, and then paused at the door, looking back over to the alpha, as he stood there in the soft candlelight.

"I appreciate what you did tonight," he said, his gaze not quite making it to the alpha's now, but he didn't try to force it. "You can sit in the study again if you like, just try not to scent mark the rest of the room. Good night."

He left then, making his way back up the stairs, the scent of warm bread and the beeswax polish
doing away with at least some of the lingering scent of Jimmy's earlier anxiety in the air. Back in his room, he made up the bed with fresh linens, now that his own mood was stable, closing the window against the chill and snuggling down under the covers to get warm.

It had been a strange sort of a night, and it took him a long time to get back to sleep, no matter the way the food made him lax and lazy, his thoughts going over the questions that Hannibal had posed. It seemed an almost ludicrous thought, to dismiss the norms of society in preference for one's own wishes, and yet even so, it might be useful to consider it at least. With the situation back at town being fractious, a clearer vision of what he might wish for in a way that wasn't tied to Alana's home, might be a useful guide.

That was for another day thought, for now, he let his eyes close, and let himself wonder whether Hannibal ate a second roll himself, when Will was gone, or whether he would leave them all for the family later that morning. The thought of the man indulging in a second roll was amusing, and warmed him as much as the food had done. It let him drift off into a sleep that was, thankfully, free of nightmares for the rest of the evening.
The next day found Will out in the estate grounds walking the dogs, with Hannibal at his side. His
sleep the previous evening had been fitful, and had lingered well into the late morning. The events of
last night, or more correctly, the questions Hannibal had presented him with, had done little to
contribute to a restful night, twisting in his thoughts, ambiguous and coy. They continued to impose
themselves on him well into the afternoon, as he attended to some minor tasks around the house,
one of which seemed to demand enough focused attention to shake those questions from the
forefront of his mind.

He still had no real answers, and yet it had made him aware of just how many of the actions and
decisions he made daily were based around the needs of the family, or society, or even merely
around mitigating his own nerves. The sheer scale of it was a startling understanding, for so much of
how he behaved was done unconsciously or out of habit bourn from decades of societal expectations
and conditioning, not his own design. It was the very scale of it, so encompassing as it was, that had
made it bypass his notice, built as it was on thousands of small things over the years.

He suspected that it would bypass most people's notice, especially if they didn't know him, and yet
Hannibal had seen enough to understand and question it. Will still had no notion of what good the
questioning was, but the task of knowing yourself was probably a worthwhile one, and he supposed
it would do no real harm either way.

He watched as Hannibal threw another stick for the dogs; Winston, Lizzie, and Hannibal's two pups
Dovano and Sargybinis, all dashing after it with great enthusiasm, warm paws marking a trail
through frost-tipped grass. Even at only 14 weeks old, the pups were still starting to rival Winston's
own size.

"You never did tell me how you came into possession of the pups," Will said as he watched them
come back, both Dovano and Sargy carrying the same stick, until the former got up close and lost
interest in it in lieu of just being near Hannibal again. He knew it had been a gambling debt, thanks
to the information from Mr George Hargreaves and the lawyer, but not how Hannibal of all people
had come to gambling with the alpha of that house.

As Hannibal took the stick in his gloved hand from the pup, Will watched as he held it a moment, his
gaze taking in the attentive dogs, before throwing it once more, and they again dashed after it with
the sort of unbridled joy that dogs seem so eager to share with the world. He thought, as he watched
them, that perhaps that was not something Hannibal had much of before now, for he had caught the
hints of pleasure from the man when the pups returned, desperate to please. It was a reaction that
seemed more pleasantly surprised in the alpha to be entirely commonplace, not that the dogs would
do his bidding, but that they did so with such unfettered enthusiasm.

"It had been when visiting an acquaintance of mine, Mr Walgrove, by invitation at a ball he was
hosting. I had been content to amuse myself with the foibles of society that evening when Mr
Hargreaves, who had been attached to a group I was conversing with, suggested cards. I decided to
indulge him in a couple of hands, but during it he made some rather disparaging remarks about a
friend of mine."
Will could remember the conversation back in the man's study, how he had warned him of how his anger could be swiftly roused by such things. Even though he knew the outcome, he still felt a little hint of foreboding for the situation being described.

"Perhaps it was merely an idle rudeness at first," Hannibal continued, both of them watching the dogs playing with the stick after he hadn't thrown it again, although neither of their thoughts were likely to be focused too much on them right now. "However he refused to recant the insult, and, having imbibed a little too much, seemed to decide that rousing my irritation at him might be a good way of gaining ground in the cards through any mistakes I might make, as his own luck had been poor that night. As the evening wore on, he drank more, and I was only too glad to relieve him of his funds in return for the indelicate comments he made in my friend's direction. In truth, he turned out to be a rather odious man, as many came to see by the end of the evening."

Telling it like that, it seemed almost pleasant and logical. Will could clearly imagine Hannibal sitting at the table, poised and elegant, with the drunken Mr Hargreaves on the other, slurring slightly, signing more bets, seeing exactly what Hannibal wanted him to see in order to do so. A man like that had stood no chance against the quick intelligence of the alpha next to him, and Will was stuck by opposing notions, of the actual outcome, alongside the instinctual warm swell of being courted by such a skilled alpha. The secondary thought was ridiculous, and he attempted to cast the omega side of his brain back where it belonged for the moment, knowing it to be the result of the forthcoming biological season, trying to focus instead on the very real outcome of that game of cards.

"You ruined him."

"He ruined himself. I did not pressure him into the game, nor to continue betting when he had imbibed far too much alcohol to remain cognisant. If it had not been myself, someone else would have taken up my place at his table instead. Should I have left him with enough leeway to keep the dam when the pups needed her? You know yourself, I am sure, how they suffer from being separated too early."

He wasn't unaware of how Hannibal was using his weakness for the dogs against him in this, trying to mellow his opinion on the matter. Whether the man guessed it or not, Will tended towards being far more protective over animals than he was over people, but at the same time, he had seen first-hand what had been left to the man with whom Hannibal had found fault. Or, more importantly, his brother.

"It wasn't just the alpha you ruined, Hannibal. He had family living with him."

"Then he should have paid more mind to their existence."

Although on the surface, the tone was as congenial as it ever was with the man, Will could hear the firmness there, one that showed well enough Hannibal's opinion on the matter. This was no passing fancy or casual opinion, but something that the alpha felt strongly about. However, it wasn't the overwhelming and domineering opinion like Humphrey's brother had been, and certainly not Jack, but a view, confidently given, and one that might be negotiated with if given a good enough rebuttal. That fact alone eased him, a certain amount of tension that had been gathering at the potential argument dissipating in the calm but assertive way the other man held the topic.

In truth, Will couldn't even deny the validity of the comment, especially having seen what had become of Mr George Hargreaves. The alphas in the house were meant to protect and provide, and Mr Hargreaves had done neither. Quite the opposite in fact. And yet Will got the feeling that should he ask, Hannibal would not begrudge him a request to do something to help Mr Hargreaves' family, despite his aversion to the alpha of the house.
He wasn't sure he should ask though. Humphrey had been right, that there was already various societal safety nets in place for situations like this, and getting more involved might not be the best of things for any of them, especially if Mr Hargreaves still had a grip on his brother's life. Considering Hannibal's penchant for retribution, it might be a poor idea indeed to involve him more in something that might include the alpha.

"I met him, you know, Mr Hargreaves' brother," Will said after a while, the silence having sat between them, passive and unassuming. "I understand why you did it, but it's difficult, seeing the results fall beyond the one who might have deserved it."

They continued their walk, avoiding the lake to keep the dogs away from it, and heading towards the small forested area that had been planted long before Humphrey had come into possession of the estate. Will had always loved the smell of the pine needles at this time of year. Nearer the winter solstice, they would cut branches to decorate the house, and the scent of them lingered in fonder childhood memories for him.

"It's the duty and pleasure of an alpha to look after his family, William," Hannibal said as they walked by the edges of the trees. Will watched him gaze off into the small forest, seemingly in thought. "If Mr Hargreaves was so neglectful as to not have enough contingencies in place for his family, then he was unfitting to lead it, and they are better off without him."

The way Hannibal spoke, stoical, almost detached, it might seem that he was merely speaking in rote, that it meant little to him other than the preservation of standards. However, as Hannibal turned once more towards him, catching his gaze before it had a chance to skitter away, he could see the utter belief there, but more, the neglect of an alpha over the safety and security of his family was not something that sat lightly with Hannibal. The part of the man that was more instinctive alpha, it burned beneath the surface at such a thought.

Will found himself caught by that intense gaze, unable to pull his eyes away. The easy walk in the chill of the afternoon had been forgotten as he was held there, aware, too aware of each of his shallow breaths, of the way that a slender gloved hand slid into his own as it was brought up slowly towards those brutally beautiful lips.

"I would let nothing threaten you, William, nor let anything take away your safety or true comfort."

He couldn't look away as his hand was turned over, shifted until the soft underside of his wrist was exposed to the warm breath against it, lips poised there, eyes burning as they looked at him. His breath caught as the very first hints he had ever felt of Hannibal's aura and presence eased into the air around him, those lips pressing softly, ever so softly against his scenting glands in a reverent promise.

A tiny whimper escaped his throat, feeling fragile and delicate in the presence of the man. And yet he did not feel weak. Those lips that worshipped him in their silent press of dedication made him feel quietly powerful despite his fragility, that someone so strong would present their life to him, to do with as he wished.

He had never felt a presence like this before, even though it was only hints of it, it was like a distant thunder that was a warning to others that might think to stand against him. It rolled, but had a sharpness to it that hinted of a danger within, surrounding him as he breathed it in, knowing himself caught within it's fog, but not threatened by it. Even in so small a dose, it was overwhelming.

"Alpha"

Will hadn't been conscious of saying anything until the word was already passing his lips, lilted with need and it's own manner of supplication, his head having tilted to the side like an invitation for the
other to take. There was a rumble, a real one this time, rather than the warning that presence offered. It emitted from Hannibal's chest and trembled in his breath over Will's wrist, making his legs weaken at the sensation.

"I would protect you, William. If you would let me."

Will's own breath stuttered as he looked into the eyes of the predator before him, aware of the slow raising of the man's hand towards his cheek. Slowly, so slowly as not to startle, slowly enough that Will could pull away if he needed to. As it settled to cup against his cheek, skin against skin, the glove having been discarded at some point, he found himself leaning in towards it, letting the innate strength there hold him gently, not pressuring, but supporting.

The message was not lost on him.

He didn't know how long they stood like that, one of Hannibal's hands holding his own gently, while the other cupped his cheek, the enticing scent of his skin so close. The scent mingled and reassured in the haze of the pheromones and presence the man exuded that seemed to render everything else insignificant.

It could have been minutes or even hours, Hannibal held so still, so steady, but time enough for the hint of his inner predator to slide back beneath the still waters of his personality, content, it seemed, to have been noted and responded to. Although it wasn't fear that had held Will there, the lessening intensity of that gaze helped to bring him back to himself more.

Hannibal stood before him, as poised and elegant as ever, steady as Will almost never felt. But no matter that the man's presence had been safely tucked away, as had the intensity of his gaze, Will still felt overwhelmed by it, and his reaction to it. He had never bared his neck to anyone like that outside of heat.

Likely sensing the shift, Hannibal slowly drew away his hand from Will's face. The cold air was biting against the place where it had been sheltered and warmed, feeling all the starker when it was gone. Will's gaze flickered away, hiding from the whine that was desperately wanting to emit from his chest at the deprivation of that touch, while the colder reality settled once more into his bones, the tight clench of claustrophobia starting to set in.

"I… I should get back to the house."

"Of course, William. I shall be here for you, when you wish to find me."

Hannibal squeezed his hand lightly before letting go, though he moved to unbutton the top of his coat before drawing forth a handkerchief from his suit pocket and offering it to him. It took a moment for Will to understand what he was meant to do with it, before a slight gesture drew his attention go the dampness on his face. Not unnoticeable tears, but oily residue from his glands that had seemingly been drawn forth to run down the sides of his face in an embarrassing abundance.

"Thank you"

Flustered, he tried to pat himself dry, knowing not to irritate the skin too much when the glands were already slightly swollen in previous response. He couldn't face looking at the alpha right then, still overwhelmed, but also the fresh embarrassment at having responded so openly outside, even if it was private grounds. His gaze fell on the Doctor's ungloved hand and saw a corresponding glisten of moisture coating it from where it had touched his cheek. The sight of it there, marking the other man, brought a fresh surge of oil to his face in response. He feared the cuffs of his shirt were likewise beyond saving at this point.
He did what he could with the handkerchief. It had glided over his skin with a softness that denoted exquisite quality, one he knew was ruined now, for oils tended to do that. And yet, perhaps the alpha would not think it ruined, for what it denoted. He needed some space, imminently, but he didn't want to leave Hannibal thinking he was rejecting him.

A flicker of his gaze up to the other man, not making it higher than those cheekbones. He folded the handkerchief once more, so the worst of the scent was tucked safely in the middle, before offering it back.

"Thank you, Hannibal."

He didn't need to see the smile that curved those lips into showing those slightly crooked teeth, nor the way his eyes crinkled in response, for the warming of that subtle scent of the alpha told him all he needed to know about the man's pleasure at having been given something that held an abundance of Will's scent-marking on it.

"You are very welcome, dear William."

Flustered at the almost purred words, Will nodded and turned abruptly back towards the house, his steps quicker in his restless agitation. All the dogs, except Dovano, followed him back towards the house, and all the way, he could feel Hannibal's gaze upon him, intent and focused.

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**Bloom Estate, Hertfordshire - Wednesday 2nd December, afternoon**

Will wanted to believe that he was not hiding in his room, but when he found himself fiddling with the cuffs of his shirt for the third time in the last few minutes, he had to acknowledge that he was, in fact, hiding in his room. Which was ridiculous, considering that it was the prospect of seeing his suitor that had him hesitating to emerge.

It was two days since they had walked together in the estate grounds, and to be sure, the alpha had been more than accommodating and congenial when they happened upon each other around the house or at meals, but it seemed so different now. More real and substantial, and in some ways more threatening for how it made him feel. He found that it was both nervousness of seeing the man, but also about being seen, that kept him pacing.

It was all too clear in his mind, those moments when their gazes had been locked and he had been overwhelmed by the alpha's regard for him. He had all but forgotten the fortune teller's reading in the preceding days. There had been far too much going on with Lieutenant Anderson, and then Jimmy and Jack and the swift relocation away from town. But with that gaze seared into his memory he was remembering them now all too clearly. The cards had always been in his thoughts since then, a promise and a warning, both.

He was scared, and he could admit it. Fear, in it's various forms, had shaped and guided his life in so many ways that it was like an old family friend. One who turned up at the most inconvenient moments and always outstayed their welcome. It wasn't that he feared Hannibal would harm him, for no matter how much of a presence he had, the man clearly had other plans for them both. It was almost laughable that, upon finding an alpha whom he responded to on an instinctual level with barely a breath of the man's aura, that he was now scared of what it would mean if he actually found himself mated at the end of the season.

It was possible. He could actually be mated this year, perhaps, and it was disconcerting to understand just how much that thought terrified him.
He had never really considered it before, what it would mean for him to be mated, not since the early years after he had presented. He had been so hopeful back then, thinking that the mating bond would help settle him and help ease his nerves and give him the stability and closeness that he couldn't seem to find enough of with the family. That he could have someone that was entirely just for him. But it had been so long since then, so many years where the hope had been a flimsy thing or cast aside altogether. He had never thought to really question since then whether or not he truly wanted to be mated. It was what was done, what society and biology expected of him, and yet he now found himself scared at the possibility, highlighted now by the fact that there was a real chance it might actually happen this year, if he let it.

It had been a long time since he had truly considered what it would mean for him to be tied with a biological lock to another person for the rest of his life. He saw only too clearly how much Alana had changed when Jack came along, from the woman he had grown up knowing, and he had to wonder how different she once might have been in her own early years when she had been with his father. Having tasted a hint of Hannibal's aura, his presence, he knew with an indelible certainty that if he became mated to him that there would be no new alpha strong enough to take the spot of head alpha in the household. If he was mated to Hannibal, he would be tied to him, shaped by his willpower, personality and goals, and Will knew he would fail, just as Alana had failed, to be a strong enough partner for her mate to hold to his own wishes and goals if Hannibal were of a mind to have differing ones.

Yet for all that, he couldn't deny the soul-deep appeal of having a strong mate of his own. Nor could he deny the fact that there might be little option but to let it happen, no matter his reservations, if he was ever to escape Jack and that single-minded drive that was tearing him apart.

Hannibal would make it easy, he knew, his manipulations were so subtle that even Will didn't pick up on many of them until after the fact, if at all. He would coax and guide him, he would lift pressures from his shoulders, and draw Will into his embrace with the unseen gestures of a magician, until manacles of the bond secured Will to him, and then never let him away again with the possessiveness of a devil.

He stifled a whine that tried to escape from his throat, and wasn't sure whether it was from the fear of losing himself, or from the core of his omegan nature that appeared to have decided it desperately craved such a firm claiming.

Ever since that time in the estate grounds, it had been more difficult to suppress that side of himself. It was a clear reminder of how only a few weeks stood now until his heat when he would need a strong alpha, something that his body wasn't about to let him forget. He had found himself a couple of times now, covertly checking on Hannibal's whereabouts, just to settle the anxious part of himself that worried the alpha could have been stolen away by another omega. It was ridiculous considering they weren't even in town, and Hannibal, as his only suitor now, would not be so ungallant as to treat him in that way, but at least this paranoia was a somewhat familiar sensation. It just didn't typically happen until a week or two before his heat.

Yet for all his worries, the questions that Hannibal had set him remained unanswered, both a query as well as a reassurance that perhaps the alpha was not expecting to have their life, if they ended up mated, as entirely driven by his choices. If anything, Hannibal seemed almost to be pushing him to cast aside the norms and expectations of society and think only of his own needs and what they would mean for their life together. Will didn't think it was an empty query either, nor merely theory, he just honestly didn't know where such a thing would lead. For all his imagination, he had spent too long caught up in the needs of other people, not only in their requests and comfort, but their expectations, that he couldn't envisage how it would be even possible to live without that as a constant.
He could ask Hannibal, he knew. He could go to him with his worries and his discussion, and know
that the man would only too happy to talk to him of them. But if he did that, he would only be
putting himself further into his sphere, and Will still remembered that searing gaze upon him enough
to fear that.

It might already be too late. He thought Hannibal was likely to have a focused vision of his own
wants and goals, and he had clearly set his sights on Will as part of them. It might only be Will's
direct and clear verbal rejection that would render him away, and even then, could he really believe
an alpha of such power would merely step back and give him up? Although Hannibal was nothing
like Jack, all alphas were driven by the same instincts, and their success and behaviour was only
changed by intelligence and their strength. Would Hannibal really give him up, when, with such
strength, he would not see others as fit to replace him, and take steps to outmanoeuvre the situation?

It was probably already too late for him.

Wasn't that what the fortune teller had been telling him, when he had asked about Lieutenant
Anderson? She had told him back then that he only had one suitor, despite him having two. But what
if what she was truly meaning was that even back then it had been too late to take another path, that
his only option was Hannibal this year, because one way or another the man would assure that was
the case?

The understanding that he had been outmanoeuvred, that he had been seen and chosen and had such
a powerful alpha fixated on him caused his breathing to pick up, and an itching pressure on his neck
where his glands were swelling with a need to be soothed by the alpha's mouth. His teeth.

Fuck.

He pressed the heel of his hand down on his groin, forcing his swelling erection to subside through
force, a small whine escaping him after all.

He needed something to do to distract himself. His anxiety, uncertainty and need wasn't going to
magically disappear, so he might as well put it to some use, the nervous agitation at least, since he
couldn't hide in his rooms here forever. There was sure to be a ton of things in the estate that had
been neglected while most of the family were at town, and technically he was in charge here while
Alana was away, so he could see to those, organize them. Practical things that didn't require vast
amounts of focus, merely determination to work through the list.

Determined at least to make himself useful, he forced himself from his rooms and into the house
proper, slipping past the sitting room where he could scent that Hannibal was, reassuring his
instincts, before going in search of the head beta of the estate, Mr Keeley, to see what might be done.

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_Bloom Estate, Hertfordshire - Friday 4th December, afternoon_

"Will, could I impose on some of your time?"

Will glanced up from his book and over to look at Humphrey, who had paused in the doorway of
Will's study, waiting for an answer. It was a polite and thoughtful thing to do, to wait and see if his
presence was currently acceptable, or if another time might be better. The last few days had been
spent in rigorous amounts of tasks, and he had taken to sitting to relax here in between them, trying,
somewhat successfully, to not think of anything more pertinent than the contents of the pages he
browsed.

"Sure, I was just reading. What's on your mind?"
He set the marker in the page and put the book aside as he watched the man come in, Humphrey pausing a moment before deciding that the desk was best, rather than a seat beside Will. There was a certain amount of agitation in the usually calm, composed alpha, not so much as to be unsettling, but there was something clearly on Humphrey’s mind in such a way that it had to be voiced.

Humphrey rarely initiated chats like the one in the offing, being a more reserved, taciturn gentleman, but the conversations he did undertake with family members did tend to be more serious affairs, for he rarely wasted words. Will didn't think that it was a need to return to the city, something like that wouldn't require a sit-down chat like this, although to be honest, Humphrey had yet to sit. He was currently over on the other side of the room having bypassed the desk after all, seeming to look at the bookcase in thought, though Will knew him well enough to see it was rather to give himself time to order his thoughts properly.

A small tap on the door, and Martha made her way in, setting down a tray of tea and small sandwiches on the side table, before slipping out once more.

So, it was to be a lengthy chat then, and one that Humphrey didn't want to be disrupted. Will leant forwards and poured them both tea, before sitting back with his own to wait out the other man, unwilling to rush him. That it was taking so long for Humphrey to gather his thoughts only showed how concerned the man was over the nature of the conversation, to want to word it so carefully. It made Will slightly nervous, but he trusted Humphrey. Whatever it was, wouldn't be unassailable.

"I was made aware of the offer that Jimmy spoke to you of, with regards to a separate household," Humphrey started, and Will relaxed a little in his chair. If anything, it was a relief that this was the topic, rather than something else, because Humphrey excelled in practical matters. He had intended to come to him about the situation at some point, and now was as good a time as any. "I have to tell you that I don't rate it as a feasible plan, not without at least one stronger alpha to reside there with you both. I say this not as a slur on your capability, but of the practical nature of maintaining an omega-run household. Jimmy would not cope being the soul alpha of a household, and he is already struggling with the pressures in our lives currently."

Humphrey had now moved, and ended up leaning against the study desk across the room, looking back over at Will a moment, waiting for the nod of acknowledgement to show he was listening, before pushing up to receive the tea that had been poured, thanking Will for it before returning to the desk. Restless, but attempting not to appear so.

"I know he is," Will said with a sigh. Jimmy had been a bit better here at the country estate, but that was, for a large part, because Humphrey and Hannibal were there, or rather because others were not. They were far from the city here, and far from the threat of other alphas to their territory in a way that they would not be if Will found a new place to stay. "I had thought perhaps to get a place, a temporary residence in town for days that the house becomes too much, or we need space. That way someone else could come and stay with us, while still being out from underfoot."

"It is certainly something to consider, although you might be better merely using the estate here. It is far enough away that you would not be bothered by trivial family matters." Humphrey took a sip of his tea, before setting it down beside him and letting his gaze roam over the books on the shelves that surrounded the room. This had always been Will's study, and was filled for the most part with books he himself had chosen, or been given. "If circumstances were different, I would have suggested a trip around Europe, to offer some time away in places of interest and tranquillity, but it isn't safe for unmated omegas to travel without a large accompaniment, and Alana would feel too vulnerable back home for you to be able to take enough of the family with you to make it so."

Despite the stress that travel itself would harbour, there was a certain appeal about it, perhaps
because he was acutely reminded of the book that Hannibal had given him all those weeks ago, along with the more recent night-time conversation. What might it be like to go travelling to some of those places, to see with his own eyes the sights that had been spoken of in that book? For the moment, he cast it from his mind. Best not to get distracted.

"I was worried about staying here longer term," Will replied, bringing the topic back to the matter at hand "not only because it is the family's and therefore I could be commanded from it, but because doing so would separate whomever was staying here with me from their mate by a fair distance. At least in town they could visit with little difficulty."

It was a calculated risk offering this to Humphrey so openly, the fact that he was concerned that if Jack needed him for something, he could just command him from the country estate and force him back to the town house at whim. Humphrey didn't know, and could not know, what exactly it was that Will worried about Jack commanding him back to the house for. But he didn't doubt the alpha himself worried about the family right now, and the pressures they were all under, and hoped that he would think it merely to do with the associated prestige of having two omegas in the family home in town that Jack was fixated upon.

"I and the rest of the house are not unaware of how unsettled, and at times unhappy, you are with how things have been in the last couple of years," the alpha replied, "Unfortunately, while we are biologically pack animals as a species, we do not do internal challenges as such; they are always done singly, and I have found myself wanting in this regard. I am not as young as I once was, and while I may fervently wish it were not so, I cannot regain the position I once held in order to right this situation we find ourselves in, not only because I have already tested that once and lost, but because in losing I no longer have the same level of drive I once did to take over. Seeing my brother reminded me of times in the past when my own actions would have been somewhat different."

Will knew this. He could feel the alpha's frustration and loss, and always had, ever since Alana had brought Jack home, over and over, during that courting season. All of them had known back then that Jack outranked Humphrey and it would only be Alana's preference that might stop it, not only because he was younger, but because Jack made it blatantly obvious with every overwhelming push of his aura to those around them. It had been nothing like the careful and polite household they had kept up to that point, but that very same dominant behaviour seemed to calm and please Alana, who had been feeling a little more tense each year; her own anxieties escalating without cause. Will had hoped that the mating wouldn't take, but was not surprised when it had.

"You have always treated the family with care and respect, Humphrey. Considering how Jack responds to perceived challenges, even from me, its very much safer that biology has safeguarded you the way it has. Things wouldn't be so bad if both Jack and Alana just listened to the rest of the family more, like you always have. It is their failings, not yours, that have brought all this about."

Humphrey inclined his head in thanks, as paltry as Will's ability to offer comfort was in these times. It helped little, when the situation remained unchanged.

"Alana is desperate for more children," Humphrey remarked, picking up the mug of tea once more, "I believe some of her wilful blindness is because of that. She needs to feel safe in order to conceive, and so she is ignoring things that would counter that."

He had known, of course he had known, that Alana was hoping for more children, though he had thought it more Jack's drive than her own. But he hadn't considered that this change in behaviour had been because of it. He had obviously never suffered the drive to have children as female omegas did, and it hadn't really seemed to be a massive drive for her either. She had always seemed fairly content with the family as it was. Had he missed something, or had her desire for more children come with
her advancing years, when chance of conception was reduced with age?

"Perhaps if Jimmy and I stay here for the remainder of the season, it would be enough then."

Humphrey was already shaking his head, seemingly having already thought of that and dismissed it as a possibility.

"No, it is far too late for that. Everything would have had to be calm for the last couple of months, and it hasn't been. Even if nothing else had happened, merely Jimmy becoming that distraught last week would likely have tipped the balance against it. It might not have with someone who had spent their lives feeling utterly safe, but her own experiences have affected her in their own way. It was why we remained here at the country estate during the seasons before we had Alexandria and then the twins."

"Jack unknowingly sabotaged his own chances at having children this year then."

"I believe so. Staying in town with all its social pressures, inconveniences and annoyances certainly doesn't breed calm."

Humphrey sighed, looking down into the tea before once more setting it aside. Although he was keeping his pheromones politely controlled, Will could tell he was troubled still, and watched as the man got up and wandered over to the window to look out on the grounds beyond.

"Life has certainly not been calm of late," Humphrey continued, not turning back towards Will, but he didn't take it as a slight, especially considering his own hesitance at eye contact. Sometimes even the most confident of men needed some space to say difficult things. "Although I have always hoped that one day you would find someone with whom to mate, I always tried to be careful to ensure that the home was always a welcome place of respite for you. That you would never feel pressured into leaving, or feel uncomfortable or superfluous. It has been a matter of personal frustration that these last two years I have borne witness to that careful cultivation of our home be changed so fundamentally in this regard. Life has offered you more struggles than most could ever bear, and to add such an attack on the sanctity of your home has been difficult to watch, knowing I can do little to assuage it. I had hoped it might merely be a time of adaption, before things settled, but as the months and then years pass, you have been struggling more, not less, when before your life had maintained stability in most regards."

Will remained silent, aware that this was truly the topic that Humphrey had sought him out for, and it was clear that he was not yet finished. The man stood at the window, his hands clasped behind him, his back straight, his gaze likely not seeing whatever was beyond the windows. It was certainly unusual for the alpha to come to Will with his worries, for that had generally always fallen to Alana. Will supposed that it wasn't only his own life that had been disrupted and shaken to its foundations by the changes in the family hierarchy.

"I believe that while many of the changes can be laid at Jack's feet," Humphrey continued, tints of smothered emotions under the civil words, "I am aware that it has been difficult for the rest of the family to adapt as easily as Alana has. I know myself to be guilty of not bringing as much to Jack as I should. I am somewhat set in my ways, and the family had been mine to organize for so long that it has been difficult to release such things to another.

"I think perhaps that, through no fault of your own, you also do not show enough for him to understand your feelings sometimes. We, who have known you most of your life, are used to seeing through the restraint you maintain to try and shield us from the worst of your nerves, but he, who is hampered further by his lack of scenting ability and his straight-forward nature, I think often misses them. I don't believe he understands even a fraction of the distress you are in, and cannot grasp the
restraint you maintain as habit for the rest of us, and then is caught by surprise when his own behavior pushes you past your limits. Alana is far more expressive in her joys and sorrows, and he is not a man of subtlety."

Will had always known that Jack saw relatively little, and was used to being able to judge a person's character with relative ease. It was therefore more than a little disturbing to hear that he had perhaps missed the significance of something, unable to see his own behavior nearly as clearly as others. Uncomfortable, he shifted in his seat a little, and tried, profoundly tried, not to dismiss Humphrey's words, knowing as he did that none of them would have been made thoughtlessly or without intent. He had to trust that in this the man was correct, and that laid at least some of the blame for the family's current troubles at his own feet.

It was not a happy thought.

"I don't really know what to do with that, Humphrey," he said, "I can try to show a bit more, but you know as well as I do that I retreat mentally when distressed. Much of the time, it is likely to be impossible to show more, and then what if I do, and then he actually responds. He pushes, and pushes when he believes he is right. He believes that I just need to get used to situations more, and that I haven't been challenging myself enough with them. If he thinks me truly distressed, and believes it more fully to be a matter worth his consideration, do you honestly think he wouldn't attempt, even enforce, traditional gentling?"

Humphrey had turned to look at him, and even now, even just thinking about such a situation, Will was sweating, his anxiety rising uncomfortably. Neither of them was unaware of what a disaster that would be.

"It is a difficult situation," was the calm reply. The rigorous control and placid response to Will's distress helped reassure the omega, not fearing the other would attempt anything of the sort himself. He tried to calm his breathing, and focus on the fact that he was not at the townhouse, and Jack was nowhere around, and he need not see him for a decently long time.

There was no imminent threat.

Humphrey gave him some time, gathering his own thoughts before continuing.

"I have had reason to regret some of the past, especially lately. It is easily done, when situations change and one looks back with hindsight on one's own actions. Although much of how things have turned out have been down to circumstances neither of us could ever change, I am all too aware of my own failings while raising you."

Will looked up sharply towards the man who had been the steady, reliable source in his life after the catastrophe that had befallen their family before then. How had he not noticed, until now, the sheer weight of guilt and quiet regret there in those solemn, hazel eyes?

"Allow me to finish, if you will," the man said, forestalling the words on Will's lips. He didn't know exactly what he would have said, but it seemed so very wrong, when Humphrey had been the one to make them a family again. "I have never been a greatly tactile person with the family, as you know, but I have cause to regret that, seeing the troubles that you have never outgrown with it. At first, I had hesitated, uncertain of how to handle a child after such trauma, especially as you had such trouble with any alpha after the attack. I will admit to my own reticence towards pushing that boundary, for it correlated too well with my own concerns over making things worse. I thought it was a situation that would resolve itself with time, especially as you still were able to gain comfort from your mother. I thought, given that time, you would come and seek that comfort on your own, once the immediacy of the situation had passed, and you had grown more used to my presence in
your lives. By the time that I realized I had erred in this, you were grown apart from us, and yet still I did not press, for you had found some manner of balance and contentedness within the family, and I was once more worried over upsetting that."

Humphrey sighed, his gaze having once more ended up trailing over the books on the shelves, the wood of the table, the rich leather on the armchair across the room.

"I don't think I would have reacted well to being forced to accept gentling, Humphrey," Will attempted, though he could tell that the man was still deep within his own regrets.

"I agree, but as a child I think you would have learned to cope better with it, even if you had only learned to be able to turn to us when you were heavily distressed, or perhaps for small familiar touches, you would still have far more than you currently have today. Back then I was too driven and prideful, keeping myself at a distance, thinking it how an alpha should behave, and it was you that suffered for that. These last few years with the children, I have tried harder to hold them, to play with them and show more active affection, and I see them responding. I feel it keenly that if only I had been less aloof, you would not be suffering as greatly as you do now. Every year you do not find a mate, I am reminded of my utter failure towards you in this, for had you been more comfortable, I feel certain you would have been heading your own household by now."

"I hardly think you acting like Jack, forcing me to put up with gentling after the attack, would have done any good."

"There is a distinct difference between acting as he does, and acting with calm reassurance, as I know you are well aware. Do not attempt to lessen my guilt in this manner, it is well deserved in this instance. Still, we are creatures of our history, our instincts and our habits, Will. If even I can learn to mellow my reactions enough to make a difference, then I have great faith that you can too, no matter how odd and uncomfortable it may feel at first. Perhaps with someone who has no great history with you, it might be easier to learn."

"You mean with Dr Lecter, I presume?"

Will guessed it would be a bit obvious to the man who had raised him, that he had been avoiding his suitor. Humphrey knew him too well, and honestly, especially when compared to others in society, his behaviour would certainly be gossip-worthy. He had been carefully avoiding thinking about the guilt of keeping himself busy, rather than spending it with Hannibal.

"Yes. I know it will not be easy for you, but I do want you to really try to allow yourself to relax more around him. Like myself, he is a man of restraint, rather than of reaction, and so I have some hope that you will find that easier to trust."

"I have trusted and liked alphas before."

"Yes, and it is a worry. I wish that more of them would set aside their pride in order to enter accords for your suit. It isn't entirely surprising that you wouldn't find their company enough to mate. You have grown up in a large family, Will, unlike most, and you have a greater sense of anxiety over safety. It isn't entirely surprising that your body would hesitate upon binding you to someone, when that binding would mean only one person seeing to your security, rather than seven."

"Maybe in future we should make it clearer that I am looking for alphas that make an accord then."

"Will, you are already pulling away from your suitor with such talk. If you believe that nothing will come of the mating, then certainly, nothing will. There has to be at least some suspension of disbelief for it to work. Do not cripple yourself so, please."
"I'm sorry. I do think him capable. There's just been a lot going on, a lot to think about lately."

"I understand that, Will, but you have been neglecting him these last few days. You know as well as I do, that he is staying here only to see you, and you have made yourself conspicuously absent. Has he done something that has offended you in some way?"

It was Will's turn to look away, shame colouring his face a touch at the query, shaking his head. It wasn't often that Humphrey had had to remind him of his manners, but he had never outgrown the effect of it. Unhappiness curled in his chest at the mild reproach.

"I'm sorry."

His words came out almost whispered, hushed in the quiet room, but loud enough to be heard.

"Will," Humphrey's voice was soft, encouraging him to look up and over to him. "Will, if he has done something objectionable, or made you unhappy in some way, I hope you can trust that I would send him from the house no matter my own previous regard for him. It would be of little matter to find someone else to see you through your heat this season, even if they were not your ideal choice. But please, do tell me what has you so at odds."

Where should he even start with that? It would be easier to say what has not got him feeling like this, considering the scope. His whole life right now seemed just a cascade of things that were not going to plan, nor how they should be, all except for his last suitor this year, whom he had now worked himself up into a far greater fear over the possibility of being mated to. The last few days had been a willful ignorance of everything he didn't want to think about, but with Humphrey's quiet insistence, he couldn't maintain it. It was crushing.

Will knew he had to say something, but he was already struggling to keep a grip on his emotions, as his instincts urged him to offer up his fears to a trusted alpha to take care of, making it more difficult to concentrate on anything else. He could see, too, the pressure it was already putting Humphrey under, in the slight stiffening of his shoulders in such a well-practiced restraint that few would have been able to maintain. But he had to say something, some explanation that would be understandable. “Nothing feels right anymore.”

He wished he could tell Humphrey about what was really bothering him at the townhouse, about why he and Jimmy had been more unstable lately, if for no other reason than to relieve the man of at least a portion of that guilt. But he knew how that would play out. Humphrey, with his clear moral and societal code would never stand for Jack's trips continuing. He would be absolutely outraged if he knew, but in knowing, it would put him at odds with both Jack, and by extension, Alana, and that would be a wound, both an emotional and physical one, when it became inevitable that he would, despite the odds, challenge Jack over it.

Humphrey would lose, and in losing again, he would be demoted further down the family hierarchy, or even physically ejected from the family altogether. Such a thing didn't happen often, but it did happen, and Will could see only too clearly that in the face of such an uprising, even merely by one man, Jack would do everything he could to crush it beyond repair. Losing his family, it would destroy Humphrey to be cast away from both Alana and his child, their bond potentially broken.

Having lost the battle, and either rendered so low in the family or cast away, Humphrey would be driven by what little he had left, the things that had guided him throughout his life; his morals and responsibilities. Those would make him try to stop Jack by any means possible, including making it public knowledge what Jack had done. The public outrage would be catastrophic. The Bloom family would be decimated by it, socially, Jack would probably be put to death by the law he had sought to serve in his own way, Alana suffering another broken bond. He couldn't see her surviving that intact.
Will found that he was not a coward enough to put them all through that merely to escape Jack's clutches. He would just have to figure out a different way to do that himself, no matter how much, in those moments, he wished he could just tell Humphrey.

He could see the small tells of desperation on Humphrey's face, hoping Will would confide in him, and allow him to protect and care for him as family should. But in this, Will was the one doing the protecting. He could not have it another way, not without destroying them all, but perhaps he could give him something else instead.

"I'm scared of losing myself," his voice was barely there, no matter that he hadn't intended for it to be. He tried harder to make himself heard, even though it felt a little like voicing the fears would only bring them to his door quicker. "Alana changed when Jack joined the household. He pushes, and she concedes, and her instincts tell her he knows best. I felt Doctor Lecter's aura, Humphrey. He's powerful, maybe the most powerful alpha I have ever come across. A mating with someone like that, I don't know that there would be anything of me left afterwards."

To Humphrey's credit, he didn't immediately dismiss the idea. Will could feel the quiet, worried, regard upon him as the words were considered.

"You believe he will be so cavalier with your life as to dismiss your wishes in future?"

It wasn't censure there, but a bid for understanding, a test of the concept set before them. Usually such questions brought clarity, but it didn't appear to be the case this time.

"Yes. No, or maybe not consciously. But you know Alana changed. It was so gradual that most of the family doesn't even really notice it, or they put it down to the newness of the family dynamic. But I don't think it is. How much of what she is doing now is merely because of Jack's wishes, even unconsciously. She responds to him, her instincts, are telling her to keep this alpha happy. She was never interested, as far as I know, in having more children, but you tell me she is fixated on it now. Jack certainly is. He always has been. I don't think she even notices herself how she has changed.

"What I am saying," Will continued, "is that even if he doesn't mean to, being mated to a strong alpha like that, when I have spent my life trying my best to accommodate other people, it's likely to only go one way. I'm just too used to doing it. Even Alana, who has always been far more forceful with her wants, has succumbed because of how the mating works like that. I would have no chance. I would end up doing whatever he wanted, and for the most part, would likely not even be aware of it."

He looked down at the tattered breadcrumbs on his plate that he seemed to have picked up at some point. It was a sandwich before he used it as a means for nervous distraction. Humphrey was silent across the room from him, considering the problem set in his hands. Will honestly didn't expect any sort of answer. What one could there be when the very nature of the situation was immutable?

"Am I correct in thinking that you believe this situation to be concurrent with any strong alpha, or merely Doctor Lecter?"

Will sighed, setting the plate aside. "It would be any strong alpha. I can't see myself being able to bond with someone weaker, not for very long at any rate before, like Alana, I would likely start seeking more to add to the family, and inevitably that would include someone more powerful."

"It seems to me then that this is more a question of becoming mated at all. Your fears in this will be a strong motivator for your instincts to remain unattached. Would you be contented if that were so?"

He thought of the last eleven years, of the months of daily living interspersed with the months of
courting. The latter was exhausting, but perhaps he could find one or two unattached alphas that
would be willing to tend to his heat without all the yearly courting rituals and social events. That
didn't seem too bad, actually.

But of course that wasn't going to be the case. Most of those years were before Jack came along and
before the household balance changed. He sat and forced himself to remember, really remember,
what the last few months had actually been like, and then the last couple of years. That dynamic
wouldn't change, not unless something tipped the balance, and anything that did that was likely to be
bad. Would he be contented living like that for the rest of his life? He thought of Jimmy, begging
him, struggling, and then reeking of alcohol when he couldn't cope without it any more. He thought
of Nathan's worried looks, and even Zeller's brusque demeanour mellowing into anxious concern.
He thought of Peter's thoughtful gestures, of Mrs Platts' careful kindesses that hid her growing
worry for him. The tense dinners. The growing dissatisfaction in the family alphas around the change
in him, of the fact that Price had punched Jack because he was at the end of his thread.

No, he wasn't content with how things would be if he remained unmated. Humphrey knew that,
most likely, but he always had been good at asking the right questions. Will shook his head.

"Then it seems to me as if you need to figure out what you are most worried about losing, and then
negotiating with him to ensure those things are safeguarded."

Will looked up and over to Humphrey, a little startled by this.

"You think it would be so simple?"

"No, little in life is so. However it would certainly be a decent starting point. Any good relationship
is based on communication and compromise, and Doctor Lecter will not wish to see you unhappy
any more than we do. Take the problem to him, and see how he responds. You are astute enough to
be able to judge whether his response is enough for you. That in itself will give you information, or
an answer, one way or another."

When so little in his life right now seemed stable, being given such a logical and definitive task
offered its own sort of relief. He hadn't thought to get an answer to his situation, and he hadn't, but
now, perhaps, he had a way to get one.

For the first time since Humphrey had come into the room, Will offered him a smile, some of the
weight of nerves easing from him at this goal, this plan.

"Thanks, Humphrey. I think I'll do that."

Chapter End Notes

Hannibal's pups' names, based on Lithuanian, via google translate:
Dovano = gift
Sargybinis = guardian
Bloom Estate, Hertfordshire - Friday 4th December, evening

After the chat with Humphrey, Will had returned to his rooms, deciding to forgo the evening meal in lieu of attempting to sort out his own thoughts in preparation for the talk with Hannibal that he knew he could delay no longer.

When he eventually emerged, it was evening, and the house had quietened down considerably, although it hadn't exactly been loud before, not with so few people here. He let his steps lead him down the hall, pausing at the top of the stairs to take in the scents of the house, letting them tell him where everyone was.

His gaze flickered towards his study, following the most recent wisps that led him towards the alpha he was looking for. He had found that Hannibal had usually taken to relaxing in the front sitting room where the light of the early evening was at its most advantageous, and then lingering there afterwards. But tonight found that habit had been altered. It had surprised him, generally, that Hannibal hadn't spent more time in the study, since he had been given leave to do so, but he was there now. The door wasn't left open this time, but the change of venue was its own invitation.

Opening the door, he stepped inside before closing it quietly behind him, pausing a moment to lean against it before venturing further inside. Hannibal sat where he had in the past, in Will's favourite seat, once more reading. Dovano and Sargybinis were dozing in front of the fire that was burning in the hearth, neither getting up, but both wagging their tails at his entry. It was Hannibal's welcome that made him flush though, and he would have liked to have blamed it on the cosy heat of the room, but in truth it was the way that his name was said with such abundant warmth and welcome that it shamed him that he had allowed himself to linger away from the man for so many days.

"Have you time to talk?"

It was more for courtesy than a real necessity, but he knew how those small things could make a difference, and he wouldn't like the man to think he was taking him for granted, no matter that he had found himself avoiding him those last few days.

"Of course, William. 'A Field Study on Human Thought' shall have to wait, now that my attention is much more pleasantly disposed."

"Yeah, it's not such a great book. 'Mercer's Four Stage Hypothesis' is better if you wanted something more insightful on the topic, or 'Archetypal Notions of Subgender' is better for its narrative. But that isn't why I wanted to speak to you."

He moved further into the room, bypassing the other chair for now and instead heading towards the drinks cabinet. He didn't have the tide of anger buoying him as it had last time they had met here, and while he was more than aware of his own failings, he had never found formally apologizing to be an easy task; words tumbling out like a dropped box of nicknacks instead of a finely crafted ornament he had been hoping might appease the person.

Pouring them both a drink, he brought one over for Hannibal, who was good enough to be patient for him without visible effort.
"I first wanted to apologize for being rather absent these last days," he said, taking a seat and forcing himself to look at the man, even though he couldn't quite make it to his eyes. Eye contact was difficult enough without the shame of his actions adding to it. "There's been so much going on lately, and things to deal with, it's been overwhelming. I know it's not much of an excuse, especially when you are here and able to try and alleviate some of that, circumstantially, and I haven't exactly been letting you do that. I just, I don't want you to think that I'm not grateful for your patience and presence here. Everything's just a bit of a mess right now. I'm a bit of a mess right now."

He forced himself to stop, aware that his rambling words were likely not making it any better.

"Your apology is accepted, although unnecessary. Forcing contact and intimacy will never foster trust, and I am content to wait as long as necessary for you to feel comfortable enough to find that." Hannibal paused, an ever so slightly tilt to his head, just a fraction, almost animalistic before a smile touched his lips dispelling the illusion. "It might interest you to hear that my own mother kept my father at a distance for quite some time. A year and a half in fact, before she even let him kiss her outside of heat. Rest assured that a few days in the quiet of your estate is not at all troublesome."

This gave Will pause. Such a situation was unheard of here. He could barely even imagine it, especially since most couples ended up mated after the first season. But more than that, the implications of what those sorts of stories and understandings, ones that Hannibal had been reared with, alongside the alpha's own notable power, was far more illuminating.

In truth, up until then, Will had been mostly thinking on the whole situation with regards to his own life and the failings therein, but the comment, seemingly casually given, brought with it a completely different notion.

Many people, he knew, wouldn't understand why an alpha would hide their aura so completely, other than due to a weakness of some sort, but Hannibal, with his clear intellect and the strength he now knew resided beneath, it might very well merely be hidden out of boredom. Especially if he was reared to want challenge, especially if he grew up expecting, even needing in some ways, to prove himself as his father had to do, revealing his aura would have the decidedly opposite effect. Even Will, who was more resistant than most to such things due to his past and his many years experience, he had been swayed by it, and that was with only a hint of the true power it could likely bring to the fore, if he had read Hannibal correctly. And if Will was swayed, then others would be just as affected. As a man who valued intellect and achievement, it would be a matter of pride for Hannibal to find challenge in other ways, without the hefty power of his aura tipping the balance. It said much that Hannibal remained at the apex of society despite having handicapped himself in such a way through choice.

Was it then, not only Will's position and his connection to Alana that had prompted the interest, but the very fact that he was so troubled? Was the task of being able to carefully work his way into Will's life and trust it's own goal for a man who sought challenge but likely almost never found it ample enough?

Yet more questions, but surprisingly, there was a certain amount of reassurance there, in that understanding. A man seeking challenge and ways to ever improve on results would not be disheartened nor likely grow tired of the various trials and tribulations that living with Will was likely to bring.

"Your family history seems to be full of surprises," Will said at last, having to say something, but not quite wanting to pass over this topic quite yet, despite knowing he should really be speaking of others.

"Not displeasing ones, I trust?"
"You know they aren't."

To this he got a crooked, pleased smile, one that, quite inconveniently, caused him to flush. Damn seasonal hormones.

"I was hoping, actually, to talk to you about something else. Or a few things really, but related I suppose."

He fiddled with his glass before drinking a mouthful from it, letting it burn down his throat, aware that the flush was still sitting high on his cheeks, the tips of his ears, and likely on his neck as well. It was not helped at all from the fact that the topic he was trying to speak of had had a similar effect. He forced himself to plough on, regardless of how much of a witless fool he might appear right now.

"Your offer, the last we spoke, or rather the way it was made, left me with some concerns."

Gods, why won't the damn flush go away? It was a serious topic, and he didn't want to be sitting there like some blushing teenager in front of Hannibal, who always looked so elegant and poised. It was ridiculous! Even worse that he was sort of desperately wanting to feel the touch of that aura again. It had been on his mind far too much these last few days, despite his best efforts to ignore it.

"And I am glad you have come to me with them, William."

A slight prompt there, and Will was forced to accept that he had probably been sitting there silent and flushed for too long, unspeaking. Too unsettled to tackle it directly, not sure if such a thing would come out incomprehensible, rude, or something else, he tried another way to get his words to actually start.

"The statue in your front sitting room, of Marcellus. You said that you kept it there to remind you of the positive nature of a worthy challenger. The thing is, I don't know that you actually ever find such a thing. How can there be, when you only use a fraction of the power at your disposal? I see the necessity of why you would hide it, but I don't see you being able to find an equal, in anything, if you are withholding so much of your strength. Certainly not in your current potential mate, and I honestly don't think you could continue to be happy with that, long term, nor that I could bear your resentment over such a thing, when all I would end up wanting to do is please you."

He hadn't meant for it to come out quite so dire sounding, but as he had spoken, it just felt like truth. Someone as powerful like that would resent a weak mate. And Will was weak, broken as he was, even if the alpha seemed generally intent on ignoring it.

The easy smile that had graced Hannibal's lips was gone now, replaced with something more concerned, more attentive, even severe. A threat to his plans that would need to be remedied, no doubt, even if that remedy seemed rather flawed to Will. It was ironic, he thought, that the very fact that Hannibal was hoping to succeed in helping him set aside such worries, would only prove some of them true.

"Have you read about the Seligman experiments?"

What? Thoughts ground to a halt, trying to grasp just where he had failed to see the link between the topics, and coming up short. He must have seemed sufficiently confused by the random change of subject, that Hannibal decided to merely continue.

"They were conducted as part of learned behavioural analysis. Quite controversial, as it involved minorly hurting animals over time when they tried to escape uncomfortable situations. It was found that animals subjected to this repeatedly not only stopped trying to escape, but also suffered from
lingering mental and behavioural changes as well. Even when the barriers towards an exit were shown without detriment, and the subject was encouraged positively and enthusiastically, the animal did not move, not until it was physically picked up and made to do so, step by step."

Will watched Hannibal, trying to understand the mental leaps that the alpha was laying out for him. The man was almost never direct, his thoughts and conversations convoluted; a sign of Hannibal’s own mental gymnastics that likely came just as easily to him as breathing.

"You are saying," Will said slowly, mentally parsing through what was said and left unsaid, "that if I were removed to a different situation, I would what, get miraculously better? I would somehow become an equal to you?"

It was anger that started to smoulder and burn in his chest, the concept far too close to the years of commentary from others on how wonderful his life would be if he could just become mated. His jaw clenched from saying something else, something toxic and likely insulting to the man.

"You stand up to me now."

"We are not mated now!"

So much for keeping his temper in check. His voice had come out loud and frustrated in the otherwise quiet room. He closed his mouth, sealing his lips shut against anything else that might spill forth to poison the air between them. Hannibal leaned back in his chair, letting his arms rest lightly either side of him, wrists upwards, his legs spreading ever so slightly further apart. It was a show of openness, but also of calculated vulnerability to the omega in front of him. Hannibal didn't want to fight with him, and when he spoke, his words were level and unassuming.

"And yet, whether mated or not, I would have you become such a fierce presence as I see before me now. I am not Mr Crawford, who smothers Alana with his desires. I would see you elevated, William, until you believe in the vision I see of you now."

Will stared down at him, taking in the body language, as well as the messages that was being conveyed. He didn't even remember when he had stood up, but Hannibal stayed sitting there, his words painting a picture of Will that was so different to how he was used to seeing himself. A fierce presence? It didn't seem like a polite way of saying over-emotional, not with that awe, even reverence, showing in those eyes.

"I would not destroy you, William," Hannibal murmured softly.

Being met with such quiet, understated confidence made the anger crumble in on itself, leaving him standing there feeling fragile and uncertain in its wake.

"You would not be aware of it," Will said at last, his arms wrapped around himself, trying to hold the various pieces of himself together. "Even if this version you see comes to fruition, it would not be me, not as I am now."

"Change need not be a bad thing, no matter how difficult it may seem right now, if it brings you contentment, even happiness."

"I know it need not be. But happiness especially is a fickle thing, and certainly one I can't trust to be there when I need it. We are both judging this situation by our own view of it. You always manage to get what you set out to, no doubt, and I have a lifetime of something very different."

It was difficult standing there with the alpha’s regard so fixed upon him, so very aware of the tangled mess of jagged emotions inside of himself, like shards of glass and wool, never knowing which edge
would cut through a strand that would cause them all to shift until he was bleeding out inside, trying to hold himself together through that pain. He had thought that Hannibal's sharp intelligent saw him more clearly, but that gaze showed him hints of the same sort of blind vision that most alphas had, as if by being together all of those shards would be scooped out, ignoring the fact there would be nothing left inside of him afterwards.

"I don't... I don't truthfully doubt you would succeed in anything you set your mind to, Hannibal. What I doubt is the aftermath, when the challenge is completed, when your focus then turns towards other things. What will I be then except an extension of your will? A person who has spent their entire life catering to others will not so fundamentally change. What more would I be except a trophy, one more in your house to be brought out and displayed where appropriate? And then perhaps you will grow weary of my nerves, and in way of things, decide it's better to tackle them, to bring about this vision of a new me that will certainly be better in your eyes, someone worthy at your side. With your clever words and the mating instincts on your side, you would probably succeed in that too, but would that really be me, or would that be just something else you crafted and designed for yourself?"

This wasn't how he had intended for the conversation to go, but with the fear crawling up the back of his throat, rancid and terrible, made all the worse by how very alone he felt, the words spilled forth like a cascade of globulous bile that he couldn't seem to stop.

"You say that you won't destroy me, Hannibal, but you would. You would delicately tear me apart until all my shards spilled out, and then you'd make me into something else."

A sudden knock on the door made him flinch, his body jerking at the reminder that reality lived outside of this room. Forcing himself to move, he turned away from the alpha and walked to it, a very real struggle to get his emotions more under control, so he could speak with whomever it was without distressing them further. Usually he was better at keeping his emotions safely penned. Perhaps it was just his hormones shifting as his body started to gear up towards the spring heat in a few weeks.

Opening the door, he was met by the stoic, concerned visage of Humphrey, likely having sensed his distress from down the hall.

"Will?"

"I'm sorry," he told the man, attempting to get his breathing at least under better control. It still seemed to be trying to escape his lungs in short distress-driven inhales. "It's okay. I'm okay."

"Perhaps a glass of water from the kitchen would be of use."

Yeah, he didn't believe himself either.

He ran a hand through his hair, his head tilted downwards as he tried to steady himself. While a calming walk to get water often helped distract him enough from nightmares and other such things, he couldn't really just walk away from this conversation with Hannibal. He knew that the man was waiting for it to continue, and while the alpha would be patient enough for him, hadn't he been waiting long enough, considering the last few days?

"Maybe in a bit. My worries just got a little away from me is all."

He expected Humphrey to take this with a nod and return to wherever he had been before then, as he usually would when Will made a decision like this. Yet, the man lingered, and Will forced himself to look up towards him once more, trying to work out what would make him hesitate. It was only when
his gaze made it up to Humphrey's face, that the alpha made a slight gesture with his head, his gaze flickering to the gap in the door towards the interior of the study, a silent reminder that Will wasn't the only one here at the moment. It brought a slight frown of incomprehension to Will's brow. He knew he wasn't the only one here, that was self-evident, surely? Did Humphrey think he had forgotten something?

He glanced back into the room, to find Hannibal still sitting there, his legs now politely crossed with his hands now clasped loosely on his knee. There was no sign of any strain there as he regarded Will, and it was with a dawning comprehension that Will realized not only that Humphrey had been concerned his nerves were going to be pushing Hannibal too far, but also that Will himself had unconsciously trusted Hannibal to remain in control of himself, to master his instincts when seeing him in such a state. Will usually had to constantly monitor himself with others, it was so habitual that there was with a faint sense of unreality when he realized that he had not been doing so with Hannibal.

Turning back to Humphrey, he managed a far more measured reassurance, and then watched as the man inclined his head and moved away, trusting once more in Will's judgement on the matter. He watched him for a moment, before turning back to the study, closing the door behind him quietly, his gaze thoughtful as he took in the alpha sitting there.

"Tell me truthfully," he said to him as he made his way back across the room to sit down on his prior seat, "Were you even tempted to get up and offer me physical comfort?"

There was a faint trace of a smile around the edges of the alpha's eyes as he regarded Will, seemingly pleased that he now understood something of what he had been trying to convey.

"In an abstract sense, it would have been greatly pleasing for you to end up tucked against my chest where I could soothe you, but in this situation, such an action would not have helped in any way, so I felt no great demand to do so. You were far better served by feeling free enough to express your fears and know yourself heard, than for an action to detract from that. How often are you truly able to do such a thing?"

Will couldn't, honestly, give a positive answer, as even the actions of the last few minutes told their own tale. It seemed as though Hannibal didn't require an answer however, for he merely continued.

"You have spent so much of your life being what others need or want you to be, William, each glance and pause, each whiff of scent is a motivation to edit yourself for them, until the thought of being cut off from those demands is like stepping into an empty chasm. You don't know who you are without it, and that terrifies you."

The man spoke calmly and almost detachedly, although with just enough intimacy in his slightly hushed tone to make it palatable. Will watched as he leaned forward, his arms resting on his knees, his fingers clasped in a display of thoughtful sincerity that was likely to be reflected in his face, if Will had looked to check. He didn't. He merely listened.

"You cannot know yourself when you cannot freely express who you are to others, William. Understanding who you are, and who you are not, is based on thousands, even millions of different interactions, looks, words, feelings and opinions offered and received throughout your life, each one a question in their own way to help define how you see and fit into the world around you. Without that, when all you do is fear the reactions of those around you, even kindly meant as they are, every attempt at interaction will only feel, in various degrees, like rejection. Those shards you say fill you, they are from the relentless recoil of feeling restricted from being yourself around those in your life."

The words cut, as keen observations will when they are so close. No matter how much it made him
feel raw and exposed, it did make sense. While it wasn't exactly a new thought, for he had considered such things a number of times over the years, it felt different, having it come from someone else, being seen by someone else in such a way. He found that his hands were trembling. Yet for all that the words were compelling, it didn't slip his notice that the source of his fears had not necessarily been answered.

"How do you see it working then?" Will asked, his gaze flickering up towards Hannibal, who sat there elegant and calm, "Merely having one person in which to find myself able to potentially react without restraint around is far more likely to create a dependance than confidence over time. There is also the issue of personal bias, which is of significant issue considering any mating would increase the pressure of that exponentially."

He was trying to sound more logical with this, rather than the outpouring of his fears as had happened earlier, if for no other reason than it was easier to think without it choking him. It helped that Hannibal was so calm, sitting opposite him, although he couldn't quite work out whether it was the trust that the alpha wouldn't react poorly to him being scared, or the fact that he was, even now, reflecting some of that calm back at the man unconsciously, and it was that which let Will maintain that stoicism to any degree. Would he ever be able to tell?

"Do you have anyone that you can confide in, William?"

Like a deck of cards, Will's mind flicked through the various people he knew; family members, friends and acquaintances, and realized, with something bordering on dismay, that his selection was rather few, and even those came with rather severe caveats. Hannibal must have guessed this, surely, and so he wasn't entirely clear why the man would be pushing this angle. However, it was with a sort of personal triumph, that he realised that he did, in fact, converse more freely with someone more than others these days.

"I confide in Mr Layton, Mr Price and Ms Katz the most often, but aside from them I write to Mr Price's twin brother fairly regularly," and then, when he realized how that might look to a courting alpha, added, "He's a beta, but he was part of our family here once."

"I expect you miss this brother quite keenly. It must be a relief to be able to express yourself to someone without worrying about their physical reactions."

Put like that, it did make him feel a little bit guilty, but honestly it was true. He knew, the more he thought about it, that should Tim have been there in the estate, he would likely not have been telling him nearly as much as he did in his letters.

"I'm aware that I don't have a lot of people I confide in. I'm a private sort of person. I still don't see your point though, Hannibal. If anything, my lack of confidantes only makes the issue around me ending up relying on a mate's opinion and viewpoint, so much greater."

"Through wariness, obligation or kindness, you edit your reactions and expression to those around you, even those closest, as I just bore witness to at the door there. That pressure is a constant in your life, but imagine for a moment, what it would be like if you had, as a start, one person in which you could fully confide without fear, or obligation, or unnecessary forethought for their feelings. Would not that trust release some of those shards in you to settle more harmoniously, and in doing so, would you not then feel more able to deal with the world around you and then seek out others? I am here to aid you, William, but the ultimate shape you decide to craft with your shards should always be your own."

It was a contentious sort of a thought, a conundrum, for what Hannibal was suggesting was to trust that he wouldn't be unduly turned against his own character by giving into allowing such a
vulnerability, and to merely allow himself to be guided by his mate's care and attention, one that the alpha was only too willing to offer. Trusting, in essence, that Hannibal's agenda would see him more contented and able in the aftermath, without losing who he was. Like a step into the dark, he could not know where that hand would guide him, and for all his own insight he could not judge what might happen with any confidence. Any change was difficult for him, and trust had never come easily.

Hannibal smiled then, perhaps guessing well enough Will's hesitance at the idea, a wry turn of his lips that showed ever so slightly crooked teeth. "I am possessive, William, but I am perfectly happy to let the world understand just how lucky I am in my mate. I have no intrinsic wish to hide you away from other contacts, and even should you desire to spend your life tucked in our home, far from general society, recall that you will have my own family adding to yours, and you can be assured of their own restraint and confidentiality should you find yourself in want of additional viewpoints and support."

For all that Hannibal had mentioned his family earlier, Will had largely forgotten about them in the intervening time. He had never seen any of them, after all, and they lived so far away.

"How can they be of support when they are so far distant? I get the idea you are showing me, but it relies on proximity that doesn't exist. Will I even get to meet any of your family before spring, do you think?"

He didn't honestly expect a positive answer. He seemed to recall both from Beverly's research as well as what Hannibal had told him, that they lived in an estate in Lithuania. It deserved being asked, however, as much to let Hannibal know he was aware of just how ambiguous that line of thinking was, considering he couldn't judge how much he would feel able to confide in a person before he met them, or how he was able to do so if they were hundreds of miles away across the sea. It was with surprise then, that it was a more thoughtful, pensive look that met him across the lamplight of the room, rather than a flat denial he had been expecting.

"I had not thought to arrange it, but my uncle often visits the city for business. I can send a message asking him to the house if he should come to town, if you would like?"

The question brought with it the instinctive battle between what he wanted to know, and the inevitable desire not to instigate a social situation that he knew would be stressful for him. All of them were, to a certain extent, but meeting family of an alpha always did bring with it additional pressure. And yet he couldn't merely hide behind a denial if he was to get the answers he sought, because if he couldn't find Hannibal's family to have the possibility of being easy around him, and him to be likewise, then he really would be at a far greater risk of being moulded only by the man opposite him, and while that might not be a truly bad thing, the risk of losing himself was acute enough that he ignored his more normal reactions.

"I'd appreciate that. Thank you."

Not 'like', he didn't like the idea, but he appreciated if it could be possible. It might not be, of course. This close to both midwinter, and the spring heat, he doubted Hannibal's uncle would want to travel away from his family estate, or his duty to the safety of Hannibal's sister, especially not for such a long a journey all the way to London, and yet he couldn't help but feel some manner of curiosity should he end up visiting. What would an uncle to someone like Hannibal be like? He honestly couldn't imagine it clearly at all, especially considering the cultural differences.

"Then I shall send word back to the house to pass on the message, and should he be in town before spring, I am sure he will be more than happy to meet you."
At the affirmation, Will nodded, his shoulders slumping a little as the situation resolved itself as much as was possible right now. He wasn't convinced, not by any stretch of the imagination, but at least in this instance, he would have to wait and see what happened, if anything. It was a strange situation to be in, going to a man and looking for solutions against being controlled, while knowing that those solutions were in their own way doing that controlling. It said enough about his messed up psyche that he was both desperate to avoid it, while at the same time hoping it would occur enough to ease the fear of that very situation. Nothing was ever simple with Will Graham, he thought wryly.

Perhaps picking up on his mood, or merely continuing the discussion, Hannibal spoke.

"You fear what will become of you should you be mated, but you reflect others so much already that it wouldn't be your own essence you set aside, but the reflection of others," The unerring way he seemed to know the pathways Will's mind took was disconcerting in its accuracy, and Will shifted a little uneasily where he sat as the man continued. "Your fears over the melding of our minds after the mating cannot be expunged until you know what it is you wish to save in yourself, rather than what you are responding to from others. There are few here at the estate for you to reflect now. It would be a good time to find yourself instead."

The words were like an echo of his conversation with Humphrey, encouraging him to find himself, but how was he even to do that? He might have discounted such a suggestion as well-meaning but ultimately without substance, as many self-help sayings often were, however this was Hannibal, who never said anything without a vast amount of consideration and forethought. It sat there between them, the understanding that the man would elaborate if only Will asked him to. That, in it's own way was another perhaps worrying sign of how controlling the man was, or it could merely be a careful amount of reservation in his flow of words so as not to be seen as overwhelming with them. Goodness knows he wouldn't blame the man after his earlier responses. Giving in to the inevitability of the question, Will tried to set aside the ornery defensiveness as best he could, and merely asked.

"And how do you propose I do that?"

A hint of a smile there around the edges of the man's eyes, but not mocking, not malicious. More pleased than amused, he thought.

"Start with your environment. Find what makes you uncomfortable, and stop engaging with it as much. You seem, for example, far more at ease and confident in the evening. Perhaps adjust your sleep to reflect that, and judge the results."

Considering how convoluted the man could be in his thoughts, he hadn't honestly expected such a simple suggestion. He looked to Hannibal in mild suspicion only to find that smile had grown incrementally wider.

"Sometimes it can be the simple things that make the largest difference," the alpha commented in response to the look.

Well, sleeping in later didn't sound like such a bad idea in all honesty. He had never been much of a morning person, and who was around to really complain? Humphrey and Jimmy wouldn't mind, and he supposed that the rest of the family here wouldn't either. It wasn't such a big deal, and considering he didn't have any better plans for how to tackle the situation, it was as good an idea as any.

"You needn't look so pleased with yourself," Will said at a sudden thought, "You realize that this means you get to deal with any callers in the morning, right?"

"Ah, well that is a burden I shall most stoically have to bear. Should I survive it, no doubt you can tend to my battle wounds in the aftermath."
Will merely huffed in amusement at the thought of anything managing to wound such a man, especially the older ladies that tended to come to the house to call when they knew the family were in residence.

"I am sure the wounds will be grievous, but I shall do my best."

_Bloom Estate, Hertfordshire - Monday 7th December, late afternoon_

In the languid, insipid rays of late afternoon, the soft sound of each letter he inscribed onto paper, just so, did little to curb the tranquility of the house around Hannibal. Several days had passed since the somewhat volatile discussion in the upstairs study, and while things between William and himself had settled considerably into something far more congenial, staying here at the estate had not been without its own challenges. The primary cause was not William himself, always engaging and interesting as he was, even when at rest, but of boredom.

He set the last word down onto the sheet and carefully set it aside to dry, taking the next, before turning the page on the old french cookery book that he was currently translating. Considering that this seemed to be one of the only useful diversions that he had to choose from currently, he could not entirely complain, especially as he had offered to do it, but he was finding the lack of viable options for his time to be somewhat more challenging than he had hoped.

It was understandable, of course, both considering the location so far from town and its many diversions, but also the fact that William was relying on Mr Layton to see to more practical matters around the estate, likely by habit as much as anything else, rather than himself. Understandable, however, did not necessarily mean enjoyable.

He had to tread carefully while here, so as to not seem overbearing or pushy, something he knew already that William would not respond well to, and yet it felt slightly more like tedium than it did relaxation or even the patience of a hunt. He was largely having to wait for William to grow more comfortable with him, to start seeing him as a part of the family dynamic, rather than as a guest. It would be unwise, at this stage, to be seen pressing for tasks or something to do, as that would only heighten any thoughts that Hannibal was not, in fact, contented here with William. While this might currently be the case, it was only circumstantially, and would bear no actual issue once he had the omega safely ensconced back in his own house.

The feeling of minor discontent itself was proving to be somewhat interesting in it's own way, he supposed, being rather unusual for him; an internal warning that circumstances were not as optimal as he would ideally like. Yet he knew that it would only be a matter of time before dear William's instincts tipped the balance in his favour. He merely had to wait, patient and still, and only draw enough attention to himself to serve his purposes.

William, by comparison, seemed to be continuing with his dedication towards seeing to the estate with an almost fevered drive during parts of the day. Although he had been making more of an effort to spend time with Hannibal, or include him in certain things, these instances were brief, but no less enjoyable for that fact. It was pleasing to see him having taken his advice, waking later in the day, at least for the moment, and seeming to make more effort in letting others deal with any interpersonal duties, such as with tradesmen or social callers. In turn, this tended to bring with it a flurry of activity during the late afternoon and evening as a result of William only being available for general house matters then. It also heightened the disparity for Hannibal between when the omega was there, and when he was not.

He could hear movement now, in fact, and carefully started cleaning off the nib of his pen when he
heard footsteps coming this way, so as to appear easily available should William be of a mind to distract him from the tedium.

A few moments later, the door opened to reveal his omega being closely followed by the beta, Mr Murrell, and Hannibal dutifully turned away from the desk in order to give them both his attention, although neither was particularly paying much attention initially to anything other than the rather animated conversation between them, one that appeared to be about window shutters.

"Humphrey spoke with the Writely Brothers that did work for us in the past, but they were booked up until after midwinter, and after that the weather might have turned too bad to make it worth it. He's going to get a carpenter from town to travel and work on the repairs this week to the ground floor at least, so the place is secure. Oh, Hannibal, I was wondering if I might borrow you for a short time, if I am not disturbing you from something?"

"You are not disturbing me, William. I was just about to take a break."

"One of the beams in the vegetable patch outside of the greenhouse has finally given up and collapsed. Mr Murrell could use a hand in lifting it, if you wouldn't mind?"

While this certainly wouldn't be his first choice in activities, the casual way that William asked it of him more than made up for it, being, as it was, one of the first true signs that he was starting to get more used to having him as a supportive influence in his life.

"Of course, William, I would be happy to help. If you would allow me a moment, Mr Murrell, I will get my coat and join you shortly."

It was slightly displeasing, having to leave the room so soon after he had fallen under William's gaze, and yet it would not suit his purposes to be seen as hesitant to perform the task, lest it make William less likely to ask him for aid in future. So he left, letting the warmth of his gaze linger on William a moment longer than necessary as he passed, knowing from the ever so slight alteration of William's scent that his omega was not unmoved by his attention. It had become more of a habit to sit together later in the evening, even merely to read rather than to talk, and so he contented himself with that thought as he went to get his coat and gloves.

Outside, the air was crisp and clear, bitter in a way that harboured warning of weather to come, although not, he thought, quite yet. Winter could be a beautiful but harsh mistress, but she was not quite ready to put on the flowing ball gown of white that would spread across the land and sparkle with the moonlight.

Moving around the house towards the vegetable garden to the rear, he found the thought of being able to show such things to William was like an ache in his chest, an agitation in the muscles of his hands. He wanted to draw his omega in close and show him the deadly beauty of the fields and forests, the silent covering that insulated the land, and the bitter teeth of ice that would not touch his mate in a way that harmed. William, he thought as he neared the beta, would look so beautifully devastating under the moonlight, his pale skin and dark hair offering a fragility that hid the fierce survival within.

For now, he tucked such thoughts away, and turned his attention towards the task at hand. Surveying the damage, it would probably be best to remove several of the timbers from the area, as a few others looked ready to give way. He cared little for the task of seeing to this house, for soon his omega would be staying in his own home and provided for there, but to leave such a task half done would be neglectful, and he disliked leaving things incomplete.

Despite this, it could be taken care of easily enough, with time to freshen up before the evening
meal. He wondered when dear William would come to the realization that he would prefer them to eat together alone, rather than at the family table. It was obvious to him the conflict of interests that he saw there at each shared mealtime with the family, the tensions and attempts to offer a happier, more friendly visage than Will truly felt currently. Soon, he hoped, and if not, well, there was always midwinter to spend together.

This thought in mind, he tugged the gloves on a little more firmly and set about the task of moving rotten timbers from the vegetable patch. In the end, it took less than an hour to shift the timbers to a better location. It would have been significantly less had he not been allowing for Mr Murrell's pride. The man wasn't as young as he used to be, and it was a matter of politeness that Hannibal set his pace at something to suit the man. It wouldn't do to have members of the household feeling resentful of his presence on the estate, after all, as that would only make William uneasy.

By the time they were done and Hannibal had handed back the gardening gloves, the sky was streaked with deepening greys and purples, the bruised remnants of day fading as all things did, the winter night coming on fast. Mr Murrell seemed eager to be back inside away from the chill that frosted their breath into the air in plumes, ghostlike, eager for the warmth to ease the stiffness in his joints that old age had wrought. Hannibal followed on behind, enjoying the last wisps of the day alongside the embrace of the evening, before entering into the sunroom behind the man and closing the door, turning the key against the encroaching dark.

Unlike the beta, he lingered there, taking a moment to unbutton his coat, listening to the footsteps retreating, while he waited.

It was only when the last button was undone that the figure stepped out of the shadows from beside a large storage cabinet. He had smelled him when he had entered, the scent too prevalent to have been made merely in passing, and he knew, with a deeper satisfaction, that William had come here despite his own tasks, and had watched him work, and had waited for him. It was a sign, alongside the subtleties of his scent, that pointed towards the growing attachment that was forming.

"I wanted to thank you for doing that," William said as he moved up towards him, and Hannibal slid his hands behind himself, knowing as he did so that it made his coat open more, an invitation for closeness without the worry of being trapped. "I know you dislike manual labour, but Humphrey was busy, and I didn't want to leave it any longer or Mr Murrell would likely try and tackle it himself."

William was closer now, drawn by the intimacy of the fading light, more shadows in the room than not, and Hannibal tilted his head, just a little, another invitation, should William feel courageous enough to take it.

"I was happy to help you, and it was a small task, easily done."

He watched as William drifted closer, and saw some of the struggle in him, likely wanting to ask for permission to act, but Hannibal had already granted it, preempted him with the silent invitation. He watched the progress of that inner monologue in the exhalation of breath, the shifting of muscles to ease from that tension.

Another sigh, a soft exhale, and William closed the distance between them, giving into his instincts and delicately turning his nose in towards Hannibal's neck glands. Was it merely a reassurance of his presence that was wished for in these moments, or was William checking for any sign of a rival? It was a little early for such instincts, as many omegas tended only to get them shortly before their heat, but trauma would likely have made those instincts more acute.

Hannibal kept himself still there, letting the combination of that and his scent and pheromones allow
William to ease closer in towards him, reassured by the restraint Hannibal was showing. He knew that the scent of his satisfaction would be clear enough for dear William to smell, something mellow and welcoming to an omega, a reassurance that their presence was wanted. The mild heat of William's closeness to him was enticing, but he allowed himself no leeway to break the stillness and embrace him. In its own way, his pheromones were already doing that, he knew, encouraging his omega closer, soothing and reassuring him, and that, alongside the knowledge of William's deepening attachment to him, had its own satisfaction.

William was, in his own way, being just as restrained as he was, although the reasons for it were less clear. Politeness when Hannibal was being so restrained was a likely possibility, as was the lingering effects of his fears around attachment. Despite this, his omega moved a touch closer, his clothing barely brushing up against Hannibal's own, before leaning up to rub his cheek against Hannibal's, the rich scent of the gland oil smearing against his skin, an indulgent reward for Hannibal's restraint. The other cheek was given the same treatment, their scents mingling as his own glands opened at the action, marking William in turn. There was a visceral pleasure in that, one that lingered even as William stepped back and saw his skin glistening in the moonlight.

They stared at each other in the shadows and the pale light of the moon that filtered in through the late glass panels, their cheeks damp with mutual claim, the scent of it strong in the air between them. Neither of them spoke, there was no need.

It was rare in these lands for omegas to scent mark, not only their suitors unless it is directly before their heat, but also their surroundings. Yet this house had touches of it everywhere, showing strong territorial instincts that made Hannibal's teeth ache for want of biting into that pristine flesh to claim him. His omega would be a vicious thing if he felt his home and those in it were compromised by an outside force, no matter that it hadn't been seen much here yet, he knew with certainty that William would protect what he claimed, once he felt adequately secure and confident in his situation. As it should be.

In the silence there, William seemed satisfied with what he wrought, and, in a singular statement of growing ease, merely turned and slipped out of the room, leaving Hannibal there to finish taking off his coat and make his way through the house to replace it.

Back at the writing desk in the sitting room later, the cookbook once more in front of him, he allowed himself to lean back in the chair and merely relish, for a moment, in the heady scent of William's mark upon him. The oils remained ever so slightly damp against his skin, both his own and William's, and mingled like that, it elicited in him a warm satisfaction that would be difficult to ignore. He had, he recalled, been turned by that scent on his skin before, for want of keeping it there, and it with an indulgent sort of pleasure that he knew that soon such a scent would always be upon him.

Taking up his pen once more, he started to translate the next page of the book, inscribing the translation flawlessly despite how his thoughts are turned towards more pleasing things. With the scent of William's partiality towards him there in every breath he took, he found that the task, and the tranquility of the house was not nearly so onerous as it was before.

It was its own brand of biological manipulation, he knew, and no matter if William was unaware of just how much he was using such methods to keep Hannibal contented and willing to stay, it didn't detract from their effectiveness. Not, of course, that Hannibal was intending to leave. He had been set on this course for months, and even before that when he had first seen William speaking at a lecture, and found him to be suitable to get to know better.

The change in dear William's behaviour though was encouraging. It had been a good choice to
initialise that scent marking so early in the courtship, clearly, and the need his omega had to show his claim on Hannibal was delicious. That William's instincts were invested in claiming him, and protecting that claim for others, settled him more.

It was rather fascinating, he thought, as he set aside another translated page, the changes that such knowledge had upon him. He could feel his own behaviour being carefully tweaked and altered by his instincts towards his mate, and unlike William, it elicited no fear in him, rather, it was with carefully corralled excitement that he waited to see what else would be altered as time went on. What would dear William elicit in him next? The newness of it thrilled him, as did the thought of being part of a mated pair at last.

Reaching up, Hannibal ran a careful finger over the slight dampness of oil upon his cheek before gently sucking the oil off the pad of his finger, the migled taste firing bright. Change, he knew, was as inevitable as the seasons, and fighting against it would only bring unhappiness. The sooner he helped William accept that, at least in this instance, the better.

Bloom Estate, Hertfordshire - Tuesday 8th December, night

Beside him, soft paws and the clip of nails against tile were a muted backdrop as he made his way up the shadowed stairs back towards his room, the glass of water in his hand already half empty. His dreams had faded now, only vague feelings of that oddness alongside the dread that so often dogged his sleep, fears given form and left to gambol and lollop around in his unconsciousness.

He'd had a couple of nights free of them, but his worries over the forthcoming heat and potential mating had been prevalent lately, so it wasn't exactly difficult to work out why he had only been given him a temporary reprieve despite the change of scenery.

Moving up to the top of the stairs, he paused when he saw a slight movement in the shadows, one that was made more obvious by the soft spill of muted light from the partially open doorway of the study, showing the outline of the pup.

He still had trouble picking the two of Hannibal's dogs apart, but he was guessing it was probably Sargybinis, as Dovano almost never left the alpha's side without command. At his own side, Lizzy padded over to her sibling, and Will had to consider whether he too was going to head over there and take up the invitation that was clearer than usual. He and Hannibal had taken to spending some time together in the study later in the evenings, before Will went to bed, just talking or reading mostly, but he had noted the last few times he had been woken by nightmares, that Hannibal was still there, still lingering in the study, and while Will didn't think the alpha was oblivious to his presence in the hallways, the man had never come out to see him, maintaining the restrained distance that Will himself had set.

Yet tonight it seemed had brought with it a change, for here was Sargy in the hallway, an encouragement and an invitation, perhaps even a reminder that Hannibal was there and would welcome a chance to help settle Will after a troubled sleep. That was what was expected of course, by biology if nothing else, but things had never been that simple for him.

Still, he found himself cautiously optimistic that perhaps even merely spending a little more time with the man, in a room that now smelled of them both, might help settle him a little quicker, enough to get back to sleep.

Moving along the hallway, he reached down to pat Sargy before moving past him and pushing the study door open a touch more in order to step inside, Winston and the two pups following along after him. It had been one of the first things he had changed when coming out here to the county estate;
that the dogs should be allowed in the house. While he knew it was causing a bit more work to keep them and the house clean of fur and muddy pawprints, he tried to make up for it by seeing to other things that had been neglected about the place.

Closing the door behind him, he looked over to where Hannibal sat, relaxed and easy on the seat, his feet propped up on the plush footstool, and there, as expected, Dovano was laying beside him, tail wagging in welcome but not moving. Hannibal, likewise, didn't get up, and there was a message there, not only that he wasn't about to crowd Will even when he would be aware of the remnants of fear still clung to him from the nightmare, but that they were familiar and comfortable enough between them at night like this, that such a formal method of greeting was unnecessary.

"I'm beginning to wonder if you sleep at all," he commented to the alpha as he moved over to take a seat beside the low-burning hearth, Dovano finally getting up and coming over to greet him, now that he was sitting rather than transient.

The smile he got in return was easy, and he was forced to admit that Hannibal looked good like this, relaxed and informal, even his suit jacket was hung instead over the back of a chair nearby. Not that Hannibal didn't look good at other times, but there was something almost untouchable about him normally, his clothing and demeanour like a barrier between him and the world. Like this, he seemed softer, which was a ridiculous sort of thought considering how predatory he knew the man could be. But then, even predators relaxed. He was aware that not many people likely ever saw Hannibal like this, other than his close family perhaps. That too was a message, no doubt, calculated and offered, but not for free. Will didn't know the price yet, but no doubt whatever it was, Hannibal would let him know soon, if he hadn't worked it out himself.

"The arms of sleep are a poor substitute when other options are to be had," Slightly suggestive there, enough that it caused Will to shift in his seat, uncertain whether it was discomfort or pleased satisfaction he was feeling. Either way, Hannibal didn't let him linger on it for more than a moment before continuing. "Your presence has quite energised your family here in the last week. The tides of rest and action have certainly had a positive effect compared to the monotony of daily life before."

A different sort of compliment there, but one that was wrapped up in the understanding that it wasn't the only thing being stated. It was a reassurance, if you could call it that, of the path that Will had let himself be set on, in changing how he structured his life differently, at Hannibal's encouragement. Yet even knowing the bias, it didn't render the comment to be useless.

"I find it difficult to tell," he admitted, "I know I am forcing them to alter their daily rhythm to accommodate me, and I'm not sure they would mention if it bothered them unless it got past a certain point."

Winston pressed his face into his hand for more petting, and he let himself be distracted by that momentarily, looking down as he let his fingers stroke through soft fur.

"Those who find satisfaction in the efficient running of a house, and serving of others, will quickly grow bored and despondent without anyone to care for in this way. I was told that it has been a long time since the estate saw use."

A cautionary comment there, insightful in a way that Will hadn't managed to be lately. He was only as perceptive as he could take in, and there was a growing concern now that he had missed on seeing things that he should have, for it to be mentioned like this.

"You think they have been unhappy?"

"I think that this is a large estate for four betas to live in themselves, one that is far enough from any
town or village to cause an inconvenience in socialisation and outside entertainment. This seems like the first opportunity they have had to care for others in quite some time, and no matter that your minor requests may have altered their daily rhythm, that very alteration and increase in tasks are allowing them to fulfill their own needs.”

Will hadn't really considered this, far too used to having his presence lately being seen as an annoyance or something troublesome.

"We used to spend the time between the courting seasons on the estate," he admitted, "Humphrey's business dealings in asset management gave us that flexibility, but Jack's job with the police doesn't allow for that really. I should probably have made more of an effort to come out here, but even that would separate more family members from Alana."

To this he only received a thoughtful hum from Hannibal in response. He ran a hand through his hair, leaning back in his chair and looking up towards the ceiling. This, like much that went on with the family, was largely outside his control. "I'll mention it to Humphrey and see if he has any suggestions. I don't think the family has been as observant of things as we could have been in recent times."

"And yet you are here now, and the minor chaos you have brought to their lives has made all the difference. Given a cause, many will push themselves when they might not have otherwise, and find satisfaction in the results."

Ignoring, for the moment, the indication that it wasn't merely the betas that Hannibal was talking about, Will considered the family here. With the amount of empathy he had, not to mention his extensive education in sub-gender dynamics, it was rather startling to find that this was yet another situation that he had found himself blinded to lately. Was he losing his touch, or was he merely too overwhelmed by circumstances lately that less was filtering through? With how much he had lamented Alana's behaviour lately, was his really any better?

"You are not solely responsible for all that happens with your family, William."

Blinking his eyes open, he looked over to the alpha who was still reclining there, easy but attentive.

"I suppose not, but when I know I can make a difference, it feels that way."

Another hum from the man, a contemplative moment in which Will could almost see the tick of thoughts like a metronome, until Hannibal seemed to make his decision on which thought to voice.

"Will you come and sit with me for a while?"

Despite the fact that he should have seen it coming, the question still took him a bit by surprise, having grown more comfortable there in the room with Hannibal. It was likely it was that very fact that had prompted the question in the first place, and while his initial inclination was a negative, he couldn't help but remember his talk with Humphrey. He was more at ease around Hannibal, and he couldn't truly ignore the fact that on several occasions now the man had rendered him passive by his scent and presence, a calm that he would likely find helpful tonight, if he were to get back to sleep soon.

Still, he was wary, because while they had shared scents before, this was different, a heightened level of closeness that Will found difficult or near impossible even with family. Likely noting the reluctance, Hannibal reached over and picked up a thick blanket from beside him, previously unnoticed, and shifted it more into Will's view.
"My sister found using them useful in the past when she was in her more prickly moods. A barrier between her and those she was with."

The slight hint of humour there, a familiarity that Will wasn't sure he had earned, but knew that it was a compromise, just like seeing the alpha relaxed and informal now, that familiarity was set into Will's hands with the knowledge that while it was freely given, there was a mild expectation there, that he trusted that Will would try to meet him in such an exchange. It was less about that, though, and more about his own determination to not let Humphrey down, that had him moving reluctantly over to take the blanket.

He knew he was hesitating there, as he held it, before forcing himself to unfold and draw it around his shoulders. He also knew that he likely looked faintly ridiculous, and could only be glad that Hannibal had politely turned his attention towards his book in order to give him more space.

There was a sense of unreality there, as he stood there with a blanket curled around his shoulders looking at the alpha reclined so artfully, the book propped up on his thigh one arm stretched out over the back of the sofa. Will stood there, watching the placidity of the alpha there on his favourite seat, knowing the man was highly aware of him standing there, but was allowing him space to come over on his own terms.

But the sense of having stepped suddenly onto the wrong room, an alternate world where such a person might be genuinely interested in him despite all his broken pieces, was too strong. It seemed preposterous that such a strong alpha would want someone like him, and if he did, then it was without truly understanding just how flawed a piece he was.

Lieutenant Anderson had seen enough of him, and had experience with such things, that while it would likely be troubling to the man, he had been fully cognisant of the struggles that they were likely to face, but he didn't get that sense from Hannibal at all. So perfectly composed and put together, nothing flustering him, nothing seeming to edge past that flawless control. Will could offer any worry, any comment, and he was sure that the man would have a ready answer, a reason why such a concern might be easily set aside. And perhaps it would be. Perhaps things really were that easy for the man, any setback viewed with interest and then plans shifted and altered until things were once more fitting to the alpha's plan for the world around him. That was likely to be Will as well. He would be shifted, tweaked and altered until he was in line with Hannibal's vision of how he could be, but was that vision really what he could trust to herald in a better future out from under Jack's thumb, or would he merely find himself adrift in a future he felt alien to himself?

Likely noting Will's altered mood, Hannibal looked up once more to where Will still hasn't moved.

"If you ensure it covers the back of your neck more fully, or even over your hair, that may help more."

Not focusing on the sudden change of thoughts then, merely on maintaining the solution, as Hannibal saw it. Not deviating, judging perhaps that Will was not at the stage for giving up on the idea, despite his hesitation.

It was easy to forget that Hannibal had lived with a younger sibling, an omega at that, up until she came into her first heat and he had moved away. Will was so used to thinking of him as he knew him now, as the effortlessly controlled surgeon, the charming member of the social elite, even as a courting alpha, that it was easy to forget that his life here wasn't the only life he had lived, and that his past held its own memories, its own understandings.

With a resigned sigh, Will pulled the blanket up more around his neck, not able to make himself pull it higher, not because he doubted it would help, but because he didn't think he could bear being seen
as more ridiculous than he already looked, or perhaps worse, being described as something 'adorable'. He has been witness to alphas speaking of omegas like that in the past when they did something particularly endearing. He didn't know how being wrapped in a blanket could look like that, but he had been witness to it enough to know that, whatever his own views, alphas seemed to find such things pleasing in the same way Will might look at a litter of puppies. If Hannibal turned all gooey-eyed and called him cute, he might punch the man. He had a brief consideration that doing so might break whatever illusion Hannibal had about him, but no, it was far more likely merely to be seen as something rather interesting. Hannibal Lecter seemed like the sort to like the unusual.

So instead he merely forced himself to sit down on the sofa beside him, donning a pre-emptive gruffness against such a potential, warding it off with a dip in his eyebrows and a defensive set to his shoulders that he couldn't loosen even if he wanted to.

He had to admit though, despite how odd and uncomfortable it felt to be sitting so close to another person, that the blanket did help. It was thick and soft, and Hannibal had made no effort to make his scent on it subtle. It was an odd juxtaposition of being physically close, but having a barrier to stop the closeness, while at the same time having that scent and the soft thickness of the blanket giving the comfort that the proximity should.

It felt strange sitting there, but Hannibal, ever patient, did not move, nor did he lower that arm from the back of the sofa to around Will, as most would have done. He merely sat there, the book in one hand, the sound of the pages turning and the fire in the background, alongside the soft little snores from the pups offering its own backdrop, until Will forced himself to settle a little closer in against the man. The restraint Hannibal was showing was admirable, and Will let himself lean a little more against him, turning his head ever so slightly to better take in the scent of the man. As strange as it might sound to others, being like this, almost ignored in many respects, had its own reassurance, so that as the pages turned, some of the tension seeped out of him, understanding that the alpha would not break in his self-imposed restraint.

He didn't know how long he sat like that. Long enough that the book seemed far more read now than not, but eventually the soft murmur of the alpha's voice reverberating through his chest close to Will's ear brought him out of the soft haze he had ended up drifting into.

"You are not alone in dealing with things."

The murmured words were soft in the air, a slight change in the steady movement of the alpha's lungs, a touch of words to his mind, meant to reassure. It took him longer than it should to realize that it was a continuation of their previous conversation, before Will came to sit.

It wasn't just a general comment, but one that highlighted that while Will had been worrying about something he had not noticed, so too had that very situation been knowingly brought to him, and then a reminder that the solution was not for Will to struggle with it alone.

He supposed Hannibal was right, not only about the family, but about his own place in the current situation. Will could admit that Hannibal's presence had been a boon lately, if for no other reason than he had helped deal with things around the estate during the day, especially with the callers that morning. He had been blissfully unaware of them until he had been told later that evening when he had roused from his rooms, that family acquaintances had come to call, having finally found out that the estate once again housed more members of the family. Considering that Will would much rather dig a latrine than spend time making polite conversation first thing in the morning, the fact that he hadn't needed to do so had been a profound relief.

"I'm a bit out of practice with having agency in the household," he said, his voice coming out a bit muffled against the blanket, but he wasn't moving. Frankly he was fairly astounded that he was, even
"Much has taken getting used to. The city can feel so very far from my homeland at times, where many customs are different," There was a pause, and Will just leaned there, breathing in the scent of his alpha, his mind trying to imagine what such a place might have been like. What a young Hannibal might have been like. Just as confident perhaps, but with less tempering of his nature. "Will you stay with me for the midwinter festival, William, at least on the darkest night? It has always been special to my family, and I would have you with me."

Will turned his head in a little more towards the heat of the body beside him, the scent of Hannibal so much more encompassing here. That he had left to ask the question until now, when Will was more settled, half asleep and less likely to find the energy to deny him, told him that it was important to Hannibal that he accepted.

Manipulative alpha, he thought with a sort of fond amusement that defied his earlier concerns. It was just like Hannibal that he couldn't just have asked at a regular time, but had to wait for the perfect moment so his plans didn't go awry. Despite this, he found the thought of spending midwinter with him had its own appeal.

"Okay."

The alteration in Hannibal's scent after Will spoke, told well enough how pleased the man was by his agreement. It wafted up, warm and mellow and Will wanted to wallow in it, unable to help the way his cheek rubbed up against the blanket that barred the way between them.

"Some of the earliest memories of my childhood are from midwinter," came the murmured response, a calculated vulnerability there now that he'd had his offer accepted. "We would always hold a vigil over the longest night, and bring small gifts to the forest to hang on the trees before warming ourselves beside a fire, sharing food together. We gave things we had made or treasured, meaningful in the time and effort taken in the crafting, or in the care we had bestowed upon it while in our care."

It was a tantalising image, especially for how different it seemed to his own family lately. When was the last time they really did something together like that, just as a family, rather than having the time shared by going out to public events or gatherings? Even the festivals that did not fall during the courting seasons tended towards being spent at gatherings that had little, honestly, to do with religion as much as merely a chance to socialise and mingle. The image of Hannibal's childhood, so much rawer and more basic than he would ever have imagined, spent, not in brightly lit halls filled with people and music, but only with a fire and close family around, maybe even the dogs too. It felt personal and appealing in its intimacy.

He sat there and thought about that, knowing in all likelihood that Hannibal could scent just how contented he was by that mental offering. He didn't know a family that might do this and admit to it, seen most likely as too barbaric, but Will found he didn't mind.

The whole description though, it sounded very much like something tied to one of the religions, though he couldn't place which one. Especially as religion was an almost entirely private affair for people, practices changed from person to person, and would possibly be unrecognisable between different followers of the same God. Even in his own family, religion was almost never spoken of, each finding their own God to follow, if they were drawn to one. It did sound like Hannibal's family were sharing traditions, something familiar passed from generation to generation. Was it one religion, or several that they had melded the festival celebrations to fit?
Either way, it certainly wouldn't hurt to join in with it. He had never, honestly, found a God that he had been drawn to follow, and honouring the festival in the ways of another didn't signify anything other than respect for the festival. It would be nice to see this other facet of the alpha he was leaning against.

Of course going to it meant that he would have to bring something himself. He knew enough about religions and traditions to know that coming without something would be inadvisable, and especially on such a time of importance, the liminal time when certain powers were at their peak, it was always better to be careful. Something made or treasured. He had, honestly, little that he treasured in terms of his own belongings. He didn't think books or clocks would be well received, and it would pain him to have them left outside to the weather. Something made then would probably be better.

"What sorts of things did you give in the past?" he asked, curious.

He got a thoughtful hum in response, before his hair was moved by the turning of the alpha's head. It brought back the feeling of vulnerability of being so close to another person. He gave up all pretense at not looking ridiculous, and wiggled until he could free enough of the blanket to draw up over his head like a hood before curling back up again. It immediately felt better, and he turned his head towards Hannibal's chest, knowing his face is now hidden from the man, and that he couldn't see how silly he must have looked right now.

"When I was very young," Hannibal murmured once Will had settled himself once more, "I used to give favourite toys, or later, drawings I had made. I would spend days on them before midwinter, and then we would burn them in the fire and watch the tiny scraps of paper light in the air. When I was older, I sacrificed my favourite hunting knife that my uncle had carved the handle for, a necklace that my mother left me, and a glass paperweight that I had coveted for years before getting. More recently I brought music to the midwinter night, and played throughout the darkest hours."

"What did you play?"

"I do not remember. It is how I knew my offering was accepted."

It was certainly a religious offering then, rather than merely family tradition. He had heard, generally, of such things before when he was young and still learning about the world. It couldn't be coincidence then that his future seemed to be guided towards winter, the card reading as well as learning more of Hannibal's own traditions. It certainly wouldn't be a bad idea to stay on the good side of Hannibal's patron god, considering that such a gaze already seemed to be upon him. He had never, to his knowledge, had one of the powers take in interest in him before. It was a rather nerve-wracking thought, if true.

"I could make some fishing lures. Do you think that would be okay to bring? I wouldn't want for an animal or bird to be accidentally harmed by them or something."

He was slightly startled at the sound that came rumbling out of Hannibal's chest, seemingly without premeditation, because the man had to swallow it back down a moment with a slight cough, enough to speak.

"I think that would be perfect."

As soon as he stopped speaking, that rumbling purr reasserted itself again, and Will gave into the urge and pressed himself against Hannibal's chest, feeling the vibration against his cheek. He remembered hearing back that first night in Hannibal's study, but it was so different here, close up, where he could feel it as well as hear it. It eased some of the tension in him, and he gave himself over to luxuriating in the rare sound combined with the scent of Hannibal's satisfaction at having him
close. He closed his eyes, and the rolling waves of sound eased away the worries of the day, drifting
thoughts of forests and winter and fishing lures mingling with the contentment that flowed through
him. Biology, he thought, did have some good effects.

When he roused later, he found himself tucked up in his own bed, still wrapped in the blanket that
smelled like Hannibal. He blinked blearily at the room around him, everything still in its place, so it
might seem as if he had brought himself to bed, if not for the fact that Hannibal’s scent lay upon the
fresh sheets in places as well, places where Hannibal had tucked them in and made the bed for Will
before laying him down on it.

It was ever so slightly mortifying that he had clearly been so fast asleep that Hannibal had to carry
him through from the study, make his bed up for him, and then lay him down, all without Will
waking. It would be slightly mortifying if not for the fact that he was sure the man would be feeling
exceedingly pleased with himself for having rendered Will into such a trusting state, and being able
to prove his alpha muscles worked. Turning his head, he took in the scent on the sheets near his head
where the man had leaned, in order to set Will down gently. Yes, very satisfied with himself. He
huffed in amusement and then snuggled back down into the blanket. No harm in sleeping a little
longer, after all.

Chapter End Notes

Martin Seligman's experiments on Learned Helplessness were actually initially
performed in 1967, so a lot of artistic licence is used here to offer something similar. I
figured that this society would be more focused on understanding distress and
problematic behaviours rather than merely jailing those performing them, so there is at
least some potential for a similar set of experiments being done earlier in this world. I
kept the name in order that people could find the details of the actual experiments if they
wanted.

I know, when a friend gets to reading over this chapter that I am going to get my
knuckles rapped for it being too long-winded without any real action for a second
chapter running. I can only assure you guys that there will be a lot more happening next
chapter! I know I should have edited this one more ruthlessly for character downtime,
but I haven't been great this month, and making decisions like that has been a bit beyond
me. One day I'll give it a re-work, but for now you get 13k words of them pottering
around the house XD
"Jimmy, for goodness sake, be careful!"

Will only got a smile in response, and a brief hand wave dismissing the worry, one that may not have been so fleeting, had he not needed to grip the ladder to halt himself overbalancing. Beside him, Martha was holding the ladder, while Will held the other end of the heavy curtain that they were currently putting up.

This was the last one in the room that needed to be done, and honestly, the changeover from the summer to the heavier winter curtains should have been tackled long ago in order to preserve the heat in the large house, but with so few people using it, those living here had merely retreated to the smaller, cosier areas of the house and focused on other tasks. But they were using the dining room more now, and he wanted them to be able to utilise more of the house whenever suited them, rather than being put off by the cold. Mr Murrell was feeling it especially, he knew, as the aches in his bones worsened each year.

He had been tackling more of these sorts of tasks after his talk with Hannibal those few days past, trying in some ways to make up for the more recent abandonment of the estate by the majority of the family, with the understanding that they didn't begrudge the extra work it created. Hannibal had been out earlier helping to clear one of the outbuildings so it could be used to store and sort cuttings for the midwinter garlands. Will was not going to be here at the estate for that, but he intended to help the family put up the decorations so that those here could enjoy them at least. It was too easy to slip into despondency for non-essential tasks, he knew that only too well, and perhaps they might feel more able to invite guests over if the place was warmer and looking better during the winter and spring season.

His thoughts were distracted by the sound of a carriage pulling up, and he glanced over towards the clock on the mantle, one he had bought and fixed years ago now. Still early enough for callers then, being only half past one in the afternoon, but he felt no particular inclination to go and greet them; Humphrey or Hannibal could deal with them.

Perhaps it was lazy and somewhat impolite of him to defer such tasks to others, but he didn't feel any real need to rectify that particular situation, having been reassured by both alphas that they were happy to deal with them. He shifted the curtain a bit higher in his arms as Jimmy hooked the top onto the curtain rail, the rich velvet soft and heavy in his arms.

However, it was the sound of voices in the house soon after that once more turned his head towards the door. It wasn't the sound of some random caller from town. No, that was Alana.

He glanced up the ladder, and ruthlessly squashed the sudden dread at the possibility of Jack being there, so that Jimmy couldn't sense it. It hurt him to see both the eagerness as well as the conflict there on the alpha's face and scent, seemingly just as torn as he was about the visit. Thankfully the last of the curtain hooks had just been placed, so the danger of a distracted Jimmy falling while trying to place them had passed.

"On you go, Jimmy. I'll just finish getting the curtains to sit right then I'll come," then to Martha, "If you want to leave the ladder for now. I know where it goes."

He himself lingered there, setting the ladder aside in the cupboard after the pair had gone to greet
Alana. It would be good for Jimmy and Humphrey especially, to have Alana come to visit, having been separated from her for a couple of weeks now, something that was likely to be pressing on their instincts uncomfortably. He found himself unmoving there in the dining room, fingers once more smoothing down the velvet like it could comfort him from the unwelcome thought of having to go and greet Jack, if he was there. Alana too of course. There was a bit of discontent in him at how the thought of Jack was sullying his enjoyment of seeing Alana, but was it merely Jack's presence that was making him feel that? He honestly didn't know whether he was pleased she was here at all.

He should go, he knew, and greet them, but it wasn't thoughts of duty that ended up moving him out of the room and down the corridor with suddenly more hurried steps, but the thought that Hannibal might even now be with her.

He knew he was being paranoid, driven by his instincts that had been far more prevalently seen than usual at this time of year. But the knowledge didn't manage to alter his course, because all he could think of was that the scent-marking on Hannibal must surely have worn off by now, and suddenly that felt decidedly dangerous.

He found them in the south-facing sitting room, having to step aside when Mrs Keeley rushed past him, the trailing talk of luncheon giving reason for the hurry. The whole room was filled now, with Alana in the center of the chaos, holding court to those around her. No Jack or Brian though, and that, at least, was a relief, but all the other alphas, as well as Peter who wandered in having likely been seeing to the carriage.

What was not a relief was the sheer noise and bustle that filled the room. He lingered there on the periphery, not yet noticed amongst the greetings and chatter of family catching up, except for Nathan, who gave him a smile of greeting from where he was slumped on one of the seats across the room. He knew, at least, that Will would come to greet him in his own time, when things had settled, but the same could not be said of the cause of the visit, for to avoid Alana when she had just arrived would only cause a scene.

He was unsettled though, standing there, the feeling of being an intrusion in his own home having returned swiftly with the sudden influx of people, noise and scents. Alana's scent was throughout the hallway and the room now, placing her mark on what he had been mostly unconsciously cultivating as his own, noticed now for how it was suddenly overshadowed.

She seemed louder, more vibrant in her expression, and he had to wonder whether she was always like that, or if it merely seemed that way from the separation.

A shape detached itself from the crowd and stepped between Will and the view of the room, sheltering him from the harsh brightness of the afternoon sunlight and the feeling of alienation.

The tease of scent that lingered around Hannibal was subtle, as it always was, but it eased some of the tension in his frame and allowed him to breathe a little easier.

"Are the curtains all changed now?"

A polite murmur from the man, a focus on the practical as well as the difference Will was making to the house, despite the sudden appearance of the other family members. A neutral topic to help him fend off the discontent and despondency that had started to seep in. He gave a small hum in response, but his attention had fixated on something else.

Hannibal was wearing one of the soft wool suit jackets today. It was a pleasing shade of navy blue that suited the man very well, but it was the arm of that suit that he couldn't seem to tear his eyes from, because right there, was the scent of Alana.
It was probably from initial greetings, for she had always been tactile. Too tactile? He could imagine her greeting him fondly, reaching out and touching his arm, just there, where her scent lingered from the minute oils released by her fingertips onto the suit jacket. Will found his eyes narrowing on it, unseen from the room, except by the alpha standing before him. That mark, unconscious as it might have been, was still something that was becoming more displeasing the more he was aware of its existence. It bothered him, scented another omega on Hannibal, no matter that it was his own mother. He wanted it gone, and yet, he knew from the way his body had been responding lately, that if he touched it now, it was likely that his oils would produce far too great a quantity and end up ruining the cloth.

He was contemplating what to do about it, when Hannibal moved, his hands coming up as if to undo the jacket, stopped by the sudden silent snarl on Will's lips. He was sure that later he would be embarrassed by such a response, but right now the thought that his alpha would have one less piece of clothing between him and others was intolerable. He didn't want that, nor for another omega to see Hannibal less than fully dressed, even if standing in a shirt and waistcoat was by no means underdressed, even in public. Hannibal's hands had stopped the motion instantly and relaxed back to his sides again, and Will flickered a look up towards him, making sure he didn't try something further while he decided what he wanted to do about the scent on the jacket. He could use a handkerchief or something to get some scent to transfer to it, that might work to avoid the worst of the damage. He liked that suit.

"Will! There you are!"

He was moving before he even fully comprehended the words, stepping swiftly around Hannibal towards Alana, before she had any further opportunity to touch the alpha. At his back, he caught a very subtle change in Hannibal's scent, one that filled him with a warmth of vindication at the approval and pleasure of Will guarding him from another omega's proximity. He wanted to feel annoyed, because if there was one thing that Hannibal didn't need, it was a further ego boost, but with Alana there in front of him, it only seemed to shore up something sharp and vicious in him. Perhaps she felt his altered mood too, because she allowed him to bridge the distance between them, though her words had failed to falter.

"I was just telling Humphrey, that there was a weather warning issued in town yesterday, so we decided to come and pass the warning on, in case you ended up getting caught in it. Vifor's Watchers say that a storm is going to hit a week from now, so you will need to be back in the city before then."

This wasn't good news by any stretch of his imagination. Warnings by the weather watchers were not to be taken lightly. He still remembered the storm that had come when he was twelve, heralded by just such a warning. The roads had been impassable for over two weeks, a great deal longer for properties far from the main roads like theirs was. There was no way he could justify keeping Hannibal away from the city when there was no telling how long the weather disruption might last for. While he would certainly prefer to know such warnings than not, it was no joyous news for him, as it would cut short his visit here far sooner than he would otherwise have wished.

"What about those here at the estate? The weather hasn't cut us off here for longer than a couple of days in a long time in recent years. I'm not sure how many provisions are set aside. I'm not happy about having them here alone when they might need help."

This seemed to stall her enthusiasm for a moment, clearly having thought little of the other issues, and he had to wonder whether it was entirely her idea to come here, or whether Jack had instigated it. If he wasn't here now with her, then work was keeping him busier than ever, and he knew only too well how that tended to go if Will was around in the house and readily available.
"Well, I was planning on going for a trip with you to Rosebury today, to get you something for midwinter, but we can certainly stop for extra provisions."

This was likewise a mixed blessing as a response, because it came with a promise of aid, but at the cost of his discomfort. Usually he would just go along with whatever she had planned, but the feeling of disharmony was still lingering around his shoulders, and he forced himself to speak of it rather than just continuing as he had ended up tending towards.

"I'd rather stay here and help with the preparations. There was already a lot needing done even without the extra for the storm, and I don't really want to go to town."

"Don't worry so much. We can all help when we get back, and you know I can never guess what you would want as a gift. Come have some lunch, and then we can go. It won't take long."

He could see it now, that determination in her. She had clearly set her mind upon going to town with him in order to get him the gift, one that he honestly didn't care about enough to want, certainly as it seemed to require him to come and choose it. It wasn't even like a town as small as Rosebury would have much in the way of variety, but this was more about Alana wanting to make a gesture to show that she cared for him, rather than the gift itself. The incongruity of that, considering he wanted neither the gift nor the trip, said a great deal about their relationship these past few years. She always had been a bit more single-minded when she was stressed and had convinced herself of a solution.

He knew without putting any effort into it, that if he didn't agree, it would only create further disharmony between them, either with her getting annoyed with him, or by trying to think of some other scheme to get in his good graces once more. There was guilt there that she was trying to assuage, and he knew that out of the various ways she might try to deal with it, capitulating now would be preferable to some grander scheme that he was likewise just as sure to dislike in some way.

Resigning himself to his previous plans for the day being utterly scrapped, he let himself be led towards the dining room for lunch. The churning in his stomach from the thought of the trip away from the estate was likely going to make any enjoyment of the food rather hazardous.

Lunch ended up being an uncomfortable affair, at least for him. The room had once more been filled with family, not only Alana and all the alphas, but the betas as well, since Will had been encouraging them to use the dining room more. While it was nice to see them taking that up and feeling more able and willing to share the time in the room, that came with Will having to sit through a lunch with so many people. Even having Hannibal at his side did little to ease it, as he was far more aware of his failing table etiquette than usual as a result of being beside someone so effortlessly poised.

Alana, of course, was in good form and bright spirits now that she was once more feeling in control of the situation and those of her household. Her talk was lively, though she was noticeably far more tactile with Humphrey than usual. Will guessed from the conversational hints, that things had not been entirely smooth-running back in the city, and she was likely missing the stability of Humphrey's presence as a result. Perhaps then it was a good thing that Humphrey had accompanied them out here if it helped Alana acknowledge the benefit of having him around more. She might take him less for granted.

Or, he thought with a downturn, it could just be a reasserting of her claim on him, especially without Jack around to fulfill the role of head alpha right now. With things in their family in flux, it made a certain amount of sense that she would be trying to consolidate things. Will watched her do it, not only with Humphrey and to a lesser extent Jimmy, but with regard to the country estate and those in it as well.

The betas had scrambled to get lunch ready for her and those she had brought, and although it was a
rush for them to cater for so many more, he could see the happiness, even joy, at the sudden challenge and desire to see to the tasks. In some ways it left a slightly foul taste in his mouth, knowing that for all that they were happy right now, she would be leaving first thing in the morning, and their joy and the challenge that seemed to make them thrive would be short-lived. Sometimes it seemed to him like it suited her to drop in and have that burst of reciprocal enthusiasm without having to put in the effort to maintain it afterwards. At least Andrew had said he would stay for the storm to ensure that they had more help, even if Will couldn't do so due to his agreement with Hannibal.

Their family would be quite split up this year for midwinter, what with Andrew being here with the betas at the country estate, and Will at Hannibal's home. He didn't doubt that if he were to stay for more than a day or two it was likely Jimmy would be dropping by at some point to reassure himself of Will's state. It was something he would need to talk to Hannibal about, although he didn't doubt the man would have guessed it already.

With lunch over, plans were already being set into motion for the trip into Rosebury, Alana and Humphrey were distracted by making the lists of provisions the estate might need to tide them over, and Will needed to have a quick wash and put blockers on. But before then, something else was pressing on his attention.

"Hannibal, could I speak with you for a moment please?"

He led the way up the stairs, where it was quieter, and into his study, one of the few places that they wouldn't be randomly interrupted. He didn't want to be interrupted for this.

Hannibal closed the door behind them, and with only the low light from the north-facing window, and Hannibal standing between Will and the door, a little of the gathered tension in him eased. Around him, the room smelled now of them both, and he had divested Hannibal of Alana's scent by way of a scented napkin at lunch.

Still, no matter that her scent was off him, it didn't massively help to loosen the urge, the need, to stake his claim on the alpha before him. Having him around the house with Alana here was bad enough considering how she had inadvertently acted in the past, but they were going to be going to town, where any number of people would get a look at Hannibal, and it'd had his instincts screaming ever since he had been roped into the trip.

That didn't mean he wasn't embarrassed by the need, especially considering how soon it was in the season. The only thing that stopped him from feeling too terribly bad was the knowledge of just how smug and self-satisfied it would make the man, knowing that Will was so predisposed towards him.

"I eh… I need to scent mark you. Before I put on the blockers."

He didn't ask if it was all right, he stopped that at least. He knew Hannibal would relish having Will's scent on him, evidence of how he was triumphant over others, how his plans were going well. Will was right, for as fixated as he was right now on Hannibal's scent, he could pick out the almost imperceptible change in it at the statement.

"Of course, William."

He watched as the suit jacket was removed and placed over the arm of the sofa, cufflinks slipped from their moorings and set into the small pocket of his waistcoat before those sleeves were turned up, the starched cuffs folded neatly three times until both forearms were revealed. Will's gaze followed those hands, strong hands, as they reached up and loosened the cravat before drawing it off in a slow sleek movement that should not have seemed suggestive, but somehow did anyway. He
hadn't asked for the collar of the shirt to be opened, but it was, revealing a slash of pale skin and the corded muscle of his neck.

He tried not to look, not to stare, but it was a losing battle. The large mating gland at the curve of the neck was hidden, but the opened shirt teased with the proximity.

Stepping forward, he took Hannibal's wrist in his hand and brought it up to his cheek. It was no surprise, considering the alpha's display, that the oils at Will's cheekbones were already abundant, coating the skin of Hannibal's wrist that he drew across it, first one, then the other. It was done quickly, not because he was disliking the task, but because it wasn't the wrists that were his primary focus just then.

The last time he had scent marked Hannibal on his cheeks had been a delicious task. As silent as they were together right now, the satisfaction of rubbing his scent onto the man, marking him for others to take note of, had settled something in him, and he wanted that sensation back, because ever since the rest of the family had turned up, he had been feeling jangled and off.

Closing the gap a bit more between them, he leaned up, as Hannibal thoughtfully brought his head down a little to make it an easier reach. Not touching, no, the man was careful never to cross a line that might make Will shy away. Now that his wrists had been marked, Hannibal had once more moved them behind himself, encouraging Will by his very placidity to the situation. It made him feel bold.

Leaning up, he breathed in the soft scents that lingered on Hannibal's skin, of the soap he had used earlier, the hints of different smells from the lunch they had shared, the freshly laundered shirt, and beneath it, the scent of the alpha himself. Will pressed his cheek against the man's skin, finding it cooler than the flush of his own, as he purposefully rubbed slowly along it, then back again twice more, ensuring his own scent was abundant, before changing sides and repeating the motion. Hannibal stayed so still, only the soft sound of his breathing, and distantly the sound of people in the house, breaking the silence.

At the last pass, he gave in to the invitation that the open collar had provided, and let his nose drift down until it was tucked in under the man's jaw, taking in his scent at one of the most abundant sources.

And, oh, his alpha smelled so good! He unconsciously pressed closer, his lips parting over the gland, just to scent, and then just a small taste on his tongue. It was slick with oil, and he knew this taste from before. It mingled with the scent that he breathed in until it felt heavy, tangible and delicious, coating his senses. His hips twitched forward in need, and were met with the taut bulge of answering arousal.

It was that which drew him out, sharply, and he took a slightly stumbled step back, dragging himself away from the source and inspiration of his suddenly rather lewd and inappropriate thoughts. They were meant to be going out soon!

He knew that he was flushed and reeking of arousal now, the slightly slick feel of his underwear as he moved gave that away, and yet it was the dark intensity of Hannibal's gaze that made him almost not care about propriety, or family trips, or anything else. Oh gods, the man looked amazing like that; so self-restrained but with an inner creature that stared at Will with dark, hungry eyes.

In a slightly panicked moment, he feared the alpha would speak, and no matter what that husky murmur might say, he was certain it would sound like a caress from those lips, and he needed, he really needed to not have that happen right now if they were going to make it out of the house at all today.
"I should go," Will managed to say, his gaze still caught in the grip of Hannibal's eyes, unable to look away, his voice not at all forceful. "I need to get changed."

He couldn't seem to move, trapped standing, staring as Hannibal watched him, the slow steady breathing giving no hint to the arousal that he could smell from the man, nor the way that those eyes seemed to want to devour him. Slowly though, the hunger was drawn back inside, step by step, until there was only the barest hint of that intensity there showing visibly in those eyes.

"Then I shall see you again shortly."

The sound of Hannibal's voice, polite, but the tone ever so slightly lower, caused a small whimper to escape his throat, unbidden. It was ridiculous, he was ridiculous for being so affected by the man's voice. No, he refused to stand there and be a whimpering mess in front of the man.

With more willpower that he felt it should have taken, he managed a nod of acknowledgement to the man, not trusting his voice at all right now, the traitorous thing, before he fled the room.

He tried to tell himself that he was merely needing to go and get changed quickly so he wouldn't hold the family up, but the thought was as flimsy as his willpower, holding only so strong as Hannibal allowed.

Back in his room, he was still flushed, and not only from the lingering arousal, but from the embarrassment of knowing he had trailed such a scent all along the upstairs corridor, and all the family would be able to smell it.

**Rosebury, Hertfordshire - Thursday 10th December, late afternoon**

Mrs Mccarthy had the most irritating laugh. It went from something that approached a high pitched squeal, then turned closer to braying, before alternated back to the former when something particularly amused her. Will was sincerely glad for the scent blockers that allowed him to only have to focus on maintaining what he hoped was a neutral facial expression, having also forgone the conversational aspects as much as civilly possible.

Each time she became amused, the urge to flinch was strong, and only becoming stronger as his limited reserves of social politeness were being eaten away the longer that she spoke with Alana.

This was the third time they had been stopped on their passage through the small town by those that the family knew, starting, of course, with those who were the hungriest for gossip and the least hindered by social norms over interrupting them for lengthy periods of time on their shopping trip. Humphrey had ended up covertly sending off Andrew and then Jacob to get the various things on their list, for the shops would not remain open as indefinitely as the conversations seemed to. Will, however, was not able to so easily extract himself, being that the primary reason for this trip was so that Alana could buy him something for midwinter.

They had been in the process of speaking to the local tailor about shirts when Mrs Mccarthy had descended upon their group, and thus he was trapped there along with Alana, although she seemed ill inclined to discourage the woman.

A glance towards Hannibal showed the man to be attentive and seemingly as pleased as Alana at hearing all the inane chatter coming from the woman, but unlike her, Will had the distinct impression that it was false, not only because there was little of interest in the conversation other than local gossip, but because Mrs Mccarthy was keeping them from their tasks, and for far longer than was generally polite.

Will flickered his eyes away and down, having to plumb the depths of his mental fortitude as Mrs Mccarthy started laughing again at something Alana said. He drew in a breath in of the scent of Hannibal from the scarf tucked around his neck, an item that had been given to him before they had entered the carriage. It was achingly soft against his cheek, and the scent had been marked upon it
prolifically enough that it offered a soft shroud against the influx around him. He tried to use the scent to get himself into a calmer state, to where every exhale of Mrs McCarthy as she laughed didn't make him want to lash out at the woman, verbally or otherwise. She didn't deserve it, and he was certainly raised better than that, no matter how irritating he felt she was currently being.

Although Hannibal didn't turn towards him, nor did Will look up to check, he could still feel the alpha's more pointed attention on him as he did so. It was a weight of focus that should feel smothering, yet somehow didn't.

Smooth tones of Hannibal's accented voice drew his own attention to the room once more, as the alpha joined in the conversation, and Will had a moment of dismay, until he realized that the man was actually attempting to extract them from the situation. Successfully too it seemed. He wasn't clear enough right now to have focused on the words when so much of his energy was spent restraining himself from causing a scene, but he was sure that the man must be the magician, for he had never seen anyone manage to get away from Mrs McCarthy when there was gossip or new company to be had before.

Soon he was being ushered outside, with the genteel manners that make everything Hannibal does seem refined and effortless. He supposed that it was far easier to have such control when your nerves were not attempting to claw their way out from under your skin. Did Hannibal ever get nervous or distressed about anything? Surely he must.

The sudden rush of cold air after the almost stifling heat of the small, people-filled shop, was bracing, and he tugged his gloves on, trying to corral his senses into a more useful state, while Hannibal spoke to Jimmy, who had been waiting outside for them.

"Mr Price, would you be so good as to accompany us to the fishing suppliers? Ms Bloom has been detained longer than expected."

The question, polite as it was, brought a sudden warmth and flash of gratefulness to Will's chest. Outwardly it was nothing, just a common courtesy of speech, but all three of them knew that Jimmy wasn't about to be left behind, not without major amounts of personal distress, while at the same time being hampered by his low status in the alpha hierarchy. In requesting his presence, Hannibal was saving him the shame of having to ask to be allowed to come along instead of one of the other alphas who would usually have seniority for such a task. Will could make out Jimmy's own gratefulness as he agreed, as well as the scent of Nathan's warm appreciation beside them for the kindness being shown.

"I'll let them know when they finish inside," Nathan told them, "I'll be out here if you need anything." A reassurance there, for Will, that there was additional family nearby if required. In a town this small, barely more than a village really, there wasn't as much of a need to be heavily accompanied, but he was pleased at the reminder.

As they moved down the street, Will could already see the bustle of people making good on the warning about the forthcoming storm. It had been the first thing they had done upon coming into town, to check that the town mayor knew, so that the news could be passed on with the most efficiency to the people there. Of course, those that Alana spoke to also had a larger hand in that too, but it meant that the town was far more crowded than he would have ideally liked, especially considering his last trip onto a busy street.

Hannibal was a gentleman though, and was careful not to crowd him, while simultaneously managing to silently fend off others from getting too close, as much as was possible, on their route down the street.
Despite this, they had been stopped two times by those who knew Will, though it was mostly to ask after Alana, since he had never cultivated many people he would consider friendly acquaintances in this town. It was with great personal relief, one that he hoped he hid well enough, that after the initial introduction, Hannibal neatly stepped into the conversation and diverted it away from Will. It allowed him to merely stand there and observe how the man effortlessly corralled those around him into thinking and doing what he wished of them. Will figured he should probably take field notes or something, because Mr Hayes was all but falling over himself to agree with the man in a way that was rather amusing.

By the third time they were stopped, a lot of the accrued tension from earlier with Mrs McCarthy, and being in town amongst so many people, had been eased away with the reassurance that Hannibal was more than adequate to deal with the inane conversations that they were being subjected to. Politely managing to exit a conversation with someone who was determined to gossip had never been in Will's skillset, but it appeared to be in Hannibal's. Will wondered absently whether he should arrange a trip out on a boat somewhere, merely to indulge in something that Hannibal was not good at.

"With the weather coming, we should probably send off the winter gifts to people tomorrow morning," he said to Price as they had been once more freed of outside conversation and were again moving towards their destination, "Did you find something for your brother? Once everyone catches up to us, you could probably go and get something if the shops are still open, if you need to."

Jimmy was about to reply, when the door they were passing suddenly burst open and a large alpha careened into their group, reeking of alcohol and shouting at whomever was inside. The action would certainly have toppled Will, if the sudden appearance of Hannibal between them hadn't occurred. He took the full brunt of that impact and used it instead to trip and topple the stranger to the ground with a meaty thud.

The drunk alpha landed heavily, cursing.

It was the shock of it, and the feel of that imminent violence that had come, riotous, along with the sudden appearance, that seemed to shut down Will's ability to think or react. He stood there, frozen, his body just as still as his thoughts seemed to become in his shock. However it was the release of that tension, when the drunk finally realized that he had almost bowled over an omega, that started the trembling, and that caused him to swallow compulsively to stop a whine of distress, that might turn into a panicked wail if given voice.

Even without his scent being apparent, it must have been clear enough that he was in a state, for the alpha was scrambling to get up, apologizing, his words still slurred from his inebriation. Whatever he saw in Hannibal Lecter's eyes seemed to dissuade the man from trying to come closer however, and for that, Will was supremely grateful.

Seeing the threat from the other alpha dissipated, Hannibal turned back towards Will, although he was careful not to crowd him. A gesture towards the street beyond by those elegant surgeons hands, but Will remained still, frozen, although he tracked the movement with his gaze. As though mocking him, his body refused to react to the impulse to move normally, and Will didn't force it, knowing too well that if he did, that any forced movement right then might turn to him fleeing as swiftly as possible and escalate his needless distress, and that would draw those around him to chase. The thought of that did nothing to settle the alarm that was swiftly consuming his thoughts.

"Mr Graham."

The words cut through the rising panic, and suddenly Will was able to focus on the alpha through the haze of fear, his gaze moving to him at the demand inherent in that voice. Hannibal held his gaze for a long moment, perhaps to reassure himself that Will was indeed paying attention to him and not
merely staring blindly, but there was also something else there, a steadfast reassurance of Hannibal's presence and a reminder of the dedication and promise he had once given to protect him.

"You were wanting to go to the hunting and fishing store," Hannibal continued, "It will be quiet there."

Yes, yes he had. It would be quiet there. A shelter from the too-bright daylight and the gazes of those that he was sure would be staring at the group by now, if for no other reason than the scene that the drunk alpha had caused. The fishing store was close-by and familiar, and he knew without asking that Hannibal would see it secured from intrusion until he could function better. Despite the chill in the air, he was sweating badly now, and he would need a place to calm down before it wore away the scent-blockers and drew a far more dedicated focus from people around them.

Somehow he managed a nod, and it was that small motion that seemed to help unlock the rest of his limbs from their stasis, allowing him to shift where he stood a little, and then to further move one step that turned into another, along the street with the pair once more. Although he didn't look, he could feel Jimmy at his side, slightly behind to guard his back, worried, but not as worried as he had been in the past in similar situations. Will couldn't dedicate enough of his attention right now to figure out why, when he needed everything he had, to focus on putting one step in front of the other in a measured way, his nose buried deep into the soft folds of the scarf, his gaze taking in the likewise measured footsteps of Hannibal in front of them, clearing a path to the shop.

No one stopped them this time, or approached.

The familiar jingle of the bell above the door, and they were inside, and the patina of scents that always frequent the hunting and fishing store quickly surrounded him. There was no one else there except the proprietor, which was a relief, and as the door's lock was clicked shut behind them, along with the open sign being flipped over, Will started to feel a little of the stress ease out of his frame.

"A seat for the gentleman, if you please."

The comment to the proprietor was polite, but there was no real request in the words, civil as they were. Price, he noted, had remained at the door, perhaps to fend off any potential customers, or maybe merely to watch out for Alana and the others.

Mrs Burns was a brusk sort of woman that reminded him somewhat of Timothy Price in her manner, but despite that, a chair was brought without complaint. He didn't have the wherewithal to force himself to smile in gratitude, but he would make sure to let her know he appreciated it at a later date. The chair had been placed in one of the darker, more sheltered corners of the shop, near enough to the counter that he could see all three people from it, and a glass of water was placed down on the corner of a box at his side.

She knew him well enough from his childhood at least not to be surprised that he had become distressed by an outing, having seen various shades of it, better and worse, over the years. He could scent her worry, but even that was muted further, as Hannibal engaged her in conversation to distract.

Hannibal had done this for him before in various situations, first with Jack at his home, and then in later situations with family, and more recently with family acquaintances that had stopped them in the street. Will no longer needed to second-guess or worry about the alpha's self-imposed role, and there was a reassurance in that. Likewise, Jimmy stayed by the door, still within view, but knowing that his presence closer wouldn't do much good right now. Will could scent his concern, but it wasn't overwhelming.

Despite this, he had to put down the glass of water again, because his hands were still shaking too badly to attempt to drink from it without it spilling. His nerves always took him like this, especially
when the situation was over and his body was no longer in an intense state of strain. It always took a while to get over it, and there was no whiskey here to help round the edges off the harsh ripples of jagged panic after an event that disturbed the waters.

There was no whiskey, and he was far from home and the comforts and securities within, but the place was calm and quiet, and the dim lighting and the muted conversation that he had no need to take part in, helped. The scent on the scarf was a reminder though that there were other things available.

"Doctor Lecter."

It took a lot to make the name, or indeed any words pass his lips, but he managed. He could sense the acute sharpening of Hannibal's regard upon him, although he didn't manage to lift his gaze to see it. He found the words stall in his throat once more, so instead he reached out one hand towards him, releasing an equally trembling breath as elegant fingers slid to his own, protected from being too overwhelming by the gloves they both still wore.

They stayed like that for long moments, while Will got used to the feeling of the hand in his own, as well as the reassuring presence of the man whose body now helped block out more of the room. Slowly then, so slowly, he drew Hannibal closer to where he was sitting, closer until the alpha's body was resting against his outer thigh as Will shifted in his seat to give him that space, letting Hannibal block his view of the room entirely.

With a soft sigh, Hannibal's hand still held in his own, wrist turned so he can take in the reassuring scent there, Will let his head rest against the alpha's hip and closed his eyes.

The shop was quiet now, Mrs Burns busying herself with writing; probably accounts. He let himself take in the scent, the stability and reassurance of the alpha beside him that eased the trembling from his limbs. He could trust this, because while Hannibal may challenge some of his beliefs, he didn't think the man would sabotage his calm in a situation like this, especially not when Will could scent the visceral satisfaction of having him lean on him like this, both metaphorically and physically.

A slight shift of the man against him, and he felt Hannibal's other hand come up around the back of his neck, causing him to stiffen at the intimate touch. But it wasn't a caress. The hand lay secure and heavy around the back of his neck, soft dark leather and passive strength protecting a vulnerability instead of exploiting it, and that understanding seemed to leech the tension out of his body until he felt lax and lazy against the soft wool of the man's coat.

How long they remained like that he couldn't say; enough time for his trembling to subside, and for the light outside to have shifted into something slightly darker. Enough time that he felt calm and reassured enough to finally go about getting the various supplies he had been intending on purchasing originally. It did not bypass his attention how Hannibal remained at his side, seemingly interested in what he chose and what he did not, but always between him and the larger part of the room.

"You make a good barrier against the world," Will murmured to him as he picked up some more feathers from the various assortment on offer, the dark of the man's coat currently blocking the view of the counter. He knew Hannibal, as astute as he was, would pick up the gratitude that was hidden inside the somewhat brisk humour.

"I have a very good tailor. I shall be sure to let him know his work was appreciated."

Will glanced up, and he could see the smile around the corners of those eyes, and was warmed by the playfulness there.
"Much can be done with a good tailor, I have found," he said in return, pausing to let his eyes scrape down over those lapels. "The best of those craftsmen are illusionists, turning plain wool into a stylish haven for distressed omegas, while also fending off the winter cold."

He tried to make his gaze return upwards towards those cheekbones, but stalled in the motion, having gotten distracted by the slight quirk of a smile touching those beautiful, cruel lips.

"Quite multitalented, my tailor," There was a slight pause there, and Will found himself waiting, eager, for what the man might say next, what subtle twist of conversation might be offered to amuse them both. It was then with slight disappointment that the subject was much more mundane. "Did you get everything you wished? I can see Ms Bloom making her way across the street."

Will glanced towards the window, through the haze of condensation from the cold outside, but yes, he could just about make out the figures that were currently crossing the street beyond. Trust Hannibal to have been maintaining such vigilance to have spotted them. "Almost," he said, forcing himself to go back to the task, knowing that Alana would inevitably distract him from it, and he didn't want to forget anything, especially considering what they were for.

He picked up a couple more of the fancier feathers, and Hannibal dutifully stepped back so he could let his gaze roam around the shelves more freely, trying to work out if he had forgotten something, before making his way to the front desk.

"Allow me," Will made to reach for his wallet, and paused to look up at the alpha, seeing there the polite smile that hid a deeper need to provide. He nodded and thanked him, stepping back and re-buttoning his coat before turning as the front door was unlocked and Alana entered.

"Will! There you are. Mr Ferris said there was an incident outside. I was so worried! Why didn't you call for the carriage?"

For all that Will's hobby was the fixing of clocks, he had never been great at keeping track of time without them being at hand, and so he had no idea how long since the incident it had been, but it was clearly long enough to show that Nathan had judged the situation dealt with and not told her until she had emerged from the store. Not exactly a situation in which he was in dire peril.

"I didn't need the carriage. Doctor Lecter dealt with it."

Considering his track record for such things, her reaction wasn't all that surprising. It was actually more surprising, honestly, that he had dealt with it this well at all. He let his gaze flicker up to Humphrey and saw the pleased hint in his eyes. Not smug, for he didn't think he had ever seen Humphrey show that, but pleased in the way that he had worried and then found those worries unfounded. At his back, he could feel Hannibal step closer, the hints of his scent becoming more pronounced to his right side, but not too close. He turned his head to look to the alpha, and they shared a brief moment of mutual acknowledgement before Alana once more drew their attention.

"Well, anyway, what a horrible thing to have happened! Mr Ferris said it was an inebriated alpha. Imagine, being drunk at this time of day! Ridiculous! Did you get everything you needed? I went ahead and ordered some new shirts for you from the tailor, but I doubt we will get much more shopping done today. Mrs McCarthy kept us talking for ages! But did you know that Miss Davidson is already picking out her mating celebration dress? She hasn't even been through her first season yet!"

Frankly Will cared as little about Miss Davidson's various purchases as he did about the toxicology of the sewer system, which was to say not at all, but Mrs McCarthy appeared to have reignited Alana's love of gossip, and there was little point in trying to stop her at this stage. He allowed himself
to be guided out of the store, nodding to Mrs Burns on the way out in thanks, before stepping out into the evening air. Alana chattered on as they made their way towards the carriage, with Will barely listening. Most of the shops were indeed closed now, and he felt bad for Jimmy, who never got to go and purchase anything he wanted. Perhaps he could go tomorrow after Alana left again for the city, but he knew the man was likely to still be ill-at-ease with leaving him in the house after the last time. Still, he seemed to be much better lately with Hannibal around, so perhaps it might not be too bad.

The carriage ride home was tedious for being trapped in the enclosed space with little but gossip to distract him, but as they reached the house, and he stepped out after Humphrey, the growing annoyance over the monologue dissipated as the four dogs ran out to greet them, three stopping at him, while Dovano went straight past to Hannibal. Will paused, turning to watch as the alpha got the pup to sit first before petting. Ever so controlled and polite, even in greeting the dogs. Will had no such control, and already had dog hair all over parts of his suit. He didn't care, and from the slight sparkle that he could see in Hannibal's eyes as they met his own, he didn't think the other man did either, being far too pleased by Will's improved mood to disapprove.

"Come on then," Will ended up saying, when the two of them were the last ones outside. "It won't be long until dinner. I guess we had best get back in, and save our tailor's work from being desecrated beyond repair by fur."

Hannibal merely smiled, and politely ushered Will ahead of him into the warmth of the house once more. It might smell of Alana around here right now, but Hannibal still smelled of him, and alongside the man's attendance at his side, that made all the difference in the world.

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_Bloom Estate, Hertfordshire - Friday 11th December, night_

Will woke with a jerk, slamming back into consciousness and staring into the darkness of the bed curtains for long moments before trying to slow his breathing into something more manageable.

Nightmares were not a new thing for him by any stretch of the imagination, but they weren't usually so damn obvious about his worries.

Getting out of bed, he went about the process of stripping it before opening the window and wiping himself down and getting a clean shirt, trying to stop the clutching fear that lingered, despite the logic, not only that it was merely a nightmare, but that Alana was gone from the house, left that morning, and therefore was not dancing around the estate like some nymph, stealing all his suitors.

Not that Will had lots of suitors now, just one, but in the dream there had been many, and each one had turned towards her, like a sirens call, while he had been left alone, bereft. He really needed to get it together, seriously. He couldn't make out the time on the mantle clock, but Hannibal would likely still be up. He found that he needed to make sure the alpha was still there at the estate with him, as ridiculous as that was.

His instincts did not find it ridiculous though, at all.

They had spent time late yesterday evening sitting curled up in the study together, the blanket once more coming of use, and Will found that he wanted that now. He wanted to curl up with the reassuring presence of the alpha, where the warmth of his body made his scent stronger, and where he could be assured that no other omegas were around to try and steal him, nor that Hannibal would stray.

Deciding to forgo a drink for the moment, he made his way along the hallway, Winston and Lizzy
padding after him, sleepy. The hallway still smelled strongly of Alana, and it did little to settle him.

But when he got to the study, it was dark and empty.

Will stood there for long moments, staring into that room, at the sofa where Hannibal always sat, the one that used to smell only of Will. But there was no one there now, and the part of himself that was riding the fear from his nightmares was starting to panic; the imperative to find his alpha, to find him and make sure he stayed found. He hadn't even really considered that Hannibal might not have been there, for every other time he had gotten up from a nightmare he had been. Will tried to calm his irrational fear. It was probably later than usual, and the man had gone to bed. No matter his joking in the past, even Hannibal needed sleep, after all.

He stared into the empty room, at the place where they usually sat together. It smelled of them both. He could try and sit there, try and use that to reassure his instincts, but his feet were moving even before he had fully made the decision to, taking him along the dark corridor towards the guest rooms. Only when he reached the right door did he finally pause.

The wood panelling of the door stood in attendance before him, and he could smell Hannibal inside. His alpha was there, safe, likely asleep.

In many ways he knew that it was expected of him that he should seek out his suitor when he was feeling unsettled, not only of society, but by his biology. He knew as well, that Hannibal would welcome him, no matter what time it was. Yet still he hesitated. It was one thing to become distressed over a situation like had happened in Rosebury, but it was quite another to wake the man up merely because of becoming unsettled over a silly dream like that one had been; childish fears that bore little basis in the current reality. He didn't need to tell him what it was about, of course, but there was a part of him that feared the man would be able to somehow know anyway, that he would see far clearer than another might, and Will's presence would become more tiresome as a result.

He ran a hand through his hair, his gaze flickering from the carpet to the door. Even if Hannibal did somehow know, surely it was better that he knew now, rather than thinking he was signing up for something he wasn't.

Yet the thought of waking him, of disturbing the man who likely got so little sleep as it was, trying to cater to his odd hours, as well as Will's own insecurities over the cause, it made him lose his nerve.

He turned from the door. He would get a glass of water, and then go and sit in the study. It was a good plan, one that was tried and tested. It would be fine. He swallowed back the sudden feeling of unreasonable bereftness, and started to make his way back down the hallway.

The sound of a door opening behind him, stopped him. Hannibal stood there in the shadows of the night, his outline highlighted by candlelight beyond. Will swallowed. There was no three-piece suit now. Hannibal was wearing something softer, less staid, silk pyjamas, Will thought as he stood there frozen. He didn't say anything, neither of them did, a mutual standoff that he thought perhaps neither of them wanted.

Eventually Hannibal drew open the door further, and held out his hand in silent invitation. Will knew without being able to see the details of the alpha's face that it was an invitation on purpose, not because Will wasn't invited before, but because sometimes being given a direction, an excuse to give in, was necessary. Will could turn away now, but in turning away it would be a rejection of the alpha's care, and Hannibal had clearly judged that Will wasn't willing to do that, especially not when he wanted what was being offered in the first place.
Will moved towards him, still hesitant, still skittish. He came close, but didn't take the hand, and was relieved when it was dropped to the side a moment later, out of the way from inadvertent contact. It would have been too much right now, but they both stood there in the doorway until Will moved forward just a touch, enough to nudge his nose in underneath the alpha's jaw to take in the scent there, chasing the elusive but enticing scent until it started to ease some of the tension from him.

After a minute, maybe two, in which some of the sour anxiety had eased, he knew he could walk away without causing offence. He had taken at least what was offered in the short term, and so he could head back through the house and let Hannibal get back to sleep. Instead, he let himself be lead inside, not by touch, but by the slow easing of almost imperceptible movements by the alpha, back into the room. Will was distantly amused at the alpha's tactic of using himself like a lure that Will would want to follow.

He followed, because despite his earlier hesitation, he found he was not willing to step away from the man.

The door shut with a quiet snick behind him, the dogs having already padded inside, and it was that sound, too much like a lock, too much like being trapped suddenly, that unreasonable panic grew claws and started clambering with increasing speed up the inside of his throat.

"Breathe, Will," came the soft murmur, "You are safe. Nothing shall harm you."

He tried to, forcing the air from his body in a shaky, but controlled motion, before inhaling that heady set of pheromones again in the same practiced way. He didn't want this fear, this familiar panic; so incredibly sick of having nothing comforting to turn to because of it.

Breath by breath, the panic eased. Hannibal didn't touch him, didn't reach out as Will knew he must be desperate to, and hid that urge exceptionally well. The reassurance of that, along with that elusive scent of the alpha, eased the tension from his limbs and let him breathe easier once more.

It wasn't just from Hannibal that he could scent it either, for the entire room had been marked, likely ever since he had arrived here two weeks ago. It overlaid the natural smell of the woods and fabrics, the candles and cleaning agents, creating a growing sense of shelter that he had almost forgotten the feel of, from suitors' bed chambers in previous seasons.

Despite the growing laxness from the scent, it was a conscious thing that he allowed himself to be drawn deeper into the haze that it created. Being here now meant that he was agreeing to more than merely a polite scent marking, and he would need that laxness, as he didn't think he would be able to handle the proximity otherwise.

Careful hands maneuvered, with conscientious touches, until he was wrapped in a soft blanket and on the bed, before being laid back upon it. Hannibal didn't loom, he knew better than to make him feel trapped. Although there was often a sense of security when alphas blocked omegas in, sheltering them, Will was still too much on the cusp of being panicked or overwhelmed for it to feel like that yet. That Hannibal seemed to grasp that nuance, one that many had not in the past, was reassuring, and let him lay back and watch while the man got back up and started gathering extra pillows and blankets from the cupboard.

He thought at first that it was merely to bring enough extra to sleep with, but as the alpha continued bringing more than could be generally considered to be needed, he started to understand, with surprised pleasure, that Hannibal was in fact building a nest for them both.

Nests were usually only made by omegas who were on the cusp of their heat, although to a lesser extent the curtained beds made a sort of stand-in. He might have considered telling Hannibal that he
needn’t bother, except he could clearly see, with each new pillow that the alpha put down, just so, tweaked until it was sitting exactly how the man wanted, that Hannibal was gaining a rather vast amount of satisfaction from the activity.

It amused and warmed him, watching him bringing over yet another armful of them, far more than were usually left in guest rooms. Will turned and drew in a breath from one of the ones already placed alongside him, and yes, they had all been scent-marked, enough for him to understand that the scent had been reapplied every day or two, so it didn’t fade. The thoughtful preparation made him shift a little on the bed with satisfaction, getting settled more, adding his own scent to the pillows close by as well when Hannibal’s back was turned.

Eventually though, when all the different layers of pillows and blankets had been placed to Hannibal’s satisfaction, Will was relaxed enough that the smooth addition of the alpha into the nest was not a jarring experience. Already surrounded by Hannibal’s scent, layers of it that overlaid everything around him, the proximity of him next to Will seemed right, an additional layer of the nest, another security between him and the world.

Will watched him with heavy-lidded eyes as he settled himself, Hannibal drawing up a blanket to cover them both a little more, before relaxing down. He could see that Hannibal wanted to lay at least partially atop him, to shield him further, but had contented himself with the preparations put in place instead. That restraint was impressive, as most of what the alpha did was. Safely cocooned in the nest, and the blanket that was still wrapped around him, Will nudged closer, tucking himself under the alpha’s chin, feeling the heat of his body, and, after a short time, the careful weight of an arm wrapping over him, tweaking the nest a little closer to Will’s back before that arm settled around his waist.

It felt good. It felt right, and a soft sigh of contentment passed his lips. It wasn’t long at all until the scents and reassurances of Hannibal’s preparations and presence lulled him into slumber once more.

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Hannibal lay awake for a long time after William’s breathing had evened out into deep slumber. It was a strange sensation, having someone in bed alongside him, leaving him more alert than he would otherwise have been. He suspected too, that it was not merely the oddness of the situation that kept him awake like this, but the desire, the need, to watch over what was his.

As the hours passed, William gradually shifted and nuzzled in closer against him, his nose once more seeking out under his jaw for his glands before sighing softly and falling deeper asleep, his arm now wrapped around Hannibal’s waist. It was a sign of trust, but also of safety that omegas did that, trusting that their alpha would notice anything amiss, and should something happen, the omega would be able to scent the sudden change in the alpha’s scent, even if they didn’t move, and wake immediately, not panicked, but certainly awakening swiftly. Having Will breathing him in like this, it felt like triumph.

Everything was going according to plan.
Audaciousness and Humbled

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*Bloom Estate, Hertfordshire - Monday 14th December, afternoon*

Around them, the air was crisp and cold, sending their breath streaming in small clouds like the ghosts of summer. Beside him, William was wrapped up in his coat and gloves, as well as the scarf he had given him several days before, carefully re-marked now to remove any taint of the panic from that day. There hadn't been much, to be honest, as very little had seeped through the scent blockers, but it was always better to be careful. It would not do for William to be wandering around with a reminder of unpleasant events, after all, certainly when it wasn't useful.

He watched as William threw the stick again, and the dogs raced off after it. Even young as they were, they were still fast, and certainly enjoying the chilled air of their walk as much as he was. They had taken to walking the dogs in the early afternoon once William had woken, a time when they could be together, and William could discuss anything that was troubling him, or things that had to be dealt with that day. It was a pleasing solution to his own now dwindling feelings of idleness here at the country estate, while at the same time adding the pleasing result of planning the day out with his omega.

"Mrs Keeley said that we have enough flour and grains," William was saying, "but especially as we don't know how long the estate will be cut off, that erring on the side of caution, and getting in more from the butchers would likely be wise. I just don't know if the butcher will have anything of significance left by now."

He hummed a little, considering this, hampered as he was by the fact that this was neither his estate, nor an area he knew well enough to recommend a specific alternative supplier. "And yet he will have contacts with others that may have an extra pig or cow they might consider relinquishing under the circumstances. Making an inquiry to the fact causes no particular strain on anyone."

As the dogs ran back towards them, he noted how a couple of their ears twitch towards the direction of the gate, Sargybinis coming to a stop and looking in that direction as well. His own hearing wasn't as acute as the dogs', but even he could hear the sound of horses faintly now, three of them.

Three horses and no sounds of a carriage, moving at a relaxed pace, was likely to mean callers. This was unfortunate, for they were currently in a part of the estate grounds that the riders would pass on the way to the house, and therefore likely stop to converse with them, something that he has been careful to shield William from having to perform up until now. There would be no way to avoid it either, for they are too far distant from the treeline, or the house and outbuildings to offer shelter in time before they were likely to be spotted and hailed. It was minorly vexing, for William seemed to be in a good mood this afternoon, and he had hoped for that to continue unabated by outside influences.

"Ah, blast!" Dear William had spotted the figures on horseback now too, and he watched as William checked the distances much as he had, before having to resign himself to the forthcoming meeting.

"Indeed." He shared a slightly sardonic smile with him in camaraderie, before calling the dogs so they wouldn't be tempted to get too close to the horses.

"I think that's Mr Acer on the dark brown horse, son of Ms Hampton. They live on an estate a few
miles from here. I don't recognise the other two though."

He judged William's level of interest in whatever conversation was forthcoming from the three to be minimal at best, especially considering his prior desire to escape the possibility of it at all. Sadly there was little he could do to assuage it at this stage.

"Then hopefully they shall have little reason to linger, and we may finish our walk in peace."

In truth, from what he could see from the three, he doubted it would be that simple. Even from this distance, he could tell that the two strangers were both alphas, and from their general demeanor, thought a great deal of themselves, which never tended to be a good sign for levels of courtesy. He did note that one of the two strangers' horses seemed slightly too large for him, and likely to have been borrowed from the Hamptons. Visitors then, house guests come along on an otherwise unremarkable task, possibly out of boredom, but equally as likely, because they had heard of dear William.

As they got closer, Hannibal having moved himself so that William was in the lee of his form for the forthcoming interruption, he noted the small tells on Mr Acer of unease, having now seen them there, compared to the acute delight from the other two. It did not bode well for a brief and uneventful meeting. Opportunists then, looking for an introduction or more. He kept his appearance polite and amiable, but his distaste for the behaviour tinted the edges of his mood.

"Mr Graham, I did not expect to see you today," Mr Acer was saying as the three came to a stop. Apology there, by someone who was aware of the imposition taking place and rather uneasy over it. "We were just here to deliver an invitation from my mother. This is Mr Goulden, and Mr Ellison who are staying with us currently."

Hannibal rather expected that the man had hoped not to see William at all, so he would not have to make the introduction, but such was the way of things. The man was very low ranked as alphas went, and had likely been forced to take the pair, either overruled either by a family member, or by the visitors themselves, a situation that might safeguard him at least a little from Hannibal's irritation. Beside him, he could pick up the minute changes in William's scent, one that denoted a sort of forced forbearance to the situation. Resigned, but annoyed at having to put up with it. Unlike the depth of scent of his distress in the past, it was rather mild. The visitors would certainly not pick up on it.

"We were just taking the dogs for a walk. This is Dr Lecter, my suitor this year."

As Mr Acer went about getting off his horse in order to bring over the invitation, and thus have a reason to leave as soon as possible, he could see that the other two eyeing him. They were not hiding their auras certainly, and it tainted the air rudely with pressure, perhaps seeing if he would retaliate at the imposition. They, like others, would likely take his stoicism as a sign of weakness or lack of dominance. Men like these tended to be unable to think outside their own sphere of behaviour. Still, for all that he had expected it in some form at least, he did not expect the callous disregard of propriety after their initial introduction offered by Mr Goulden.

"I know we are all fairly far from the city, Mr Graham, but surely you can do better. The season is still young enough that you need not be resigned to spending it with someone so old. Come to the party and we can show you that there is far more life left in the season to enjoy."

Hannibal was not the only one shocked by the audacity of the statement; still beside his horse, Mr Acer appeared aghast at the rudeness, though perhaps not entirely surprised. In contrast, William seemed only irritated by the discourtesy, possibly having seen plenty of such posturing in the past. Still, the statement needed an answer, and he was certainly not willing to be overlooked by such an insignificant gnat in this circumstance.
"Perhaps you should keep your opinions to yourself, Sir. It was neither needed nor requested."

This only prompted a smirk from the man, who was still sitting atop his horse, feeling himself superior. He was young, and the young were always more brash, but the rudeness inherent in his speech went a step beyond that. He could pick out the slight behavioural tells that showed that the man was falling victim to rather typical alpha posturing behaviour while in the presence of an unmated omega; the puffing of his chest, the flexing of his hands, his posture altering to put himself at better advantage. Young enough and confident enough to trust in his success, the man was ignoring the larger threat that Hannibal posed, possibly intentionally as a slight, as well as the growing signs of irritation from dear William at the behaviour.

Beside him, he noted the slight shift in William's body, the one he was used to seeing him do before replying to something of import. Speech, at times, was difficult for his omega, and it was almost as if the small movements helped him overcome the hesitance towards speaking. Perhaps it was a reminder to himself that he could leave afterwards, or merely that he existed outside of his own thoughts. Whatever it was, the man didn't pick up on it, instead merely responding to Hannibal's comment.

"Getting worried are you? Easy enough to be the only suitor if there is no one else around. What a pity that I don't intend to let that be the case."

On its own, the statement would be enough, but it came with a blast of aggressive challenge in the man's aura and presence, one that Hannibal didn't doubt he had used in the past to get his way. It was vastly discourteous, especially when in the presence of bystanders. At his side, he could feel William stiffening in response to the threat, and he knew that this interaction has gone on long enough. It needed to be put a stop to quickly, so that it didn't end up as more fodder for William's nightmares.

In the background, Mr Acer was stuttering a little in his attempt to get the man to stop his behaviour, only getting a rather backhanded comment of dismissal of such concerns. Despite this now being a situation of challenge between Hannibal and this man, it said much that Mr Acer would attempt to diffuse the situation despite the peril of attempting it. Hannibal could respect that, even if he had no intention of ever seeing Mr Acer again. That in itself was compliment though, considering the circumstances, even if no one else saw it.

He knew he had to be careful though in responding to this challenge, despite it being given by someone as clearly unworthy as this. Usually he would be ill inclined to bother with such a thing unless it was in private, and plan something more suitable for a later stage, but he found that in the presence of William, where the challenge was related to Hannibal's claim on him, it had roused a deeper more dangerous part of himself, and he could not let that be seen too much. It wouldn't do to scare people more than intended, especially not William. It seethed though, beneath the surface of his civil guise, far too eager to tear this man apart.

He let himself drift forward. It was a motion that was well practiced in seeming unthreatening as well as disguising just how fast he could move. Not having removed himself from the horse, the man appeared confident in the advantage it gave him, and foolish in that assumption.

"You should listen to those who know better."

He offered this as a final warning. Usually he would only offer one, but he made an exception in this case in deference towards Mr Acer whom they came with, someone who had far more sense and courtesy than this one did. His comment was met only with a sneer, and Hannibal had to lament that this man had already formally declared his intention to court William this season, and was thus protected in part by Hannibal's own gift to his omega, no matter how much he wished to carve him open for his discourtesy.
That did not mean, however, that he could not teach the man a lesson.

Having eased himself over in a slow walk towards the man's horse, he suddenly grabbed him in a movement far too fast for him to respond to, and hauled him down off his horse and onto the ground, taking little care for lessening that particular impact. Despite the challenge that had been offered, the action seemed to have been so unexpected that he managed to get him pinned face down on the ground with little effort, the sole of his shoe pressed firmly down on the back of his neck, one hand holding onto the reins so the horse wouldn't bolt.

Staying aware of what went on around him, he let himself have this moment, staring down at this irredeemable waste of air, having to hold onto his impulses with a tighter grip than he typically found necessary. Usually it was no problem for him to keep himself restrained, especially when around those that might see more than they were comfortable with, but he found that the challenge by someone as unworthy as this in front of his omega had ignited something dangerously exhibitionist in his instincts, the need to prove to him, and those others, exactly what they were tangling with. It was difficult to withhold, and only a lifetime of self-control kept his foot a steady, but currently unfatal, pressure on the alpha beneath it.

The man struggled a bit, briefly, but in his tumble his leg had been caught in one of the stirrups and kept it raised behind him, ungainly and trapped, and as he made to try and dislodge Hannibal's shoe from him, found it only pressed deeper, mashing his face to the dirt more firmly until it elicited a pained sound, one that was bordering on panic when he started to fully realize just how precarious his life was right then.

Hannibal let his gaze move from the piece of refuse under his shoe, towards the other visiting alpha, but found him frozen there on his horse, rather than aggressive, seemingly uncertain what to do with this turn of events. The threat from them both had been adequately dissipated. No one moved.

"You may deliver your invitation now, Mr Acer" Hannibal said calmly to him, as if he wasn't standing there with the other alpha's face ground into the dirt under his foot, no hint of the violence he was fighting against enacting showing in his tone.

Mr Acer made his way over cautiously, his posture and movements fairly screaming placative submission, despite being an alpha, as he handed the envelope over to Hannibal. He was clever enough not to attempt to get any nearer to William to do so. Hannibal took it and passed it over to his omega without taking his gaze away from the three callers, even as Mr Acer retreated back towards his horse, apologies that were not his to make touching the air.

From behind him, he did not hear William opening the envelope, but his omega did speak, his voice seemingly firm and calm, despite the nervousness and agitation Hannibal could scent.

"I'm afraid that under the circumstances, I won't be able to make it to your mother's gathering, Mr Acer. Please pass on my regrets to her."

"Of course. I'm so sorry Mr Graham. Doctor Lecter."

He watched as Mr Acer moved around his horse, perhaps as much about having a shield between him and the situation as it was not wishing to turn his back on Hannibal in order to mount up. The man had good instincts, despite the fact that Hannibal was sure nothing of his inner beast was showing obviously, other than the evidence under his foot.

The delightful scent of fear came up from the man on the ground as Mr Acer mounted up. He was right to fear, being trapped as he was in the repercussions of his behaviour. If the pair left him there, Hannibal would be well within his rights to continue the challenge as he saw fit, and he didn't doubt
that the man, this Mr Goulden, had by now come to the realization of that danger. Likewise, he could merely let the man go, or rather let his grip on the reins go, and allow the horse to follow its stablemates back along the estate road, dragging this inferior specimen along the ground behind it, still caught as he was in the stirrup. That thought must certainly have occurred to him as well, for that low level fear turned to sharp panic as the horse shifted slightly at the signs of imminent departure.

Yet while that might have been satisfying in its own way, he knew it would only upset William, and so after a long enough pause to let the man stew in his own fear, he lifted his shoe and stepped back, watching as the man's most pressing action was to release his foot. All of them watched in silence as he struggled with it until the boot came off and he became a rather ungainly heap on the ground. The dirt, scratches and heavy bruising that was already showing on his face from the impact earlier, pleased Hannibal. Visual reference that would be difficult to explain away with any grace.

Despite this, the urge to rend the man apart, to pull out his insides, to tear out his tongue and then feed it to William, it was strong, made all the worse by the fact that this was not a delay of recompense as many such insults might have been. There would be no future hunt for this man, not unless he transgressed against them, and that made Hannibal's temper and urges far more difficult to control. William must have sensed at least something of his mood, for there was a light brush of his glove against the back of Hannibal's own, and then again against his wrist.

William need not fear though, he was letting this man go. He would let him go.

He watched as the man finally hauled himself up into the saddle, his actions and posture showing clearly that the outcome of the challenge had worked its way into the man's hindbrain. There was no bluster now. He couldn't even seem to raise his eyes to any of them.

Hannibal still wanted to tear the man apart.

At his back, he could feel William moving closer, seemingly unsatisfied in some way by the situation. He didn't want William closer to them, and yet he would not reject the closeness that now presented itself, as his omega slid himself in against his side, before nuzzling in against his throat.

He continued to watch the three alphas as his arm automatically curved around his omega as he sought reassurance. It rendered his right arm far less useful in the context of battle, but he wasn't unaware of what William was doing right now, his body a weight against his side, drawing his instincts more towards providence than hostility. Omegas almost never showed such affection in public unless it was to calm their feelings of insecurity with their alpha's pheromones. But more than that, William was making a statement with it, of that Hannibal was certain, that it was Hannibal that he has turned to, not anyone else, was a clear preference that would be impossible to ignore.

As he stood there, his omega in his arms and scenting him in public view, that knowledge made his instincts very satisfied indeed.

"I believe you have worn out your welcome. Please remove yourselves from the estate."

As he watched them, aware of everything going on around them, from the way that the horses shifted, the breeze in the chilled air, and the presence of Mr Layton and Mr Price by the house, the dogs quiet and alert closeby, so too was he aware of how the presence of dear William in his arms, the soft breath at his throat, had brought his more volatile instincts to heel. The desire to stop them, to move and drag two of the visiting alphas from their horses and wipe their existences from the living world was more of a passing thought now, rather than a need so strong he had to actively restrain his reactions.

He turned his head a little more towards his William, letting his purr come forth to ease him, while keeping the retreating alphas in view at all times. The surge of contentment and pleasure that William
had come to his arms, voluntarily, despite his hesitation to initiate close contact, was nearly as great as the vindicated satisfaction over the understanding that his omega had called his anger back. With soft, careful movements, merely by sliding into his arms, dear William had eased and manipulated his instincts, both the cause of the strain, as well as the solution. He had always known that William would be the right choice for him, and the proof of that was a heady, resplendent thing.

Holding William like that, loose but secure, he revelled in the trust his omega was showing, especially considering the various struggles he suffered from. That William trusted him with his safety like this, allowing himself to become lost in his scent while in a semi-public area, especially after an altercation, was vastly pleasing.

He let his gaze turn towards the house, and sure enough, there were Mr Layton and Mr Price. He inclined his head a little towards them both, enough to show an acknowledgement of their presence and the fact that he had things well in hand, but not enough to dislodge dear William from his place against him. Mr Layton returned the gesture, before moving from the building towards the stables, likely going to lock the estate gates for the day, despite the early hour, and check the boundary. Mr Price offered a bright but relieved smile, and while he lingered a few moments longer, before he retreated back into the warmth of the house. It really took very little to ease the man.

Eventually he had deemed enough time to have passed to reassure his omega's instincts, enough time for him to track Mr Layton as he rode towards the gate, for the dogs to resume their play in the frost-coated grass, and for William's breathing and scent to become easy and lax. He let his purr fade, and after a couple of minutes shifted slightly where he stood, enough to help nudge William away from the mental daze he had been taking refuge in. It wouldn't do for him to catch a cold from staying out in the wind too long, after all.

In almost sleepy motions, something that Hannibal was pleased to have seen first-hand several times now for comparison, William became more aware, and then seemed to force himself to step away; not, he thought, because of dissatisfaction, but more because he'd likely had as much close contact as he could handle in a day.

Neither of them spoke about the incident, although he didn't doubt they were both considering it as they resumed their walk with the dogs. There was little need to, in fact. William's scent wasn't conflicted as he had thought it might be after returning to himself, and he had to consider that perhaps Ms Katz was correct, and that his William was indeed likely to respond quite well to careful signs of power. It would be something he would use sparingly then, for best effect.

"A quiet meal tonight, perhaps," he said to William as they made their way past the stables towards the greenhouse, "The west facing sitting room is quiet lovely in the early evening."

He drank in the way that William looked over towards him, those clever eyes taking in far more than most. There were no words there, but the incline of his head in acquiescence was more than enough of an answer after the careful consideration of the supposition. He smiled, letting the pleasure of this show more keenly. It really was a beautiful day.

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Later that evening Will lay on his bed, staring up at the shadowed canopy above him. His thoughts had been preoccupied since the imposition of the visiting alphas to the estate, and certainly with good reason. That event, no matter who he had been with, would have caused his thoughts to run in that direction, circling around it over and over, feeling for the jagged points that wounded, sufficient that he could know them well enough to avoid them in future. But this was a different sort of fixation, because for all that the situation had been uncomfortable and set his nerves off, it hadn't done so nearly as much as he would have expected. His thoughts were far more captivated by the very fact
that even with direct physical confrontation right in front of him, he had not felt threatened as he usually would have, no matter if it was pointed in his direction or not.

Perhaps it was because the challenge, when it came, was almost laughable considering what he knew. A man like that was of no threat to someone like Hannibal, for although he had never before seen him act with any sort of violence, he had felt the touch of his aura, like a breathing, living thing, one that gave hint to something huge and monstrous, and he had seen the ease with which he had lifted those timbers in the garden when helping Mr Murrell. A challenge from someone as young and inexperienced as that had stood no chance. Mr Goulden had not been a threat, no matter that his aura had been offering that supposition.

It was becoming more of a certainty that his instincts trusted Hannibal in this respect, for he had found himself standing there watching as Hannibal had walked slowly and gracefully towards that man's horse, and had not felt any greater implication of distress. Rather, he had been fascinated with the way he moved, gliding almost, deceptive in the calmness. The waters hadn't rippled, the pool running too deep, until suddenly it was over. A flash of movement that even he hadn't fully followed, and Mr Goulden was on the ground, whimpering.

Was that calm sense of surety how other omegas generally felt every day? He had seen it often enough in others to recognize it, but had never truly felt that same level of ease, even when with his family. Too much history there, perhaps.

It was the aftermath though that really held his attention, and had him laying awake considering it.

Usually he would never voluntarily have approached an alpha after such a situation where the tensions were running high. No matter that Hannibal's aura and scent gave him little to go on, for both had remained hidden, he had still felt something stirring, as if the monster in the lake, having risen to deal with the threat, had remained just under the surface, more restless than before. There hadn't been the sense of it when they had been accosted in town by that drunk, but it had been there after the challenge, pitiful as it had ended up being in the end. Hannibal's own instincts, perhaps coupled by such a challenge in front of his intended mate, had not settled easily, no matter how calm he had appeared afterwards.

It had been that fact which had driven Will to reach out to him, to try and offer a slight distraction, a slight reassurance of his presence there at Hannibal's side. He had tried touching his hand, and then the soft skin under the cuff of his coat, but while he knew the man had been very aware of him, it hadn't settled that feeling of danger to those around that were not Will.

That Will understood the threat was a protective and possessive one had helped him, because for all that he felt reassured by that focused attentiveness towards a perceived threat, he hadn't wanted that beast to break the surface once more, knowing that it would likely be a far more violent rendering than the almost polite way it had dealt with first. He hadn't wanted that, and so he had forced himself to move, to ease in against Hannibal's side despite his own hestiance towards contact, knowing himself safe from the threat that Hannibal posed, and carefully nudged his way into his arms.

His own calm had been a tentative thing, but the arm that curved around him had remained loose enough not to feel trapped, and he had made himself breathe in the scent of the man, trying to catch any hint of what he knew was there, just under the surface. It was as much knowledge of alphan instincts, as well as a release of his own that had him letting his body lean heavier against the alpha, a small measure of trust there, that Hannibal would not let him fall.

Slowly, slowly, he could feel that danger start to recede, calmed and reassured of Will's presence at his side and in his arms. It had relaxed Will more, not only that the situation was resolving itself, but that he had been able to do that.
Laying now in his room hours later, he still remembered the feeling of quiet triumph, that he had managed to deal with the situation; a strange sense of power at directing such strength. Hannibal had purred for him, clearly pleased to have him there, rather than feeling thwarted at being held back from a fight. It had felt good, so good, to be listened to, even if it was without words, and that feeling had lingered throughout the evening as they had shared a meal together before retreating to the study for the rest of the day.

Turning over, he drew a pillow towards him, then gave in and grabbed the scarf that still held Hannibal's scent on it, burying his nose into the soft wool. It retained the scent, but nothing like the heady, soothing pulse at the alpha's throat. After a long moment, he threw the covers back and slid from behind his curtains, before slipping from his room and going to his alpha's. He was welcomed silently, the pleasure warm and mellow in Hannibal's scent as he tucked himself in against his throat and let himself be drawn to bed once more.

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*Bloom Estate, Hertfordshire - Wednesday 16th December, afternoon*

The trip back to the city was a sedate one, which had as much to do with the worsening weather conditions as it was through planning. With the storm due to hit the next day, returning to town couldn't be put off any longer, no matter how much Will might wish it otherwise. The time at the country estate had been a pleasing break from city life, no matter that a hefty amount of self examination had been necessary.

Will was travelling back in Hannibal's carriage with him as well as Jimmy, Humphrey rode alongside, while Mr Hunt, who had ridden to the estate after receiving the request for his presence, drove it. Their own smaller carriage had been left with Andrew at the estate in case they needed it to transport larger supplies after the roads had been cleared. Will would be travelling back to Hannibal's home initially, and he found himself strangely eager to take in the house that he had not explored much in the past.

Jimmy had been entirely content on the journey, both cheerful and relaxed, and Will couldn't help but think that it was in some way to do with the noticeable trust he had in Hannibal's presence. The entire carriage was suffused by his scent after all, and much like it had an effect on Will, Jimmy too was affected, albeit in a different way.

They chatted on and off, Hannibal pleased, it seemed, to either engage them in discussion or to sit in silence, showing no signs of being discontented or irritated by the conversation, even at the sillier comments that Jimmy, in his laxity, made. It was nice, Will decided, as he let himself relax in the seats as they travelled, an extension of the peace they had carved for themselves during their time away.

They were spared much of the traffic and bustle of the city by way of the circuitous route that Mr Hunt took them on to Hannibal's home, likely by design, and Will could only be grateful for that. It was already a bit jarring, being surrounded by so many buildings and scents of the city, not many of them pleasant, all of them invasive in their own ways. By the time they arrived outside Hannibal's home, Will was glad to be escaping into the relative peace of the building, waving as Humphrey headed back to their home before allowing himself to be ushered inside along with Jimmy.

It had surprised him, just how easily Hannibal had accepted the other alpha around. Although Jimmy wasn't a dominant presence, nor was it that unusual even at this stage to have a family alpha around while visiting, it seemed almost like it was an assumed situation that Jimmy would be there. It helped settle a little of his nerves, if for no other reason than knowing it would ease Jimmy's own anxiety by being allowed to stay close. Perhaps Hannibal had guessed that, or perhaps he was just far more used
to having unbonded alphas around, considering what he had said of where he grew up.

"Would you like some time to settle, before dinner?"

Will looked towards Hannibal as he spoke, before hanging up his own coat. Honestly, even though they had just finished spending hours sitting in the carriage, he found that the idea wasn't a bad one. He had thought, before, to have a look around the house, but now that the suggestion had been made, he could see the logic in it.

"That would be good, thank you."

"Of course. Let me show you upstairs then, where you can avoid much of the bustle."

Up the stairs they went, and he had to admit a certain amount of curiosity. The rooms he had thus far seen were mostly public rooms, and he had to wonder whether he might learn more from seeing something more private. Should it even be considered more private to someone like Hannibal, who had clearly intended on him ending up in such a room? A man so meticulous and controlled would likely have left little to chance, and yet even such planned gestures might let him learn more regardless.

Various guest rooms were pointed out, as well as a sitting room done in turquoise and gold, but they stopped in none of these, merely continuing on until they reached a different door, and even before it was opened he knew that it was Hannibal's bedchamber. Many people would mark their doors, usually alphas, so that someone didn't accidentally enter the wrong room, but this was clearer than most, especially considering how mild and polite the alpha's scent usually was; almost not there at all. No, this was an almost intimidating sort of scent, even light as it was compared to the usual. It warned a visitor that they had best have been invited before considering entering, and it gave Will a little frisson of sensation, made by the understanding that he was about to enter a place that a strong alpha guarded. It was not an unpleasant feeling, but did make his heart beat a little faster in anticipation.

"I see to my own chambers, so you will not be disturbed," Hannibal said as he opened the door and stepped aside to let Will in, making him feel corralled and channeled into the space, but not in a bad way.

As Will moved inside, he was unable to keep his gaze from straying around the room. It was done in greens and browns, which actually surprised him, having perhaps expected something brighter, more vibrant, or at least more typically alphan. Although, should he have? Hannibal did seem to enjoy bucking trends, but this was his private space, even from the betas in the household it seemed, and was muted, tasteful and earthy rather than ostentatious. What dominated the room though was the bed.

It stood in the center of the room by one wall, a generous four poster ebony creation, topped by quilted bedspreads and folded down blankets in dark forest green and brown that matched the room's decor, with curtains pulled back and secured at the head. But what really drew the eye were the ebony panels on the sides with flowers and foliage painted upon them in clusters and garlands. The panels were perhaps a foot high around all four sides but one, where it had been let down by hinges.

"You will not be as familiar with the style, I think," Hannibal said, having noted his preoccupation, from where he was moving Will's travelling case through to what he presumed was the dressing room, before the man returned a moment later, "Curtains are not typically used where I grew up, both because they offer little in the way of security, but also because they block the view of the room from the alpha."
"I think most of the time the curtains are more for matters of warmth than security, especially in winter. It would be strange sleeping without them."

Will watched from where he was standing beside one of the corners of that bed, as Hannibal knelt beside the hearth to start the fire there to warm the room, all the wood and kindling already in place, prepared in advance and waiting.

"And yet you seemed not to mind their lack in my bed when last we were together."

The words held a sort of self-satisfied smile to them, even though the alpha's mouth hadn't quirked. The observation startled him, and he watched as the flickers of flame caught and gathered in the hearth before Hannibal rose, setting the guard in place in front it so errant sparks wouldn't pose a threat to the carpeting. It was true, he realized, he hadn't noticed the lack of bed curtains back in Hannibal's room at the country estate, but now he thought about it, the bed curtains hadn't been closed. It had been dark, perhaps that was the reason.

Seemingly content with his work here, the fire and Will's understanding, Hannibal moved to the door.

"Feel free to explore and mark as much as you like. I shall come and find you before dinner."

With that he left, and Will regarded the closed door for long moments. He had expected to feel some sort of restlessness with that door closed, even trapped in that space that smelled only of the alpha and whatever muted scents he had allowed to reside there, but as he stood there, his gaze staying on that closed door, breathing in the room, he found instead that it felt far more of a security than an ill-fitting coat he might have imagined. The air seemed almost thick with the scent of the man, years of marking laid atop each other to create a room that was so utterly Hannibal's that it was a wonder he was able to sleep anywhere else.

While he knew that an alpha would react to his own scented room far differently to an omega would their own, there was still a reassurance in it for them, especially in a room that was devoid of the scent of others. The slightest of changes would bring an alpha awake immediately, but allow him to sleep deeper. Had Hannibal managed to rest adequately at the country estate, even with the scent marking in his rooms there, when the family betas routinely cleaned and saw to the rooms? That Will was not only being allowed inside this room, but encouraged to mark it himself, something that he knew the alpha would pick up on for months in a room like this, even if he never returned here again, was a deep sort of compliment, and illuminating.

Forcing himself to move, he headed into the dressing room where his case had been left. Although he wouldn't be staying here tonight, they had agreed it would be useful to have some of Will's clothes here, as he would be visiting and staying over more as the days moved inevitably towards his heat.

The room was large for a dressing room, an arc of fitted wardrobes in a horse-shoe shape, as well as a dressing table with mirror, and a counter where Will's case now rested. There were large mirrors, and a window that lit the room in the late afternoon light, filtered through muslin for privacy. Will let himself move to open cupboards, knowing full well that Hannibal would be able to track his explorations later by the minute amounts of oils from his fingers. He could imagine the man's clever eyes holding that curiosity he had seen hints of, as he wandered through his rooms, seeing what Will had noticed, and what he had not.

What Will found, when he started on the left nearest the window, was a wardrobe that was filled with suits. Not exactly surprising, but the amount of them was, perhaps. Each one was placed exactly
apart in neat rows, with drawers at the bottom that held matching socks, cufflinks, cravats and pocket squares. There was an almost forbidden sense of excitement at seeing something so private, even though it had been allowed. He had known that the man was neat, but the meticulous order of the wardrobe showed just how much pleasure and satisfaction Hannibal truly got from such things.

Closing those doors, he moved along, finding more casual clothing, trousers and sweaters, less formal shirts and cardigans. Colour, he noted, was not something the alpha skimped on, being almost as vibrant as some omegas could be. A crimson sweater drew his attention, and he couldn't help but reach out to touch the wool. No, not wool, far too soft. Cashmere perhaps. He restrained himself from bringing the arm of it up to rub against his cheek, no matter how much he wanted to.

The wardrobe in the center held all manner of bedding items, sheets, blankets, pillows. A lot of pillows in fact, and he had a visceral memory of the man having placed a similar amount of them in the nest he had made back at the country estate. Leaning forward, yes, each of them were similarly scent-marked, although faded a bit now from time away. He didn't doubt that they wouldn't stay that way for long.

It was a rare treat that he got to see such physical evidence of a person's personality and character as he did now, each new cupboard, drawer and box offering its own insights, like being offered an exciting glimpse of a secret. It was with an almost playful anticipation that he went to the next wardrobe, wondering what might be inside. More suits perhaps, or perhaps clothing that had been brought from his homeland?

He opened the door to it, and stared for long moments. It was entirely empty.

Opening the ones beside it, he found that all of them were likewise empty on this side of the room. It took him an almost embarrassing amount of time to understand that they were there, waiting, for when Hannibal had a mate who would need space for their clothes. For Will's clothes, if things went Hannibal's way. It was a clear reminder that although this space was so very much Hannibal's, much like he had been invited to scent mark, so too had it always been here, waiting for the time when another would share it.

Standing looking at that empty wardrobe left him feeling oddly vulnerable. The enjoyment of satiating his curiosity, fracturing, at the reminder of wishes and expectations, ones that he had never been able to fulfill in the past. He had never been able to be the mate that they hoped for, and beds and dressing rooms, cupboards and wardrobes were likewise soon empty once more of his belongings, returned to his family home along with him, where he always ended up.

No, he could not allow those thoughts. Not here and now when he had no scent blockers on, Hannibal having encouraged him to forgo it for the journey. He didn't want to taint the room with his low mood, knowing the man would be forced to suffer it whenever he came in here later. Bad enough to be a passing scent, worse if he allowed it to grow claws and dig in.

He turned his gaze away, forcefully, towards something, anything, to stop his mind from going further down that track. He stared at his case, still sitting there, waiting to be unpacked. No matter that it might be temporary, it would do no good to leave the clothes in there. Hannibal, he knew, would not appreciate the untidiness of having a case left out long term, and so he forced himself to move, unlocking it and trying to focus only on the practical task of moving the clothes from it into the wardrobe nearest.

Honestly, it didn't take long, and he looked at the wardrobe now, his clothes hanging there, with some changes of underwear and suchlike all tucked away out of sight, and he felt a little better. It didn't seem so cavernous and empty now with familiar clothes as well as his scent lightly mingled throughout. He wondered, momentarily, what Hannibal would have done if Will had been used to...
having a beta dress him, when these rooms were devoid of anyone's presence but Hannibal. Many omegas tended towards taking help, especially if they favoured more complex attire, but the thought was dismissed almost as soon as it came to mind. Hannibal would, of course, have taken great pleasure in helping him dress. There would have been no need for a beta. He could imagine it all too clearly; those precise, careful gestures, the meticulous attention to detail. Oh yes, Hannibal would likely love dressing him, of that he didn't doubt.

Setting the case out of the way, he moved back through to the bedroom once more, intent on finding something else to distract him until the lingering mood had dissipated enough to relax again. It was a familiar sort of dance with himself, fending off a turn of his mind and emotions, when allowing it to linger was detrimental, not only to others, but also himself.

Across the room, his gaze found portraits, and he let himself wander over that way, eager to see what Hannibal's family looked like.

There were several pictures there, grouped together on the wall, but one was larger than the others, done in richly coloured oils while most of the others were sketches, drawing the eye to the pair in it. It was set in the traditional pose of the omega sitting, relaxed, with an alpha behind them, watchful and protective.

He didn't need the plaque at the bottom to tell him that this was Hannibal's sister, for the likeness between them was stark, although she had far more open friendliness and playfulness captured in her gaze than he was used to seeing on Hannibal. Younger too, although he had to remind himself that it was likely having been done before Hannibal had moved country. Here, she was a teenager, although hints of her maturity could be seen. Already she was stunning, and Will had no trouble understanding just how much of an impression she would have made, had she come to London during courting season. He found himself profoundly glad that she was Hannibal's sister, and not a potential rival for his affections.

The sheer friendliness of her gaze towards the viewer, one that drew the attention, it wasn't something that he could imagine someone as possessive and protective as Hannibal being okay with in his own bedchamber, unless the artist was someone of whom he was also at least indulgently fond of. Or, he amended, as his gaze sought the bottom corner of the painting, himself.

There it sat, yet another proof of Hannibal's varying and abundant talents. Of course it was Hannibal that had painted it, why had he ever considered anything else? He mentally rolled his eyes a little and let out a huff. The warmth in her gaze was much more understandable now, a reminder when the alpha glanced at it when passing, of her clear affection for him.

The other figure in it, one that was listed as Mr Robert Lecter, was a dark haired alpha, compared to the almost white blond that both the siblings shared. He was older, perhaps as old as to be a father, and yet knowing that Hannibal had lost both his parents at the same time, it was far more likely to be his uncle. Robert Lecter stood there, just as typical in his stance as one might expect, and yet, much like Mischa Lecter, there was an indulgent amusement in those watchful eyes. Almost as if this was not a typical thing for them to do as a family, and he was merely doing it to indulge Hannibal. Was it not normal for such portraits to be painted like this in Lithuania then? He might have to ask Hannibal, if he remembered.

There wasn't much else he could really glean from it, other than the less formal clothing style, and so Will allowed himself to be drawn to the other pictures. There were several, one of the extensive Lecter Estate that Will couldn't help but be aware had likely been left there specifically so he would see it, as well as a couple of less formal sketches, one of which included Mischa and Robert Lecter, along with another woman, likely a beta, and Mr Hunt in the background.
What really caught his attention though, was a sketch that sat amongst the rest, of a man sitting in soft lamplight with a blanket over his legs, having just glanced up towards the viewer.

It was him.

The picture, framed in the same wood as the rest, sat nestled between the picture of the family's estate in Lithuania, a rather nice rendition of a forest glade, and the casual sketch of the Lecter family. Done in pencil, it was a moment caught, and as he stared at it, at himself in that picture, he realized that it had been done from a memory of that first time he had visited Hannibal's home, the night of the initial dinner, when Hannibal had been distracting Jack across the room before the meal. Beatrice wasn't in the picture, but if his posture was to be believed, it seemed like a moment where he was poised on getting up, having glanced upwards to look at his host.

Looking at it, you would be mistaken for thinking it had been done mostly while the subject was unaware, and that was true, but this, a moment so perfectly rendered, showed far more. It showed how picture-perfect Hannibal's memory was for such things. That was just as much a statement of this picture, as it was of the placement amongst the places and people Hannibal valued. It was a set, situated precisely for his viewing and understanding, and he was once more keenly aware of just what a rigorous control Hannibal kept over every detail and every interaction, even ones in which he was not present for.

And yet, was it offensive or displeasing? Will contemplated that as he meandered over to the window, glancing out past the sun-strewn lawn towards the forest at the rear of the house that made the colour choices in the bedroom make far more sense. Yes, Hannibal was vastly controlling of his environment, but that didn't necessarily mean it to be a bad thing, not as he was used to seeing such behaviours. The man had used those skills, those traits, in making Will's time with him easier and smoother. He might be viewing the results of that character trait in the meticulous detail shown in the arrangement of the room, but that very same behaviour had allowed him to understand that Will would benefit from time alone in it as well, where most others, even his family, would not have.

Sitting down on the edge of the bed, he leaned over the covers to look better at the paintings on the wood. Pear blossom for comfort, heather for protection, honeysuckle for devotion, and others he couldn't quite remember the meanings of, all intertwined with antlers in a way that reminded him of those more primal instincts along with the beauty. Considering what he now knew about Hannibal's skill with painting, he had little doubt that the man had painted these himself. He just couldn't imagine him allowing someone else to decorate something so intimate.

Reaching out, he let his fingers trail over the lacquer, feeling the slight raised swells of the paint, the flowers glistening with the touches of oil from his fingertips. They were beautiful, the colours popping against the black wood, a bright statement of intent.

Letting his gaze move around from where he was sitting, his attention was once more drawn to those curtains, ones, he knew that had been left there more for show than anything, if Hannibal was used to using such a thing. Perhaps too, it was in case Will might use them at a time like this, when Hannibal was not in the bed with him. He had to admit to himself at least, that he was aware of very little else when ensconced with the alpha, his instincts seeming calmed by his presence in a way that was less usual for him, even in the run-up to his heat when they were more prominent.

The more he thought of those nights in Hannibal's bed, the more he had to admit that his ease without the curtains was far more likely due to the creation of that nest that Hannibal had so carefully placed around him. He could remember all too clearly how meticulously the alpha had made it each time, the layers of pillows and blankets that were, he thought, at least as high as those barriers on the bed. Looking back at them now, even as odd as it was for him looking at the barriers on a bed, he
could imagine them giving a firm foundations for a very secure feeling nest during his heat.

Getting up, he unbuttoned his jacket and let it hang over the back of a nearby chair, before slipping off his shoes, and hopping back up onto the bed. Even now he could feel the indelible mark of the alpha's scent working on him, easing some of the tension from being back in the city from his bones. The bed was soft and plush under him, pleasing in it's mellow, earthy colours.

Leaning over, he rubbed his cheek against the bedpost, before shifting over to do it to the other side too, visceral satisfaction when his own scent mingled with the pleasing scent of the alpha. Under his hand, he could feel the slight dampness against the covers where his oils were likewise marking the cloth without his sayso. It couldn't be helped much, but just knowing that his scent now filled the space as well brought its own satisfaction.

Laying down, he found himself squirming a little to get comfortable, the covers rucking up a bit from their pristine neatness, and there was pleasure there, in knowing he was leaving an impression that altered the alpha's surroundings.

The pillows were wonderfully clean smelling, but still held the doctor's scent upon them, and he turned his head more to breathe it in, a warmth blooming in his chest, feeling almost elicit in the action, while knowing that it was allowed, even encouraged. Usually he wasn't like this. Usually he might merely have sat in one of the armchairs and read a book until dinner, but the softness of the bed, coupled by the strong barrier of the bed's panel at his back, it left him lax and pleased, the last of his sour mood having dissipated without him noticing.

Hannibal would sleep here tonight, and he would have Will's scent in his nose. The thought was uniquely pleasing, and he couldn't help but stretch and shift a little more, nuzzling into the bedding, knowing exactly what he was doing would affect the doctor who had crafted this space to shelter him.

Bloom Residence, London - Sunday 20th December, mid-morning

A bleary eye to the clock on the mantle told Will that it was mid-morning, which was still earlier than he would have liked, but the bustle in the Bloom household was such that he had not yet been able to achieve better.

Today found him woken by the sounds of the children, seemingly having taken to playing games in the snow on the lawn under his window, ones that required an abundant amount of screaming. It was a far harsher wake-up call than the one he had been gifted with when Hannibal had found him dozing on his bed that evening when they had come back from the Country Estate. The alpha had looked so pleased and fond, that it had been impossible to be properly embarrassed at being found hugging the man's pillow.

But that day was not today, and since he had been woken anyway, he knew he should really get up and make a start on the various holiday preparations that he had to complete before heading over to Hannibal's house for midwinter. Most of his time since returning had been spent like that. The storm had hit hard, but had affected them minimally after the initial blast of weather, due to being in the center of the city. It still snowed now, but more akin to something pleasant rather than life-threatening, so long as people were careful. He had used the time to work on the house decorations and arrangements since as a prominent House in the city, it would be host to many visitors over the festive season. He was more than glad to forgo those visits, but he liked the decorating, having grown up with Jimmy's childlike joy over the season, one that always seemed to wash away the burdens from the man, at least for a little while.

By the time he was eating a late breakfast and looking over his list of things to do that day, Nathan had joined him in the dining room with a cup of soup and the paper that Humphrey had finished with
earlier, having managed to extract himself from helping with the children for a time. Alana, Humphrey, Jimmy and Andrew were out doing some last minute shopping and calling in on a couple of her friends, while Jack and Brian were at work, now that the main roads had been cleared enough to be used in town with carriage wheels swapped for sled runners.

Around him, the dining room, as one of the most frequently used rooms, had already been decorated with cut branches made into garlands over the fireplaces and over picture frames, the table hosting a trail of holly and pine along the center, tied with bright crimson and yellow ribbons for colour. The front sitting room, as well as several other rooms had likewise been done, but none of the upstairs rooms had yet to be touched. That would be a good task for today, or perhaps the kitchen, although perhaps Mrs Platts would rather do that herself.

His thoughts were interrupted by the dining room door, and he glanced up, expecting Peter or Jacob, but it was neither of them. It was Jack.

"I've managed to make some time to take you into town now, Will."

No greeting, just straight to the point. Will hadn't even heard the carriage, which was surprising until he realized that the snow would have muffled the sound of the horses considerably. None of that took away from the fact that he had no wish to be going anywhere with the alpha, especially considering that the only places that Jack took him these days were grizzly murder scenes.

He could feel Nathan's watchful gaze upon them both, having been witness to the last time Jack had taken him out. Nathan wasn't hot headed or stupid enough to try and challenge Jack over something, but if he became troubled enough then words would be said to Humphrey, certainly. Perhaps that was why Jack had been careful with his wording this time, likely congratulating himself on making the statement sound as if Will had requested a trip to town, and so turning it down would seem thoughtless and rude. What he didn't grasp was the fact that Jimmy and the rest of the family were more important to him than sounding rude.

"I don't want to go to town today, Jack. Jimmy isn't here, and I have too much to get ready before Dr Lecter picks me up tonight."

"Jimmy won't be back until after lunch, and I won't delay returning to work merely because he is absent. I will make sure you are back well before he returns. Get your coat, Will. I don't like my time being wasted."

The more congenial tone had shifted now to something firm and bordering on the severe. A warning there, not merely in the words, that Jack would not just leave him be this afternoon. He didn't need the imagination that Jack valued him for, not to understand Jack's mood and likely actions, nor of Nathan's, from whom he could already scent the growing unease. Jack had set down the flag for battle, and the devastation that would ensue if he didn't capitulate would be disastrous. He had imagined it all too often in recent months to not grasp just what the stakes were. Fuck.

"I'll need to get something from my room first."

"Well hurry up then."

Despite the fact that Jack knew very well exactly what he was picking up from his room, for it would be ridiculously foolhardy to go without applying scent-blockers, he could clearly smell the smug pleasure from the alpha at having got his way without much of a fight. Breakfast abandoned, little point in it now, for Jack wouldn't wait for him to eat it, nor would his stomach hold it with the anxiety and distress that would be forthcoming. He headed up to his rooms before that same distress could be picked up on more by Nathan.
By the time he got to his room, it was anger that mostly filled him, caught between protecting his family and being forced to do something he hated. Anger at Jack, but more, anger at himself for not holding up on his promise to try harder for Jimmy. No matter that he knew that arguing with Jack would have been pointless and foolhardy, it still felt like he had just given in with hardly a token resistance.

He stared around his room, the haven he had in the house, that he knew, even now, would be invaded should he take too long in coming down to the carriage. Stalking to the bathing room, he stripped off his jumper and shirt and started to smear the ointment over his glands. He knew he should feel worse about the fact that people were dying, and he did feel bad for them, but not at the cost of his family. It wasn't his job to find them, and being forced to do so only made the coals of his anger burn hotter.

Moving back through to his room, tossing the shirt over the back of a chair, he got out a new one, pausing a moment when he caught sight of the scarf that Hannibal had given him, the one he kept near his bed to reassure his instincts on difficult nights. The thought that Hannibal wouldn't mind if he stayed at his house until his heat, that he could go to his tonight and not return here until after his heat was over, several weeks away, it was more appealing than he thought it might be. Hannibal would love it too, no doubt, having unlimited access to Will. It was early in the season to stay with an alpha, but considering how prominent his instincts had been this season, it would be understandable. It would let him stay away from the house, away from Jack, for a while longer.

Yes. That was what he would do, he decided, pulling on a clean shirt. He might have to deal with this today, but he could take himself away from here after it. Jack could find those killers himself, like he should have been doing already.

Will held onto the anger, letting it sit low enough that it wasn't too obvious, but helped mask any signs of anxiety that Nathan, whom he could see through an open sitting room door as he made his way down the stairs, would notice.

He held onto it in the carriage, when he got in and sat on the seat that had seemed ample when it was Humphrey, Price and himself, but seemed cramped and too enclosed when it was just him and Jack.

"I don't want to do this anymore, Jack," he said, his gaze fixed upon the streets as they passed, "It's not my job, or responsibility."

He was pleased at how firm his voice came out sounding. He hadn't bothered giving more reasons why, feeling angry enough with the both of them to only state the inherent criticism. Not that he thought that more reasons would have made things better. Jack had ignored his concerns too often in the past to feel they were worth the breath.

It was a surprise then, when he was met, not with an angry reply, or at least not in a way that was as bludgeoning as it usually was, but more a frustrated anger, directed elsewhere.

"You're supporting your family, Will. The whole police department is inefficient and it's almost ensuring killers go free as a result, and I can't fix it until I get that damn promotion. I just need one of these killers dealt with, and it should be mine, and you can go back to fixing clocks or whatever it is you like doing."

Will turned away from the streets to look at him as he sat there, large and irritated. The time that Will had been away from the house, though it had only been around three weeks, had not been easy for the alpha, he noted. Strain from the job, along with the extra pressure of trying to manage a large household without the support of Humphrey's calm organization had taken its toll. It was, perhaps, the first hint of an acknowledged weakness from the man, a plea for aid, or as much of a plea such a
man could offer, and despite his own anger at having been forced into this, it did lessen some of the
enmity he felt towards the man.

"I will help you this time, Jack, but i don't want to do this again. I don't want to sacrifice the
wellbeing of the family or myself just so you can get a job promotion."

He turned away again then, hiding the fine trembling that had more than started at the implicit
confrontation between their wills. The carriage was saturated in Jack's scent, and his aura, never
being used to constraining it to any greater extent, burgeoned with his anger and frustration at having
his wishes questioned. Even though no words appeared to be forthcoming, the press of that aura and
scent crushed him in the small carriage was all the more distressing because he didn't think the alpha
was actually intending on troubling him with it, nor could he find voice now to request him to be a
bit more circumspect. Such was his life.

It didn't take long for them to reach the location, the blinds on the carriage having been drawn down
while in transit to keep out the eyes of the public. Jack shifted on the seat, a hesitation there before
reaching for the door.

"I'll come for you when it's clear."

Will didn't look at him, or acknowledge the statement, having ended up retreating into himself merely
to cope with the barrage of Jack's presence, meant or not. The alpha looked at him for a long
moment, before merely exiting, leaving him alone there, waiting for the knock that would herald
more nightmares to add to his collection.

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**London - Sunday 20th December, late-morning**

Blood and bone, viscera and teeth, and anger. So much anger and fear, it saturated the location, as
stark and brutal as the large spatters and pools of blood that had eaten away at the snow.

"It's the same one," Will said, having to keep his sentences short, because deep in his throat he could
feel the clenching of the muscles that would release distressed whimpers or even wailing if he wasn't
very careful. "Alpha. Rejected. Very personal. He's been working up. To them. The other... the other
suitors."

He had to stop, swallowing back the whine at the memories of what he had seen behind him. Jack
seemed, for once, to grasp that this might be a struggle for him, and didn't press, just waited. Maybe
it was to do with the scent of vomit off to the side, where someone, a beta, had lost their breakfast
after seeing the surface remnants of what Will had dived into mentally. Had watching a person vomit
clued him in that this might be a difficult one for anyone to bear?

"I need a moment."

The alpha grunted, seemingly still of a more lenient mood, probably because Will had managed to
give him something concrete to go on, although why he couldn't have worked it out for himself was
beyond him. Nearby Brian was glancing towards him constantly, and he could easily scent the
unease there, more than usual, even over the blood and death.

He took himself away to the side. There wasn't any threat really, not from this killer at least.
Whomever it was, was fixated on the suitors, not anyone else, and the whole area had been cleared
by police earlier anyway; the small park it was in, closed to the public now. He just needed some
space away from the anger, fear and death, away from Jack and the carriage that stank of him. A
little more time and Brian would be free to take him back home, and help him slip past anyone there,
so he could retreat to his room and try to recover before Jimmy got back.

The pine trees and shrubs drew him, something, anything, to clear the unwelcome scents from his nose, though it wasn't as easy to purge them from his memory. The snow didn't reach as deeply here, with the trees overshadowing the ground, just a dusting in places, frost and ice in others, that crunched under his boots before even that gave way to just chilled earth as the trees became thicker. He let his footsteps guide him, just so long as it didn't take him back to the crime scene, not worrying about getting lost, not in such a small park, as it was barely two street blocks long, if he was remembering the location correctly.

Walking with his head down and in the thick coat, a stance that he had practiced enough to be almost unconscious now, to make him seem deep in thought rather than distressed, the shaking that was already starting to overtake his body hidden by the layers of clothing, or the cold, should anyone notice. His breath might be the thing to give him away though, had anyone been watching, for in the chilled air it suffered with the struggle to not give in to the sounds that were desperate to come forth. Still, it might, he thought, look more like he was huffing in irritation, or stalling his breathing at different thoughts. No one would know he was distressed necessarily, they wouldn't start questioning why someone that consulted for police would be upset over a murder, and even if they did, he wouldn't have been the only person to be bothered by the brutality. They wouldn't guess he was an omega. They wouldn't.

It had been bad though. He could still feel the taint of the victim and the murderer in his thoughts, violent and terrified, mingling with his anxiety and becoming like a cornered animal in his thoughts, ripping bloody gouges from his insides, tearing bits of him away and seeping into its place.

His breath was coming faster now, and he knew he needed to slow it down, but it was difficult when the sounds were struggling harder to be free. Get a grip, Will, slow breathing. Slow. But his breathing didn't want to slow, not when his lungs were ceasing, when his head was swimming in disorientation from the cold, from the memories.

A whimper escaped.

Out of nowhere, a hand grabbed him from behind, another going over his mouth. He gasped in foul smelling fumes from the cloth there, the cry that tried to escape his lips silenced as his mind rolled. He struggled, briefly frantic but slowing, but the body behind him was unyielding in it's hold, the task growing easier with the syrupy weakness that was fast consuming him. His fingers, which had found his attacker's hair, loosened on it, then fell away, limp at his side, as the blackness of unconsciousness ate up the sudden terror. Then he knew no more.

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Malevolent eyes watched as the younger of the two alphas became increasingly more uneasy the longer that the omega was out of sight, while the larger seemed more concerned over directing betas that had come to clear up the dead body nearby. Those eyes watched as the younger alpha kept staring into the trees, rather than doing his job, how he shifted on his feet, unsettled and anxious before finally the need became greater than his fear of reprimand.

"I'm just going to go and check on him."

Annoyance there in the larger alpha, but a glance to the trees, where nothing could be seen despite the flush of daylight, offered its own incentive, and with a few shouted words to the betas, both of them followed the imprints in the snow and frost that were still clear despite the light snowfall.
They didn't need to walk long. The younger saw the omega first, and a distressed whine escaped his throat, thoughtless and raw, drawing the larger alpha's eyes to the bright splashes of crimson against pale skin dusted in snow.

"Will!"

The name was spoken, aghast and horrified. Those malevolent eyes smiled before slipping deeper into the forest.

Chapter End Notes

Phew, so I actually got the chapter out on time! Big relief! I would have liked to have spent a bit more time polishing it, because I think perhaps section 2 might be a bit too long, but who knows how long that might have taken.

Saying that, I do have to admit that there won't be a chapter out next month, as I work on a 2 week lead time to give my beta-reader a chance to check over the chapter while I start on the next, and I was right down to the wire on getting this chapter out, as in, I just finished it this morning, because I was away on holiday. So the next chapter won't be out until the 18th of November, because I am now 2 weeks behind schedule.

As always, please leave comments! I love hearing what you liked and disliked, what interested you, and what you noticed. Its rather fascinating!

End Notes

As I have not written fanfiction before, some critical feedback would be useful. What did you like and not like about the story and why? Were there any glaring plot holes, or things not explained properly that disrupted the flow? What would you hope to see more of in future?

I will also put out here that I am looking for another beta reader who would be interested in helping me go over future chapters. If so, please leave a contact email address in the comments or send me a message on Facebook (link in profile)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!